

OLD PILOT TUG AWAITING DISPOSAL

*But could she not form a focal point of a revitalized
Maritime Museum in Cape Town's Waterfront?*

Anyone want a tug? **Alwyn Vintcent**, moored for years in the Waterfront Marina is to be cleaned up. Although thieves have stolen some of her fittings, she is reasonably intact and historically, was the last operating steamship on the South African register.

Cash-strapped *Iziko Museums*, the umbrella body controlling the Maritime Museum that will re-open this year in the old Union-Castle building adjacent to Quay Four, requires help to put the tug to educational use.

Named after a prominent shipping personality in the southern Cape, **Alwyn Vintcent** was one of five Italian-built sisterships that came to South Africa in 1959 to replace ageing coal-fired pilot tugs, some of which dated back to the early part of that century. With their wheelhouse windows boarded up, she and **SJ Harrison** had been towed to South Africa by the Dutch tug **Hudson**; the others came under separate tows.

Her design included an uncluttered afterdeck for her role as a passenger tender at Mossel Bay where the weekly Union-Castle mailships anchored to load wool, timber and canned food until the accelerated mail service began in 1965. In that year, **Stirling Castle** - on her last voyage - also made the last mailship call at Mossel Bay.

From the hill above the Methodist manse where my father was a locum-parson for a few weeks in 1956, I recall watching **Pretoria Castle** arriving off Mossel Bay early one morning. Before the mailship had dropped anchor, the old steam tug **William Messina - Alwyn Vintcent's** predecessor at the port - with clouds of smoke billowing from her long funnel and towing two laden lighters, left the harbour. When the lighters had been made fast alongside the ship, the tug also came alongside presumably to disembark passengers who were lowered in a wicker basket onto her heaving deck. (Apart from Cape Town, this was once the usual means of landing or embarking passengers at all South African ports until harbour construction allowed larger passengerships to berth.)

Mossel Bay had another tug, the 1912-vintage **Good Hope**, that I saw laid up in the inner anchorage in the mid-1950s and that ended her days beached near the harbour in 1961.

Although cargowork in the Mossel Bay roadstead had ceased, a weekly Unicorn coaster brought sugar for the town's cannery and household goods. Besides carrying the pilot to the ships, **Alwyn Vintcent** also assisted these vessels into port and on sailing.

Replaced by a more modern tug in 1983, **Alwyn Vintcent** and two other pilot tugs - **RA Leigh** and **SJ Harrison** - were to sail to Australia where they would have become preservation pieces, but when common sense aborted the voyage to Australia, she came to Cape Town, prior to her purchase by Knysna interests.

When the South African Cultural History Museum bought her in 1988, she returned to Cape Town, towed by the tug **Strandloper** from Knysna to Mossel Bay and, thereafter, by **SA Kuswag IV** to Table Bay in April 1989.

Restored to her former glory by energetic volunteers, the old tug was re-commissioned in 1991 to carry tourists around the harbour until a personnel shortage and a reduced budget forced the Museum to pass the tug's operation to a private company.

Since her boiler was ageing and to cut operating costs, a diesel engine was installed alongside her original steam engine. The venture failed, the tug was returned to the Museum and decommissioned in 2001.

Back in January 1994, Cedric Hunter, a reader of this column and one of the enthusiasts who had tried valiantly to keep the old girl going, drew out the tug's boiler fire and closed down the ship prior to her conversion to diesel. "*She never moved under steam power again and, as she was the last South African ship to do so,*" he wrote in Cape Odyssey, "*I gained the poignant distinction of being the one to close the era of South African maritime steam....*"

So what is the prognosis for this old tug?

Durban's maritime museum has two steam tugs : the classic 1961-built harbour tug **JR More**, a floating exhibit, and the pilot tug **Ulundi** that is on the hard and through which hundreds of visitors, including classes of schoolchildren, pass each week.

That is a possible role for **Alwyn Vintcent**, but requires considerable funding to lift her out of the water, to fit her out so that youngsters can walk safely through her, and to maintain her thereafter. And, of course, she will need a suitable site at the already congested Waterfront.

Another is to return her to Mossel Bay where she spent most of her life. Since she would probably not withstand the rigours of a tow, a heavylift ship would need to piggy-back her. Unless someone is generous, or a passing heavylift vessel can spare a couple of days for a kind gesture, the cost will be prohibitive. And the folks at Mossel Bay will have to foot the tug's maintenance bill.

Lamentably, other options are easier - strip her of interesting memorabilia for display in the Maritime Museum, and let the navy use the hulk for target practice, or sell her for scrap. That will destroy the country's last operational steam tug.

Excellent ideas abound to transform the Museum into an exciting maritime learning centre. Perhaps the Waterfront's new owners can lead the way by taking over the Museum's operation. Once they have shown the desire - even by exempting the Museum from the exorbitant rent - let the maritime industry also invest in this dynamic project to stimulate interest amongst our shipping-starved youth.

Could **Alwyn Vintcent** be the catalyst that draws public and corporate support for the Museum?