

## SHIP-SPOTTING A FASCINATING PAST-TIME Even modern vessels can attract interest

Ship-spotting is an ancient past-time. Noah's curious neighbours practised the art - with unfortunate consequences, Egyptian tombs contain sketches of ships, and Greek muses lyricised the sea and its galleys.

I clocked up the big six some days ago, and for more than two score and ten, I too, have enjoyed the past-time.

Most of my ilk reflect with deep nostalgia to times when passenger shipping was the focus of transport. Indeed an early memory is meeting my grandparents who came from Durban in **Capetown Castle** in about 1950, an eagerly anticipated event that makes an airport arrival rather bland. In the dawn light, one saw the ship off Sea Point, and hastened to the docks to watch as she entered the Duncan Dock to berth at A Berth, then the terminal for the northbound mailships. Besides the excitement of seeing the distant figures of relatives or friends aboard, there was movement aplenty with the tugs doing their thing, the berthing gangs making fast the mooring lines, the throng on the quayside... All fun for youngsters.

Shipping buffs and passengers alike were enthralled by cargo of all descriptions being handled by shoreside cranes or ships' derricks. Delightful jargon accompanied cargowork at the time : union-purchase was one of the contemporary handling methods that ensured the speedy landing of cargo; snotters - not mentioned in polite company - were ropes or wires with an eye spliced in each end, while bull ropes were used in holds when goods had to be dragged from the sides of cargo spaces into the hatch square before hoisting.

Gins, runners, shackles, slings, nets and other bits made up the array of the stevedores' equipment, and before the grabs came to discharge bulk cargoes, huge bucket-like skips brought phosphates or grain ashore from an old British trampship with teak fittings on the wheelhouse.

Wharves were littered with crates, drums, grain bags and the ubiquitous dunnage, cheap timber that was used to minimise cargo movement and damage while the ship was at sea. Stevedores were particularly delighted when they opened the hatches on an American ship to find Oregon pine or beechwood dunnage, and, since it would have been discarded, much found its way to timber merchants' premises, courtesy of the stevedore manager.

Incredulous you might be, but I also enjoy today's brand of ship-spotting, clinical as modern ship design might appear. Although geometric to the extreme, a large fully-laden containership is a scientific wonder in terms of the computerised systems that dictate the cargo stowage plan and that control her ballasting, so crucial with all that deck cargo.

While you will see few ships with the elegant lines of their predecessors, engineering marvels come into the port daily, although their size - large to local ship-watchers - compares poorly with the huge vessels operating elsewhere.

Those along the St Helena Bay coastline have seen some large vessels pass, and may not have noted the laden 300 000-deadweight ore carrier, **Ruhr N**, that anchored off the bay last week. With winter still beyond the horizon, she was the first large casualty this year. En route from Brazil to China, she sustained a crack in number 4 hold, and put into the shelter of the bay for repairs.

Such damage has become too common, particularly in vessels crossing the South Atlantic where the south-west swell causes significant stress on ships of around 300 metres. I wonder whether we might not witness a few more tragedies at sea involving larger bulkers this winter.

Despite their age and being past their scrap-by date, some of these Capesize vessels are kept in service by owners wanting to capitalise on the currently soaring market as the demand for coal and iron ore continues. A couple of owners have been smiling recently as they obtained over \$100 000 a day for a time charter of their Capesize vessels. Who would want to scrap a vessel earning even half that per day?

Those heading home along the Atlantic seaboard in the wee hours of Sunday morning will spot the lights of **QE2** as the most famous passengership moves to the pilot station. I wonder whether her passengers will enjoy the dilapidated shoreside facilities when they disembark for their tours.

But watch also for the other regular, less conspicuous callers that bring our fuel, televisions, grain and car parts, or that carry our fruit, minerals, paper and steel to far-flung ports. That is the excitement of shipping - ships from remote places, transiting crowded waterways, or passing idyllic coastlines while carrying a myriad of different cargoes.

Eco-gurus have erected interesting boards at beaches and along seashore paths, detailing aspects of the flora and fauna that one otherwise might have simply passed by. And strangely amidst today's destructive world, I have not seen one defaced by the graffiti curse.

The eco-gurus' idea could be extended to the shipping world. Since folks don't meet their grannies at the harbour these days, similar boards - mounted unobtrusively along the waterfront, the walkway at Mouille Point, or at the Table View carparks - could depict types of ships that the casual walker might see in the bay. What ships might carry, how an oil rig operates, the secrets of containerisation and other pieces of maritime interest could be encapsulated on these boards.

A bit of cash and some real oomph to get the show on the road will engender a new form of ship-spotting to open windows on a fascinating and vital industry that to its detriment, has secluded itself from the public gaze.

***Who will sponsor the first ten boards ?***