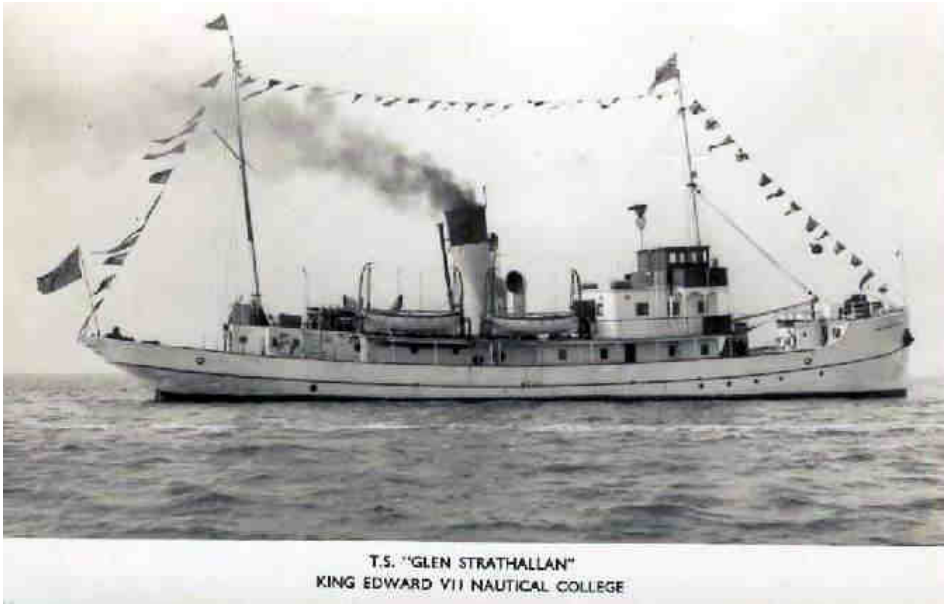
Glen Strathallan



During the last year at college, we did a short training cruise on an old converted fishing vessel called the Glen Strathallan. She was around 800 tons displacement, with an old fashioned triple expansion steam piston engine as the main power plant. Her coal fired boiler had been converted to oil in an effort at modernisation and as a means of reducing operating costs. The fish holds had been converted to dormitories for about 20 or 30 sea cadets, all sleeping in the two holds in two-tier bunk beds. There was only the Captain, the Chief Engineer, a cook and the Bosun as regular crew. All the rest were cadets with their teachers or (as in our case) trainee Radio Officers. We had to do a bit of everything, taking turns to stand bridge and engine room watches, steering, painting, cleaning on deck as well as steward duties, helping in the galley and learning the black art of navigation. It was a very interesting and unusual experience.

As we had no operating certificates yet, our instructor (who obviously did) had to do the actual wireless operating. It was of course illegal to operate without the proper qualifications. (The old ship was using an ancient 100 watt IMR MF transmitter running from a rotary transformer housed in the cupboard underneath, fed from the 240 volt DC mains. Modulation was by means of the unsmoothed 400 Hz HT supply direct from the generator – all very primitive and probably dating from the early 50's! (As far as I remember, the transmitter was not even crystal controlled.) The short messages we sent only consisted of a TR (Track Report, consisting of ships name, position, port from, port to, speed and ETA) which we sent to North Foreland Radio (GNF) on clearing London. Occasionally our instructor (The one from Scheveningen Radio) would send the odd test transmission to show us how it was done, or to demonstrate a point of instruction in the classroom lessons which still took place inside the main cabin.

At night, we were at anchor off Southend, not all that far from the pier and its twinkling lights. Our small steam powered DC generator was stopped to conserve fuel, and apart from some battery powered riding and anchor lights, all was dark and very quiet. Trying to keep a bunch of high spirited young lads under control was doomed to failure, so you can imagine what high jinks us young trainee radio officers had then!

We had travelled down by train and joined the ship at the Millwall Docks in London. It was highly interesting being inside what was then one of the biggest ports in England. The old ship was berthed in a little forgotten corner into which the wind seemed to blow almost all the

rubbish that was floating around in the dock. The water looked scummy, dirty and rather unpleasant. It took a full day to get the old lady ready for sea, and to get up steam. The boilers were old, and had to be heated slowly to their operating temperature to prevent leaks. The docks were busy, and we could watch from the old ships railing as numerous vessels steamed silently past, through the locks, out into the Thames and on to mysterious destinations. It struck me even then just how quietly ships moved. Only a few hundred yards away, and despite the thousands of horsepower, all you could hear was a gentle hum from fans and ventilators, and sometimes a faint panting from the main diesel engine.

That night, I and a couple of others investigated some of the many dockland pubs nearby. The area was somewhat run down, with many rows of terraced houses outside the docks themselves. Despite the run down appearance, lots of pubs were to be found in the area with interesting names and probably histories as well, conveniently placed near the dock entrances. Myself and a friend investigated a few – just out of curiosity of course! On the way back, we met two rather attractive young ladies who needed a push to get their car started, and whose father was very suspicious indeed when they invited us home for a coffee at around midnight. I often wonder what would have happened if he had not woken up!

The next day we sailed slowly down the Thames in wonderful weather and brilliant sunshine, as far as Southend. I well remember my first sight of large ocean-going ships, ploughing along with a large creamy bow wave, coming up fast astern, illuminated by the late afternoon sun, and then overtaking us with ease. We could only make about 9 knots even going flat out, and their wake made us roll and pitch gently. It was a really stirring sight. At that time, London was still a busy port, and merchant ships of all nations and all sizes passed up and down the Thames every day, using the various London Docks, as well as those at Gravesend or Canvey Island.

We anchored off Southend at night, the long pier, its lights twinkling brightly about a mile away, and, sailed around for a while during the day, doing navigational exercises with the Decca Navigator (A hyperbolic navigational system used around the European coasts) and practiced using the radar. We were even introduced to the old wartime Consol navigation system which was still in operation at that time. I was quite amazed at how accurately one could navigate using such instruments. One exercise had us giving steering commands to the wheelhouse above, from a darkened main cabin, relying only on the Decca navigator. We were trying to manoeuvre close to a particular buoy which was marked on the chart we were using. On opening the curtains, we were very often only yards away from our chosen object. Considering we were unskilled, and had no navigation experience, it was remarkably accurate! Other jobs, such as cleaning, chipping and painting the ship and looking after the engine had also to be done. There was never a dull moment.

After anchoring in the evening, the engine had to be wiped down with oily waste and kept absolutely gleaming. This wiping down was also a part of our job and gave a great feeling for the size and power of the machinery used on even a small ship. The engine room watch had to carefully clamber all over the engine, wiping off all traces of condensation water after the ship had anchored. The Chief engineer used to supervise this, and was very particular. I think he was rather proud of his engine. Even at that time it was quite an antique and a rarity.

I still vividly remember my very first engine room watch. I was standing at the main engine controls, right next to the engine itself, looking in terror at the vibrating high pressure steam piping coming from the boiler, imagining what would happen if they burst or sprang a leak. I had a vivid imagination, and the pictures it conjured up were not pleasant. I had also, not long previously, seen a film “The Sand Pebbles” with Steve McQueen, where just exactly this had happened. It did not do much to ease my mind! Then there was the high pressure water

feed pump for the boiler, which often jammed for a few seconds, then with a heart-stopping clang, would start again. The big firebox with its oil burners, pumps and sight glasses cast an eerie flickering glow. The generator, its huge open flywheel a high speed blur and wreathed in steam, with only a flimsy wire mesh guard stopping anyone from touching it. Then of course there was the roar of the ventilation fans, and the all pervading noise of the massive three cylinders, open crankshaft and connecting rods of the main engine itself. It was over two stories high, and as long as a bus. The brass handrails gleamed in the dim light and its three pistons hissed and thumped as they moved.

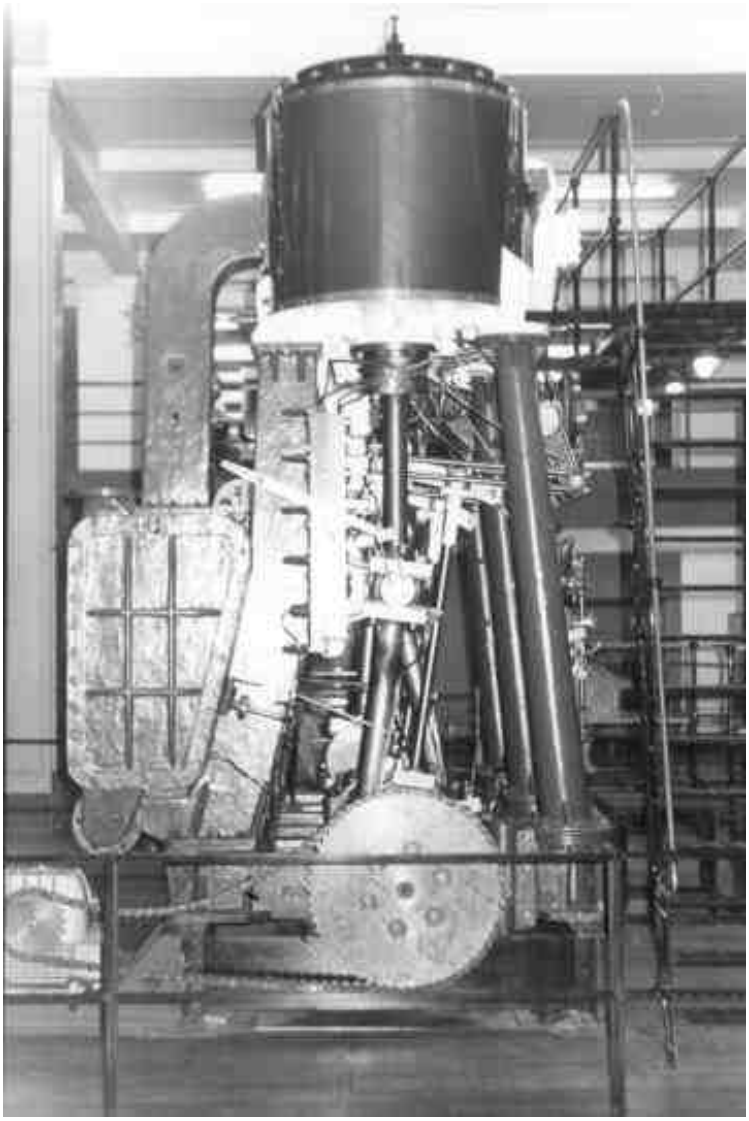
Occasionally, the chief engineer would go away to do something incomprehensible to unknown dark humps crouching in dimly lit corners of the engine room, leaving me alone. My heart was in my mouth until he returned. The noise, dim light and vibration, the smell of steam and oil are still with me to this day.

I remember how as an experiment, I pushed against the side of the ship when she was in the dock, and after a few minutes of hard pushing, managed to get her 800 or so tons to move slowly away from the quay. It demonstrated that you don't need much power to move a ship slowly. A lesson which the old canal barges (with literally only one horse power) demonstrated only too well, moving many hundreds of tons using just a single horse. The power required however rises very steeply as speed increases, which is why the amount of engine power required to propel the big, fast, container ships, huge warships and passenger liners is truly astronomical. The SS United States for example, reputed to have been the most powerful passenger ship ever built, is said to have had well over 200,000 horsepower hidden in its main engines, and could even do 20 knots even in reverse!.

Eventually, after many years of service, the Glen Strathallan became too expensive to keep going. Her boiler was in need of expensive repair, and the hull itself was becoming pitted with rust and would require expensive drydock work. Under the rules of the bequest with which she was given to the school, she was not scrapped. The engine was removed (it was a prime example of its type) and placed in the Science Museum for safe keeping. The hull was towed to Southampton, and sunk offshore. It is used even today for training by diving schools, and for research into the fauna and flora growing in and around old wrecks.

I must admit, that when I visited the London Science Museum a few years ago, and saw the old engine displayed on the ground floor, tears came into my eyes. It brought a lot of old memories suddenly very close. It also seemed a shame that I still remembered this engine as being almost alive, and lovingly cared for, while to others it is now just a cold heap of old metal parts. A monument to old technology.

Glen Strathallan engine in London Science Museum



The end of an old lady