



The 150th Anniversary

Reunion of HMS



WORCESTER

June
2012

An unofficial & Personal Account from an Old Worcester. Capt Alan Bridger (50-52)

In 1862 the first HMS **Worcester** was handed over by the Admiralty as a training ship establishment, preparing officers for the Royal and Merchant Navies of our country. This followed the success of the initial trial of HMS **Conway** three years earlier. At about this time ships officers were often uncouth and not exactly gentlemen in the accepted manner of the day. A system of employing better suited personnel in positions of responsibility was needed, pre-sea training in navigation, seamanship, as well as science, the arts, and languages brought about the introduction of "**Conway**," then "**Worcester**". Both full rigged 3 masted vessels.

At various sites around the Thames area the training on HMS **Worcester** continued until 1968, when, due to the decimation of the British flag, and the lack of demand for trained officers, (indeed, training had ceased as flags of convenience were sought by all and sundry) the Thames Nautical Training college, HMS **Worcester**, (then sited at

Greenhithe in Kent), was closed.

During the 106 years three ships carried the name "**Worcester**", the final one a purpose built training vessel (ex TS **Exmouth**). The standard of the training received had become recognised by the Marine World as producing a more educated, better class of officers. Well trained, respectful, with high leadership potential. Many by now well known, indeed some famous names were **Worcester** cadets. Two went to the Antarctic with Scott. I was one who is not well known, famous, or even worthy of fifteen minutes of fame. A perpetual backbencher then, and still the same now!

Apprenticeship

My introduction to the ship was in error on my first day. It was April 1950. Wearing my brand new uniform I and a group of other cadets were taken from the shoreside causeway in a large motorised boat. On arrival at the ship side, two gangways led upwards. A queue formed to climb one of them.



Author Alan Bridger as a cadet in 1950

I chose the other, quite deserted. Big mistake, for that gangway was reserved for the captain and senior officers! A form of punishment followed of course.

For two years I was ill fed (rationing was still in force), regularly beaten by cadet captains for some small misdeed or other (a minority were sadistic bullies), scrubbed wooden decks until they shone, and made to climb the rigging of the 3 masted **Worcester**, (and the **Cutty Sark's** which floated alongside). All with no safety nets! As the ship was a recognised small public school, and a paying one at that, many a dotting parent sweated over the demand for fees to pay for all this. The officers were all ex Navy or Merchant Navy and were impartial to any abusive punishment meted out. They also had their favourites amongst the cadets. These were used to feed them information, often warped or wrong. It couldn't happen today. Beating and caning are forbidden. Health & Safety would have closed the ship down. I took it all and ignored the treatment, I'd already seen it worse in my young life.

In return I was turned down for a RNR commission(?), played rugby, boxed



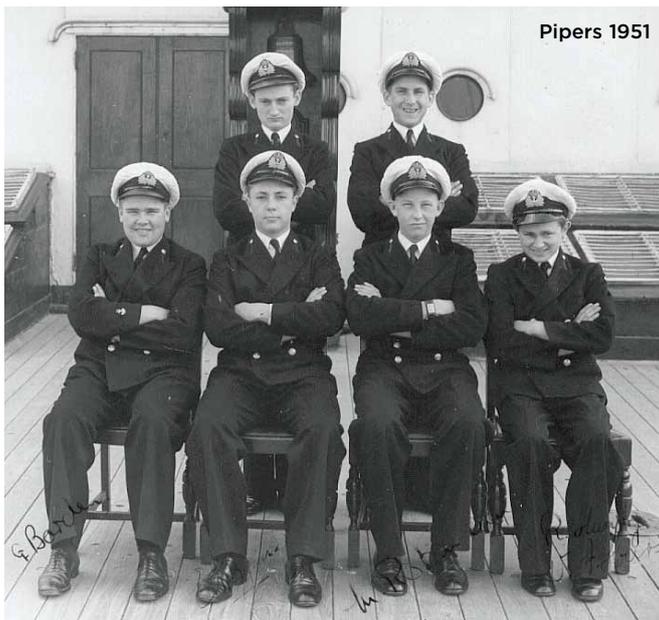
HMS Worcester



in the ring, and I was taught everything I would need to start successfully a long career at sea. By arrangement with that famous Greenhithe shipping company, Fred Everard (Yellow Peril), I was also allowed to make a five week summer voyage to Sweden & Denmark as a working crew member on one of their ships, not having a home to go to for summer leave. I was knocked into shape, and metamorphosed from a fifteen year old cheeky, disliked, and callow youth, into a respectful, civilised, well mannered seventeen year old ships apprentice, ready for anything the future threw at me. I did not leave with any honours, but was, and still am grateful for what I had become.

I signed indentures with a small shipping company nobody had heard of and landed on my feet. Unlike most shipping organisations of the day (including Royal Mail, P&O, Ellermans, Blue funnel, Shaw Savill, RFA, etc) they treated me well, not as cheap labour, but as one of a large family. With decent human beings as senior officers, I slotted in quickly, leaving the UK and not returning for five years!

So my training was a success, as will the majority of ex cadets admit. I was a 3rd Officer in two years (acting uncertificated), Senior 2nd officer on a 1,000 passenger ship at the age of 22, Chief officer two years later, and in command years earlier than others of my generation.



Pipers 1951

2012 is 150 years since the first **Worcester** started training cadets. Because training stopped in 1868, there are very few ex cadets now still at sea. The last entry of cadets would have been born in, or about the year I left (1952) making the youngest around 60 years old!

Grand reunion

The Association however still goes strong, it is very active, with well over 1,000 members spread across the globe. So the committee organised a grand reunion this year to commemorate 150 years of the **Worcester** existence. Portsmouth, for its long association with the sea was chosen as the venue, spread over 3 days in June.

A great deal of organising was involved, but just another part of an ex **Worcester** cadets training! The committee have always been a group of dedicated ex cadets of the ship, mostly retired masters.

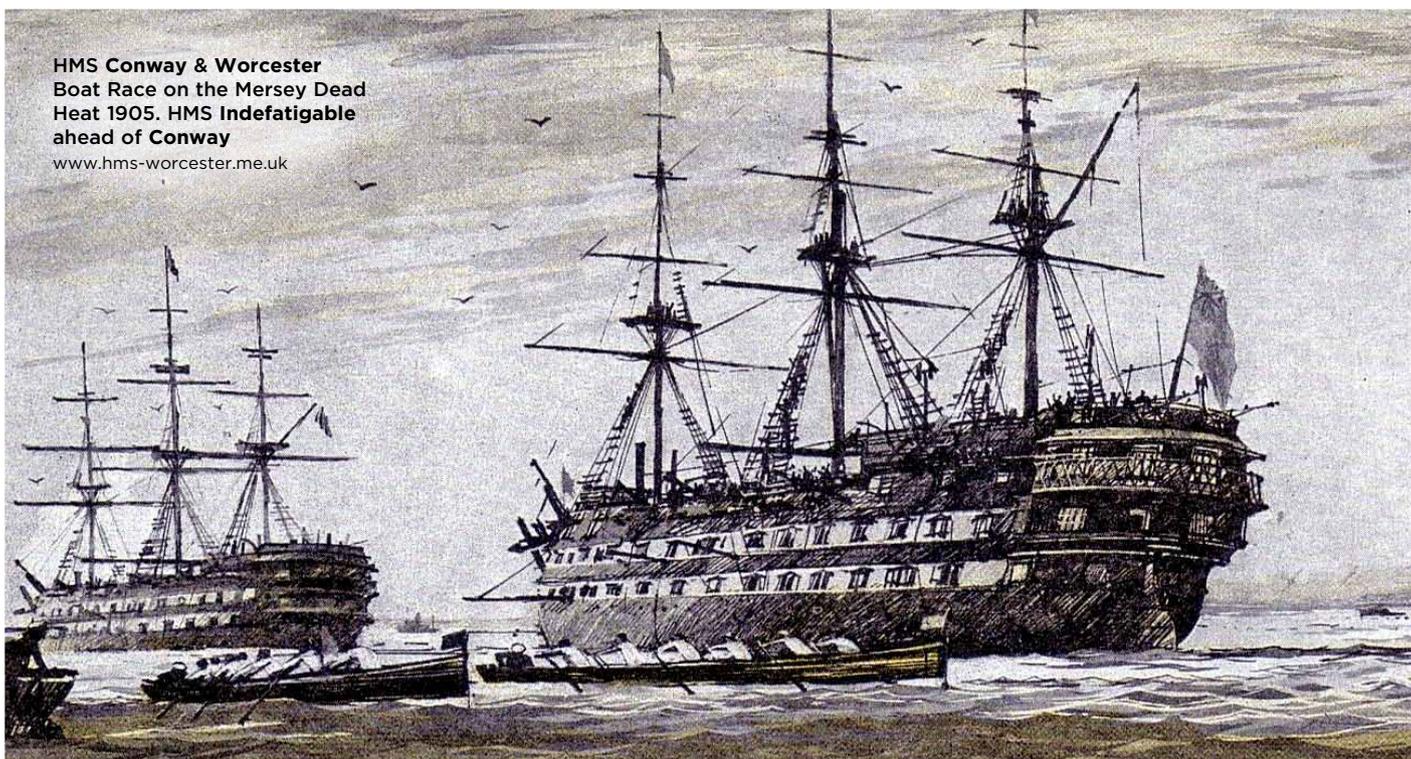
Invitations were advertised early, and the old boys started arriving in their droves from Canada, the USA, the Antipodes, and all other stops between. With guests, a total of over 600 descended on Pompey, taking over practically every hotel. Gunwharf Quay was bursting with OW's boats, yachts, and a few gin palaces! By 20th June, the 1st day, the ever present rainclouds had given way to sun, and three chartered cruise vessels were filled with Old

'The actual Worcester ships bell was also rung, creating a few nostalgic tears from hairy legged ancients!'

On leaving the ship every cadet who had served the required amount of terms was invited to join the Old Worcester's Association, and this old boys club is still going strong. Also we have the Old Worcester Yacht Club, and members are allowed, by permit, to fly the blue defaced Worcester ensign.

HMS Conway & Worcester Boat Race on the Mersey Dead Heat 1905. HMS Indefatigable ahead of Conway

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Worcester's & friends. Old acquaintances were met and dealt with accordingly! An evening meal on board was served for a Solent jolly lasting over 3 hours. Arriving back the Royal British Legion Band greeted them, and others awaiting their arrival. The band gave a rousing concert and the Sea Cadets marched on and re-created, through music, life on board.

Reveille, colours, piping meals, sunset, pipe down, & last post were sounded as a reminder of the old regime on board for the cadets. The actual **Worcester** ships bell was also rung, creating a few nostalgic tears from hairy legged ancients!

An Old **Worcester** played the bagpipes, joined by the band, and then the National Anthem, to end the 1st day officially. They do say however that a few beverages were imbibed afterwards!

The following day, Thursday 21st commenced with the raising of the **Worcester** ensign over the quay, as all the OW owned vessels raised theirs to a bugle, played again by an OW. The heavens had opened by 11am, and unfortunately rain set in for the day.

The Royal Maritime club had been "commandeered" for the day to house an exhibition of **Worcester** memorabilia. The Nelson Room was filled to overflowing with items, either on loan from museums, from ex cadets, or from the ships archives, "rescued" by the Association. Swords, bells, cups, sporting colours, magazines, receipts, cap badges, belts, and books, books, books, vied for attention with a video, and a graphic, but glamourised version of how Captain Gordon C Steele (Diddy), (who was the captain when I was there and who disliked me intensely) won his Victoria Cross in 1917.



HRH Princess Anne addressing the Association, June 2012



The Committee and friends showing off! June 2012.

A formal lunch was served in Boathouse 7, the restaurant in the Naval Dockyard, and this historic place proved of great interest for the many who had not been there before. Another reunion dinner had been enjoyed by many OW's on board HMS **Warrior** some years before.

The day concluded with the grand reunion dinner, for which the Guildhall was taken over. A Sea Cadet guard of honour greeted us.

The following day, the last of the three days, in company with recently renewed friendships, we packed Portsmouth Anglican Cathedral to the rafters for a service of thanksgiving. The Dean was ably assisted by three ordained OW's, one from the United States. In my day anyone who didn't wish to engage in servile work took holy orders! However that was a long time ago, and I cannot include these three gentlemen! At the Cathedral the Mission To Seafarers Padre

'All agreed it had been an excellent celebration of 150 years of the Worcester'

With a champagne reception, a five course meal, with wine, port, & brandy to follow, over 600 Old Worcester's & friends were seated, at tables for 10. The majority were seated with others who had been cadets at the same time. I was with my wife and old friends myself.

The Guest of Honour, Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal appeared to be enjoying herself up on the platform, surrounded by many other honoured guests, all who no doubt were wondering what to say without being shot for treason!

We, the ordinary members (plebs?) however enjoyed her address, given with obvious deep knowledge of the nautical scene. We rose to the toasts, saluted our committee, laughed at the humour of the speakers, and thoroughly enjoyed the evening, and the menu, from date to toothpick. It isn't often that over 200 master mariners get together and stay sober!

Her Majesty wrote to us from Buckingham Palace, with best wishes for the reunion, and congratulating us for still being alive no doubt! The hierarchy and honoured guests galore shook hands with HRH, and it poured down with rain outside. Everyone got wet returning to their respective hotels, boats, or whatever, and it was almost like being back at sea!

Canon Musford gave a homily filled with humour. In fact humour was there in spades that day. The seafarers version of the 23rd psalm, the person near me who sang his own words to the hymns, and the gentleman taking the collection who recognised an old friend and stopped to chat to him, all had the congregation chuckling.

After a collection of a vast sum, divided between the British Legion Band, The Sea Cadets, & The Flying Angel (MTS), we left the Cathedral, with the **Worcester** ensign from the Oz emigrants group flying from the flagpole. The swansong took place in the Royal Navy and Royal Albert Club immediately afterwards.

Drinks & a buffet lunch was served whilst a force nine raged outside, and all agreed it had been an excellent celebration of 150 years of the **Worcester**. It was also agreed there would be nobody around to celebrate the 200th anniversary!

Annual reunions are still organised. Usually on a floating block of flats with a funnel at Southampton Passenger Terminal. The Yacht Club have an annual bun fight at different harbours around the country. The commodore at the time holds court, as a flotilla of boats flying the defaced blue ensign gather to remember their own cadetship, and the now fading memory of HMS **Worcester**, the ship that trained them. 