



Cutty Sark must SAIL again

I HELD tightly to the helm as the Cutty Sark, her magnificent sails stretched taut, powered through the waves with astonishing ease.

But my thrill at steering one of the world's greatest ships was tempered with sadness as this would be her final voyage.

Just 15 years old, I was the last person ever to take the wheel of one of the jewels in our maritime heritage - and I'll never forget it.

Two days later Cutty Sark was tied up, never to sail again, and was later taken out of the water for good to the dismay of anyone who ever saw her sail.

Nearly 40 years later I visited Cutty Sark at her dry dock in Greenwich, and I felt the same mix of emotions.

She looked magnificent, beautifully restored to her former glory. But it was a sad sight to see the ship I had witnessed slicing like a knife through the sea, motionless and imprisoned in concrete.

From that moment on I always believed it was wrong to take Cutty Sark out of



WRECK:
Burnt out clipper.

her context, the water and the wind, and leave her stranded on dry ground.

If only those who come to admire her could have seen her in her natural environment, as I did, 70 years ago, ploughing through the sea with the wind in her sails.

It was the Cutty Sark's beauty, design and speed which made her a marvel around the world - so how could she be appreciated out of the water?

That is why I believe those restoring her should have a radical rethink following the fire that gutted her a week ago today.

Why not give Cutty Sark the respect she deserves by getting her sailing? Let's make her a treasure of the sea again, not just a motionless museum piece.

I signed up for the merchant navy aged 14, inspired by Cutty Sark's adventures on the high seas, her record-breaking trip around the Cape of Good Hope and her heroics in the race to bring tea from China.

A year later I was one of 12 cadets chosen to bring Cutty Sark from where she was docked in Palmouth, Cornwall, to Greenhithe, Kent.

I was so excited that I didn't sleep during our boat trip down there, and ended up helping the skipper by steering the tug during the night.

Arriving in Palmouth we transferred our

BY CAPTAIN ROBERT WYLD
The last person to take the clipper's helm on the open seas



hammocks to Cutty Sark's hold. Because of my eagerness to navigate on our way down, I was - to my surprise - picked to steer her back to Greenhithe.

The harbour was thronged with yachts and small boats as we left, everyone was cheering and waving. As we passed the Royal Cornish Yacht Club they fired a 21-gun farewell salute.

But disaster nearly struck as our commander, Captain Steele, answered by firing a cannon on deck. The wind caught the muzzle flame and blew it back to the other charges on deck, setting them off in a massive explosion.

The next I knew Captain Steele was running around the deck, his clothes on fire. My trousers had been scorched in the explosion, but I never let go of the helm. Steele, who spent six weeks

in hospital, wrote in my report book: "Did bravely remain at his post during an explosion on Cutty Sark."

As we entered the waters of the English Channel we set the main topsails so we could catch the wind coming from behind us. The ship was already in a much poorer state than during her glory days when she managed to overtake steamships on route to collect wool from Australia.

But even now she powered through the water with the majestic ease she had become famous for.

Everything was fairly primitive aboard. The toilet was a rough seat with a lead pipe going straight into the sea. No problem, but at times a surge of cold sea water would suddenly come back up the pipe, taking you by surprise.

Cutty Sark was welcomed with a fanfare of bosuns' pipes when we arrived in the Thames Estuary - but it marked the end of her life as a working ship. For the next 16 years she would be tied up alongside the HMS Worcester - her anchor lowered and raised, her sails furled and unfurled - but never moving



CREW:
Robert

from the spot. She finally reached her dry-dock in Greenwich in 1954.

Then, last Monday morning, my brother called me where I now live in New Zealand telling me to brace myself for some bad news. "Who's died?" I asked. "This is just as bad," he replied.

He was right and I was devastated. Just to think that I had proudly steered that now charred hull through the sea broke my heart. The magnificent ship that had survived the worst nature could throw at it, had been reduced to cinders after being taken out of the water.

But now I believe that this disaster may be an opportunity to get Cutty Sark back in the water.

She could be transformed into a living museum that could travel around British ports and the world.

It would be more than fitting for a ship that became famous for darting around the globe to be crossing the seas again, showing off her beauty and sharing her history with people the world over, wherever she docks.

So many ships in far worse conditions have been successfully renovated, so why not the greatest of them all?

What better way to properly pay tribute to one of the world's most famous ships, and the fastest tea clipper the world has ever known?

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