

AGE EXCHANGE UK

INTERVIEW WITH ALF WILLIAMS

Charlie: Well, good morning Alf.

Alf: Good morning.

C: Your full name is Mr. Alf..?

A: Edward Williams.

C: Alf Edward Williams. And that would have been the name on the indenture ?

A: Yes.

C: Bill Lindsey has already shown me his indentures, and so has Jack Maclean.

A: So you've seen them. Jack Maclean ?

C: Yes. Do you know the Jack, the lighterman..?

A: I know of him, put it that way.

C: He's now living at the Sam Manners House in Greenwich, and he talks about lighterage some time with me. But one of the funny things, on looking at the indentures; all the language is seventeenth century.

A: I come of an era before them: My indentures are on parchment.

C: So theirs is not on parchment?

A: Theirs just paper, that's all.

C: So it's a scroll that unravelled?

A: Yes. My father's half was cut from my half, so that they matched together, to identify an apprentice. However the...

C: Did your father; was he the Master?

A: My father was my Master.

C: And he stood apart from you as he stood at the Court of the Watermen, St. Mary Street?

A: Oh, yes.

C: And was it a ceremony that was taken very seriously then?

A: Oh, absolutely. Probably a lot of them first time there themselves.

C: Can you remember the form of it, the ceremony: What happened?

A: Well, the court sat in array, horseshoe fashion, with the Master in the middle, and the wardens and all the officials; licenced men, some would be from the union, a Gosling from the union. And you would be bound to serve a term of five, six, or seven years. If you was an apprentice at sixteen, you usually did five years. If you was apprenticed earlier, you did seven years. But, in my case, they didn't want to be bother me because I'd been four years in France, so I only did the five years apprenticeship.

C: So your apprenticeship was broken up by active service in the trenches.

A: Oh within days. Within days of being an apprentice I joined the army.

C: As an apprentice lighterman you could have joined the Royal Navy: What made you decide on the army?

A: I don't know. It was a popular thing to join the army.

C: Really?

A: Oh, yes.

C: Because I know that the Navy has always had first pick of the lightermen, haven't they ?

A: You were free from tapping you on the shoulder and saying; "Come on."

C: Pressing you.

A: Pressing you. You were free from that. In any case, I was under age. I joined as nineteen.

C: How old were you when you, in fact, first went off overseas?

A: Sixteen.

C: And that was in the year 1915, was it ?

A: Yes.

C: I didn't know people went off at sixteen. I thought it was eighteen. Sixteen years old. You told them you were eighteen?

A: I told them I was nineteen.

C: Where did you see action, Alf?

A: First of all in France, then..

C: Any battlefields?

A: Ypres. But then we went up to Serbia. They called us away from France, and took us up to the Dardanelles, we had a look at that: They didn't land us, 'cause they was leaving the Dardanelles. This was about 1915.

C: Was that after Gallipoli?

A: Yes. Well, Gallipoli was still going as we was going from France to the East. Withdrew from the Dardanelles, two divisions of Australians went straight to France, why they changed us like that I'll never know.

C: I wonder if they knew what they were doing at that point ? I wonder if the H.Q., the generals behind the line knew what they were doing ?

A: Lloyd George wanted to reinforce Selonica and the French. Kitchener wanted all eight to go to France. And somebody else wanted to.. And so they got a lovely botch up in the.. 19th, the 29th, and the 10th Irish Division leaving the S.. (this was 1915) and the troops leaving France, crossing and getting sunk on the way: Alot of it would be sent down with 2,000 troops aboard. And we was on the Royal Edward, and they landed us at Selonica.. Oh; first of all we went up to the Dardanelles, and then they landed us at Selonica. That was the 25th of November, or the 5th of December , 5th of December, it was 1915.

C: Then the Prince Edward set off back, did it?

A: I don't know where she went. I believe they made.. Anyway, we lost interest in her. We were pleased to get our feet ashore, because the ship's pretty tiny, and so help once they get to you.

C: No lifeboat: Where would you row to really ?

A: The Edward was sunk, and we were on the Royal George.

C: Once you got out there were you hanging about in the Dardanelles ?

A: Only a few days: A few hours in [Mewdloss?]; we came out of there and they landed us at Selonica. Mind you that was the 5th of December, the.. 5th of December, that was. It was all flat country there, until you got to the Serbian border.

C: It was a good job they landed you in Winter, because, otherwise, the heat would have been dreadful.

A: It was snow. It was snowing then. My Christmas dinner was a couple of hard biscuits and jam, and that's it. From somewhere, I don't know where, they procured a half pint bottle of beer, and we got that at night when we had a [drummers'?] concert. And it snowed this high !

C: If the enemy didn't get you, the weather was going to get you?

A: Well they was the other side of the hills, you see; we weren't going to forsake our position.

C: And they were Turkish, weren't they?

We came into the last end of the retreating, went down into Corfu. Those who were receiving French help went down into Corfu with the French. Those who were receiving.. So come down back to Selonica with us: Or the plains of Selonica; didn't go right back to the coast. Went back to about ten mile from the coast. And others, of the Serbian army what was left there, went down to Corfu.

C: Who were you fighting at that time?

A: The Germans; the Bulgars; the Bulgarians. We was fighting with the Serbians.

C: Because that was the start of the war with Serbia, wasn't it? That's what started it in the first place.

A: That's right. Well this was the Serbs retreated all along, and we stopped the retreat, for what it was worth (because they didn't want to come any further) and we stopped, too. It was only the weather we had to fight. And the disease; dysentery.. You can name it, it was about.

C: I'm surprised that you're still here after being through all that, Alf !

A: Well, anyway, this was Christmas 1915.

C: So when did you return to this country? When were you demobbed, if you like ?

A: Well, I was about three or four years out there. Three years out there, and.. Oh, no, I came back... Those of us who they thought they could ('cause you'd go down with malaria all the time) they thought they could, rejuvenate us, I'll put it that way, with a bit of long leaving. Just come to me one day, and so he says;

"You're going to "Blighty."

I says;

"What for?"

I never expected to see England again.

He says;

"I don't know; you've got to see this general."

So, I was on my way to Plassey. I was rather a long time coming home, different camps. Eventually we got a ship from Selonica to Italy. I don't know if it was [Birindi?] or it was Torrento; one of those two places. And we get the train from South right through Italy; through Monte Carlo, and all those places along the coast. We had bully beef and biscuits all the time.

C: And you were stuck on that train for hours and hours?

A: It stopped for one hour every day. And where they stopped there was tubs of water and you had to dive in quick.

C: To get your ration for the next day.

A: Yes. And have a wash and that, 'til the next day. And you was in cattle trucks; 28 men in truck. So being the last truck there wasn't 28 of us, there was about 16. We stopped for a wash at some place, and there was a sailor walking along the track with his bundle. And he came to our truck and he looked in. I said;

"What's the matter, Jack; can't you find a berth?"

He says; "No."

I says; "Well come up here, we've got room."

So in he came. We sat talking. He said;

"This is a place called Fourbier."

I said; "I lived in Robert Street."

He said;

"Well, my mother lives in Edar Street; that's the next one. But she lives in Greenock now."

And he told me he was.. the old Thames iron works, which took the foreman from West Ham up to Scotland.

C: Why did they do that ?

A: The brains went up there.

C: Is that how Greenoch came to be the great naval base, and everything ?

A: They took the work away from West Ham. West Ham was Thames iron works; they build the biggest ships there.

C: So it was the upper Clyde then, really; 'cause Greenoch is on the upper Clyde, isn't it ?

A: Yes, well, anyway, Thames iron work took the foreman and [leesymen?] up to Scotland when they moved. So that accounted for his mother living in Greenoch.

C: What was he doing wandering around in the south of France?

A: He'd finished his fifteen years in the navy, and the navy wouldn't let him go, but at the same time they wouldn't hold him. So he made his way: He went from Italy, made his way from there to Portsmouth.

C: You get a wonderful feeling of the care with which the officer classes looked after their men at that time !

A: There you are. And he had to find his own ship. He had to look after himself.

C: Disgraceful really.

A: It was. But he didn't mind, he was going home; he was going to get there. So, and we was going to say to him;

"Lie down to Le Havre."

you see, on our train. Of course, Portsmouth, he only had to get a lift on a lorry once he got to Portsmouth. And then they'd given him leave, as we were. So they dumped us at Dover, about ten days after this.

After knocking at the door, and coming in, it was Saturday evening, and my father says;

"We'll go down and have a drink."

So we went down, and a man stood along side of me, never seen him in me life, and we were talking, and he casually came out with a remark;

"My brother was in the navy; he's out East."

So I said; "Oh, I came out with a sailor from the East."

And he said; "My brother's out in the East."

I said; "What's his name ?"

So he said; "... (oh, I forget his name now).

He said;

"My brother's out in the East. I haven't seen him for seven year."

So I said; "This sailor's name was So- and- so."

He said; "My name's So- and- so!"

So I looked at him. I said; "It's your brother."

He said; "Where did you leave him ? "

I said;

"On the quay at Southampton; he was going along to Portsmouth."

He said; "Goodnight"

He went out. He was only living next door to us! And of course, the next day he's back home, he says;

"That was my brother." He said, "I found him."

C: Isn't that extraordinary that you should be the person who said, "Hop aboard", and , in a way... There's something providential in it all, isn't it ? Like you were meant to do that!

A: Actually, I can tell you his name. He was related to Penfold. And he was a first class engineer; his father before him. When his mother and father went up to Greenoch 'cause he stayed in London. He was brother-in-law to Penfold.

C: I gather from this that you lived in the Deptford area at that time.

A: No. My father, at one time, was pier-master at Greenwich Pier.

C: Is that in Greenwich, the same place it is now, Greenwich Pier, near where the Cutty Sark is now ?

A: Yes. There's no Cutty Sark up there; there's a pub there !
Lovely old pub.

C: Was that bombed in the war, that pub ?

A: Yes.

C: What was the name of it ?

A: Used to look out of the window onto the river. And there's a similar one to it at Woolwich.

C: As the pier-master, did he have to go and check the ships as they were cooing in ?

A: Well, first of all, you see, we had a line of passenger boats went from Greenwich to Kew and back. They were named after people like, Shakespeare, Milton... All Elizabethan names.

C: Like Raleigh.

A; They were good jobs. And when they had a bad Summer, and the powers that be wrapped up the service, 'cause they was losing too much money. They were losing money, but not much. When they wrapped up the service they made him pier-master at Greenwich Pier. Well that mean that he was pier-master of all the piers; 'cause he went to them all in turn.

C: What was his job?

A: He was skipper.

C: What were his duties as a pier master?

A: Collect the tithes from vessels; providing the berth for vessels; and collecting their tolls.

C: Did he check on the traffic going right down the river?

A: No.

C: He didn't do that?

A: Only when they touched his pier.

C: Then he checked them: In no uncertain language, I should think !

A: A boat might come down with thirty people aboard. I think he used to charge them a penny; as long as they only touched the pier.

C: But your father, Mr. Williams, had been a lighterman?

A: Yes; and my grandfather.

C: So it was in the family?

A: My grandfather got the [Chung Fennet??] Medal at the Roan School in 1848. Solid silver; big as that.

C: What was that for?

A: Geography.

C: And do you think that watermen, lightermen, go back in your family for generations beyond that ?

A: We can go back to the old church at Greenwich of the 1600's; when we were vintners. Now, whether it was convenient to be a waterman and a vintner, or whether we were honest enough to be vintners; that's how we become watermen !

C: So you were following in a time honoured tradition then ?

A: As far as we know, we stopped looking at 1610, I think. Then we got fed up with looking. But it was all down in the old church: We had it on paper, but my... One of the boys lost them.

C: So when you took your apprenticeship, it was actually something that had been going on in the family for generations and generations ?

A: Oh, yes.

C: Father had apprenticed son, had apprenticed son, had apprenticed. Is that right?

A: Yes.

C: Would the form of the apprenticeship similar to what it used to be in those days ? Only on the sailing barges, mind you. Can you describe what you used to do as an apprentice for the Master ?

A: You was mate of the vessel. Sam Macarthy gave you the wheel and there was plenty of wind up there, and she was;

"All yours; I'm going to have me lunch."

C: You had a sail on yours, did you, or was it all done with sweeps ?

A: No; they were nearly all sweep barges. But there was a ... Carried an extra hand. Three hands. Generally the mate was a qualified mate.

C: And did you used to have another barge on behind you ?

A: No, not tied. Oh; if you were in tugs and steam; you were in tugs, oh, yes you could tie up a six barge. Have to tie them.

C: But otherwise if it was just the barge on its own, it's all done with the... ?

A: No, no ,no. Wheel: The wheel and mains'l, tops'l, fors'l, mizzen. The coasters, you generally had a balloon sail, a spinacher, or something else, that put up, when there we weren't much wind out.

C: I suppose, very quickly; you knew every single tide all along the reaches of the river ?

A: Absolutely; you had to. And you had to find your way in the dark.

C: What did you have to light you in the dark?

A: Light you? Anything; it was the tides and you had to make the the most of it.

C: So you just had a kind of lamp?

A: You had a masthead lamp, and a port and starboard lamp.

C: What would have terrified me would be the bridges.

A: Well, the bridges you took your mast and sails, and everything, and row. If you didn't take on extra hands, you usually had two rowing, and one at the stern steering.

C: When you say rowing, are you talking like driving?

A: Yes; driving.

C: Driving the ship. I don't know how it's done, but you've got these two big oars, haven't you, or did they used to be called paddles or sweeps ?

A: There they are.

C: Oh yes. And that was really a skill, wasn't it?

A: Oh yes, it was a skillful job; no use saying it wasn't. You'd go up through there with half a dozen barges in the tow rope, about 2,000 ton; you know you've got them.

C: Was the aim to catch the stream of the tide?

A: Yes, that was the art of it; to make use of the tide.

C: And did the streams change from section to section of the river ?

A: It came off the point into the bight, or from the bight into the point.

C: Let's now get very specific about this. Where are you telling me that it comes off the point into the bight; what part of the river ?

A: You wouldn't notice a bight. Or a point.

C: I wouldn't.

A: But we would know it. And through working through it dozens and dozens of times, we'd get to know every point in the dark. That's the art of it to know your way in the dark; not to know your way with a moonlight night. Or you'd get in plenty of trouble, if you hit one of those bridges. And the tide sits under the bridges; Waterloo it sloshes? round there. If you want to make a successful passage through the archway, you want to steer to the [button??], 'cause you'll get carried away from it.

C: Which would you say was the trickiest section of the river?

A: The one with most traffic. That'd be the upper pool. The pool.

C: Because there was nothing like a shipping lane; they didn't come down on the right or on the left, like in the Channel ?

A: It order is, of course, port to port; and that's the order internationally.

A: ...up through the bridges. You 've got ships coming down; if they've got plenty of water underneath them, they've not got much room up here ! And if they had plenty of height, they haven't got much water. So it's knowing the time, and knowing the tide when it's best to go.