



PROBUS



RECORDER

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE PROBUS CLUB OF GILLINGHAM, DORSET
www.probus-gillingham-dorset.org.uk

Issue No. 217
 February 2023

CHAIRMAN'S NOTES – *Roger Lester*

Well, another month has gone by already and thankfully we are now heading towards Spring and warmer days, when we should be able to get out and about more. A few ideas for visits are still being considered and if anyone has a suggestion, I'd like to hear about it. Also, as I said recently, we are looking for a new Scribe as Alan Jeffs has been doing the job for at least 9 years now and could do with a rest. With the AGM only 4 months away (time flies), it would be good if members could think about what role they might think about volunteering for. We have had the same old people, bar one, going round the Committee for quite a few years now, and it would be good to have a little fresh thinking aboard!!!

On a more personal note, a few days ago I attended a 60-year reunion at my old school in Exeter, and while even after such a long time I met 8 fellow ex-pupils, it was disappointing that there weren't more attending. Despite this moan, it was good to catch up and we all enjoyed hearing about what we'd been up to over the last 60 years. A few more people to keep in touch with now!! In the evening we had a talk by an ex-pupil - Dr John Shears - about the expedition he led to find Ernest Shackleton's ship the Endurance, a talk that commanded an audience of 300. It was very interesting, but as he lives north of Cambridge, I won't be booking him for the Club.

My final point is to let you know that the profits from the Christmas Dinner Raffle have been distributed to the Dorset & Somerset Air Ambulance, and the Yeovil Freewheelers (Blood Bikes) – with £57 going to each.



WELFARE & SOCIAL

Welfare – *Roger Ellis*

Not a great deal to tell you all, I am glad to say, except that our thoughts are with Phil Butler at this difficult time.

I have told you before how guilty I felt at the Probus Dinner when one of the ladies took me to task about forgetting the widow when one of our members passes away. Colin Chamberlain and I will not forget them in this coming year when we think of invitees for the BBQ and Christmas Lunch.

I called Christine Allberry this week to pass on a phone number to her and to enquire how she was coping. She told me that she has her good days and bad days, which is only to be expected, but the family are assisting - as one would hope. She tells me she is going to sell Chas's Mercedes, and if any member wants one of these "C" class vehicles in showroom condition let me know. (I could get my Fiat in the boot!)



Social – Lunches – Roger Ellis

At the time of writing this report we have twelve persons for the lunch at the Rugby Club on 21st February, and Jeanette has asked for meal choices to be with her two weeks before the event. I will remind you again before the deadline date.

I will be going to the Udder Farm Shop shortly to try and arrange the March lunch (21st March), but I expect to have to email the Pope and our PM in order to extract a menu from them!

Social – ‘Ferroequinologists’¹ – Roger Ellis

If any of you happen by WH Smith's in the next week or two, February's 'Continental Modeller' magazine is featuring a wonderful Swiss/Austrian model railway. Don't buy the magazine, but just thumb through the pages as though interested! The railway layout is neat, organised and despite its age looks rather good, just like the person who built it!
(Wonder who that might be? – Ed)



Social - Future Club Events - Editor

<p>Tuesday 10th February 2023</p>	<p>‘Life & Death of the German Battleship Bismarck’ <i>James Porter</i></p>
<p>Tuesday 21st February 2023</p>	<p>‘The Red Arrows’ <i>David Parsons</i> This is a Ladies Invitation Day – and there is a lunch in the Clubhouse after the talk. (see website)</p>



¹ "A person who is recreationally interested in trains and rail transport systems" – Wikipedia.

REPORTS ON OUR JANUARY TALKS

‘One Plod at a time’

John Bartlett – 10 January 2023

John Bartlett, who lives at Milton-on- Stour, provided us with some reminiscences from his service with the Metropolitan Police (“the Met”) as a Police driver.



Having previously served in the traffic section of the Surrey Constabulary for eight years before he joined the Met, John was already an experienced driver, and came with his advanced driving qualification. However, despite his experience with the Surrey force, he started his posting with the ‘big boys’ of the Met as the driver of a ‘Panda’ car (a Morris Minor). As a result, he was initially at somewhat of a disadvantage when chasing more powerful cars through the back streets of London!



Following a course at the Police Driving School at Hendon, John became a qualified Class 1 Police driver, and moved on to driving more powerful cars. Partly as a result of this, he found himself regularly attending the Central Magistrates Court, and John told us stories of a wide variety of cases he encountered.

During his time at the Met, John was based at several Police Stations, and moved on to driving 'Q' cars (these are high performance unmarked cars with an unassuming exterior).



His career progressed and he went to transfer to CID, where his driving skills were again put to good use. He told a number of stories connected with the job, but time prevented him recounting the details of too many.

The Chairman gave the vote of thanks.

Report: Alan Jeffs



‘The Merchant Navy in WWII’

David Parsons MNM – 24 January 2023

David Parsons spent 29 years in Merchant Service, joining as an apprentice, and rising to the rank of Captain. He also served in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary and finally on Cross Channel ferries, and following retirement is the current Chairman of the Yeovil Probus Club. His talk about the Merchant Navy in WW11 explained how essential merchant shipping was to the very survival to this country, and the huge losses of ships and crew involved.



The term ‘Merchant Navy’ includes all ships and seafarers engaged in the nation’s shipping; the term was conferred by HRH King George V in 1922, in recognition of the importance of the Merchant Navy (MN) in times of peace and war; for the talk, it was used as a generic title for the shipping fleets of the UK and the Commonwealth.

At the turn of the 20th Century the British MN comprised the largest fleet in the world, with over 3,000 merchant ships. By the 1930’s, due to the recession, the number had reduced considerably, with many ships laid off, and seafarers looking for employment. But by the end of that decade, the winds of war were blowing once again. Germany was putting its U-boat fleet

and battleships to sea; the MN started to take precautionary measures, such as strengthening decks to be able to take guns. Sealed orders were issued, containing details of convoy rendezvous, to be opened in the event of war being declared.

Britain declared war at 5pm on 3rd September 1939. At 7:40pm the same evening the liner 'Athenia' was sunk by a U-boat, even though passenger vessels were not considered legitimate targets; as well as the loss of the ship, 19 crew and 93 passengers were lost, of whom 28 were Americans.

SS Athenia



Three days later, this was followed by the loss of the Cunard freighter 'Bosnia', and the tramp ship 'Royal Sceptre'. The battle of the Atlantic had begun.

The convoy system was quickly put into operation; but naval escorts were limited, with old US destroyers being used under the lend-lease agreement with the US, and there was very limited air cover. Some converted merchant ships were armed

and put under Navy discipline for convoy protection duties. The ship 'Rawalpindi' was sunk in November 1939 with major loss of life after encountering the German battlecruisers 'Scharnhorst' and 'Gneisenau'. A year later in November 1940, HMS Jervis Bay - a British liner converted into an 'armed merchant cruiser' - was sunk by the German heavy cruiser 'Admiral Scheer' while protecting its convoy in an action which earned her captain the Victoria Cross. The shortage of Navy ships and officers was a major problem.



HMS Jervis Bay

The German Deutschland class battleship 'Graf Spee' was responsible for shipping losses in the South Atlantic, until being scuttled in December 1939 following the Battle of the River Plate. Survivors from its actions against Merchant shipping (e.g. the cargo ship *Clement*) had been taken prisoner on the 'Graf Spee' and were transferred to the German supply ship 'Altmark', which was eventually found in February 1940 by the 'HMS Cossack' in Norwegian waters, and the prisoners were freed.

The Merchant Navy performed a vital part in the evacuation of Dunkirk and surrounding areas in 1940, with smaller boats transporting troops from the beaches to the ships lying offshore, whilst enduring heavy bombing. The MN fleet grew substantially as the war continued, supplemented by ships from displaced countries, the Empire, and – post Pearl Harbour (December 1941) – from the USA.

Despite the protection given by travelling in convoy, there were still considerable losses, both in terms of personnel and in ship tonnage. Even ships in port were not safe during the Blitz, with the enemy bombing the docks. Gradually, convoys became more organised and better protected, with aircraft used to spot U-boats, better intelligence (from Bletchley Park), and the use of depth charges. The North Atlantic convoys were organised from an operations room in Liverpool.

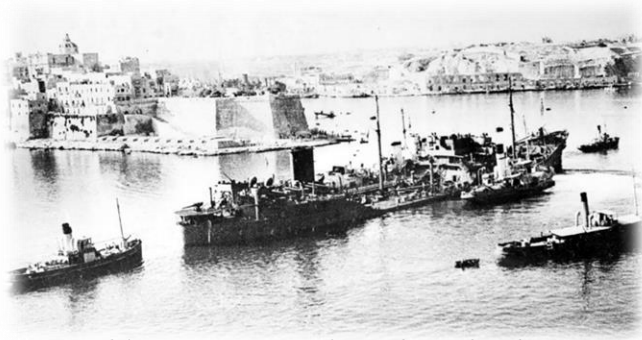
Convoy escorts were strengthened by *Castle* and *Flower Class* corvettes. A number of merchant ships were also converted into aircraft carriers.

RN Escort on Arctic Convoy



The Russian convoys - battling through the icy cold waters round the North Cape of Norway to supply Russia - were particularly hazardous; survival in the water in the event of ships being sunk, was 3 minutes at best. A major disaster occurred in 1942 to Convoy 'PQ17' sailing from Iceland to Arkhangelsk, Russia was scattered when it was

thought (erroneously) that the German battleship ‘Tirpitz’ was moving to attack the convoy. After the covering force split off and the convoy broke up, out of 35 merchant ships, 24 were sunk by Luftwaffe aircraft and U-boats (not by ‘Tirpitz’).



SS Ohio post convoy in Valetta harbour

Another ‘famous’ convoy that suffered badly was the well-defended 50 ship convoy assembled for *Operation Pedestal* in August 1942, which sailed to relieve the strategic island of Malta; only five merchant ships managed to make it through, including the tanker *Ohio* - an American-built tanker with a British crew. More than 500 Merchant and Royal Navy sailors and airmen were killed and only five of the fourteen Merchant ships reached Grand Harbour, Valetta in Malta.

The Merchant Navy was also essential to supplying the invasions of Sicily, Italy and D-Day in France. The war in the Far East was particularly brutal, and Merchant Navy crews and officers were not immune from the Japanese culture of Bushido used on captured servicemen.

Whilst the vast majority of seafarers were men, there were a few exceptions; one notable woman was Victoria Drummond (the first woman marine engineer).



The final cost at the end of the war:

- **2,535 British Merchant vessels were lost.**
- **A death toll of some 32,000 British Merchant seafarers.**

But their loss helped to make eventual victory possible.

After questions (and our own Horace Erridge recalling his own experiences in the wartime convoys), the Chairman gave the vote of thanks.

Alan Jeffs



ENDPIECE – Editor

Murphy’s Laws

1. **Law of Mechanical Repair** - After your hands become coated with grease, your nose will begin to itch, and you’ll have to go to the loo.
2. **Law of Gravity** - Any tool, when dropped, will roll to the least accessible corner.
3. **Law of Probability** - The probability of being watched is directly proportional to the stupidity of your act.
4. **Law of Random Numbers** - If you dial a wrong number, you never get a busy signal, and someone always answers.

5. **Law of the Alibi** - If you tell the boss you were late for work because you had a flat tyre, the very next morning you will have a flat tyre.
6. **Drivers' Law** - If you change queues or traffic lanes, the one you were in will always move faster than the one you are in now. This also works in supermarkets and shops.
7. **Law of the Bath** - When the body is fully immersed in water, the telephone rings.
8. **Decree of Close Encounters** - The probability of meeting someone you know increases dramatically when you are with someone you don't want to be seen with. This is also the case if you are female, and you have gone out with no makeup and wearing your worst clothes and with greasy hair.
9. **Murphy's Office Law** - When you try to prove to someone that a machine won't work, it will. You will also find this when you show someone that something on the computer is easy, and it doesn't work.
10. **Law of Biomechanics** - The severity of the itch is inversely proportional to the reach.
11. **Law of the Theatre** - At any event, the people whose seats are furthest from the aisle arrive last.
12. **The Starbucks Edict** - As soon as you sit down to a cup of hot coffee, your boss/wife/partner will ask you to do something which will last until the coffee is cold.
13. **Murphy's Law of Lockers** - If there are only two people in a locker room, they will have adjacent lockers.
14. **Law of Physical Surfaces** - The chances of a piece of marmalade covered toast landing face down on a floor covering are directly correlated to the newness and cost of the covering.
15. **The Conundrum of Logical Argument** - Anything is possible if you don't know what you are talking about.
16. **Law of Physical Appearance** - If the shoe fits, it's ugly.
17. **Rule of Public Speaking** - A closed mouth gathers no feet.
18. **Law of Commercial Marketing Strategy** - As soon as you find a product that you really like, they will stop making it.
19. **Doctors' Law** - If you don't feel well, make an appointment to go to the doctor; by the time you get there you'll feel better. Don't make an appointment and you'll stay sick.
20. **IT Law** - If you don't save things on your computer, you will - sooner rather than later - delete them.