

Piloting The Solent

5th February 2008 - Roy Underdown Pavilion

Michael Sparkes gave a fascinating and entertaining insight into his life as a Choice Pilot for Esso, guiding the crude oil tankers in and out of the waters of the Solent.

Michael started off his talk with a history of pilotage, which dates back to 1514, when King Henry VIII gave a charter to the brothers of Trinity House, situated behind Trinity Church in Deptford. The brothers of Trinity House were given the licence for pilotage of the local Thames area. Trinity House, itself, was to become the authority for pilotage across the whole of the UK, up until 1988, when an Act of Parliament handed this authority over to the individual ports. This original charter referred to "lodesmen" who were the fore-runners of the ships pilots. The lodesmen were so called because one of the tools of their trade was a lodestone, a natural magnet, which was used to re-magnetise the ships compass needle to make it respond quicker when changing course, especially important in narrow channels.

Michael started his talk as a History lesson, and then went through the Mathematics involved in calculating the roll of the ship, being the tangent of the angle of roll times half the length of the beam of the ship! A lesson in meteorology explained the effects of barometric pressure on the "under keel clearance", the most important factor when navigating a large ship carrying as much as 200,000 tonnes of crude oil, through relatively shallow waters. Hethen progressed through the Art of Navigation, the Geography of the Solent, and the Science of fluid dynamics, as he reminded us of the Venturi Effect!

Michael spoke of his experiences piloting the 400,000 tonne supertanker Hellepont Grand, 400 metres long and 84 metres wide, the size of 4 football pitches, and regarded by the Captain as a "Par 4" in golfing terms. He spoke of how the ships were boarded 5 miles south of Nab Tower, to give plenty of time to position the ship correctly to bring it through the Solent. The method of boarding the ship via the rope and wooden ladder was tricky, even in moderately calm waters, and the trick was to identify one of the wooden steps as the pilot boat rose up alongside the ship, then, when ready, the pilot would quickly jump onto the step as the pilot boat dropped away below him, and climb the ladder as quickly as possible before the boat rose again on the next swell. This rise and fall could be as much as 3 metres, but Michael only knew of two accidents, in his 33 years of service, where the pilot had fallen off the ladder. In one incident the pilot unfortunately fell back into the pilot boat, which left him permanently disabled. In the other accident, the pilot fell into the sea, and was quickly recovered by one of the ships life boats

Although he retired from pilotage on 31st December 1999, in one hour, Michael captivated and educated his audience in all aspects of the job he clearly loved so much.