

Hamble's Compass Expert

16th February 2010 - Roy Underdown Pavilion

Ron Robinson, Hamble's Compass Adjuster, has been in business at Hamble for over 30 years and is based at St Andrews Building, where he also has a Nautical Antiques shop. Ron explained his work as a Compass Adjuster was an outdoor activity and not done in an office/workshop as many people think.

He outlined the history of the compass, the principles being discovered around the 12th century and they came into use in the 15th & 16th centuries. The start of compass adjusting came in the mid 19th century when iron and steel was introduced into ship construction.

It was found that this caused significant errors in compasses, creating many problems including shipwrecks. This was overcome in 1840s by placing correcting magnets around the compass.

Ron brought a variety of equipment to the meeting to illustrate his work including old compasses, charts and a 1911 German book which is the definitive history of the compass containing some superb drawings. He used an old simulator to explain the process of compass adjusting.

Over his career he has worked on most of the cruise ships that operate out of Southampton, plus oil tankers, container ships etc. His work needs to be carried out accurately and quickly. He usually undertakes this by 'swinging the ship', which takes about 20 minutes, between Ryde and Portsmouth in the Solent as it leaves on its voyage. Following this he disembarks with the Pilot at the Nab Tower.

He also works on naval ships, recently some in the Falklands. A great amount of his work is on leisure craft and his main area of work is from Dover to Portland. Ron has during his career 'swung' thousands of yachts off Hamble Point Buoy and regularly visits Sunseeker at Poole to adjust compasses for its new luxury boats. He also supplies compasses for the special needs of classic yachts.

Ron has worked on many notable boats, such as Francis Chichester & Alec Rose round the world yachts and compasses for Atlantic rowers such as John Ridgeway and Chay Blyth.

Compasses have to be tested and adjusted every two years, and there are only a few people that undertake this work, so Ron is kept very busy. From his talk it was obvious that he really enjoys his work and he has trained his daughter to follow in his trade.

Ron also summarized how he set up his Nautical Antiques shop and his attitude to choosing the items he buys and sells. A fascinating and informative talk!