

The Nautical Training Corps - From Ian Hick

Moving “up” to King James’ Grammar School in 1949 I found myself in a class with a couple of boys from Boroughbridge (Alastair Burkes and John “Chucky” Reynard) who were members of The Nautical Training Corps. This was a sort of “independent” Sea Scouts run by “Skipper”, who (if my memory serves me correctly) had been captain of HMS Sheffield during World War II. They met on Monday evenings when Skip travelled over from Pool in Wharfedale and learnt basic seamanship skills - knots, chart reading, weather signs, use of a sextant and compass, etc. During the winter meetings were usually held in members’ homes - the Tasker’s (Michael) in New Row or the Sadler’s (Ernest) in High Street.

I was persuaded to join and each Monday evening caught the bus to Boroughbridge from my home in Knaresborough, proudly wearing my navy serge shorts (nobody under fourteen ever wore long trousers) and pullover, but carrying my carefully blanched beribboned sailor’s hat.

In the summer time we met on the river bank at the bottom of Boddy’s woodyard, where our two boats were stored alongside the ramp where boats built there had been launched in times past. The Corps had a small clinker built dinghy, complete with mast and single sail, and an ex-Royal Navy twenty foot lifeboat, open to the weather but with long oars and a very small outboard motor that could be attached to the stern to save our arms. Many happy hours were spent rowing, and sailing, up and down the river learning how to tack and gibe, row without splashing or “catching a crab”, avoid Dick Potter’s barges, splice ropes, and, to work as a team.

Each year the Corps went away to camp and, as there were not many of us in the Corps, Skip invited some Sea Scouts from Wembley to join us. This meant that, once all the tents, cooking equipment, food, and personal gear had been loaded there wasn’t room for all of us in the boat so it was agreed that each day two of us would cycle to the next planned stop. Of course, this tested our map reading skills as we followed the route drawn up by Skip. The very small outboard motor had to work hard to keep a steady three knots and progress was quite “steady”. However, Skip had planned for us to reach the tidal waters below Naburn as the tide was ebbing and provided useful assistance as we made for Blacktoft for an overnight stop. As this was my first camp I was dutifully “christened” on the dockside with a large, full, bottle of lemonade, leaving my pullover quite tasty but very sticky for the rest of the week.

Next morning we had to time our journey from Blacktoft so that we could aim for the mouth of the river Trent just as the tide was turning so that our tiny engine could manage to get us across the Humber before we were swept back in the direction of Naburn. There was a slight panic at one stage when the water seemed to be rushing past but the boat didn’t appear to be actually moving towards the opposite bank. It quickly became apparent that we were resting on a sandbank and so it was a matter of three or four of us leaping over the side, to lessen the draft, and pushing the boat into deeper water. Down through Gainsborough and Lincoln we eventually arrived at our destination - Boston - and set up camp. There wasn’t sufficient tentage to accommodate all of us so, each night, four people slept on the boat, with a large tarpaulin covering everything. A lot of very tired bodies slept solidly and the overnight rain didn’t wake anyone. Next morning the occupants of one tent discovered a small stream running diagonally through the tent wetting half of them, and their gear. Skip sent a couple down to the boat to check on its occupants and they found the

tarpaulin seemed to contain a number of large pools of water. Keen to awaken the sleeping sailors the enthusiastic volunteers jumped on to one end of the boat and watched, in horror, as the water on the tarpaulin rushed towards them like a tidal wave before pouring into their end of the boat, soaking the poor souls underneath.

Nothing ever seemed to bother Skip and he soon had us squeezing as much water out of the wet clothing and blankets before draping over the nearby fence where they quickly dried out in the warm sun.

On the way home Skip decided that we should take a different route from Goole along the Selby Canal but, as it was now very little used and full of weed, our tiny outboard quickly became clogged and, after freeing it a number of times, he decided that it was time to get out the oars. Taking it in turns to row I am sure we travelled much faster - until it started to rain, quite heavily. By the time we reached Selby everyone was literally soaked to the skin and it was decided that we would make the rest of the journey by service bus. Now blue is not a particularly colour fast dye and, now that all the excitement had passed, we began to notice each other and realised that we were giving a pretty good impression of woad decorated Ancient Brits - we were blue from head to toe, although the bus conductors were very good about it and never said a word!

In 1951 the passenger carrying service of the railway was discontinued and Skip arranged for us to use the redundant waiting room on Boroughbridge Station as our Headquarters. He also came across an RNLI lifeboat that had been released from service and this was duly parked up in the canal, alongside Canal Garage. However, other members of my class were now members of 1953 Squadron Air Training Corps, in Knaresborough, and, as I could walk from home to their HQ in Jockey Lane, I decided to transfer my allegiance from the Navy to the RAF.

Both Alastair and John went on to serve in the Royal Navy I understand but I have never seen them since I left school in 1954. I went on to work for ICI Fibres Division, alongside Michael Tasker, and we still bump into each other from time to time.