

My First Cruise

Bob Wallace (Alias ACE/Biffo)

I joined what was then the National Institute of Oceanography (NIO) in October 1967 having recently left the Merchant Navy as a second engineer. The position at NIO was for a laboratory technician in the workshop and I was told at the interview that there would possibly be some sea-going in the future on the research ships that were used by the scientists. This appealed to me as I missed the sea going from my previous employment.

In the summer of 1968 I was asked to go down to Southampton to work on Discovery in preparation for the initial trials in Loch Fyne of the Mk1 GLORIA. Unfortunately when we tried to launch it in the dock for tests prior to sailing the davit collapsed and Gloria was badly damaged so we all came home.

The following year, 1969, I was asked would I like to do a short sea trip on a vessel that we had chartered for some current meter mooring laying and recovery. The ship was the Vickers Venturer which had been bought by Vickers from the White Fish authority and converted to launch and maintain their submersible Pisces. The ship had a spare slot so we chartered it for four weeks.

My job was to drive the Double Barrelled Capstan (“DBC”) which had been built for the purpose of deploying and recovering current meter moorings. So I packed my bags and set off to join the ship in Plymouth. (Description on the Technologies and Infrastructure page)

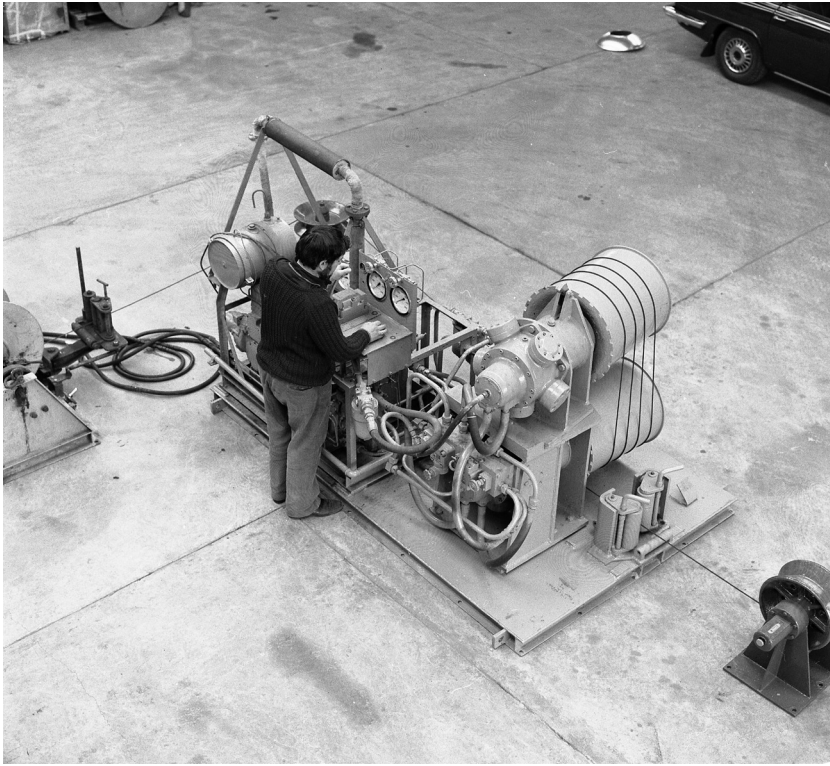


The Vickers Venturer

On arrival I took one look at the ship in utter horror having been used to 20,000 ton cargo ships this thing was a tiny trawler and would roll on wet grass. I gingerly walked on board and met the chief scientist, Dr John Swallow, whom I had been told about earlier and was a man who took no prisoners and you were expected to work as hard as he did.

I was then shown my cabin which was below the waterline in the converted fish hold - so, no porthole, no sink and no toilet. They were on the deck above reached by going up a vertical steel ladder at the end of the hold. These days it would be illegal to put people in accommodation like that but this was before all the health and safety rules that came in later. “Ah well”, I thought, “this should be an experience”. So I unpacked my bags and was asked by Dennis Gaunt (who was the head of the technical team on board and who had designed the DBC for the mooring work) to head for the pub at the end of the dock, “The Spiders Web”, where we would all meet up prior to sailing that evening. I asked Dennis what time would we be sailing “Oh when the pub shuts I expect”. I had been used to precise times when the ship would sail as we had to have engine trials, boat drills and inspection of the ship by the chief engineer and captain. No such thing with this outfit which made me wonder what lay ahead.

I walked back to the ship after last orders and decided to look down the engine room - BIG MISTAKE! No one down there - just a small generator running and two larger engines which weren't running as yet. Since we were due to sail I thought at least they would be warming them up. Again, compared to what I was used to, they were tiny twin Maybach's which were originally designed for Tiger tanks. By this time I had lost all faith in this lot so I went on deck to watch the ship sail. That was a laugh; the captain threw the rope on board, leapt onto the bow and said “Shall we go?” I went to my cabin and turned in before the next shock.



Bob Wallace testing the DBC in the yard at Wormley.

I went for breakfast at 0730. The saloon was very small and we all sat facing the bulkhead with no view as there were no portholes. The food was OK but nothing fancy. The ship had a funny twisting motion as it steamed into the swell, which was very moderate. In a gale it would really perform being short and wide in the beam. On the good side, the ship was clean and the food palatable and the crew were very friendly. There was no shortage of tea and coffee or cigarettes and beer.

We arrived at the working area in the North of the Bay of Biscay after about 2 ½ days steaming. The weather was glorious and the sea like a millpond. The winch that I was driving was situated in a large well deck and was powered by a small diesel engine which was very noisy and the fumes from the exhaust hung around in the well

deck as there was no wind to blow them away. The winch was a pig to drive as you had to lean over the main pump and pull a small lever up and down to control the speed and direction of the winch drums. Also you had no view of what was happening on the stern when they were laying and recovering current meter moorings as there was a bulkhead between the winch and the stern. I had to rely on hand signals from Dennis who was leaning over the stern. So what with the noise and fumes, and not really aware of what the mooring team were doing, I was not a happy bunny.

After a week of this I began to get used to it and became more familiar with what was going on. The days were long, at least 12 hours a day, if not more. No overtime in those days and no limits on hours worked. We started dragging for a lost mooring which took 3 hours to pay out the wire, 3 hours on the sea bed and 3 hours hauling it all back in and we did that for 3 days with one night off. So we decided to have a bit of “R and R” in my cabin which involved six of us and a case of beer and a bottle of gin. At about 2230 John Swallow appeared clutching another bottle of gin. This was unusual for John as he never normally got involved in any drinking bouts. By about 0130 in the morning the party broke up and we all turned in. I was woken up at 0530 by John tapping on the side of my bunk and saying “Morning Robert. Could you come and drive the winch as I want to put out 3000 meters of wire to start dragging?” I couldn’t believe it. I was having serious doubts about this job at NIO.

The final straw came when I awoke one morning and all was quiet. I went up on deck and the ship was dead in the water the main engine had seized up due to a cooling pump falling over in the night. So the captain asked a passing ship for a tow back to Plymouth. That was it I decided to return to the Merchant Navy on my return to NIO.

All this happened 46 years ago and in fact I stayed at NIO/IOS/SOC for 34 years and had a very enjoyable time. On reflection my first trip was a bit of an eye opener but I went on to do many more sea trips on NERC ships and many charter ships. Over the years I sailed with John Swallow many times and I had great respect for him. I did one of his last cruises before he retired, it was in the Indian Ocean in 1979 and again he did something very unusual for him at sea. I was driving a winch on the foredeck on *RRS Discovery* it was a glorious afternoon and John appeared with a bottle of wine and cheese and biscuits on a silver tray with two glasses and said “I think we will have a break Robert.”