

HI INTERVIEWS ADMIRAL STEVE RITCHIE, COLUMNIST ‘AS IT WAS’™

A Farewell to Times Past

We have all enjoyed the column entitled ‘As it Was’™, contributed since the very first issue of Hydro international by Admiral Steve Ritchie. The piece has always been very much appreciated and we have received many positive reactions to it. Steve’s lifetime has encompassed the technical revolution in hydrography; it is seventy years since he entered the surveying service and forty since he became UK Hydrographer. So that in terms of memory alone he was the perfect man to carry the ‘As it Was’™ column. But he also had a reputation as author of some interesting publications, including his books *Challenger*, *The Admiralty Chart* and *No Day Too Long*. It is with regret that we have accepted Steve Ritchie’s decision to stop his column. Luckily for us, he has assured us of his willingness to keep on contributing, including advice when he deems it necessary. And he kindly agreed to this interview with Hydro international.

Almost superfluous, but for those readers just entering the hydrographic arena, can you tell us something about how you became involved in hydrography and what followed thereafter?

I was a naval cadet at Dartmouth Naval College from 1928 to 1931 and during the holidays one evening Admiral Sir Frederick Learmonth came to dinner. He was a former Hydrographer of the Navy currently serving on the Board of the Port of London Authority, of which my father was the secretary. When I was introduced to him as a Dartmouth cadet he realised he would have an attentive listener to his stories of navigating in treacherous currents through narrow channels in pulling boats with sextants and lead and line. And how the sailors landed to camp at night on the fringes of the forests of British Columbia.

Back at Dartmouth I asked those officers I could approach for details of the Surveying Service, but they knew little of the dozen or so survey ships working in many distant parts of the world. During my three years at sea as a midshipman I was always on the lookout for one such ship, but it was not until I became a Sub Lieutenant that I was able to join the ancient, coal-burning vessel *Herald* as a temporary acting 4th Class assistant surveyor. My feet were on the first step of the long ladder.

Looking at all the publications from your hand, you must have a keen interest in history. Can you tell us how this started? Were you already interested in history at primary school, or did it arise from a certain occasion in your life?

It was at sea when I saw the wonderful work that had been done by nineteenth-century naval hydrographers that I began to interest myself in the lives of these men, many of whom drew the beautiful coastal views.

No doubt you have an interesting private library on hydrography? Can you tell us something about it?

The interest awakened at sea led on to collecting books concerning the early hydrographers and oceanographers, a collection that steadily built up over the years and is now catalogued. These books were of very great use to me when researching here at home for the material for ‘As it Was’™.

The Ritchie building at the UKHO in Taunton is a tribute to you, in recognition of your contribution to hydrography. Can you tell us something about what the building houses and how this is accessible to the interested public?

I have always been worried about the hydrographic archives, which include surveys and reports by the earliest UK hydrographers and were in the care of the Hydrographic Office. They were particularly badly cared for in the cellars in the Cricklewood Office for about twenty years following the Second World War, until the office was moved to Taunton; even here space was declining as incoming material from many nations inevitably increased. So for me it was a wonderful day when Hydrographer Wyn Williams informed me that new ‘state-of-the-art’™ archives were to be established alongside the Hydrographic Office at Taunton. The building was to be named after me and I was to dig the first great foundation trench with a massive digger “what a joy!

Six former UK Hydrographers were to be among the many guests, to include twelve of my family and friends, at the opening of the Ritchie Building by HRH the Duke of York on 26th November 2003. I felt an enormous sense of satisfaction when the last of the archives were finally installed. The Archives are all part of the National Collection and may be visited for study by arrangement through the Archivist, UKHO Taunton.

Your book *No Day Too Long - A Hydrographer’s Tale*, describes both your personal experience and the techniques used during your time from junior surveyor to president of the IHB. Can you tell us what experience or survey in retrospect made the most impression on you and why? We are impressed by your covert surveys on the Normandy coast in preparation for D-day, but you may have another choice.

Looking back on fifty years of sea surveying, I have thought that I should write a book describing the many technical advances which took place during that time, from lead and line to GPS.

I had many exciting times in the field, but perhaps the best remembered was when as a young Lieutenant I was attached to the Eighth Army in North Africa, Sicily and the East Coast of Italy as far as the River Sangro. I had with me an RNVR Lieutenant and four men. Our job was to be at hand with our small boat on a truck when the Army captured a port, when we had to survey the damage created by the departing enemy so that we could find berths for the fleet of small vessels bringing succour to our army.

Revolution in techniques: you started surveying in almost the same way as was practised at the time of Dalrymple, the first British Hydrographer, back in 1795. But during your time as hydrographic surveyor then technical wonders like Decca, the Tellurometer, and side-scan sonar came into use. Can you recall your thoughts at that time and describe them now, looking back and perhaps comparing what is now on the market?

The arrival of Decca on D-Day 6th June 1944, followed by the development of two-range Decca, was to me the most significant breakthrough, leading to a great increase in inshore work in so many parts of the world. Although, I have to admit, GPS seems to me the winner so far.

You keep pace amazingly with developments in technology, using email as a normal way of communication. This feel of yours for the use of new technology must have influenced the UK Hydrographic Service, especially while you were Hydrographer. Can you tell us something about this?

When I was appointed Hydrographer in 1966, ageing single-colour printing presses at Taunton presented the opportunity to install new, four-colour Crabtree Sovereign machines to enable us to launch chart modernisation. To change the traditional grey format of the Admiralty Chart to a coloured version with continuous contours, anticipating the introduction of automated seabed cartography. In 1967, when we were finalising the four-colour chart, the Labour Government under Harold Wilson decided to encourage adoption of the metric system by establishing a Metrication Board. As it was fifty years since the IHB had passed an early resolution to the effect that all depths and heights on charts should appear in metres, it seemed to me that the metric system could now be introduced on the differently coloured chart. Even if the final scheme might take thirty or forty years. The Navy and yachtsmen were not enthusiastic but the world's merchant fleets generally approved and the final scheme of metric charts facilitated the introduction of international charts as the years rolled by.

Can you tell our readers something of the tradition behind your dancing at the HYDRO conferences?

I have always enjoyed rhythmic dancing, and have had the opportunity during many visits to Pacific Islands and five times participation in Trinidad Carnival Road Marches. Certain Dutch "friends" were constantly arranging, unbeknown to me, for me to dance with beautiful ladies at the festivities during Hydrographic Conferences. It was a final pleasure to dance with Pamela Sanabria at Hydro 06, a partner with whom I had danced so often before.

Can you tell our readers how you became a columnist for Hydro international?

At the tenth Biennial Symposium of the Hydrographic Society (Hydro 96) in Rotterdam in 1996 Commodore Egon Bakker, lately Netherlands Hydrographer, told me that Johan Boesjes of GITC was about to launch a new magazine to be entitled "Hydro international". Its aim would be to keep all those interested in positioning and measurement at sea regularly informed of the steady advance in instrumentation and technique becoming available to hydrographers worldwide. Egon was to be editor-in-chief and asked me to contribute a monthly column that he called "the old stories", in which I was to cover highlights of hydrographic history worldwide. I began in the first issue with a steam-sounding machine invented by a British Surveyor, which we used onboard the Herald in 1936 when sounding in less than eleven fathoms. Using the echo sounder did not yet have the confidence of our captain.

I have found many interesting friends over the years to help me with the column, and have learnt much from them.

Is there a subject that you should like to have written up for "As it Was" but were prevented from doing so by lack of facts or time?

I was very interested in doing an "As it Was" Column on the San Rafael Lagoon and the early surveys that were made to access this Chilean lagoon and its famous ice wall by Admiral Enrique Simpson, former Chilean Hydrographer. I had received an excellent text from Captain Roberto Garnham, but never seemed to be able to find sufficiently readable charts or diagrams to illustrate the intricate channels concerned.

Can you tell our readers how you intend to fill the time which has become available now you no longer have to research your column, or other contributions, such as for the Show Daily produced by the publisher of Hydro international at major exhibitions like the OI?

Time will not hang heavy on my hands. I have underway several hydrographic articles, including a long chapter for a book on South African Surveys, and I will expect to write the occasional book review.

In the summer my family will be fishing for herring to make kippers and smoked mackerel to fill the freezer for the long winters.

Do you have a message for our readers?

The ever-growing world interest in the ocean will require more skilled hydrographers and oceanographers, and more sophisticated instrumentation to meet these demands; only an ever-growing profusion of both will do so.

