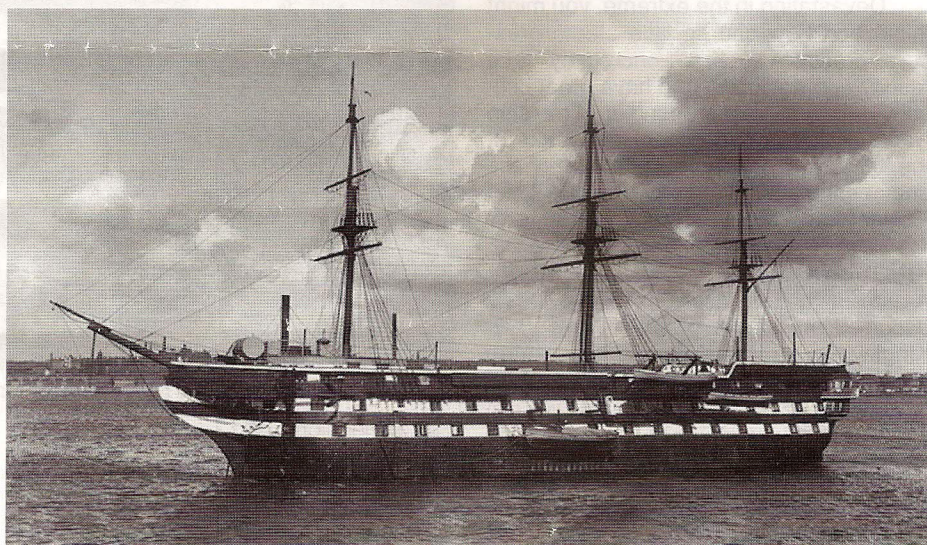


H.M.S. CONWAY AS I KNEW HER

In 1848 it was said in Parliament that the British Merchant Service was "at all times imperilled by the incompetence of British shipmasters". Steam was replacing sail and marine technology was developing much faster than the education of those who commanded merchant cargo vessels.

Lloyds and other insurance companies were increasingly worried at the frequent loss of ships and cargoes through the ignorance of many ships' masters and officers, who did not know how to navigate accurately out of sight of land. So in 1851 a Parliamentary Act was passed to establish marine boards for the "strict examination of men seeking to become masters and mates in blue-water ships, and for dealing with marine mishaps". The Crimean War (1854-56) exacerbated this situation when transport ships were foundering due solely to uneducated masters and officers running them into trouble. After the war there was a lively desire to improve things and eventually the Mercantile Marine Service Association (M.M.S.A.) of Liverpool was formed. The Admiralty provided a laid up "jackass frigate", H.M.S. Conway, a sixth rate man o'war, to be used as a training ship for boys wishing to enter the Merchant Service.

Thus the school frigate Conway was anchored permanently in the Sloyne, off Rock Ferry, near Birkenhead, opposite Liverpool, offering a year course of everything nautical, from handling boats to mastering stellar navigation. Cadet numbers soon went up to 150 and HMS Winchester, a fourth rate of 487 tons became the second Conway in 1862. Applicant numbers continued to grow and in 1876 the much larger H.M.S. Nile, a 92 gun, two deck ship of the line became the third and last Conway, still H.M.S. as she



H.M.S. Conway.

was only on Admiralty loan to the M.M.S.A., which became the shipmasters' trade union. For the rest of her life she was largely financed by Alfred Holt's Blue Funnel Line.

Thousands of young men passed through the ship into the Royal and Merchant Navies over her next 77 years, including the future Poet Laureate John Masefield who left her in 1894 to join the White Star Line's four masted barque Gilcruix for a voyage from Cardiff out round the Horn to Iquique in Chile.

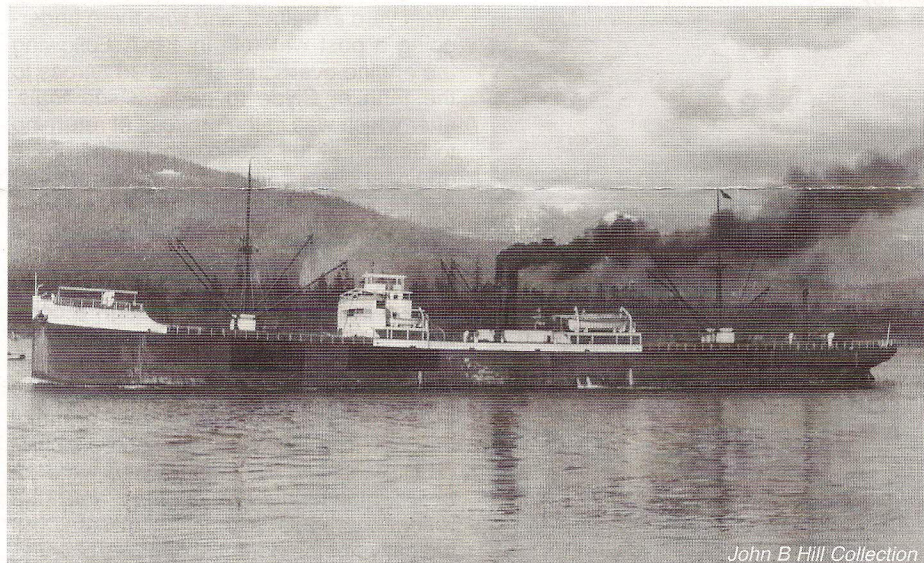
The Merseyside blitz of 1941 must have been extremely worrying for all aboard that old wooden ship, anchored with 200 cadets aboard in the Luftwaffe's direct line of fire. Captain Goddard, who was still in command as Captain Superintendent when I joined eight years later, watched as a German bomber dropped two parachute magnetic mines overhead. They floated down between the

masts, into the water alongside. Captain Goddard (himself an old Conway) ordered 'Abandon Ship' and everyone including the cat was soon off and safely ashore, but next day one of the mines which had lodged under Tacoma City, which was anchored nearby, blew up and Conway's No 1 motor boat picked up 45 of her crew including the captain.

Conway's two white strakes were painted black to make the ship less obvious to German aircraft but deeming the situation to be too dangerous for the ship and her boys, on 21st May Conway was towed by the two Liverpool tugs Langworth and Dogworth to Bangor at the eastern entrance to the Menai Straits, off which she remained at anchor until 1949. In 1948 it had been decided to move and anchor her off Plas Newydd, the Marquis of Anglesey's stately home, part of which had been acquired as a shore base, to house the first hundred or so cadets. The more senior boys still lived aboard the ship, on main deck, lower deck, orlop deck and hold.

I and my good friend Mike Hatton had decided to make the sea our careers and our parents were persuaded by our high school headmaster that the best way to start was by doing two years on the Conway. This would be expensive but M.M.S.A. scholarships were available, to which our age of 16 years and good O Levels helped, and we were awarded scholarships after attending the ship off Bangor for interviews.

Her yards, topmasts and topgallant masts were struck and all unnecessary weight removed before she was shifted by the tugs Dongarth and Minegarth. All went well through the difficult passage, with only four feet beneath her in the shallowest part and then only three feet between the lower mast heads and the two bridges. Passage through the Menai Straits by the largest and deepest draft ship ever to do

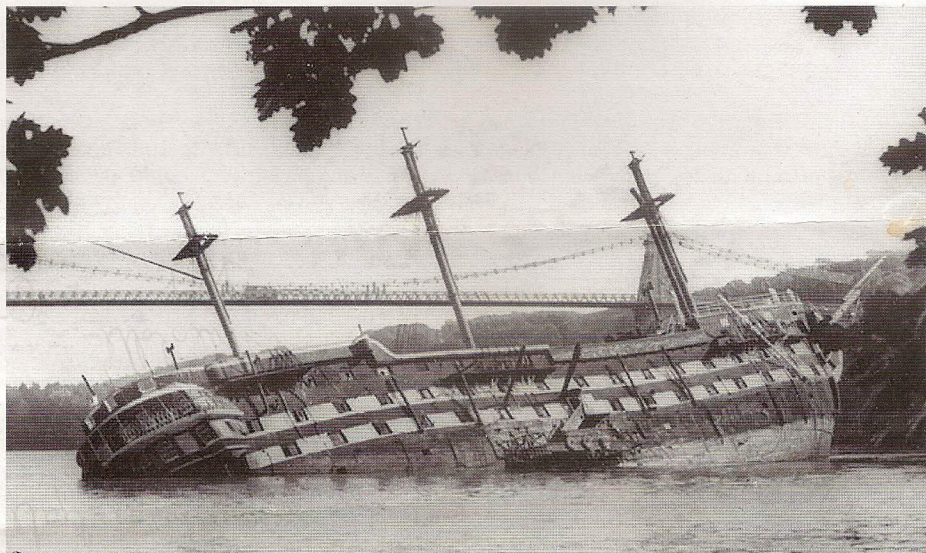


The 4,738grt Tacoma City blew up when she hit a mine near to H.M.S. Conway on 13th March 1941. She was built in 1929 by Wm. Gray at Hartlepool for Reardon Smith.

so, and that without her own power and entirely dependent on two tugs, was a magnificent piece of seamanship and Captain Goddard cheerfully admitted afterwards that his previous experience in marine surveying helped his determination to get the ship through and into the new lease of life which the Plas Newydd anchorage would provide. A year's work in surveying the Straits, the tides and likely weather, had been carried out with enthusiastic skill, and he, above all others heaved a sigh of relief when his precious Conway arrived safely at her new anchorage. Here Liverpool Salvage Association's steamer Ranger was there to meet her and join up the previously laid moorings. These consisted of four big anchors, (two of them the Conway's originals), laid in specially dug graves, two on the Caernarvon bank and two on the Anglesey side, with four lengths of ship's anchor chain from them to a mooring ring on the Strait's bottom from which a vertical chain led up to the swivel, shackled to the ship's two bower anchors. Thus she was able to swing safely to the tides, full circle twice a day, in what were always strong currents in each direction. I was only able to appreciate the magnitude of this operation when I joined the ship a few weeks later, for summer term 1949.

Coming from the sheltered life I had led at home, life on Conway was at first quite a shock. We slung our hammocks every evening before turning in to the bugle's "last post", then turned out next morning to "reveille" at 0600. Up a wooden companion ladder to the draughty basins for a wash in cold water, back down to the orlop deck to dress for breakfast. Our normal rig was what were called S.B.s, with blue shirts and detachable soft white collars, a navy battledress, reefers with stiff white collars on Sundays. Lash up and stow then. In the first term the lashed up hammocks were inspected by our Cadet captain and one stroke with the rope's end, called the teaser, was applied for every piece of bedding he could pull out, as hammocks were our lifebuoys if the ship sank and were only waterproof when lashed up tight with seven turns of rope. Should six pieces of bedding be pulled out you qualified for six of the best, on the spot. It was pointed out that you had to do every job properly or you'd suffer for it, which was sensible when one realises that lives aboard ship depend on everything being done correctly. Until the school bugle sounded we cleaned our orlop deck, shifting the big wooden sea chests. Every cadet had one of these, painted black with his name white-painted on the side. School classes were like a shoreside establishment except we were taught nautical maths, navigation, seamanship, signalling, and all the other nautical subjects. We were a public school where the classical subjects such as Greek and Latin were replaced by nautical ones.

The Conway depended for her links with the shore on her boats, manned by the cadets. Foremost was the pinnacle



The Conway after she was wrecked in the Menai Strait.

which had once been armed with a machine gun, belonging to a German raider which had begun life as a Blue Funnel ship on the building stocks. She was impounded when the invading Nazis took over her builder's shipyard. The water boat was a small tanker which brought water from Port Dinorwic, two miles away on the Welsh shore. Numbers One and two were all purpose motorboats. All four motorboats had cadet crews of four, cox, engineer, bow and sternman. Also in constant use were three wooden former Royal Navy cutters, ten and twelve oared, pulling and coxing which became quite an art, especially when coming alongside with a six knot tide running.

Throughout my second term I was Pinnacle Sternman, which I thoroughly enjoyed. Going out before reveille to take her off the moorings, helping run her till school-time when her school crew took over, resuming in her after school until taking her out to her mooring around bedtime. It was especially quite daring in rough weather in the dark. The boats carried passengers, mail, coal, sacks of potatoes and other food to and from the ship in all weathers. We cadets kept the boats spotlessly clean, painting when considered necessary.

Rugby, cricket and cross country running were the main sports, after gangs of us had laboriously removed stones from the pitches.

There was of course some bullying aboard the ship, not exactly encouraged officially, though it was accepted that learning to deal with bullying was an important part of training for the life at sea. One bully I recall suffering under was a different fellow when years later he came aboard the ship of which I was master, in Liverpool. By then he was an officers' union rep who was sorting out what he called bullying in my ship. When I reminded him of our Conway days he closed his briefcase and went ashore without another word.

The Aberdovey Outward Bound Sea School, also a Blue Funnel financed establishment, took about twenty of us in

our fourth term for a month, which we enjoyed immensely. The Aberdovey food was vastly superior to that dished out on Conway for a start, and served on plates bearing Hitler's swastika added piquancy as they had been taken from the same one-time ex-Blue Funnel German raider. The Outward Bound course took us on long hikes over the Welsh mountains and out to sea across Cardigan Bay in their ketches Garibaldi and Warspite. Seasickness was soon overcome and Aberdovey was like a holiday after the rather draconian life we led onboard. Some of the younger lads, some cadets began aged only thirteen, found life onboard terrible but we older ones learned to take it in our stride, guessing life at sea in most companies would be even harder.

Life at Sea? Onboard we were grouped not in houses but in tops, old navy style. The tops were Fore, Main, Mizzen, Forecastle, Quarterdeck, and Hold Party. The number of lads aboard had risen to 250 by now, as the shipping companies were rebuilding their war-torn fleets and cadets were in demand. Most of us were six terms aboard before joining such companies as Blue Funnel, Union-Castle, Clan Line, Cunard, Port Line, Shaw Savill, Elder Dempster, Pacific Steam Navigation Company, Booth Line, Lamport and Holt, Blue Star Line, Shell (at that time called the Anglo Saxon Petroleum Company), British Tankers - to mention but a few. The choice seemed endless!

It seemed then (1951 when I left to join Blue Star Line) that the Conway would last for ever, but when in 1953 she was being towed to Birkenhead for her first dry docking/refit since 1939, her luck ran out. The weather out in the Irish Sea worsened, a tow-rope parted at just the wrong time, and our old wooden mother went aground on the mainland rocks, never to be refloated. In two years she had taught me to become a sailor who would eventually be fit to take command. How to get on with shipmates was valuable in my future career, and the knowledge which I absorbed on the Conway stood me in good stead all my working life.