

LIFE ON THE DURHAM
BY
PETER MATTHEWS

Peter Matthews served his deck apprenticeship on the M.V. Durham between 1956 and 1959.

The following is an extract from a letter that he sent home to his mother. It was dated 14th May 1956:

“.....My first impressions of NZ are not at all what I thought they would be. I was expecting NZ to be very modern and go ahead. Instead it is almost the reverse. To start with “Closing time,” is at 6 pm. I don’t know how the poor wives get on, but, so far as I can see, after the husbands finish work they make straight for the bar and shovel as much beer inside themselves as they can before closing time. They are then pushed out to go home to their wives. Despite this, Sunday has to be experienced to be believed. The only thing that breaks the silence is the church bells. No pictures, no sports whatever – public transport is almost non-existent in any case. From Port Chalmers, one train an afternoon goes to Dunedin, about twelve miles away. The trains are diesel, but the carriages look as if they have come straight out of a cowboy film! Every day there are power cuts. There is not one light allowed on the streets at times, so consequently getting back to the ship is like the ‘Black Out’ during the war, stumbling and groping around. As for the price of a meal, I had to pay 5/6 (five shillings and six pence) for sausage, bacon and egg. Not much future on apprentices pay. In all fairness, I suppose we must say that NZ is a very small country with a population of only 2,000,000 and still very young – the first settlers came in 1848, not very long ago.

One good thing that I have experienced here so far is the people. Almost everyone I have met seems to have emigrated quite recently. How friendly they are and how they go out of their way to help you. As soon as we arrived in Lyttelton we found that a group of girls had laid on a party for us in Christchurch. Can you imagine English girls doing that? On second thoughts, perhaps they are short of boys here! They were very nice though and really went out of their way to see that we enjoyed ourselves. In return we held a party on board ‘Durham’ for them, which I am afraid to say caused quite a social stir. The mother of one of the girls, who was not at the first party, had the cheek to ring up and ask why her daughter had not been invited!! She was not given a very nice answer.

Unless you have friends, there is absolutely nothing to do here in all the places that we have visited in the South Island. I realized that the first time that I went ashore and went to Christchurch. It was a choice between the cinema and listening to the Salvation Army Band. Here in Port Chalmers there is even less – a picture house, the type that is a community thing, which does not start until

everyone is settled in and ready and NO salvation Army band! It may sound a little mean, but all the girls are really wanted for is the meal that Mum will cook if we are invited back home. The food on 'Durham' is so awful. It helps if Daddy has a car and will let the daughter drive it. I am afraid it makes me very nervous though when the girl gets keen and starts 'phoning at all hours of the day. Yes, they must be short of boys here!

Once upon a time I heard stories about NZ being a nice place, because it was very much like England, except that the climate was not so extreme. Forget it! I have never seen such awful weather as we have had in Port Chalmers. Being on the edge of 'The Roaring 40s', it howls a whole gale half the time and the rest of the time is spent still howling, but with a hailstorm put in for fun. When it hails, it really hails, my hands are half blue from cold, and the other half are blue from bruises. We had the "good fortune" to play a game of rugby in one of the hailstorms – they breed them tough down here – quite honestly it was impossible to see anything if you looked ahead. Thank heavens that the grog is cheap here. We went and got nicely warmed up after the game – more from necessity than pleasure....."

The following are comments that Peter has written now from memory to amplify his letter:

We were always broke or near broke, so when we held a party on board we would pool our funds so that we would have enough alcohol to ensure that the 'Punch for the Ladies' was well spiked.

Our pay was variously 7 Pounds 10 shillings to 19 pounds a month. It didn't go far, but my memory is that we lived like kings when we were off the vessel, trading on our English accents, which always went down well in NZ and were worth a fortune in Texas, when we ended up in Galveston for 6 months. I remember one of the Texas Mums commenting about one of my fellow cadets who came from Stratford-on Avon and who could quote Shakespeare by the yard, "la doo so laike John, he's soo cul-tured". I think that John even got to drive the family car! Not so in Australia, where many of the Aussies of our age seemed to have a chip on their shoulder and were looking for a fight.

We all liked NZ much better than Australia. We used to keep a 'Social Register' on the 'Durham', and the girls were rated in the following order:

- *Is the Mother a good cook?*
- *How often will you get invited home?*
- *Does the father allow the daughter to drive the car?*

Looks and receptiveness to sexual overtures came a long way down the list! Not that most of us got too far sexually. There was a lot of talk, but precious little action! The pursuit was the attraction! I guess that the Pill altered all that, not necessarily for the better.

Not quite so in Timaru though. A great holiday resort town for Kiwis during the summer. On the beach was a dance hall where we all used to end up. There were five sisters who always seemed to be there whenever we arrived in port. They were called 'The League of all Nations'. They had the same mother but had five different fathers!

A lot of the Officers in 'The Company' really did want to be more Navy than the Navy. Most of us dreaded it if a RN ship was in port with us. The bugles from the 'Durham' had to out do the Navy at Sunrise and sunset. Attention to detail with the uniforms for those going ashore was a real performance and the holy stones seemed to be going non-stop. I remember one of the 'Durham' officers, who was RNR, and who will remain nameless, was invited to go on board one of the 'Daring Class Destroyers', which was in port with us at some long forgotten port. He left the 'Durham' looking fantastic in his RNR uniform, complete with sword. He mounted the gangway of the destroyer. The RN quartermaster piped him aboard. He turned aft to face the Quarter Deck, positioned his sword alongside his leg and sharply pushed down on it in the approved RN manner and saluted smartly. Pity that the sword got stuck in a grating and could not easily be removed! Spoiled the whole effect.

The apprentices did most of the deck work on 'Durham'. I cannot remember any arguments about either doing the work or about the quality of the work. I can remember having to re-do work or even shore leave being cut because work had not been done properly. Overall we accepted what we had to do and enjoyed doing it. There was an experienced Company: Boson and Lampy to direct us and a Training Instructor. There were also 2 or 3 regular seamen. They were great guys who all came from Sky or the Western Islands of Scotland. Big men, who never said a lot. They just got on with their work in a steady way when the vessel was at sea. It was a pleasure to have known them, except that the Class thing was still alive and well in the mid to late 1950s, and, as cadets and future officers, we were not allowed to work or mix with them. All they ever asked of the Chief Officer was that, when the vessel made first port after the six or eight week voyage from UK to NZ or Australia, the first day was a free day for them, so that they could go ashore and have a blast. Give them that and they were never any trouble. I remember on one trip we had an inexperienced Chief Officer, who I guess wanted to make a name for himself and denied them their first day. What a miserable time they gave him for the rest of the trip.