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Bygone days revisited

Europe was in turmoil in 1939 as the drums of war beat louder and louder. Here in Falmouth the port was about to witness the final epoch of sail during that long summer leading up to hostilities with Nazi Germany. Steam ships were being replaced by motor ships and the days of the large commercial sailing ships were numbered.

In the Australian grain loading ports of Port Victoria, Port Germein and Port Lincoln, situated in Spencer's Gulf, 13 sailing ships loaded their grain cargoes for Europe in what was to be the last Grain Race of any magnitude.

The average passage time from Australia to Europe for the 1939 race was 124 days. Of the 13 ships that left southern Australia five were bound for Falmouth for orders, three for the Lizard to pick up instructions and the remainder sailed for Queenstown, Ireland.

Freight rates saw grain being carried for 25 shillings per ton. Ships normally sailed from Australia in March and April for the 100-plus days passage to Europe either via Cape Horn or the Cape of Good Hope. Between 1921 and 1939 a total of 328 sailings were made from the Australian Grain ports of which 146 ships called at Falmouth.

Pamir, Lawhill, Pommern, Winterhude and the Archibald Russell were bound for Falmouth when they sailed in 1939 from this sometimes inhospitable part of Australia known for its searing high temperatures in summer time.

Moshulu made a passage of 91 days to Ireland closely followed by the Padua, now the Russian sail trainer Kruzenshtern (93 days). Pamir arrived at Falmouth on June 12, 1939 after an uneventful 96-day passage.

Archibald Russell and Winterhude sailed past the Manacles on August 2 and 3 respectively to await orders at anchor south of Pendennis point. Archibald Russell sailed for Hull on what would be her last voyage. Stripped of her rigging this once majestic sailing ship ended her days in Goole as a storage hulk. Winterhude spent the war near Hamburg where she was scrapped.

Ships still receive instructions to proceed to Falmouth for orders. Only nowadays the instructions come via the satellite communications network or e-mail and not by the words written in The Charter Party for Grain Cargoes in Sail (1935) which clearly state that "the windjammer is forthwith to proceed to Queenstown, Falmouth or Plymouth for orders to discharge in any one safe port in Great Britain or on the Continent".

The halcyon days of commercial sail have long disappeared. Yet the majestic Russian tall ships Sedov and Kruzenshtern, both survivors of the Grain Race era provide us with a tangible link with the past providing a poignant reminder of the role Falmouth played in one of the most fascinating sailing ship trades.

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