

A Visit to Southampton Docks

Report by Michael Minton - Speaker Secretary

On 12th September 2011 Members went to the AB Port of Southampton on a visit following-up an entertaining talk on the Port given by Doug Morrison the port director in February 2011. The first part of the programme was an update talk on the past and current plans for the port with a visit and demonstration by the Harbour Master of the way the port manages sea traffic through its VTS operations room. All the operational staff have a magnificent view of the ever-changing flow of traffic on the water. This is supplemented by display screens which pick out the individual craft by radar and plot them on the various screens.

The Harbour Master has total control of what can enter this stretch of water and when it can leave. He also oversees commercial traffic into Portsmouth Harbour. His controller sits to the rear of the operations room making decisions continuously over movements: another officer in front administers and manages the pilots on and off the larger vessels, anything over 12 metres: although based in the port pilots have their launches stationed at Gosport. His forward plan is on a large scheduling sheet which is again continuously amended as circumstances and ships change with times of arrival and departure. There is another desk devoted to monitoring all the traffic with radar and communications much of which is by VHF radio channels. There is a calm professional ambience in the room with highly skilled operators carrying out a very complex task especially with container ships weighing thousands of tons, ever larger cruise ships getting towards 200,000 tons and a multitude of smaller craft from fishing boats, yachts, motor cruisers and tugs all criss-crossing and travelling back and forth along this highly congested waterway. As the size of vessel increase so does the depth of water required and plans are in hand to dredge out to 16 metres from the present 14.

The channels around the junction from the Solent into Southampton Water are particularly difficult requiring the large ships to slow from 17 knots when entering the Solent after the pilots pick them up 3 miles south of the Isle of Wight, to anywhere down to dead slow which enables them to be manoeuvred depending on the wind and tides from a line close to the island past Cowes and then to turn to starboard and then to port as they enter Southampton Water. Here radar and the controllers keep close support to the pilots to ensure clear space is available for the massive ships and cruise liners.

That Monday was particularly windy with gales in the north and a Costa cruise liner had had to seek shelter instead of going into Dover. This was a good illustration of the flexibility of the port if a berth is available. Members were able also to see the flag ships of the Cunard lines, the Queen Mary 2, a ship of 145,000 tons, and the slightly smaller Queen Elizabeth 2, plus The Eclipse which were all in harbour at the same time. Next July all 7 P & O cruise liners will be in together, so this will be a major challenge for the Harbour Master.

Ron Hancock talked about his 30 years working for the company which had shrunk from thousands of employees to just 250, but owned all the docks and provided work for 12,500 people with the major franchise being the container port. Now so much of our imports and exports are on containers with some ships carrying 11,000. Southampton is the second largest port to Felixstowe, but still the main port for cars. This trade is quite heavily biased to exports from factories all over this island. Now the challenge is to be able to accommodate ships up to 400 metres long and 220,000 + tons, so a new area of the port is being dredged to a depth of 16 metres with a new modern wharf.

With the cruise ships security is a major issue as it is with airlines and there is close co-operation with MI6 and the security services on the alert levels.

The members went on to Ocean Village for a cruise along the length of the docks to view the cruise liners and container traffic. Ron gave a continuous update as a mine of information on the past and present. Members left the port with a much greater appreciation of the dedication, skill and professionalism required to keep this country fed and supplied with a multifarious range of goods. They also understood how vital the port is to our economic prosperity as they seek to ensure Southampton remains a key resource in the trading life of this island.