

A job with a difference



Pilot Cutter Estuary Warden

Story and photographs by Tony Withers

ONE of the fascinating aspects of living in Kent is the wide range of occupations and tasks undertaken here. In an area which includes countryside and agriculture plus seaside and commercial enterprise, a diverse wealth of experience is put to work in a surprising number of ways. This first of a series of articles looks at the individuals and companies responsible for sustaining this economic region and examines their unique contribution.

Today, we look at a day in the operation of a company that spends its working hours transporting the pilots that enable the safe navigation of merchant shipping around our coastline and the work of the pilots themselves.

The English Channel is the world's busiest shipping lane and just a few miles off the tip of the Kent coast of is the northernmost part of this channel, the Thames Estuary. Ships of all sizes converge here from all over the world destined for the port of London and ports in Kent and Essex and the captains of these ships, in most cases, do not have the local knowledge, experience or authority to navigate in our often shallow and sometimes treacherous home waters. This is the job of the pilot.

Whatever the weather or time of day, pilots are responsible for the safe and timely movement of an estimated 5 million tons of shipping past our shores every month. This work is imperative if we are to avoid maritime accidents and all the horror that goes with them. Aside from the possible loss of life, imagine a scenario where all of Kent's beaches were polluted with thick black oil as

the result of an accident or spill a few miles offshore. The affect on wildlife, tourism and the local economy would be devastating and unthinkable.

In order to provide a safe and reliable boarding and landing service for pilots joining and leaving ships sailing to and from London and the Medway, Estuary Services Limited (ESL) was set up as a joint partnership with the Port of London Authority and Peel Ports, the company that operates the ports of Sheerness and Chatham. Fast launches based at Ramsgate and Sheerness serve ships at the N.E. Spit Buoy, Margate Roads Anchorage, the Warps/Oaze Deep and the Anchorages at Southend and the Great Nore. These pilot cutters are available to safely transfer pilots and subject to pilotage requirements, personnel and small stores to and from vessels in the above areas; it's a vital service and it is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

ESL is based at the Royal Harbour in Ramsgate and also at Sheerness. Vessels entering British waters from away will be met by a pilot transported out from Ramsgate. Once he is aboard, he assumes responsibility for navigating that vessel safely to its destination which may be Tilbury, Thames Haven, the Isle of Grain, Thamesport or Felixstowe, all of which fall into Port of London Authority's area of responsibility. The pilot will then leave the vessel at Sheerness and may then repeat the procedure, often in the opposite direction.

The pilot's transport is a 15 or 17 metre seaworthy launch also known as a cutter, managed and serviced by ESL who operate a total of 6 boats at both Ramsgate and Sheerness and out of these 6 boats, 4 will be operational at any given time, the remainder being on standby or undergoing maintenance. This is essential in order to provide a continuous service



MCV Norfolk Express

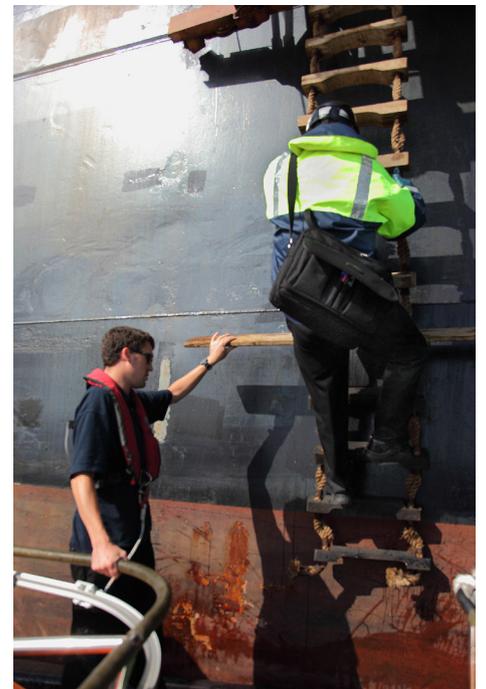
without interruption.

On the day I joined the team, the launch *Estuary Warden* with its crew of 2 was our transport from Ramsgate with the sea state being categorized as decreasing from 'very rough' to 'rough'. The local seas together with strong tides and currents can be very unkind and hazardous at times, especially during winter months but the specialized, purpose-built boats in use are so seaworthy that they can contend with almost any weather. Unlike many pleasure craft which have planing hulls that sit on the water, these workboats have semi-displacement hulls that sit *in* the water making them much more stable. For speed they are powered by twin diesel engines each providing up to 550 hp of power which can push them along at a respectable 22 knots (about 25 mph) when required.

Our trip from Ramsgate was to

meet the first target, the German-flagged 45,000 ton container ship *Norfolk Express* 7 miles offshore at the NE Spit pilot station at a pre-arranged time and took just 30 minutes. The vessel had travelled from Le Havre and was bound for Thamesport Container Terminal on the Medway loaded with over 3,500 containers of mixed cargo with 300 of these being refrigerated containers known as reefers. The total cargo is worth in excess of £11m and the vessel itself another £30m. We were to transfer our pilot Glenn Smith to enable him to safely navigate the vessel to Thamesport where he would be retrieved by the Sheerness end of the operation.

On most occasions it is impractical for larger vessels to stop for us so it slowed from a cruising speed of 18 knots to around 8 knots for us to travel alongside at a matching speed which is considered safe for transferring personnel. As we got closer it became clear just how



enormous many of these vessels are and this one is no exception at over 240 metres long (almost 2.5 times the length of a football pitch) with a beam or width of 32 metres. Some container vessels are much bigger! We knew in advance that we must approach the vessel on its starboard side as this is where a ladder had

been prepared in readiness and the lea side of the large vessel gave us a little shelter from the weather. A good head for heights is important as the pilot grabs the rope ladder in front of him and climbs up to a gangplank some 10 metres above us. Of course, he has done this hundreds of times before and managed so far, to stay dry he assures me. He is met on board by a crew member and escorted to the bridge where he meets the master and they exchange information. The master gives Glenn details of the vessel itself whilst the pilot explains the route he will undertake to guide the ship safely to Thamesport. Despite the various protocols laid down it's all very convivial over a welcome cup of tea or coffee and if it happens to be mealtime, Glenn will be fed as well.

Glenn Smith has been a qualified pilot for 18 years. At one time, Trinity House, the organization that supervises and maintains all the lighthouses, lightships, buoys and other navigation beacons along the coastline and in British waters, used to be responsible for licensing and providing pilots but today Glenn is employed by Peel Ports with ESL providing his seaborne transport and support. He admits that he loves his work because it encompasses all of his passions;

he loves the sea for a start having previously served in the Merchant Navy with responsibility for his own vessel and he follows a family seafaring tradition in that his father was also in the same service. In fact, ESL's Operations Manager Andrew Thompson MBE is himself an ex-Royal Navy professional and again, someone following in their father's footsteps. We are indeed a nation of seafarers!

The Thames Estuary is a constantly changing seaway. Even without considering the variable weather there are changing tides which can rise and fall as much as 6 metres on this part of the coast, hiding unseen obstacles such as constantly moving sandbanks plus wrecks and other floating objects that need to be avoided. The advent of the new wind farms has created the latest obstacles that must be considered as soon as they are built however, many of these are constructed in waters that are close to sandbanks; waters that would be too shallow for us to pass anyway.

Maritime navigation charts have traditionally been printed on paper and are carried by all vessels but the frequency at which these need updating has more recently led to them being available in electronic form as well. Data is downloaded



from satellites and combined with a GPS navigation system so updates are very much speedier than they used to be, however, at the time of writing there is only one International Maritime Organisation approved electronic chart system in use resulting in the continued and preferred use of paper based charts. A modern, fully equipped vessel like the *Norfolk Express* is able to pinpoint its position within 3 metres at any time making navigating a lot more precise and reliable which is just as well, for when loaded, this particular vessel needs 9 metres of water underneath her just to remain afloat so for this reason, the GPS system is used closely with an echo or depth sounder in order to pinpoint the vessel's precise position on the chart.

When it comes to navigating, mathematical calculations can be performed in a flash by computer and course and speed easily and quickly achieved by competent crew. So why do we need a pilot at all? Although this is not the first visit of the *Norfolk Express* to the Estuary (in fact she has visited over a dozen times) ship's masters change and new faces may not know what to expect in our waters nor do they have the experience



Estuary Warden Coxswain Bob



Ro-ro ferry Emden

of the local conditions and it is for this reason that most major seaways and ports around the world employ the mandatory use of a locally qualified pilot. The only exceptions are vessels that regularly visit the Estuary eg., ferries or British warships which are granted an Exemption Certificate.

Incidentally, while we have been looking at the ins and outs of navigating, Glenn is now halfway to Thamesport where he will get a taxi home and wait for the phone to ring again. He may be required to undertake several such trips in the course of a week depending on the volume of shipping, the state of the tides etc., but every trip will be different; he will meet new captains and renew old acquaintances. All in all, an interesting way to spend one's working day but how does he spend his spare time? No surprise there: he's just booked a luxury cruise where he can enjoy the sea without the usual responsibilities. He probably has salt water in his veins too!

After placing our first pilot on

the *Norfolk Express* we return to Ramsgate but not for too long as we are soon off again, this time to pick up another pilot from a ro-ro (roll-on/roll-off) vessel bound for Hamburg. He has brought the vessel safely down from Sheerness and we meet at the same NE Spit location offshore. The *Emden* is one of the oldest vessels on this run at 25 yrs of age and is used for transporting cars and trucks that can be loaded under their own steam without the use of containers or cranes. Many of the UK's used cars are exported to the continent and even to places like West Africa in this way. We collect our second pilot and return him safely to Ramsgate where he will get a more familiar form of transport, a taxi to take him home; until his next call.

Current commercial practices dictate that more and more consumable goods and other commodities such as natural gas and petroleum products must be available in place at precisely the right moment and frequently on a 'just in time' basis. If a consignment is

not delivered on time, production can be interrupted and if it arrives too early there is nowhere to safely store it and it is for this reason that ESL and the pilotage service play such a vital role in ensuring that incoming and outgoing vessels are kept on schedule, for to miss that crucial time slot could affect us all by resulting in increased prices for the goods we buy, the fuel we put in our cars and ultimately affecting the economy of the whole country.

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