

PORT NAPIER

When I left school my father asked me what I planned to do for the next six months before being conscripted into the armed forces to serve my two years of National Service, something everyone had to do when they turned seventeen in the years after the war. I had absolutely no idea how to answer the question, because I had not given any thought to my future or how I would earn my living. In the back of my mind I had a picture of sons following in their fathers' footsteps, as my friends planned to do. In those days there was no such thing as a Careers Master at schools.

One evening my father suggested that I should work my way around the world in a cargo boat via Australia, which sounded like a fantastic idea to me and I leapt at the suggestion. The trip would only take four months so I would be back in time for my call-up.

The next time we were in London my mother took me to Gieves and bought an 'off the shelf' seaman's uniform and an officer's cap with a Merchant Navy badge. When I got home and tried on the clothes I thought I looked pretty smart and the future very rosy.

One wet afternoon I put on the uniform and my mother drove me down to Tilbury Docks. We found the *Port Napier* and it looked extremely bleak, painted as grey as the day. I asked the chauffeur to drop me some way from the ship so I could walk alone to the gangway. I said goodbye to my mother and watched the car drive away. Suddenly the world didn't seem quite so rosy after all!



Port Napier

I climbed the gangway as though I was walking the plank and wondered if I hadn't jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. Perhaps I should have stayed another year at Rugby after all. I thought, *in for a penny, in for a pound*, and walked up the gangway to be met by a very friendly young officer, who seemed to know all about me and was waiting for my arrival. He took me straight down to a cabin.

The cabin could not have been nicer and I found out later that it was meant for the third mate, but because the ship was sailing without one the cabin had been assigned to me. My friendly officer told me to unpack and settle in and that he would be back in three hours and take me to supper in the saloon to meet the captain and the other cadets with whom I would be working during the voyage.

We sailed within a couple of hours of my coming on board by which time it was pitch dark outside. I have no recollection of meeting the captain or the cadets that evening. My next memory was of the mist-shrouded White Cliffs of Dover as they slipped by the following morning, while watched from the deck as I leant on the rail feeling decidedly miserable. If I had realised then that I would not see England again for 17 years I guess I would have been even more miserable, but thankfully what you don't know you don't worry about.

Work is a great cure for the blues and the bosun was just the man for the job. The first week on board I was employed with other deckhands to scrub salt from the paintwork with very cold fresh water, which left our hands numb. If during this job we found areas of paint lifting we chipped it off with a hammer. This was a rather satisfying job and warmed us up so we tried to find as much paint to chip as possible. As we steamed south the weather improved and the sun came out, making life on deck extremely pleasant.

The cadets spent at least four hours of every day learning navigation and all the other things a Naval officer is required to know. I was excused these lessons, which is why I spent so much time chipping paint!



The 'Cadet Officers' and gloomy 'John'

The cadets and I had our own table in the dining saloon while the captain and officers ate with the six fare-paying passengers. These privileged people used the upper lifeboat deck for exercise and as we headed slowly south we put out deckchairs so they could sit rugged up in the sun. My most important job during the whole voyage was to paint the little white circles on the deck for Shove Golf, a game played with a broom handle and wooden discs instead of golf clubs and balls. When it became hot we erected a canvas swimming pool and filled it with seawater in readiness for crossing the Equator and the inauguration of the passengers into the services of Father Neptune by the bosun and the carpenter. On Sundays we had the day off and were allowed to swim in the pool.

My work actually boiled down to helping the bosun and Chippy. Both men were extremely friendly and ran the ship as far as I was concerned. I became their *Go-for*. One day the bosun asked me to go up to the Bridge and ask for the 'key to the keelson'. The officer on duty told me to ask the wireless

operator and he in turn sent me to someone else. This meant my running this way and that for an hour before the captain told me to tell the bosun to behave. The keelson turned out to be the spine of the ship and it certainly didn't have a key!

The bosun taught me how to splice a rope and I became quite good at it, spending many hours helping him with hessian ropes while he tackled the steel cables. He was so skilled that watching him was like watching someone knitting a wool jumper with heavy steel cables. Being able to splice rope has come in very handy all through my life.

Our first port of call was Cape Town where I remember feeling very important as I was given my first officer-type job and allowed to wear my white Naval cap. I was told to sit on the edge of the hold and count the boxes of frozen cod as they came on board, each one carried up the gangway on the shoulder of a native stevedore. I had to count the boxes as they passed me before they were put on a shoot and slid out of sight to be stacked into the freezers by more natives down below.

It was a beautiful sunny day and I couldn't get over the fact that all the natives wore thick army overcoats. The mystery was cleared up when we unloaded the cod in Adelaide and found that quite a few boxes were empty, so I guess the missing fish ended up in the pockets of the greatcoats!

My other exciting job in Cape Town was to go to the post office and collect the crew's mail. This entailed a long walk into town and my first footfall in Africa. It was also my introduction to being amongst a mass of black people as in those days there were very few to be seen in Britain.

Chippy was in charge of the dunnage that held the crates in place in the cargo holds, this being before the days of containers. We used to climb around down in the holds between the crates making sure that none of them had broken loose and had caused damage by crushing other crates. This was a very frightening job as we were surrounded by the creaking and groaning of the shifting cargo caused by the rolling ship.

When we were crossing the Indian Ocean we hit some extremely rough storms. I shall always remember one particular day when we were steaming well below latitude 40° south, close to the Raging Fifties, as it was then that the funnel caught on fire and we had to heave to while the flames were extinguished. While we wallowed in a very angry sea I watched the enormous wave crests race past us level with the lifeboat deck. It was one of the most frightening displays of raw nature I have ever seen as the huge waves had to be seen to be believed. Since that day I have always had unbounded admiration for sailors like Captain Cook as no words can adequately describe the fury of the southern oceans in a gale.

The mess in the holds caused by this event was frightful and the broken dunnage beyond repair. When Chippy and I went down to look in through the bulkhead at all the smashed timbers he decided that it would be suicide to go in to rectify the mess, so we didn't. The insurance companies were not going to be very happy.

Years later I read the diary of my great grandfather, Anthony Bennett Robinson's, first voyage in 1850 to Melbourne in a sailing ship. He also ran into very heavy weather in the Indian Ocean, which nearly caused the timber ship to sink as they were carrying bricks that began to swell when the sea broke through the hatch covers. It must have been an extremely risky passage in the

days of the First Settlers. I read one very tragic story from the early history of Melbourne when after a six-month voyage a sailing ship ran aground and sank at the entrance of Port Philip Bay, only a few miles from its destination. The ship was carrying migrant families and everyone was drowned.



'SS Great Britain' in the ice heading for Australia

Anthony Bennett survived two trips out and one back so he was lucky. In an entry in his diary he wrote, *I managed to send a letter home on 'SS Great Britain' before it left Melbourne*, the second of Brunel's steel steamships, built in 1845 and now lying in a Bristol dry dock.

Anthony Bennett was born in 1805 and christened in Holcombe Church in Somerset only a few miles from where we now live, a fact that amazes me. When he settled in Melbourne he worked his way up to become the Financial Editor of *The Age* newspaper.



'Anthony Bennett Robinson' and 'WS' at 'The Age' offices

One of the jobs the bosun used me for was cleaning the outside of the Bridge windows. To reach them meant my climbing a very long ladder while he held onto the foot, struggling to keep it upright! Up at the top I hung on with one hand and scrubbed away at the glass with newspaper with the other. It was a scary job as the ship was rolling and I was very pleased when I had finished.

When the ship arrived in Adelaide we unloaded the frozen cod and three brand-new Jaguars, the most luxurious car to be built in England since the war. The holds of ships in those days were roofed over with heavy timber planks that were stacked onto a net by the ship's crane and then lifted out of the way. Unfortunately one corner of the net was not made fast, so as it was lifted the planks broke free and slid out, one by one, onto the top of the new cars below. The damage was unbelievable and it was lucky no one below was killed. It was definitely not going to be a good voyage for the insurers!

Much to my surprise, just after this accident happened, I was called up to the Bridge to report to the captain. What had I done wrong? I had been sharply told off by him a week before for whistling as I cleaned his portholes. He told me that I was out of tune and besides sailors considered it to be bad luck to whistle for the wind, so I should stop immediately.

I went up to the Bridge and the captain told me that he had received a message requesting shore leave for me to go and see my father. I couldn't believe my ears but immediately went and put on a clean shirt and ran down the gangplank where a taxi took me to the Adelaide address I had been given. It was wonderful to see my father so unexpectedly and we had a very happy lunch with me doing most of the talking. We had only a few hours as the ship was due to sail that evening, but in that time he suggested that I should disembark at Melbourne and stay for a month before catching the ship back to London from Sydney. I thought this was a great idea as I was thoroughly sick of the sea by then and happily agreed.

When the *Port Napier* arrived in Melbourne I asked my father if I could take the three cadets out for a meal and to the theatre as a 'thank you' for all their kindness to me during the voyage. The captain agreed to give them leave and we had a great evening as my father sent his chauffeur, Jim Ellis, to collect us from the docks and drive us around. I can't remember what the show was or where we ate but it was a very happy and fun party.

This was my first meeting with Jim and the beginning of our long friendship. He returned us to the ship where I found the bosun and Chippy waiting for me, both men more than a little under the weather and insisting on my having a drink with them. They were drinking rum and very soon I was completely fuzzy headed. Chippy asked me if I would give him my officer's cap as a souvenir, which I couldn't refuse, even though I was very sorry to give it up as I would need it for the voyage home.

The two men got very philosophical as they became steadily drunker and I got steadily sicker. They told me that they both intended to come back in the next life as a rich woman's pet dog, because they had had enough of being at sea and wanted to spend their next life sitting on a lady's lap! They eventually left me lying in the scuppers where I spent the rest of the night being sick. Jim came in the morning to collect me and my thumping brain. I have never had such a headache and it took many years before I could face drinking rum again.

In those days when he was in Melbourne my father made his home at Menzies Hotel. Jim took me there and I had a body-mending hot bath before

being sent off to buy some summer clothes. The following day my father was flying to Broken Hill and he wanted me to go with him.

We set off in the morning in the Silver City aeroplane, the same small *Dove* that I had been in when we were lost over Holland and had spilt the tomato juice. The trip took several hours as Broken Hill is in the top north-east corner of NSW.

It was my first experience of being in the Australian Outback and I loved it, finding the smell, heat and space all very exhilarating. My father arranged for a tour underground and I found going down the shafts and walking the drives of the lead and zinc mines very exciting. We didn't have time to explore out into the Bush, but when we took off again for Port Pirie I saw more of the barren open sun-parched country that is so typical of the Outback.

We landed at the smelter plant in Port Pirie, north of Adelaide at the head of Spencer Gulf, and it was then that my father suggested that I take the overland train to Kalgoorlie to see the gold mines. He also suggested that, as I would then be in Western Australia, I should go on down to Perth and meet Willie Williamson, who was joint owner with WS of a wheat farm called 'Wanneranooka' 300 miles north of Perth near 'Three Springs'. I could spend a week with him and then return to Melbourne on the train before catching the ship home from Sydney.

The train trip across the Nullarbor Plain was an eye-opener to a boy who was fresh from the green English countryside. East to west the Nullarbor is 350 miles wide and 150 miles from the north to the southern edge, where it falls into the sea over a 300-foot high cliff. There are no rivers on the limestone plateau as the annual ten-inch rainfall immediately disappears underground, which is why, as the name applies, there are 'no trees'. The train track runs for 300 miles in a dead straight line without a bend over dead flat country. I had not experienced anything like that before in my life and found the two days of unchanging scenery absolutely fascinating.

I think the carriages must have been at least 100 years old and as I was travelling steerage and the seats were wood covered with brown leather, it was exceedingly uncomfortable. We rattled along at a very leisurely pace, stopping every now and then to fill up the old steam engine with water. I suppose the ticket included refreshments but I don't recall eating anything. I do remember only having enough money to buy ten Black and White cigarettes and that they were disgusting.

A canvas water bag hung at the end of the carriage with a tin cup on a chain so no one would pinch it. It was necessary to quench my thirst all through the day, as the heat was stifling, even though all the windows were open. This actually added another problem to the journey as the air was full of red dust that settled in a thick layer over everything. You could write your name on the leather seats by the time we reached Kalgoorlie and all the passengers looked like Red Indians.

Very early in the morning we pulled in to the station where I was met by Frank Espie Sr, the Manager of Great Western Mine. He took me to his bungalow for a much-needed shower that I stayed under for hours. When I was clean his wife gave me breakfast and then handed me some overalls, a pair of heavy steel-capped boots and a hard helmet as Frank had organised a trip underground for me.



A budding miner in Kalgoorlie

The most memorable thing about that trip underground was when I walked out of a tunnel into one of the largest caverns one could ever imagine. It was vast. I was standing on a balcony looking down on dinky-toy tractors loading ore into miniature trains. Looking up I could see the rock roof miles above. It was like a movie set for a James Bond film as lights shone this way and that illuminating different areas where I could see tiny men working. This vast chamber had been excavated to extract gold.

There was another shaft nearby called Iron Duke. Both this name and Great Western became very familiar to me as WS and Willie Williamson had named their racehorses after the two shafts. I believe one year Iron Duke won the Melbourne Cup or something equally prestigious.

Frank collected me when I returned to the surface and took me back to the bungalow for another shower. He was the proud owner of a brand-new Holden saloon, the first General Motors car made in Australia. He also owned a Jack Russell dog that used to stand on the back seat with his paws resting on the top of the front one. His head was directly by my right ear and his breath smelt awful. I shall never forget the next moment as suddenly the dog vomited down my neck! Another shower was needed and thank goodness I had been wearing someone else's overalls! Frank was only worried about his new car!

I took the train to Perth, arriving in the late evening and caught a taxi to the Esplanade Hotel. I was met by Willie who announced that we were off at first light to drive 300 miles north to 'Three Springs'.

The drive north was another eye-opener, as the road seemed to go on forever. Willie was very friendly and explained about the type of farming country we were passing through along the way. It was all very different to Chute Standen in Wiltshire as there was not a single blade of green grass to be seen anywhere. And was it hot! We had the windows open to catch some breeze but as it was mid-summer the air seemed to be coming from the open door of a furnace.

I had a wonderful few days at 'Wanneranooka'. Mrs Williamson was very kind and cooked red-hot curries for Willie, a taste he had acquired when he was manager of a silver mine in Burma that WS had been associated with, which is how they had met and became friends. Willie had been forced out of Burma by the Japanese invasion in WWII, escaping to Australia.

At the end of the week I returned to Perth on a very old bus. The car trip might have seemed to take forever, but compared to the bus it had been lightning fast. In those days there were no loos on buses, so the one stop we were allowed was something of a relief, as well as being my introduction to Bush facilities!

When I went to the railway station I was not looking forward to boarding the dusty old train one bit, so imagine my surprise and delight when I started to walk down the platform beside a giant snake of gleaming silver metal. A few days after my arrival in Perth the new Trans Australian Express had been inaugurated and I was about to travel on it. Each passenger had a little compartment to himself with an armchair that turned into a bed. Opposite the chair were a basin and a loo. You could even drink the water out of the tap, although I missed the swaying canvas bag with its chained cup as I had never seen anything like that before. There was a restaurant car where I had a beautiful dinner followed by a sumptuous breakfast the following morning before pulling into Adelaide. The whole journey had taken only one night instead of the two days on the way over. What a change, although the view from the rear observation car of the 300-mile long dead-straight track hadn't changed one jot.

I arrived back in Melbourne to be met by my father and was all set to join the ship again for the voyage home from Sydney. Over dinner that night he asked how I had liked Australia and, as I enthused, he asked, "Why don't you stay here?" I replied, "What about my National Service?" My father answered, "Well if you're not there you won't have to do it." Having heard what an awful time my brother Mike had had in the army in Germany I had no desire to suffer as he had. *Right*, I thought, *you like it here, why not stay?* So I did. Believe it or not in those days people from Britain didn't even have to have a passport to disembark in Australia. Looking back you could say I *jumped ship*.

If I was to become a farmer my father thought it would be a very good idea if I went to an agricultural college. As the academic term didn't start for a few months he suggested that I went to work on my aunt's property Torrumbarry before going to work for some friends near Ladysmith in NSW. This would take me up to Christmas, when my mother was due in Melbourne for the holidays.

It all seemed very simple and in hindsight I am sure the whole thing was planned right from the moment it was suggested that I should work my way around the world on a cargo boat. It had been a clever parental plot to get me to Australia, and the sort of trick I learnt to play when I became a father and started to worry about what our three boys were going to do with their lives. All I can say is I am extremely thankful to my parents for hatching the plan, as I can't bear to think of all the wonderful adventures I would have missed out on if I hadn't stayed Down Under.

I went to both Torrumbarry and Ladysmith and loved both places. By that time I was completely hooked by 'life on the land' and couldn't think of any alternative as a job. I fully intended to become a sheep farmer, although little did I know what was around the corner in the form of Roseworthy Agriculture College. All I could think about was spending the Christmas holidays with my parents at a hotel on Port Philip Bay.