

## Captain Alan Villiers Blue Plaque Award

6th May 2017

“Professor Evans, Oxfordshire Blue Plaques Board and Associates; Mrs Villiers (Nancie) and the family; guests.

It is a privilege to have been invited by Kit on behalf of the family to say a few words about Captain Alan Villiers. It is a privilege, too, that we have all of his family with us here today. Nancie who will be 102 this year (if I may be forgiven for mentioning a lady’s age), Kit (who by chance went to the same Oxford College Corpus Christi as I had done), Peter, Kath and her husband Roger and the young generation Alan and Georgie of all of whom Alan would have been greatly proud.

It is a privilege, too, to have with us our special friend Marietta Mullen from Plymouth Mass. who ran Mayflower II at Plimoth Plantation for some 25 years until this year during which period the ship was visited by millions of Americans. It is a privilege that we have Captain Adrian Small with us who was Second Mate on Mayflower II. He must be the last man in the world to hold a Board of Trade ticket in sail; he spent many years sailing film ships with Alan and has untold knowledge of matters of square rig sail. And our shipmate John Winslow descendent of the Pilgrim Edward Winslow all the way from Australia with Krystyna. And Nigel Glassborow who sailed with Alan on film ships. And Nancie’s relative Rob Wills over here from America.

I referred to “Alan”. I would have been keel-hauled had he ever heard me using such a familiar term aboard Mayflower II.

Let me explain how I came to be aboard. I was at Corpus from 1953 to 1956. My friend and shipmate Mike Ford was at University College (“Univ”). In 1955, Mike told me that Alan had been invited to dinner at the “Univ” High Table and would then give a talk to the students. I could come as Mike’s guest but must tell no-one lest too many turn up. Telling no one meant that no-one turned up. On the day, we waited with a few others in a cellar that would seat at least 40. A Don came down the stone steps to one side, looked around anxiously, left and returned minutes later followed by a sheepish gang that he had extracted from the adjacent beer cellar. Who other than Alan could have had this beery lot listening to his every word on the subject of Rope”! At the end, he asked *“do any of you lot want to sail aboard this Mayflower replica?”*

Mike and I put up our hands. Despite their interest in rope, the rest slunk back to their beer.

Eda Forbes Secretary to the Board tells me that a “few” words equals 10 minutes. How can the life of a great man be expressed in 10 minutes? Lack of time prevents me from talking about his many accomplishments. No matter. These are set out with absolute modesty in his classic books. Suffice to mention his early voyages around Australia under sail in small trading ships; then his voyages to and from Europe around Cape Horn in the great four-masted barques that he loved; his decision to record the last days of sail as a journalist; his voyages on Arab dhows; with the Portuguese schooners fishing on the Grand Banks; around the world as Master of his own “Joseph Conrad”; film ships and aboard the “Mayflower II” replica. Nancie generously donated his still pictures to the National Maritime Museum and they reproduced some of these in their “Last of the Wind Ships” publication – magnificent pictures of the barques which were surviving as bulk carriers in their final days. Along came World War II and Alan’s record, handling squadrons of Landing Craft, earned him the rank of Commander in the Royal Navy Reserve and the Distinguished Service Cross. What else would one expect?

A Blue Plaque remind us of those who we wish to be remembered. Remembered for what, above all, has been bothering me ever since Kit called me given Alan’s many accomplishments? If we put aside his wonderful descriptions of ships and the sea, the cold, the danger, the poor food and Cape Horn, what stands out are his descriptions of the lives of the last men of sail (by that time mostly boys with an average age of 17) before steam, diesel, economics and War killed off their ships. Alan wrote about sailors of every nationality but think of the British. The British sailor enabled the travel and trade in goods around our coasts and around the world that helped shape our history. Over hundreds of years he helped shape our national character. Think of how much of his language we still use today. He or she is “hard up (“helm hard up for Poverty Bay”), is “broad in the beam”, is “sailing close to the wind” and so on.

Living with and writing about a strand of the human race that was about to die out, puts Alan, I suggest, in the same category as other famous writers who did the same.

- Wilfred Thesiger who wrote about the Marsh Arabs before their marshes were drained by Saddam Hussein and about the Maasai at a time when a young Maasai claimed manhood by killing a lion with a spear. Now he might be a tour guide.
- Mark Twain who wrote of the Mississippi River pilots before the damming of the river made them redundant.
- Dr Wilfred Grenfell Medical Missionary who doctored freely the isolated families fishing and farming on the Labrador and Newfoundland coasts; families so poor that, if unable to pay the private doctor for pills for all three children with diphtheria, they would have to choose the one child to be treated and who would live.

Surely an important branch of anthropology. Wilfred Thesiger; Wilfred Grenfell; Mark Twain; Captain Alan Villiers. You can tell a man by the company he keeps.

How can we best remember Alan himself? As a great sea Captain, I think. He may not have had the opportunity of the great German Hilgendorf, of the British Jarvis or of the Finnish Captain Reuben de Cloux to Skipper a big barque around Cape Horn, time and again. But he came straight from their mould. Hear this about Captain de Cloux from Alan's book "Voyage of the Parma" and think of Alan.

*"For'ard one sees little of the master; he is a being aloof, an inhabitant of the Olympian heights, a super-being living on a plane unapproachable to us. He holds no converse with his mariners. If there is anything to say he says it to his mates. They are his servants no less than the seamen in the focs'l; to him all are inferior beings"*

This was a perfect self-description. I must not focus upon "Mayflower II" which was but one of the smallest square-rigged ships of which Alan was master except that it gave me an experience, not at all of the hardships aboard a great wind ship around Cape Horn, but of being servant to a master in the de Cloux mould.

I never spoke to the Captain. In a 53 day voyage, he spoke only twice to me! I can remember exactly what he said. First, not long after we set sail, he saw me making a nice circular deck mat from the tail end of a rope which earned *"We don't want those tiddly yachtsman's coils on this*

*ship*". Next, when my Mate Jan Junker's watch (Jan a great Captain himself who had sailed with Alan on the "Joseph Conrad") had the graveyard watch 12.00 midnight to 4.00 a.m. The ship was wafting westward under a trade wind towards South America. All but the watch were asleep. Mike was on look-out probably sitting on the fore-yard, legs dangling over the fore course. Jan was on the main deck talking quietly with "Peggy". Andrew Anderson-Bell known as "Scotty" was down below filching something for me to eat from the Cook's stores. I had been or felt seasick for the first 16 days and was in starvation mode. I was alone at the wheel on the quarter deck. The ship followed a golden moonlit path across the southern sea, rolling fast from side to side such that her spars and rigging cast a mesmeric trace across a sky jewelled with a myriad of stars. Perhaps I started to sleep. That voice was in my ear *"Helmsman! Put the Southern Cross back where it belongs"*. The Captain like any Captain under sail could have been woken by seeing the wrong star through his cabin porthole. Or by a slight change in the ship's motion caused by my straying off course. Nelson felt the coming storm after Trafalgar because the "Victory" began to lift to an approaching swell. The ship back on course, Alan went back to his bunk.

There was a third occasion when he spoke to me. After we had spent time at Plymouth Mass. we were taking the ship down to New York, having stopped at Newport Rhode Island on the way. On a bright breezy morning, it happened to my trick at the wheel just when we headed up the Hudson River close-hauled on port tack with the whole of Manhattan spread out to leeward. The Captain feared that we would fail to keep sufficiently close to the Staten Island shore from which the wind was coming to be able to keep under sail all the way to our designated pier. He stood close by me; eagle eye upon me and upon the wind. The fireboats were out, water jets high in the sky; there were yachts and tugs and pleasure boats full of spectators, a blimp; helicopters. A Jacobean ship sailing up the Hudson was a sight to see. Our main deck was full of reporters, photographers and dignitaries. The National Geographic book "125 Years" has a picture.

*"Keep her on the wind, helmsman", "Aye aye Sir"; "Keep her on the wind helmsman", "Aye aye Sir"; "Keep her on the wind helmsman", "Aye aye Sir"* continued until the inevitable. The wind could shift faster than the ship could alter course. The weather leech of the main topsail (we had long handed the fore topsail) fluttered and backed. Suddenly the whole

sail flapped. We spun 180 degrees. Alan knew what to say. A “super being” he had known what to say to Vice President Nixon at Plymouth and to Senator John Kennedy. He was not fazed by Madame Bougere (last doyen of Newport Rhode Island society) at her dinner, a liveried footman behind each place, or by her guests such as Harvey Firestone. He would know how to handle Mayor Wagner in New York and a Ticker Tape parade. Pointing to a nearby helicopter, he called out to the press on the main deck *“That there helicopter caught my ship aback!”* Nancie was aboard and will remember as will my shipmates here including Peter Padfield, our man amongst the top ranks of historians.

I must tell you that Sea Captains armed with a book were the ship’s medics. They set broken limbs with carpentry tools. They cured many things. Here is what a Sea Captain told Alan about how he as an apprentice reported sick to the famous “Cutty Sark” skipper Captain Woodget. This was against the advice of his fellow apprentices a year older. From memory:

*“Sick? How sick?”*

*“Just sick Sir, sick all over; no particular pain anywhere”.*

*Woodget looked the boy over with his mild blue eyes; kindly old whiskers bristling. His collie dog and her puppies joined the inspection.*

*“What you need my boy is a good cleaning out. Run along to the galley and tell the Doctor (sailing ship name for the Cook) to hot up some water. Then come back here.”*

*When he returned he found the Captain marrying a piece of codline to a thin object with a wire brush he knew to be used for cleaning bottles.*

*The Doctor arrived with a knowing air.*

*“What? What are you going to do to me Sir” the boy asked. “We’ll clean you out fore and aft with this” said the Captain. “I’ll reeve the fore part down your throat and the Doctor will haul the after part out through your stern. Come here now. It’s going to do you the world of good”.*

*But the boy had fled. Out of the saloon and up to the foremast head. Where he stayed until evening. He never reported sick again.*

Captain Villiers was a “Master under God” as the old ship’s articles put it. He believed in God as did most deep sea sailors under sail. He read the Bible to us every Sunday. He wrote that being a Master under sail was not only the best life for a man, it was the only life. So much for all of us bar Captain Small! Behind the superior man was often the superior

woman. Time to tug my forelock to Nancie; Captain Alan Villiers Captain!

To conclude, might Dr Fewster consider making a National Maritime Museum proposal for an Alan Villiers display at the Tate; the mast, rigging and sails of a three-masted barque to be set up in the Turbine Hall? A sight to capture imaginations. Sub-title: "A three-masted barque. One with five masts could carry 8,000 tons of cargo around the world under 60,000 square feet of sail with zero fuel cost and no pollution." Marry the rig later to a hull and the Museum will possess a workable ship, the "Alan Villiers" to display afloat at Greenwich.

But enough pipe-dreaming. Today this Blue Plaque is unveiled adding Captain Villiers name to a list of famous Oxford residents ensuring that he will remain part of Oxford's history. Testimony to the great sailor. The family wish me to express their great thanks to you Professor, to the Group, your Associates and to Eda for this honour.

Amen to that from all the family Villiers relations and friends. Thank you.