

SOME THOUGHTS ON JOINING THE PURPLE EMPIRE

BY

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Ever since the day I first wore naval uniform, in 1933, I have been obsessed by the threatened shadow of the 'Purple Empire' over the erstwhile 'Grey Strippers'. As time has passed, rumours of a 'take over bid' of Chippies by the Plummer have blown hot and cold reaching super steam heat just after World War II.

Almost casually, it seemed, rumour became fact on 5th February, 1960, with the publication of A.F.O. 374/60.

Like all policy-making A.F.O.s of this type, there was a great deal of background and hard work before publication. I first heard of its possibility when appointed to Admiralty in April, 1959, when I was presented with a copy of the CRUST report to study and comment on.

The CRUST report which has set down a working pattern for the Rating Structure of the Fleet does not call for pertinent comment here. Suffice it to say, it produced the argument for, and was the final instrument which prodded the Chippies under the Purple umbrella and after considerable study it has been agreed—with reservations—that the Committee's recommendation to place Chippies in this position is forward thinking calculated to be to the mutual benefit of both the Service and the Branches concerned. The ultimate concept of one Technical Branch in the Service must be right and should produce a better answer to this ever present problem of day-to-day running maintenance of the Fleet in all its aspects.

Now the merger is a *fait accompli*, my thoughts inevitably turn back to the good (?) old days before merger, 'take over bids' and what-have-you, and I could not help reflecting—somewhat sadly perhaps—on the 'what might have been'.

I thought of the days of 'wooden walls' when the only regular or Standing Officers were the Master, Boatswain, Gunner and Carpenter.

These Officers were appointed to their ships for life—were never pensioned off and actually lived on board, when their ships were not in commission, with their families—being responsible to the Admiralty that all defects were made good and that their ships would be available when required to be Commissioned by Gentlemen for some specific task—to fight a war, or on some tour of exploration. The crew were pressed into service—usually the night before sailing!

From these Standing Officers has stemmed the whole regular Officer Service of the Royal Navy. The Master is father to the Navigator Branch, the Gunner to the Gunnery Branch. Boatswain and Chippy have moved but little in status since those days.

Until the introduction of steam propulsion into the R.N.—about 140 years ago—Chippy was the only truly technical officer borne. Engineers—strange people in those far off days—were treated with considerable suspicion and it is on record that at a meeting of the Carpenters of H.M. Fleet held at Portsmouth in 1827 a resolution was passed that:—

'It was derogatory to the position of Warrant Officer who had been indentured in H.M. Dockyard to have charge of the Engine-men and their stores of oil and coal, and the Chairman was requested to respectfully lay the matter unofficially before the Port Admiral.'

It would thus appear that in those far off days the Chippy might easily have 'taken over' the Engineer. It is true that the first Chief Engineer of the Navy—one Thomas Lloyd—started his early training as a shipwright, studied Naval Architecture and was instructed to make a special study of steam. This he did to such good effect that in 1850 he became the first Chief Engineer of the Navy. Although a civilian he was responsible to the Comptroller of Steam Machinery—an executive Captain!

One could write a book about the changing fortunes of the Carpenter/Shipwright during the latter half of the last century.

It was not until 1912 that the format of the present race of Shipwright Artificers began to emerge. Before that date carpenters and shipwrights had variously been recruited from fully indentured craftsmen or from boy shipwrights trained in H.M. dockyards. The early part of this century does show the hand of change from the 'hit and miss' recruitment of earlier years. In 1912 the situation became steady over the training of boy naval shipwrights

in the naval dockyards who were required to serve for a period of five years and discharged to sea as a petty officer. World War I saw many changes due to the rapid expansion of the Navy, but the shipwright lagged behind his engineer contemporaries and saw boilermakers, smiths, fitters, etc., being entered as C.P.O.s while they could still only enter as P.O.s. The end of World War I saw a stabilizing of all rates and the career structure of the Shipwright came at last into line with his E.R. contemporaries. Officers of the Carpenter Branch became Shipwright Officers (Warrant and Commissioned) for the first time and the title Carpenter was finally abolished.

In the years 1920-30 reductions in pay, complement and alterations in status were common throughout the Service and Chippy bore his share of these changes.

The record of the Shipwright Branch in World War II indicates the high standard of training and integrity of the shipwright and many ships owed their survival to the prompt efforts in Damage Control by the Chippies.

The penultimate change took place in 1948, with the introduction of apprentice training, together with all other artificers in *Fisgard* and subsequent specialist training in *Caledonia*.

The splendid work of these two training establishments needs no embellishment from me. We were invited to train our young men using their facilities as it was becoming obvious that the limitation of the old dockyard training and lack of local recruits meant some inevitable change. After a testing period of 12 years it is fair to say that the quality of the Shipwright Artificer produced from these Establishments is at least the equal and in many cases the better of their dockyard trained predecessors.

And now the wheel has come full circle and we are to become a part of the Purple Empire. Sadly perhaps one thinks of the missed opportunities of past years but, after only a few months under the new regime, a new horizon is starting to open. Early indications show a genuine desire to retain the traditions and name of this old and honoured Branch ; to break down all artificial barriers of demarcation that have tended to frustrate ; to bring harmony between Shipwright and Engineer ; to enable these two splendid Branches to work together for a common cause mutually supporting each other in their stated role--the maintenance of Her Majesty's Fleet.
