

I HAD WANTED to do a cruise in the Sail Training Association's *Sir Winston Churchill* ever since she was launched and now, thanks to B & C and the Marine Society, I had my chance. After a night and day of travelling, I found myself standing on the quayside at Leith gazing up at the mass of rigging that surrounded the three masts, wondering if I'd ever be able to work it all out. The greeting of the chief officer brought me back to earth.

With the other trainees I followed him up the gangway and into the half-deck which was to be our quarters for the next three weeks. The first thing that greeted us was food, which was welcome after the long journey. We signed on in the chartroom where the captain was very interested to know that the Merchant Navy had sent along a representative and said he hoped I would enjoy the change from big to little, power to sail.

Our first evening was spent getting to know the others in our watch: I was in Main watch which consisted of thirteen trainees and a watch leader.

The next morning we were up and about well before breakfast, learning all we could about the ship, her rigging and how to handle it. Some of the trainees had never seen a sailing ship before, but it didn't take long to learn under the eye of the bosun. After a quick lunch we prepared for sea. At four o'clock on Monday August 26, 1968, cruise 42 of *Sir Winston Churchill* got under way. The captain asked me to take the helm and I steered her out of Leith docks into the Firth of Forth.

When we were clear of the harbour we made sail. The first up were the headsails and the mizzen, and we rounded off to the southwest to pass out of the firth into the North Sea. We soon settled down to watchkeeping, and I thought the dog-watch system worked quite well, giving everybody a chance to do day and night watches. The next three days were spent learning how to handle the ship's sails and gear. We carried the wind all down the North Sea, through rain and mist, to the Channel, where the weather cleared and we shaped a course for Le Havre.

On Thursday, the sun shone for us as the local boats escorted us into the docks, where we berthed next to our sister ship *Malcolm Miller*. As soon as we were all fast, there began a great campaign for cleaning and polishing, after which we sat down to discuss the passage. The bosun arranged the following day's work to suit those who wanted to go ashore.

The next morning we started work. The stays were oiled and many hours were spent clearing the oil off the decks, after two days in Le Havre, carrying out odd repair jobs, we were happy to be preparing for sea again, and at three o'clock Sunday afternoon we slipped out of the harbour and headed out to sea. The wind died toward evening but by the time we came on watch at eight we were bowling along under a stiff breeze, with the canvass billowing out to leeward. The wind had strengthened steadily and just before we were due to be relieved the order came to shorten sail. For the two hours that followed we battled with ropes, canvas and spray. We took most of the sails in to avoid getting into Spithead too early in the morning. At two o'clock we were told to go below, and fell into our bunks with much relief.

In the morning we awoke to find ourselves anchored in Cowes Roads, awaiting the start of the Portsmouth-Cherbourg sail training race. Preparations made, we

weighed anchor and made up to the starting line. At the gun we were still a fair way behind the line, but with the fresh wind it wasn't long before we were away and going well. *Malcolm Miller* was well ahead of us and at times we seemed to be gaining on her, but as afternoon drew into evening and the wind died, she pulled ahead. We rounded the Royal Sovereign lightship and settled down for the night. We hardly made any way, and the dawn found us still in sight of the English coast. In the early afternoon a light breeze grew up and we trimmed the sails to catch every little cat's-paw. As the wind strengthened we picked up speed and with the approach of night caught sight of the French coast. At three next morning we were approaching the finishing line.

Immediately the stop-clock clicked, the helm was put hard over and we spun round into the wind. All hands on deck, the sails were handled in record time. At eight bells the anchor was let go and we brought up in the inner harbour of Cherbourg. We had come third.

Relaxing days ashore

We went in alongside just after daybreak and the routine jobs were handed out. Those off duty wandered ashore. In the evening we all went to the yacht club, where we had a good time talking and drinking 'till late evening. The following day we prepared for sea once more, sailing in the afternoon bound for Alderney, only five hours sail along the coast. We carried a gentle breeze right into the harbour. We spent three relaxing days in Alderney but we soon wanted to be at sea again.

We set sail, this time bound for Brest. We ploughed steadily on, meeting the long, Atlantic rollers coming in round Ushant. We made Brest in just over a day pulling alongside as the evening light began to wane. It was now Monday of the third week and this was to be our last port of call. Almost everybody went ashore.

For the last time we put to sea for the long leg back to Cowes, and finally Portsmouth. We cruised along, slowly losing the Atlantic rollers as we made farther up the Channel. It took two days to make Cowes, two days spent reflecting on where we'd been and what we'd learnt. It had been a worthwhile experience. Although it was a fair cross-section of boys, everybody pulled his weight and mucked in to make it a happy cruise.

On Thursday afternoon we dropped anchor at Cowes Roads for the night, a quiet peaceful anchorage, shattered later in the evening by sounds of uproarious singing from the half-deck as we let off a little steam. That really marked the end of the cruise.

The following morning we weighed anchor for the last time. We tacked serenely down Spithead in company with *Malcolm Miller*. The gentle breeze left us becalmed just off the harbour entrance, so we motored in through the entrance slowly shedding our escort of local boats and coming to rest alongside H.M.S. Dolphin. The decks were cleared and tidied and preparations for our departure began. Telephone calls were made and bags packed; farewells said all round and hands shaken.

As I drove away from the quayside, I thought back on three weeks which I will never forget.