

A brief excerpt from ‘MY OYSTER’

The early life of William George Atkins 24th July 1884 - 6th June 1966
written by him around 1950, and edited by his grandson Michael Austin, August 2012.

The words ‘My oyster’ come from Shakespeare's comedy, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*:

*Why, then the world is my oyster,
Which I with sword will open.* (2.2.3-4), Pistol to Falstaff

Nowadays, with Pistol's thievish plots largely forgotten, ‘The world is my oyster’ has come to express the boast that riches come to those who exploit the world's many opportunities.

Part of Chapter 1

The Docks at Rotherhithe and I sail for the new world

It is not an easy matter to open an oyster, or prevent the other fellow from getting the best from life, but if one's mind is determined both may be achieved. Life is usually like that.

I commenced my life with wonderful parents in an agreeable environment. My father, George Atkins, was an Assistant Dock Master in one of the great London Docks, said to have originally been built by King Canute, who allegedly failed to rule the waves.

Daily I would watch the great ships arrive in the Thames from all parts of the world. Some with cargoes of wood stacked high on their decks. Most of these ships had severe lists and their black funnels were white with the salt spray of the seven seas and its wild wind. My imagination was fired with their unspoken stories, and their shifting cargoes, moving in the heavy seas – kings of the sea who did rule the waves!

Many times I have listened to the sailors chanting the old Sea Shanties as they turned the capstans that hauled these great sailing ships to their respective berths. The smell of the freshly cut timber as these cargoes were unloaded was beyond words and it set up thoughts in a young boy's mind. Where did this vast quantity of timber come from? Later, I would discover the answers were in the Shipping Lists of the Dock Company.

Then, what sort of men felled those forest giants where they had grown probably for many centuries in peaceful tranquillity; until man decided they must lose their majestic surroundings to provide houses or public buildings for the use of civilisation? How I was thrilled with the urge to visit the countries from which these great ships sailed and how different they must be to my own overcrowded little England! I felt the day must come when I could visit these countries and live in the vast spaces, so impossible to do in my own land.

The sailors always spoke an unknown language; they would drink heavily and often fight amongst themselves, never with their fists, but always knives, which rather belittled them to me. With boyhood imagination I used to create my own little stories from studying the ship and their crews.

Ships loaded with grain from Odessa, Bessarabia (Moldova,) Libou (Libya,) as well as many other Russian ports, or Turkey and Danubian countries, or from the Great Lakes area of America and Canada, from where the grain was shipped or railed to the Seaboard for trans-shipment to London.

Sometimes timber 18 inches square and 120 feet long would arrive from Pensacola (Florida,) brought there for shipment from the limitless forests of America, then floated down their mighty rivers by professional lumbermen, a type of man hard to find in any other country. Both live animals and frozen carcasses of meat would arrive from the great American ranches for our consumption. In fact, every conceivable article for human use would arrive daily from the great outside world, making my urge to travel even more definite.

Eventually, after the death of my Mother in May 1901, I got my belongings together and sailed from Southampton via Cherbourg to New York on the SS St Louis, a transatlantic passenger liner built by the William Cramp & Sons Building & Engine Company, Philadelphia. It was launched on 12 November 1894 and entered merchant service in 1895, with her maiden voyage between New York and Southampton, England.

We embarked and disembarked some passengers at Cherbourg.



Our ship was registered to carry 1,100 tons and we also carried 1,200 passengers including Americans, Englishmen, Russians, Poles, Italians, Scandinavians, Danes and central Europeans. Quite a number of the latter wore homespun clothes and travelled steerage, the cheapest method. At noon every day the ship blew her whistle so we could put our timepieces right. After some two or three days a German travelling with his wife kept looking into

the sky saying he could see an aeroplane. When he had nearly everyone looking for this he walked away laughing.

Soon after this a storm broke, the ship rolled and pitched as though she was a cork. When she dipped, the great twin screws would leave the water and race sending a trembling movement through the whole ship, like an earthquake. The storm raged for three days and nights. All passengers were battened down below and a network of ropes fastened about the decks for the safety of the venturesome.

At times great walls of seawater would strike the ship broadside (now I could see how the dried salt appeared on the cargo boats' funnels) and pour over the ship, obliterating the sky. Most of the passengers suffered severely from sea sickness and their condition was indeed pitiful.

The wind was so violent that the rain was horizontal. And the passengers so sick, I could count on my fingers the number that turned up to enjoy the usual four course dinner, which consisted of roast meat, poultry, vegetables including sweet potatoes. Various sweet puddings were included along with ice cream and pink watermelon. In the smoking room, I was thrown from one side to the other and landed under a seat.

After seven days out from Southampton the storm abated, the sun came out and we found we had lost our wireless aerial and a large amount of deck housing was smashed. A clergyman gave a special service

of thanksgiving for the ship's safety and remarked that the captain had said that during his 25 years of crossing the Atlantic he had never known anything so rough.

We were a day overdue and as we had not been able to use our radio, the authorities had been getting anxious. About 24 hours before we reached the Statue of Liberty I saw a mirage of our ship standing some 400 yards off the port bow, a truly wonderful sight. We entered the Hudson River and berthed at our moorings in New York. My first impression was of its orderliness in spite of its crowded businesses. My baggage was collected and put on rail for Kansas City. Our ship then unloaded and dry docked for overhauling and re-riveting the plates.

A lot more of the story follows, but this brief excerpt covers the historical observations of London Docks near Rotherhithe in the late 1800's, near the end of the Victorian era.

These recollections have not been published before.