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Attention All Shipping

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Sea, Soup and Silvertown

The solemn, rhythmic intonation of the shipping forecast is as familiar to us as the sound of Big Ben chiming the hour. Since its first broadcast in the 1920s it has inspired poems and songs in addition to its intended objective of warning generations of seafarers of impending storms and gales.

Sitting at home listening to the shipping forecast can be a cosily reassuring experience. There's no danger of a westerly gale eight, backing south-westerly increasing severe gale nine later (visibility poor) gusting through your average suburban living room, blowing the Sunday papers all over the place and traumatising the cat. The chances of squally showers, moderate or good becoming poor later, drenching your new sofa and reducing the unbroken two-year run of *Hello!* magazines under the coffee table to a papery pulp are frankly slim unless there's a serious problem with your radiators. There's definitely something comforting about the fact that although some salty old sea dog in a draughty wheelhouse somewhere will be buttoning his sou'wester even tighter at the news there are warnings of gales in Rockall, Malin and Bailey, you can turn up the central heating and see if there's a nice film on the telly. *The Cruel Sea*, perhaps.

Oddly comforting though the shipping forecast is, to most of us it is totally meaningless. A jumble of words, phrases and numbers which could be thrown into the air, picked off the floor and read out at random and most of us wouldn't be any the wiser. It has, however, accompanied most of our lives from childhood, a constant, unchanging cultural reference point that goes back further than *Coronation Street*, the Ovalteenies and even the Rolling Stones. No one, not even the most committed mariner, listens to all four broadcasts every day. In fact very few of us make a point of listening to the shipping forecast. But it's always there, always has been, always will be, lodged inexplicably in our subconscious. Stop anyone in the street and ask them to name as many of the areas as possible and the chances are they'll get through about half a dozen before even pausing for breath. I guarantee Dogger and Fisher will be two of them as well. Ask them how they know these things, and you're likely to receive in response a gaze into the middle distance, a slight furrow of the brow and a 'Well, er, dunno really . . .'.

For me as a small boy, when the shipping forecast came on the kitchen radio just before six o'clock in the evening it meant that my tea was nearly ready. It didn't mean any more than that; just a hotchpotch of incomprehensible words that acted as a Pavlovian bell to my tastebuds. In fact, it's only recently that the words 'Forties', 'Cromarty' and 'Forth' have stopped causing me to salivate slightly and think of Findus Crispy Pancakes.

If anything, the sound of the shipping forecast made me think of being safe at home. It also necessitated at least one visit to Greenwich Hospital when the familiar words prompted an uncontrolled hunger-inspired scamper of stockinged feet across polished kitchen lino that was interrupted at full tilt by an unfortunately positioned domestic appliance. Stitches were required. Come to think of it, I could probably blame the shipping forecast for the scar on my forehead that scuppered an otherwise inevitable modelling career.

Childhood visits to casualty aside, for me the shipping forecast retains a soothing, homely aspect to it, which is strange when you think that its contents are anything but soothing and homely. But as I grew up and began to sprout hair in places I'd never considered before, and began to live in places I'd never considered before, catching the shipping forecast on the radio would always be a comforting experience. The forecast itself might be telling me otherwise, but hearing it meant that everything was all right. No matter how bad things got, no matter how dubious any career or romantic issues became, not to mention global events, the knowledge that the shipping forecast was still going out four times a day, regular as clockwork, meant that everything would be fine. Not, perhaps, for the good people of Hebrides when they heard severe gale nine was heading their way in the next few hours, but the great scheme of things was generally all right. Oh, and my fish fingers were nearly ready.

I was up working late one night. In my dark office, a lamp cast a pool of light across my desk while the orange glow of a streetlight filtered through the slats of my window blind. I slumped back in my chair and placed my feet on the desk. By rights the next line should be 'I was about to pour myself another bourbon when in walked this blowsy broad and I knew I had my next case'. Instead, I was wrestling with an article about football in an obscure eastern-European backwater with the radio on quietly so as not to wake the slumbering form in the bedroom next door.

As I gazed glassy-eyed at a flashing cursor on an otherwise unblemished white screen a report came on the midnight news. The British fishing industry was in crisis – it was running out of fish. A combination of the European Common Fishing Policy, which allowed EEC members wide fishing rights, overfishing of young cod and a rise in sea temperatures making breeding conditions difficult had meant that the trawlers which put out to sea

all around these islands were coming back practically empty. The battered fillets dunked into the hot fat at your local Master Fryer were more likely to come from Icelandic than British fleets. The entire industry was on its uppers, and the European Union was proposing a ban on cod fishing to allow stocks to rise again.

Sitting there in that puddle of weak light I looked out of the window where a slight drizzle had begun to speckle the pane from the darkness beyond. Trawlers would be out at sea now, hauling in nets barely half full with immature fish, the fishermen not knowing whether men in suits in Brussels were about to bring their livelihood to an end with a flourish of signatures on the bottom of a document so sesquipedalian as to induce headaches and drooling in all who attempted to read it.

The clock ticked around towards one o'clock and eastern-European football was becoming no more alluring. The murmur of voices on the radio then gave way to a calming piece of music, all rising and falling strings and a lilting melody, before the familiar recital began:

> And now the shipping forecast issued by the Met Office at 0015 on Thursday the seventeenth of October . . .

There were warnings of gales in North Utsire, South Utsire, FitzRoy, Sole, Fastnet, Shannon, Rockall, Malin, Hebrides, Bailey and South-east Iceland. Brrr, I thought. Glad I'm in here. The fortunes of Ukraine's representatives in the UEFA Cup suddenly seemed far more appealing. Those trawler men would be at sea in these gales. Homely and comforting though the forecast remained, for the first time I began to realise that there was much more at stake here than just my feeling cosy and reminiscing about Alphabetti Spaghetti. I slept restlessly that night.

The next day I went to Greenwich, where it's probably appropriate that time seems to have a quality of its own. While the rest

of London hurtles around at a pace that can make your nose bleed, the Greenwich day slows almost to a halt among the amiable jumble of shops, pubs and historic buildings on the southern shore of the Thames. Maybe it's because time, or at least our attempts at harnessing it, is manufactured here. Outside the Royal Observatory, the home of Greenwich Mean Time, a brass strip runs through the tarmac representing zero degrees longitude. Tourists can hop back and forth across the line, jumping from the eastern hemisphere to the west, bouncing around the centre of time.

Perhaps the sense of timelessness stems from the fact that Greenwich is now out of step with time. Where once it was the heart of the maritime world, today it is a nautical anachronism, a museum to Britain's seafaring rise and fall. Shops sell ropes, clocks and bells, but they are ornaments for mantelpieces rather than wheelhouse necessities, sold to tourists at inflated prices. The architectural centrepieces of Greenwich, the Inigo Jones-designed Queen's House and Christopher Wren's Royal Naval College, were once of huge importance to Britain as a maritime power. The former meant that explorers such as Martin Frobisher and Sir Walter Ralegh were regular visitors – Ralegh famously laid his cloak over one of Greenwich Park's puddles in order that Elizabeth I would not soil the royal shoes, an even greater act of chivalry when you consider that it probably said 'hand wash only' on the label – while if the First World War was won on the playing fields of Eton, Britain's great naval victories had their basis in the ornate but draughty classrooms of a former nautical poorhouse.

Today the Queen's House has not been home to a monarch for more than two hundred years and forms part of the National Maritime Museum. The Naval College had been conceived as a refuge for destitute and invalid sailors left on the streets at the conclusion of the naval wars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It had housed around three thousand sailors before

being taken over by the Royal Navy and converted to academia in the nineteenth century. In 1997, the college was moved to the Royal Airforce College at Cranwell, and Greenwich's last working link with the sea was gone, its decline mirroring that of Britain as a maritime nation. A short way along the river the great royal shipyards of Deptford and Woolwich, which produced legendary vessels like Henry VIII's *Great Harry* and Charles I's *Sovereign of the Seas*, are long, long gone.

Having lived in or near Greenwich for most of my life I like to spend time in Greenwich Park. Sitting on a bench under General Wolfe's statue offers one of London's most dramatic and detailed panoramas, with the city landscape at its sharpest after an autumn shower has rinsed clean the air. With St Paul's Cathedral and the Tower of London far off to the left and the Millennium Dome to your right, Greenwich can appear physically to be at the very centre of London history, something that certainly suits my Greenwich-centric view of the world anyway. It has grown from an ancient fishing community to become the focus of both British royal and global maritime life, and when you look down from beneath Wolfe's startled expression (as if he has just been goosed unexpectedly by an elderly aunt) the look of Greenwich betrays much of its former glory and its struggle for a place in the modern city.

On a walk through the park, the paths wet and shiny in the wintry late-afternoon sun that shoots between skeletal trees from behind the Royal Observatory, it's easy to take the peace for granted. Barely a hundred yards from the park gates, just the other side of the immaculate classical lines of the Queen's House, runs one of London's most fearsome one-way systems, where traffic thunders day and night to remind you that you are actually in a twenty-first-century city.

Once you're through the covered market and have passed the Spanish Galleon and Gipsy Moth pubs, the spindly masts and rigging of the *Cutty Sark* make an incongruous foreground to the silvery skyscrapers of Canary Wharf on the other side of the river.

Placed in dry dock by the river at Greenwich half a century ago, the famous old tea clipper still gives off a musky whiff of the lapsang suchong that used to pack its holds. A glance into the concrete crater in which this noble old ship sits, not to mention onboard encounters with the spooky mannequins representing life on board in the glory days of sail, serves only to underline further how Britain's maritime dominance is a thing of the past. Where the proud figurehead at the bows once led the way, rising and falling through crashing waves, today she overlooks nothing more than an expanse of paving stones. If you examine her expression there appears to be a desperation in her eyes as she reaches out for the river fifty short but impassable yards away.

Walking beyond the *Cutty Sark* and past the pleasure-boat terminal takes you to the footpath along the river itself. You pass the old Naval College, stepping to one side at the Queen's Steps to allow cyclists through. The college was built by Sir Christopher Wren in two symmetrical halves because Queen Mary wanted the view of the river from the Queen's House undisturbed – the distance between the two sections is exactly the width of the Queen's House. Hence from the Queen's Steps you look right through the college to the Maritime Museum and the park beyond, and then up the hill to the Royal Observatory.

At these steps Martin Frobisher stopped off for an audience with Elizabeth I on his way from Deptford to search for the North-west Passage, and here is where Nelson's body arrived back from Trafalgar pickled in a barrel of brandy. Transferred to a coffin, he was taken from the ship to lie in state in the Naval College's Painted Hall before being rowed upriver for a state funeral. His bloodstained uniform now resides in a glass case at the Maritime Museum.

Before long you arrive at the Trafalgar Tavern, a big old draughty Georgian building of fading grandeur where Dickens

dined regularly and whither parliament would decamp for an annual whitebait dinner. Beyond the Trafalgar, along the river, you pass the tiny, whitewashed seventeenth-century Seamen's Hospital, in turn dwarfed by an enormous power station wholly out of place on the otherwise dignified Greenwich riverside. Its huge but now redundant jetty passes over your head and thumps into the river next to you with a defiant belligerence out of line with the genteel hospice next door. A new complex of luxury apartments is being built beyond – prior to construction the old British Sailor pub had stood here, derelict and half demolished, letters missing from its name and the red-bearded sailor on its sign looking faintly embarrassed.

We've reached our destination now, and one of my favourite places in London. The Cutty Sark pub is a good half mile from the ship that gave it its name, but that doesn't seem to matter. Inside it is dark and timbered, snugs here and barrel stools there. A grand wooden staircase sweeps up through the centre, and I like to sit and look out at the river from the huge first-floor bay window. Here it's easy to be lulled into Greenwich time, where the days pass more slowly than anywhere else in London. It's late afternoon and the pub is all but empty. The weak, wintry sun is still leaking from behind the Observatory and occasionally will be caught by the brown sails of an old Thames sailing barge making its way along the river. Hundreds of these used to buzz around the east coast carrying cargoes of all descriptions right up to the middle of the twentieth century. There are no working barges now but a handful are maintained by a dedicated band of enthusiasts, some still making their dignified way up the Thames for the benefit of tourists, their dark old hulls and brown sails almost lost beneath the huge glinting skyscrapers of Docklands beyond.

If you sit to the left of the window you can see the Millennium Dome looming large on the Greenwich peninsula, and the Thames barge soon disappears behind it. You have to

crane your neck a little, but off to the far right you can just make out the two slim, black-tipped silver chimneys of the Tate & Lyle sugar refinery in Silvertown. And Silvertown is where this journey really begins.

From the turn of the twentieth century until its destruction during the Second World War, my great-grandparents, Harry and Nelly, ran the Royal Victoria & Albert Docks Shipping Laundry at the heart of the London docks in Constance Street, Silvertown.

An industrial and residential district in east London, Silvertown took its name from the Samuel Winkworth Silver Rubber Works established in the 1850s and quickly grew from empty boggy marshland into a major industrial area. It was poor, despite the presence of the three huge royal docks that made Silvertown, with the docks to the north and the Thames to the south, an island. The docks were a major terminus for global shipping particularly during the days of the British Empire, and all sorts of exotic craft, people and cargo passed through this part of London. I have on the wall above my desk an old black-and-white photograph of my late uncle as a little boy reaching out in wonder to touch the outstretched trunk of a baby elephant peering out of a crate destined for who-knows-where.

Silvertown was often rough and occasionally tragic. In 1917, fifty tons of TNT exploded at the Brunner Mond chemical works in west Silvertown, killing seventy, injuring hundreds more and destroying much of the area in an explosion that was heard as far away as Norwich. The blast blew in the windows and tossed my grandmother from her cot, and my great-grandmother opened up the laundry as a temporary refuge for the injured and homeless. Their business shipping laundry had started by sheer chance. 'Dad was always out of work,' my Great-aunt Joan once told me. 'Well, everyone was in them days. But one day Mum said to Dad, "Go down the docks and see if

there's any washing." Now, the big liners had their own laundry, all run by Chinamen, you know, but on the odd smaller ship the men had to do their own washing.

'Well he came back with six white stewards' jackets that had to be starched. Course, they hadn't got any bleedin' soap, had they? So Dad had to go next door to the neighbour and borrow thruppence. They bought a penny bar of Sunlight soap, a penn'orth of starch and a penny for the gas to heat the water, and the old girl scrubbed up these jackets, starched them and pressed them. Dad took them back, got probably a tanner for each of them and it all started from there. The old man used to stand there on the dockside and they'd all bring their stuff out to him.

'When you took the laundry back to the ships you didn't get paid. The captain signed your chit to say it was all correct and you took it up to the shipping office in London. Of course, your great-granddad liked that bit on the ship because they'd all be saying, "Have a drop of rum, Harry, have a drop of beer."'

Harry always volunteered to take the laundry back to the ships because with his reputation as a bit of a comedian he was guaranteed an invitation to stay for a tipple with the sailors, an invitation he accepted heartily. At least once a month the ship would sail with him aboard, necessitating his being put off at Tilbury by the Thames pilot.

'One day though, during the First World War, the bloody boat kept going, didn't it? Him and his mate the greengrocer, who was also having his chit signed, ended up sailing for the other side of the bloody world. Mum was expecting at the time, as she usually was, but the old man had been shanghaied. He went all over the place, the Dardanelles, everywhere.'

Harry was put to work in the galley, and had the misfortune to be carrying a huge vat of boiling soup at the moment the ship was torpedoed. The soup spilled all over his leg, and the ship's surgeon had to be called from more conventional military injuries to declare that the extent of the burns meant Harry's leg

had to come off. Overhearing that, my great-grandfather, understandably rather partial to his lower limbs due to their crucial role in propelling him to the pub, decided to jump ship.

'He literally went over the side and swam for it,' said Joan. 'He'd seen this bit of ground not far off, this island where they'd anchored to inspect the damage, and him and his mate the greengrocer swam out, and it was the bloody Falklands, wasn't it? I didn't know this until the Falklands War started and my sister, Win, told me, and how they had to wait there until another boat pulled in and they could get home.'

No one alive today knows how he did it, but several months after his inebriated departure my great-grandfather arrived back at Silvertown station with all limbs still attached. As his train pulled in, through the steam on the opposite platform he saw my great-grandmother dressed in her Sunday best waiting to board a train. Harry hurried across the footbridge, convinced that during his lengthy, unannounced absence she'd found herself a new man, only to find that the baby born after he'd left was gravely ill with dysentery in Bethnal Green Hospital. They travelled there together and made it just in time to be present when their child died.

Despite having grown up with a wealth of such tales, I realised only recently that I'd never been to Silvertown. With the wind at my back and the aid of a sturdy catapult, I could probably twang a pebble across the river into Silvertown from my bedroom window so I had little excuse not to go. Consumed by family nostalgia one afternoon, I pulled out a street map and discovered that although Silvertown had been flattened in the blitz (mostly on one horrific Saturday afternoon in 1940, which necessitated my grandparents fleeing the area on a motorcycle with fires raging and bombs falling around them, my grandmother riding pillion with my infant mother in her arms), a truncated Constance Street was still there.

There were spots of rain in the wind as I boarded the

Woolwich Free Ferry, which has shuttled people and vehicles across the Thames since 1889. On a warm summer evening in 1940 my mother had been born on the ferry; the nearest maternity hospital to Silvertown was over the water at Woolwich and hence she made a spectacular entrance halfway across the river.

Peering between the whitewashed ironwork of the foot-passengers' deck as we chugged across the river, I could see the titanium-coated shells of the Thames Barrier and the gently decomposing Millennium Dome across the choppy, rain-pocked waters. Small bullets of water stung my face as I took in the magnificent riverside panorama of London from this century-old aquatic vantage point.

When we reached the north side of the Thames, a cheerfully weather-beaten man in oilskins and a West Ham United ski-hat unhooked the chain at the front and I began a walk along the river to Silvertown. Constance Street was there all right, but would be unrecognisable to my ancestors today. A small row of shops, no more than twenty years old and nearly all boarded up, gave way to a new-looking council estate. I knew the laundry had been at number 16, so counted the shops. The last in the row was a disused British Legion at number 14. The empty paved space next to it, where some leaves and crisp packets did circuits in the wind, was clearly the site of the old laundry. I was, erm, home.

Back at the end of the street was an abandoned old pub. Clearly grand in its day, it had no name, no painted sign, and the windows were covered with metal grilles. This could have been Cundy's, one of the pubs to which my grandfather repaired for his nightly pots of beer.

'When Dad died there were more wreaths from bleedin' pubs than there were from family,' laughed Joan when I asked her about Harry. 'The Rose and Crown, the Queen Victoria, Cundy's at the top of the road, the Three Crowns, the Royal Albert at North

Woolwich, the Queen's Head; all wreaths from bloody pubs!'

As I walked past the pub I thought I heard something – music from within. It was then that I noticed that the metal grille over a side door was half raised. Despite every apparent effort to make it seem otherwise, the pub was open. I ducked under the grille and went inside. It was an old-fashioned, high-ceilinged Victorian pub with threadbare carpets and faded flock wallpaper. Weak sunshine streamed through the grilles, flecks of dust floating gracefully in the thin beams of light. A few old men with wispy white hair and shabby overcoats squinted through rheumy eyes at pints of Guinness on the tables in front of them. I ventured to the bar across a carpet so old it shone as if polished and slid to a halt like a novice ice-skater wobbling to the barriers. A friendly man in his forties wearing a grubby tracksuit poured me a Guinness, and I asked what the pub was called. 'The Railway Tavern,' he said. My heart sank a little, until he added, 'But everyone around here knows it as Cundy's.' This was it, this was the right place - Harry's local. In addition, it was a famous dockland pub: during the Great Dock Strike of 1889 Eleanor Marx, wife of Karl, organised strike meetings in Cundy's.

'Cundy owned the place in the early years, when I was a kid. And ooh, he was a sod,' Great-aunt Joan explained to me later. 'Dad would make his first move up to Cundy's for a couple of pints before he'd start doing the rounds of all the other pubs and usually end up back there. He used to tell me, "Old Cundy knows when I've had a few." Dad used to give him a pound and it would be, what, fourpence a pint in those days, and he'd only get change back from ten shillings. The old man marked his pound note one night, and Cundy gave him change from ten shillings. Dad says, "I gave you a pound," so he said, "No you didn't," and Dad's got a policeman from outside. He checked the till and there's this marked pound note, and Dad never went into Cundy's again from that day on.'

I sat at a table in the corner and looked at the pictures around the walls. They showed the docks in their heyday: forests of cranes dipping their heads over the decks of enormous vessels, cockney stevedores milling around cavernous containers, vast liners like the *Mauretania* nosing into the Royal Docks, the largest inland acreage of dock water in the world.

In my grandmother's day, Silvertown was like an island; with the docks to the north and the Thames to the south, you had to cross water to leave. It even had an island mentality. Right up until her death my grandmother was suspicious of anyone not from Silvertown, even though she never returned there to live after being bombed out. Cockneys in general were just about okay, but anyone else was dodgy and not to be trusted. 'You've got dock water in your veins, boy, and don't you ever forget it,' she'd warn me.

It struck me that, a few ferry trips and the odd session on a pedalo aside, my own seafaring experience was not nearly as impressive as it should have been, given the nature of the fluid apparently coursing through my arteries. Even my grandfather was a seafarer, although more intentionally than his father-in-law. Charlie wasn't a particularly successful sailor, however, and his fishing boat would regularly have to be rescued. Rarely would an expedition with Great-aunt Joan's husband, also called Charlie, end without mishap.

'We went out one day, me and the two Charlies, down to Folkestone because they had to do a bit of tinkering with the engine,' Joan would tell me. 'They decided to take the boat out and there's me sitting in nothing but a cotton frock, three or four miles out to sea. And the waves are getting up and the boat's rocking from side to side, and we're having to sit with our feet out, braced against the side.

'So all of a sudden we're in a calm bit, and your granddad says, "You all right, Joan? Do you want a rod and line?" and gives me a line with a load of hooks all along it. "Chuck it over the side,"

he says. So, of course, silly cow, I do it, don't I, and within a minute I'm nearly over the side myself. "Pull it in," they're shouting, "pull it in." We pulled it in and there's bleedin' mackerel all along it. Mackerel's easy to catch – you can chuck a bit of silver paper in and get mackerel – and I'd got hundreds of 'em. Took about an hour to get these bloody things off and chuck them back in the water.

'So we're sitting there and it's cutting up a bit rough again, and fog's come down too. There's your granddad in the wheelhouse with his pipe, all happy, you know. My Charlie's down below tinkering away with the engine and all of a sudden there's this big "paaaaarp, paaaaaaarp", and it's only the bleedin' cross-Channel ferry about a hundred yards away, coming straight for us out of the fog. I looked at your granddad, and he's just standing there looking at this ferry going, "What's the matter with that silly so-and-so?" My Charlie's looked up from the engine, seen this bloody great thing coming for us and gone, "Jesus Christ, let's get a move on!" And the bow wave comes right over us. The ferry's gone by like a bloody ten-storey block of flats and your granddad's leaning out of the wheelhouse shaking his fist after this thing, going, "You silly bastard!"'

Sitting in the pub that day I thought of Joan's tales and realised that I'd probably been a bit of a let-down to the nautical side of the family. Not only had I just passed some of the family silver over Cundy's bar for the first time since the great marked-note scandal of nearly a century earlier, my ten-minute trip on the Woolwich ferry was probably about the most daring maritime escapade I had ever undertaken. I had never swum for an unknown land half the world away in order to save a blistered leg, nor had I taken on a cross-Channel ferry and lost. Indeed, about the closest I had ever come to being a seafarer was probably catching the shipping forecast on the radio late at night and thinking, Boy, I'm glad I'm in here and not out there.

I left Cundy's deep in thought. As I made the return journey south on the Woolwich Ferry I thought of the shipping forecast and the news bulletin I'd heard in the early hours of that morning. I was starting to realise just how much the forecast is part of the fabric of Britain. Those of us who don't work on the sea see it as a kind of poetry, almost a comfort blanket that the world is still turning as it should. Those who do put out to sea in craft large and small, the people who actually know what the announcer is on about, see it as something different, a friendly, helpful and above all useful voice. My grandfather would have listened to it. And by the sound of things, largely ignored it.

Yet familiar though the sea areas are by name to the rest of us, and strangely comforting as their recital may be, few people give much thought to where they are or what they contain. The old pictures on Cundy's wall of ships departing for who-knows-where, with linen laundered by the scrubbed, shiny red hands of my own family, caused me to ponder how I could put right my nautical failings.

I strolled along the towpath back to Greenwich and parked at my favourite table in the Cutty Sark, looking out through the huge bay window at the Thames as the sun prepared to set. An idea was forming.

With a great-grandfather who once sailed to the Falklands by mistake (and became possibly the only man in British maritime history to be seriously wounded by soup), a mother born on the Woolwich Ferry and a grandfather whose boating misadventures left him on first-name terms with every lifeboatman in the South-east, there was only one thing for it: I would take more note of the shipping forecast than my ancestors and see the places it represents. Where were these curiously titled sea areas and what do they contain? These regions, mentally recited as soullessly as multiplication tables rote-learned at school, barged into my mind as I sat in my favourite boozer, and I felt sure that a little research would yield enough information to make an

exploration of them worthwhile. Who, what or where was Utsire, of North and South fame? Who were Fisher, Bailey and the most recent addition to the fold, FitzRoy?

Trawlers, container ships, barges, ferries, yachts, fishing smacks, lifeboats: the range of vessels that depends on an accurate maritime weather forecast is as wide as the ocean. What better way to continue the nautical legacy of my dock-watered bloodline than to explore the shipping forecast? I began to rue that I had never had my timbers shivered, barnacles blistered nor my deck pooped. To this hopeless landlubber Sole was what I had on the bottom of my shoe, Dogger Bank must be where golden retrievers kept their savings, and German Bight was something unpleasant contracted by my sleazier friends on a visit to Berlin.

Who on earth can hear phrases like 'low Latvia one thousand moving south-east and filling' and 'North Spain one thousand and thirty two losing its identity' and know what they actually mean? When I listened to the shipping forecast that night in my office my only claims to seaworthiness were the half-empty bottle of Captain Morgan in the kitchen and the battered copy of *Moby Dick* on my bookshelf. But out there somewhere on the swell were fishermen, trawler men, lifeboatmen and dredger skippers all tuning in, a range of seafarers from the impeccably uniformed captain of a vast passenger ferry to the crusty old salt in his brine-spattered fishing boat, all of whom were depending on this strangely poetic mantra for their immediate safety.

My task was set. I would travel the shipping forecast, and I would do it within a year. It was October 17. Exactly one year hence, I decided, I would return to this table in the Cutty Sark pub situated at the heart of Britain's maritime heritage having conquered this broadcasting idiosyncrasy. I'd know how and why it's there, where it came from and what lies behind the mysterious names. It wasn't a voyage as spectacular or drink-fuelled as

my great-grandfather's, but if I succeeded I could at least hold my head up as being a part of my family's nautical tradition.

I left the Cutty Sark that day with my mind full of lighthouses, fishing smacks and buoys. But to find out more about the shipping forecast than the sketchy list of names I had absorbed from the radio over the years, my first destination would not be a maritime one. I would have to plot a course to a place whose skyline is punctured not by masts but by office blocks. My ears would be assailed not by screeching gulls but by screeching brakes. My journey around the shipping forecast map would doubtless take me to some bizarre places, so a nondescript new town just outside the M25 provided a suitably abstruse first port of call.