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# SEVEN SEAS



# MAGAZINE

OLD SHIPS AND OLD SHIPMATES  
BY  
KENNETH D. SHOESMITH RI

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## **THE SEVEN SEAS MAGAZINE**

**The Official Organ of The Seven Seas Club**

**Vol. 76 No.4**

**DECEMBER 1999**

### **EDITORIAL:**

Not only is Christmas approaching, a fact which our Chaplin draws our attention to, but so is the Millennium. Perhaps I am getting old, but this 'event' strikes me as being entirely specious. Theological scholars tell us that the Christian era is four years adrift, while mathematicians affirm that the year 2,000 is actually the last of the 20th Century, hence its name, and not the first of the 21st. From another point of view, the Chinese are well ahead of us in the Millennium stakes, while the Moslem world is one astern. But we have to face reality and admit that insofar as the regulation of our computer driven world is concerned, the instant we are all poised between the year 1999 and the year 2000 is predicted to be interesting. Let us hope all the prophets of doom are proved wrong and we can actually cope without too much reliance upon a machine.

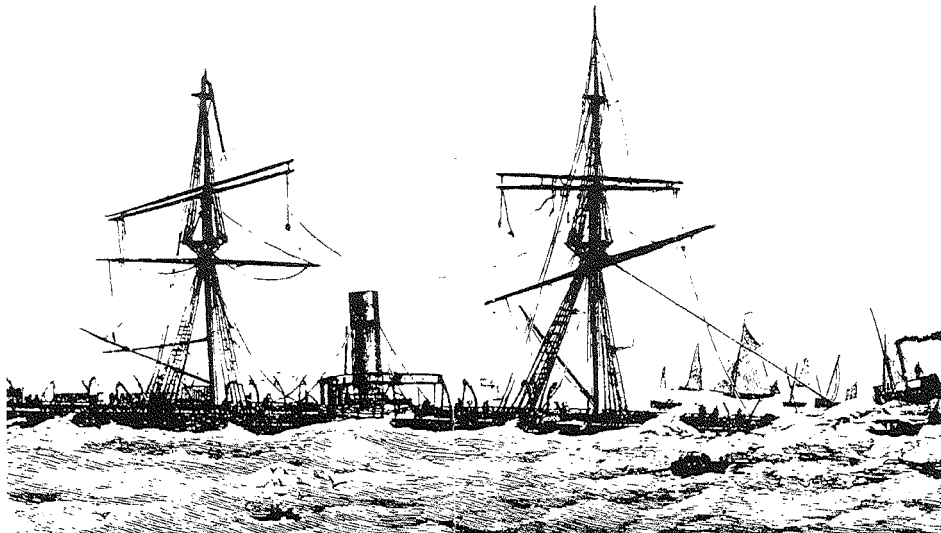
But New Year's Eve, not only marks the end of the millennium, it is the end of the century, one that has seen enormous social and political changes, massive numbers of deaths by war and disease and a complete eradication of the notion of 'the established order'. We have passed from subservient patriots, through the valley of shadow of mutually assured destruction to the open free-for-all of the world-wide-web. We have eradicated horrendous diseases only to find new infections; we have found the means to feed untold millions, only to see famine stalk the world with consequences that beggar description. As for our own country, we long ago ceased to be the workshop of the world and the once huge merchant navy that carried the output and collected the raw materials for that production has vanished. But some things remain the same; we are still an island surrounded by the sea and many of us still seek upon its waters the challenges and experiences that make us an island race. In this common interest, members of the Seven Seas Club can continue to maintain the traditions of our nation, be we (in alphabetical order) English, Irish, Scots or Welsh.

**Richard Woodman.**



## ROPE -YARNS

Up until 1875, the RNLI had insisted that no lifeboat need be stationed in the Harwich area. Two attempts to provide private rescue boats had failed on account of their requiring a steam tug to tow them to sea, but in 1875 the Norddeutscher Lloyd's auxiliary steam emigrant ship *Duetschland* was wrecked on the Kentish Knock with the loss of 57 lives. The Kentish Knock is the most easterly of the extensive shoals lying in the Thames Estuary and the ship ran foul of it in heavy weather during a blinding snowstorm. The master sent up rockets, but these were not at first seen until after dark, when the snow cleared. There were two steam tugs at Harwich but the weather was so severe that the master of one, the tug *Liverpool*, decided he could achieve nothing until daylight. However, arriving on the scene the following forenoon, John Canington laid his tug alongside the stricken ship. She had been aground for thirty hours, was holed, her topmammer had been wrecked and her decks were awash. Carrington succeeded in taking off 173 survivors. In the outcry arising from a report published in *The Times*, Canington was widely criticised, though the inquest absolved him from blame. Whether or not the grounding was seen from the Kentish Knock lightvessel is uncertain, but the then method of communicating distress to the shore, firing of cannon and the sending up of rockets, were probably also not observed in the prevailing conditions. The Board of Trade concluded that a better method of transmitting messages should be available and Trinity House actually experimented with carrier pigeons before wireless telegraphy was available.

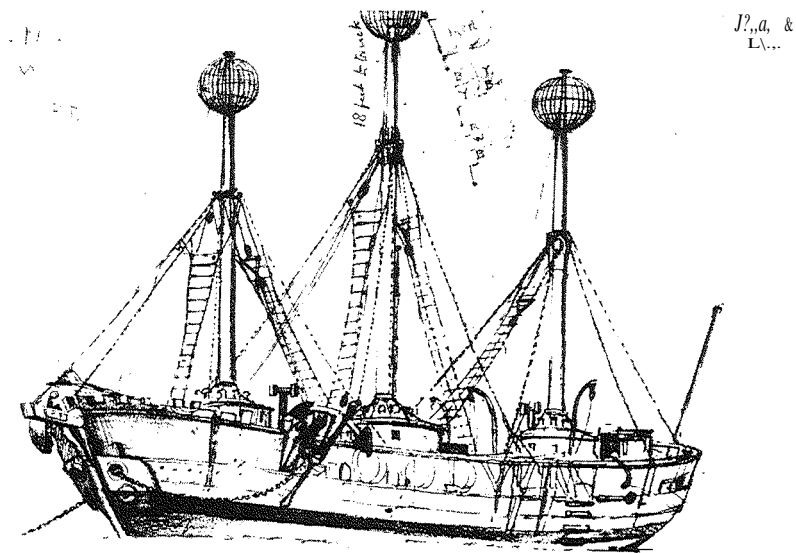


In the following year a Miss Burmester donated £200 to provide a self-righting lifeboat and thus the Harwich lifeboat station was established, the first boat being called Springwell.

The *Deutschland* was on passage from Bremen to New York and, despite Canington's noble effort, for it cannot have been easy to take a paddle-tug alongside a waterlogged vessel lying on a shoal, 44 passengers and 20 of the ship's company were lost. Among the drowned immigrants were a group of nuns, a fact which moved the Jesuit poet Gerard Manly Hopkins to write his poem, *The Wreck of the Deutschland*.

## FEATURE

### A HISTORY OF ENGLISH LIGHTVESSELS, Part One 1730-1905



A lightship of about 1830, seen in a drawing by E.W. Cooke. *National Maritime Museum*

In 1836 an Act of Parliament brought all English and Welsh lighthouses under the management of Trinity House, London. The old practice of allowing private landowners to erect lighthouses and levy dues as a speculation was ended, and England and Wales conformed to the practice already established in Ireland and Scotland, where commissions for the administration of these seamarks had been in existence since the last quarter of the previous century.

Trinity House had for long approved the establishment of lighthouses, advising the crown on the appropriateness of a lighthouse when a landowner petitioned for the patent to erect one, and thereafter levying an annual fee. Most patents ensured a lighthouse reverted to Trinity House after a century, permitting the builder to recover the costs and make a profit, and considerable sums were made. A diarist at the court of Charles II noted that he should catch the king's eye and beg of him a lighthouse and Dickens, writing much later in *Nicholas Nickleby*, had Nicholas's mother approached by an amorous lunatic who evidenced his wealth by claiming to 'have jewels, ma'am, and lighthouses'. The system worked well in a few places where responsible landowners ran efficient lights, but more often than not the quality of the lights was poor and did not keep up with technology. Moreover, if a landowner did not want to erect a lighthouse, it was only with difficulty that the Trinity House could be persuaded to undertake the task itself, though it did in a few places like Lowestoft where lack of seamarks regularly threatened the supply of coal to London. Thus the west coast of England and Wales was neglected and almost unlit during the 18th Century, no-one seeing much point in remedying the matter.

This chaotic and deteriorating situation existed throughout a century in which trade and shipping steadily increased. Lighthouses were chiefly known to the public not as aids to navigation, but as aids to private enrichment. Such a situation provoked envy among ambitious but unlanded men.

Notwithstanding this general cynicism, there were those interested in the protection of property and cargoes (there were always plenty of seamen) sought means to make coastal navigation better by the increased provision of buoys, beacons and lights. As early as 1679, a Sir John Clayton proposed mooring a vessel with a cresset at its masthead as a seamark, but the Elder Brethren of Trinity House, shipmasters all, opposed this on the grounds that it would be ineffective and difficult to maintain. The idea, however, was picked up by Robert Hamblin, a barber of King's Lynn who developed an interest in nautical matters after marrying a shipmaster's daughter who brought to her husband a share in a collier. Hamblin failed as a shipowner as he had as a barber, being reduced to a state of penury when he met an adventurer named David Avery. Avery saw possibilities in Hamblin's idea of mooring lightvessels on the many banks which littered the southern North Sea and annually took their toll of ships and men. The idea was not new, for a Captain Waggett of Yarmouth had advocated a warning vessel should be moored near the Dudgeon shoal in 1724, so we may suppose the notion was commonly mooted among mariners. For Hamblin and Avery the prospect of light dues was too attractive to be denied so Avery, knowing they had little chance of obtaining a patent, hit upon a brilliant subterfuge.

The main problem of lighthouses at the time was identifying one from another, not surprising given the then state of navigation. It was usual to do this with multiple towers, so that a mariner entering the Channel from the Atlantic would know by sighting a single light that he was off the Scillies, two light the Lizard, and three the Casquets. Avery hit upon the idea of claiming Hamblin had discovered a better solution without actually disclosing what this solution was. He received a 14 year patent dated July 1730. The two men now fitted out a collier with a single mast, crossed by a yard at the arms of which two large lanterns were suspended. The new-fangled lightvessel was towed into the Thames and moored insolently close to the 'buoy of the Nore' maintained by the buoy yacht of Trinity House.

The Elder Brethren were furious and objected vehemently to this paltry object, particularly as Avery announced more of such craft were to be fitted out. Trinity House therefore invited the Admiralty to join the Brethren in taking proceedings against the two adventurers. However, their Lordships were unsympathetic; they had been considering the establishment of such 'alarm vessels' on their own account and Trinity House approached the Attorney-General who deliberated for two years by which time extensive lobbying of the King had had the partners' patent revoked. The clerks then had the vexatious and unprecedented task of drawing up an instrument of revocation.

But the lightvessel had been on station long enough to prove a success and there was an

outcry among seafarers at its proposed abolition. Avery rode the tide of popular approval but adroitly made a conciliatory appeal to Trinity House for a lease, stating the outlay had been £2,000. The Elder Brethren sensibly gave ground, granting the partners a lease at £100 per annum, payable to them, for a period of 61 years from 1733. Three years later Trinity House were suing certain owners for evasion of lightdues!

So popular was the Nore with its twin lights by night and its large flag by day, that mariners clamoured for more. Avery now exploited Waggett's idea and managed to convince the Elder Brethren that another lightvessel was wanted on the Dudgeon. Avery got his second patent in 1736. Nevertheless Trinity House tried to discourage proliferation by charging Avery £200 a year for his patent, increasing to £300 after two years and in 1739 refused a patent for a lightvessel at the Cockle Gat at the northern end of Yarmouth Roads. The main reason for this was a fear of the lightvessel drifting, of danger to her own crew and to other vessels misled by such movement.

Notwithstanding this, the success of the Dudgeon encouraged the Admiralty who had never shared the misgivings of Trinity House. When Smeaton built his light tower on the Eddystone he converted a brigantine, the *Harlequin*, as a lightvessel and moored it adjacent to the reef on 13th August 1756. Insured for £850, *Harlequin* remained on station until Smeaton lit his stone tower on 16th October 1759, thus proving beyond doubt of the feasibility of the idea. The Admiralty now pressed Trinity House to establish 'floating lights' for the benefit of the nation, by which their Lordships meant the Royal Navy. In 1788 a special vessel, built at a cost of £4,500, was moored south of the Owers shoal in the approaches to Portsmouth. The Owers demonstrated that a vessel moored in relative shallows will give more trouble than one moored in deeper water. The Owers broke adrift several times, once bringing up off St. Valery-en-Caux.

Then, on the night of 30th October 1789, two convoys of merchantmen ran foul of each other in the Cockle Gatway off Norfolk. Twenty-three ships foundered, 20 ran ashore and some 600 seamen lost their lives. Lighthouses were built to improve navigation in the area, and a light vessel was proposed close to the Newarp shoal. Fitted with two horizontal lights she was laid to her moorings in December 1790. By now the light vessel was an accepted and welcomed part of the coastal scene. In August 1795 a lightvessel showing three lights in a triangle was moored at the North Sand Head of the Goodwins. When more were established round this most terrible complex of sand banks, the North Sand Head became the North Goodwin. To some extent the Elder Brethren's caution was borne out. Dragging, particularly of the North Goodwin at her shallow station was to dog them and in December 1924 and November 1954, she broke adrift, evoking the Brethren's prophetic caution two centuries earlier: 'a lightship would not ride, would break adrift and drown all the people'.

In July 1796 a patent was issued for a lightvessel at the Sunk station, off Harwich, to guide ships into the Thames Estuary from the north, although it was three years before this was laid, such was the fear of the French using it during the war. The Admiralty also wanted a

light on the Galloper, not far away, but Trinity House did not concur and in 1803 the Admiralty had to fit this out themselves, though its maintenance, at a cost of £1,800 a year, was put in the hands of George Strivens, the Trinity agent at Ramsgate. In 1809 the Gull Stream lightvessel's two horizontal lights marked the passage inside the Goodwins.

In May 1811, the Admiralty requested a master for the lightvessel fitting out in the naval dockyard at Portsmouth, destined for the Bembridge Ledge to mark the approaches to Spithead. William Loosemore, mate of the Owers was recommended and asked if a carronade could be fitted as a warning gun, and muzzle-loading carronades remained in service aboard lightvessels until 1955. The lightvessel was to be stored, manned and serviced by Trinity House who gave the task to their agent at Littlehampton and Trinity House recommended two lanterns be exhibited to avoid confusion with the single light at the Owers. On 10th September 1812 the Brethren were informed the converted traw *Maria* was ready for sea, that the Trinity seaman should man her and she should be 'ignited' on 29th September. In this manner Trinity House found itself managing all lightvessels long before it took over all English and Welsh lighthouses. Even Avery's two vessels had long since been taken over, presumably upon his death. During the Nore mutiny of 1797, an Elder Brother, Captain Calvert, had attempted to reach the lightvessel which lay under the guns of the mutinous fleet, to see if all was well on board. Calvert had been briefly a captive of the mutineers who had afterwards let him go.

During the passage of a British fleet into the Baltic prior to the raid on Copenhagen in 1807 (not to be confused with Nelson's of 1801), the Danes extinguished the Skaw lighthouse. Anticipating this, the Admiralty ordered the fire-ships *Prometheus* and *Lightning* fitted as lightvessels to help the fleet. 'A man from the Trinity House joined with three immense lanterns and about 130 gallons of oil', wrote young Captain Parker prior to taking station in *Prometheus* on 21st October 1807. Exactly a month later, at 1400, Parker ordered his cable cut due to the severity of the weather and the danger of dragging onto the reef under his lee.

Once the Napoleonic War was over new lightvessel stations rapidly appeared: in 1815 the Stanford was laid off Lowestoft. (This name derives from the quaint phrase 'stand forth'.) In 1832 the South Goodwin was established with Chinese gongs as fog signals and struck every ten minutes, replacing the confusing ship's bells used hitherto.

Interest was now expressed by other nations. In 1826 a Danish naval officer was permitted to examine the Galloper, prior to his government establishing a lightvessel off the Trindelen Rock. Moored to a heavy mushroom anchor and 200 fathoms of chain cable, she carried two spare anchors each with a further 100 fathoms and these were handled by a large, three barrelled windlass. As a routine cable was hove in in good weather to keep her close to her station (verified in good visibility by the occasional compass bearing of landmarks) and ensure the anchor was not foul, and veered in bad to enable her to hold to her ground tackle. Chain cable was agonisingly hard and slow to work to handle. The gypsy whelps had yet to appear on windlasses and their barrels still required three turns of cable

to enable them to 'bite'. Even the largest line-of-battleships of the period still used cable-laid rope for their anchors. The lightvessel also bore sails to regain station if she drifted off. By day the Galloper flew a large red flag, and by night two lights and she bore a crew of master, mate, lamplighter, cook and none seaman. Relieving was carried out in such a way that either the master or the mate and eight men were always aboard.

In 1837, possibly as a result of the new-found authority of Trinity House which now moved rapidly into the technological vanguard as the supremacy of Britain as the world's major maritime power was assured, the scarlet flags were replaced by wooden balls, formed from curved ash battens built round the fore and after masts. If and when a lightvessel was off station, they were struck and the light was not shown.

Then, in 1849 the Leman and Ower lightvessels was laid beyond the extensive banks which extend far off the north east coast of Norfolk. She showed two lights, a fixed light aft, 27 feet above the sea, and a revolving light forward hoisted nightly to a height of 38 feet. Rotated by a motor at the foot of the mast, a crude square drive operated this most efficiently and a array of lamps each with its own spermaceti oil reservoir and backed by a polished, silvered parabolic reflector, allowed the distant mariner to take a bearing of an accurately timed flash. The lantern was lowered during the day to allow the reservoirs to be topped up, the wicks trimmed and reflectors polished. Crude and simple, such hoisting lanterns remained in service until the Second World War.

By this time steam power had arrived to facilitate towing to and from station and lightvessels were attended by a small fleet of steam tenders operating out of Trinity House depots. Lightvessel crews worked two months at sea and one ashore. With the exception of the masters, they assisted in these depots to help clean and paint the many buoys which it was also the business of the tenders to lift and service. The local agents were gradually phased out and Trinity House formed its own uniformed staff out of the old 'Yacht Establishment', with District Superintendents representing the Elder Brethren at several ports. With the acquisition of their first steam powered paddle-tender, the *Vestal* of 1835, the Steam Vessel service was formed, and among its ships were two built specially to facilitate the construction of lighthouses such as the Wolf Rock, the new Eddystone and others. In Scotland and Ireland, the Commissioners followed suit and by the end of the century the British Empire was served by several colonial and Dominion organisations, smaller colonies being under the Imperial Lighthouse Service.

By the 1840s the whelped gypsy had appeared on ships' windlasses to handle chain cable and this was necessary as links made from bars of iron 2 inches in diameter and a foot long were in service aboard the lightvessels. On most stations either sand or mud were the predominating components of the sea-bed and mushroom anchors became the standard ground-tackle. Chain was generally acquired from the Limehouse Company of Huddart and Co, founded by Captain Huddart. A former East India commander, Huddart had interested himself in moorings having seen a ship drive ashore with heavy loss of life. It is almost needless to say that Huddart was an Elder Brother.

By the mid 1840s more lightvessels had been established at the Mouse station in the Thames, at the Varne and East Goodwin stations in the Strait of Dover. Another had appeared in the Bristol Channel and was later named the English and Welsh Grounds, abbreviated as 'E & W Grounds' for the purposes of painting the name in conspicuous white, black shadowed, capitals down her scarlet tides. All Trinity House lightvessels were individually numbered and painted red, passing from one station to another as the endless progress of refit programmes progressed. Irish lightvessels, of which there were far fewer, were painted black and given the individual names of seabirds, though the names on their topsides indicated the station upon which they rode.

An account of laying of a lightvessel, the long awaited Cockle Gat, is dated 20th December 1834: *Vestal*, Trinity Steamer, having the lightvessel in tow, was seen entering the St. Nicholas Gat (the then southern entrance to Great Yarmouth Roads) on Tuesday morning when the vessels laying in Yarmouth Roads immediately hoisted their colours and as she passed alongside Her Majesty's Ship *Blazer* the crew manned the rigging and gave three hearty cheers by way of welcome. At noon the lightvessel was in her position ...'

By the time of the Great Exhibition of 1851, the three British lighthouse authorities, Trinity House, the Commissioners for Irish Lights and the Northern Lighthouse Board, led the world in the provision of aids to navigation generally. In an age when navigation was a primarily a visually based art, it was considered desirable to have a major light, such as was provided by a lighthouse or lightvessel at intervals of no more than 20 to 25 miles. Off the extensive banks of eastern England and in the shoals of the Thames Estuary by which access was had to the world's busiest port of London, it was largely lightvessels which provided these. In little over a century, the lightvessel had become a familiar and reassuring sight to mariners; even in fog it could provide some clues to position with its gongs or air-powered horns. Moreover, if a ship grounded nearby in thick or heavy weather, while a lightvessel's crew might not be able to render immediate assistance, the boom of their carronades and the flash and flare of their rockets would transmit the news from the Kentish Knock, up the Barrow Chanel via the Barrow Deep, Mid Barrow and Mouse lightvessels, to the Coastguard at Southend who would call out the lifeboats and paddle-tugs which would attempt rescue and salvage.

In 1855 there were 35 lightvessel stations under Trinity House's management, with spare ships at Blackwall, Milford Haven and Great Yarmouth. The Corporation was also responsible for 420 buoys and beacons and 77 lighthouses scattered about the coasts of England, Wales, the Channel Islands, Gibraltar and Helgoland. The light vessels were all of wooden construction. Iron construction was introduced in the 1860s, early ships being sheathed with wood and copper to eliminate corrosion. Some of these hulls lasted a long time; Erith yacht club possessed a club-house which had originally been a lightvessel with a hoisting lantern, and sheathed hulls were still in service until the early 1970s.

As the 20th Century dawned the old amateurism had gone. The lighted buoy had appeared about 1875 and in 1887 the first submarine telephone cable had been led out to the Sunk lightvessel for reporting ships in distress or signalling for pilots. More followed, but these frequently fouled and were replaced by wireless transmitters in 1905.

In fact, from an obscure origin the lightvessel had come to play a part on the forefront of technology, for it was with the East Goodwin that Marconi had carried out one of his early transmitting experiments, and it was the East Goodwin which transmitted the world's first radio distress signal when, in fog, she was run into by a steamship.

Helmsman

## THE NATIONAL CORE COLLECTION OF HISTORIC SHIPS

Funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and The National Maritime Museum, the National Historic Ships Committee, announced those historic vessels deemed to be the most important to the national heritage. A press conference was held at the Royal Institute of Naval Architects during November. Supported by a Technical Committee of experts, the whole chaired by Admiral of the Fleet Sir Julian Oswald, the actual data acquisition was undertaken by Dr Robert Prescott and his research officer, Denna Groom of St. Andrew's University. Some 1,599 vessels are registered by their owners on the National Historic Ships Register. About 140 of these are Designated Vessels, said to be of significant interest, with about forty forming the National Core Collection. The parameters for inclusion in either the Core Collection or the List of Designated Vessels were strict, no vessel built outside the UK was eligible, missing those behind the preservation of *HMS Trincomalee* which was built in Bombay, for instance. Also disqualified were vessels of less than 40 feet in length or vessels built after 1945. A series of consultative roadshows will take the debate round the country in 2000.

## CLUB DINNER DATES FOR YOUR DIARY, 2000

Thursday 27th January

Thursday 24th February

Thursday 30th March

Friday 28th April (Ladies Night)

Thursday 25th May (Annual General Meeting)

Thursday 28th September

Thursday 26th October

Thursday 23rd November

Friday 8th December (Christmas Party)

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### PLEASE NOTE:

Club Christmas cards, at 10 for £3.75, will be available at the Christmas Party on 10th December, or may be obtained from Frank Whymark with post and packing extra.

### Seven Seas Sweatshirts

Members are also reminded that Club Sweatshirts in Navy, Grey and Red are available in standard Small, Medium, Large, Extra Large, and Double Extra Large sizes from Jeremy Miller (to whom cheques should be made payable) at a price of £18.50

### MAGAZINE EDITOR (for correspondence):

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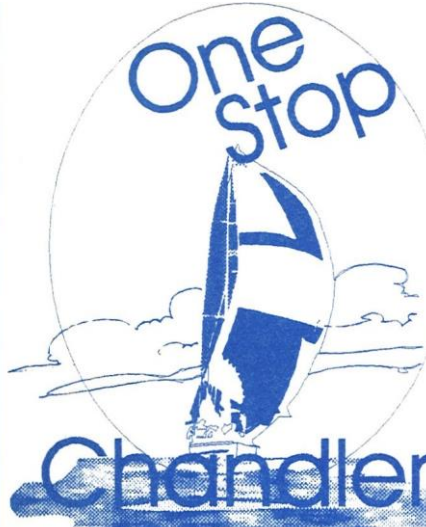
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Members are reminded that original copy is always welcomed by your Honorary Editor. Brief articles, old journals, reminiscent notes or sketches all form grist to the editorial mill. Our printers are assiduous in returning illustrated material but since loss in the post cannot these days be absolutely guaranteed, photocopied material is preferred.



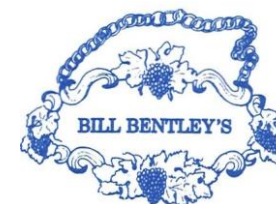
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