

The Pandemic, Torbay and the Ships

A unique story of friendship between the people of Torbay and the cruise ships moored in the Bay during the Coronavirus Pandemic

Torbay has always provided a safe anchorage for visiting ships - most of them have been welcomed - The Neustra Senora del Rosario, captured by Drake during the Spanish Armada in 1588 and brought into Torbay laden with treasure and Spanish prisoners, The Bellerophon carrying Napoleon after his defeat at Waterloo in 1815, and the English Channel Fleet reviewed by King George V in 1922 to name a few.

But on 23 March 2020, Torbay found itself in lock-down due to the Corona Virus that swept the world to become a pandemic. The country ground to a standstill.

In May, a visitor slipped into the Bay. A cruise ship with no passengers and nowhere to go. The cruising industry had been brought to a halt as the virus found its way onto ships. No-one wanted them. In February 2020, the Holland

America Line ship, Westerdam, was around Vietnam passenger went virus, and the was turned away after country.

Another ship of the America Line, MS off the coast of



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1,243 passengers and 586 crew onboard. On 14th March, 13 passengers and 29 crew fell ill with the virus. Refused entry to the ports of Chile, the Zaandam sailed toward Port Everglades in Florida. By 24th March, 77 onboard had fallen ill and initially the ship was denied transit through the Panama Canal. Four died whilst waiting for permission to transit the Canal. By now there were 148 sick people on board. On 28th March, the Rotterdam, also of the Holland America Line, accompanied the Zaandam through the Panama Canal and the two ships sailed together to Florida. Zaandam had four physicians and four nurses on board, while Rotterdam had two physicians and four nurses.

On 30th March, the two ships reached Florida but found they were not welcome at Port Everglades. The City's Mayor refused permission to dock "without extensive precautions" and the Governor of Florida agreed. The President of the Holland America Line made a public plea for help, as the ships were running low on provisions and medical supplies. On 1st April, President Donald Trump stepped in, saying "we have to help the people". On 2nd April, the two ships were given permission to dock at Port Everglades. By now, there were 107 passengers and 143 crew with influenza-like symptoms. As countries made desperate arrangements to fly home those fit to travel, it was decided that all crew, regardless of their condition, must remain onboard. 14 critically ill passengers were hospitalised, whilst the remaining passengers were only allowed to leave the ships once arrangements for their flights home were confirmed.

By mid April, only three cruise ships were still at sea – virus free, but with no port wanting them. On 20th April they finally were given permission to dock having been turned away by country after country – the Magnifica docked in Marseille, the Pacific Princess in Los Angeles and the Costa Deliziosa in Barcelona.

Whilst unable to operate, the cruise ship industry placed many of its ships into 'minimum non-operational manning' (MNOM). This meant the ship could operate with a skeleton crew whilst maintaining safety and complying with nautical and

environmental regulations, operating with a crew of between 100 and 180, including officers, deck crew, engineering, catering and medical staff. Known as 'warm storage' in the industry, this was a cheaper alternative to 'cold storage' where the ship is effectively closed down and to re-start the engines, generators, water and sanitization systems is a massive cost.

Before Covid, there were approximately 50 cruise lines with 270 ships sailing the world. In 2020, 34 of the ships were scrapped to avoid the cost of storage. Rather than meet the massive costs of docking in ports, many of the ships headed for safe anchorage at sea, and on the South Coast of England, Weymouth, Lyme Bay and Tor Bay soon filled up with a majestic collection of huge "ghost" ships.

Torbay and Lyme Bay proved a popular anchorage with many of the Cruise Lines – among them, the Holland America line's Zaandam, Eurodam, Oosterdam, Niuew Statendam and Volendam dropped anchor. TUI ships Marella Explorer 1 and 2 and Marella Discovery joined them, together with the Queen Victoria and Queen Mary 2 from Cunard, and Ventura and Arcadia from the P&O Line. The ships came and went, as they "popped off" for a few days to refuel, or sailed up the Channel to undertake routine marine work.

Over the initial months of lockdown and misery, as death tolls rose and people faced economic and mental hardship, a friendship sprang up between the people of Torbay and the cruise ship crews.



[view from Preston Down Road]

It started with dog walkers gazing out to sea and wondering what it was like on those huge empty ships. Then others came to gaze and wonder, and pretty soon people began to swap photographs of the ships. On the social networking site, Facebook, a page was set up to provide people with a place to post and share their photographs of the ships. This page was 'Ships in Torbay and Lyme Bay'. By November 2020, there were 10k Members of the group following news of the ships and sharing comments. Today (June 2021) there are 18k Members. The site's creator and Administrator is Trevor Leaman.

Quite soon, a rapport began between the people of Torbay and the crew of the ships. People wanted to know what life was like onboard, and began asking not just technical questions, but about life on the empty ships. In response, crew would share photos of the interiors of the ships – devoid of passengers, and explain the mysteries of anchor chains and routine maintenance.

Every now and then, one of the ships would sail off to places like Weymouth or Southampton to re-fuel or for supplies - they would be missed, and when they re-appeared in the Bay, they were welcomed home as old friends.

During the summer of 2020, the news of the virus became more positive. Cases fell - Devon and Cornwall thought the worst was behind them. Visitors, still unable to travel easily abroad, came to Devon for a holiday. Here, they too fell in love with the cruise ships and many small pleasure boats would take them out to see the huge ships up close, as they towered overhead. Every possible photograph was taken - ships at sunset, ships at sunrise, ships in mist, ships in the rain, ships lit up at night and ships sailing away, ships with a rainbow behind them and ships in a line. You name it, someone photographed it.

Then in September, things took a turn for the worse. Cases of the virus rocketed and the death toll rose. The ships were going nowhere.

In November, the ships joined in with the Bay's Remembrance Day to honour all who lost their lives in war - following the silent remembrance on land, the ships sounded their horns at sea in homage to the fallen.

As Christmas approached, the people of Torbay wanted to include the ship's crews in their festive thoughts. Some sent Christmas cards to the ships, and others collected presents for the crew members - toiletries, sweets, souvenirs of the Bay - and the Brixham pilot boat acted as Father Christmas to deliver the gifts. Photographs of the bridge, with Christmas cards on every ledge, and of crew members opening their presents in the crew quarters appeared on Facebook. The people of Torbay had opened their hearts to the ships.

By the end of December 2020, the country was again in lockdown, and celebrations were restricted to households. The pubs and bars were closed, and parties were banned. This didn't stop the ships 'shouting' their message of 'Happy New Year' to their friends on land by blasting their horns, each one with its own note creating a haunting melody played to the many hundreds who came out at midnight to shout back from the beaches 'and a Happy New Year to you'. [Click on the video clip with your speaker on to hear the ships' message]



New Year's Eve
Paignton 2020.mp4

In February, one death from Covid stood out. 100 year-old Captain Sir Tom Moore died - a retired soldier who raised over £30 million pounds for the National Health Service during the pandemic, he had become the darling of the nation. At 6pm on 3rd February, the people of Torbay came out to stand in front of their homes and clap for Sir Tom, and the ships joined in with blasts from their horns.

By Easter the ships were beginning to sail away, to await a return to cruising in warm waters such as the Caribbean or the Mediterranean, and as they left, they sounded their horns in fond farewell.

For now, this article is unfinished. Several ships are still in the Bay, new strains of the virus are sweeping across nations and people are still dying. But vaccines are being developed, and there is hope that the people of Torbay can and will come out of lockdown, and the ships will sail off to warm seas on the other side of the world and be full of laughing happy passengers again.

But the unique friendship will not be forgotten.

Karen Chapman
June 2021

Cruise Ship Visitors June 2020 - October 2021

PS On the afternoon of 13th October 2021, P&O's ship Acadia sailed away, bound for Newcastle and then onwards. She was the last ship to leave our Bay due to the Covid pandemic. Sailors never say goodbye, so we simply wish 'may you have fair winds and following seas'. And finally, many thanks to Sandie



Carnival Breeze



Carnival Magic



Carnival Valor



Cunard Queen Elizabeth



Cunard Queen Mary 2



Cunard Queen Victoria



Emerald Princess



Holland America Line Eurodam



HAL Nieuw Statendam



HAL Oosterdam



HAL Volendam



HAL Westerdam



HAL Zaanadam



Marella Discovery



Marella Discovery 2



Marella Explorer



Marella Explorer 2



P&O Arcadia



P&O Aurora



P&O Azura



P&O Ventura

Armstrong-Buller who has given me permission to reproduce the following collection of her photographs of all the ships which anchored in Torbay & Lyme Bay.