

# MY 'INCHANGA' WORLD

By Alan Rawlinson  
(Author of "Any Budding Sailors"?)

A year to remember....



1952 was the unforgettable year I spent sailing on the M.V. Inchanga between India and Africa. I was 16 years of age coming on 17 and that year is filled with a host of vivid memories of the life I had on this white painted passenger ship. She and her sistership, Isipingo, was seen as icons of the Bank Line fleet, and they were named after locations in East Africa. She was also becoming a relic with some fading pre-war opulence, having been built in 1934 in Belfast to fill the need for a reliable India/S. Africa passenger service. A third vessel, the Incomati, was lost in WW2. The loop-like nature of the itinerary meant any appointment to this ship was for the duration of the articles - 2 years at that time, and not universally popular due to this certainty!

The so called "white ships" were seen by many as 'Yacht-like,' although in many opinions the profile would have benefitted from a more substantial and nicer shaped funnel. At the launch they were fitted with 10 lifeboats, 5 a side, with 2 double stacked adjacent to the mainmast, and which meant launching the top boat and rewinding the davits inboard to launch the lower stowed boat. Below is the newspaper report of the launch in March 1934





Messrs. Workman, Clark (1928) Limited successfully launched from their North Yard on Tuesday the second of three passenger and cargo motor liners building for Messrs. Andrew Weir & Co. London.

The *Inchanga* has been especially designed for the owners' passenger mail and cargo service between India and South African ports, and is equipped with all the most modern improvements of a first-class passenger liner. She is a twin-screw vessel, the principal dimensions being length over-all 425 feet, breadth 57 feet, depth 37 feet.

Accommodation is provided for first, second, and third-class passengers. The first-class accommodation, situated amid-ships, is most luxurious, a large proportion of the rooms being arranged for individual accommodation — also cabins de luxe, and the remaining state-rooms, for two persons, have provision made by the introduction of communicating doors for this accommodation to be made en suite, and with private lavatory accommodation for each room.

The public rooms comprise dining saloon, lounge, smokeroom, verandah cafe, and garden lounge and dancing

space. All the rooms are spacious and the decorative treatment is modern in character with furnishings in harmony, a feature being the most attractive lighting schemes.

The accommodation for the second-class passengers is situated on the after deck, where comfortable cabins and public rooms are arranged. The third-class passengers are arranged in spaces on the main deck.

Other items worthy of mention in the *Inchanga* include extensive promenade and open air games spaces, laundry for ship and passenger service, surgery and consulting rooms, mechanically operated boat davits, and all the latest approved devices for ensuring safety of life at sea.

The *Inchanga* has large holds for general cargo; also space for the carriage of refrigerated cargoes, and a large outfit of electric winches and derricks are provided for quick cargo loading and discharge.

The propelling machinery, also constructed by Workman, Clark (1928) Limited, consists of two sets of Workman, Clark-Sulzer Diesel engines, and are of ample power to give the vessel a speed of about 15 knots.

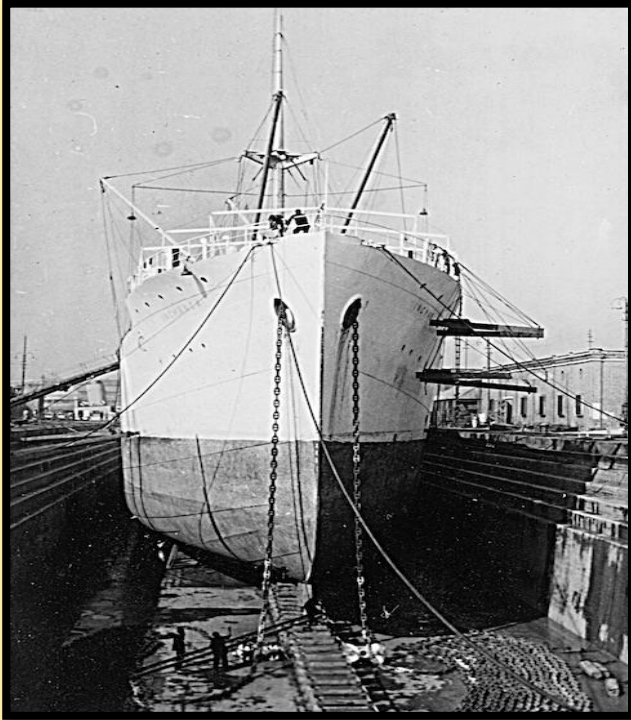
The wide, wood sheathed alleyways on the main deck were an interesting feature, enhanced as they were by the beguiling aroma of tea, cinnamon, cloves and other spices which emanated from the ventilators that had gaping wide cowls. These were placed at head height in the alleyways, adding to the sensation which was almost overpowering at times. The long deck with its near white holystoned timbers and black bitumen caulking was attractive to the eye. Steel doors at the forward end sealed the alleyway from wind and waves in bad weather, and the apprentices cabin porthole also opened on to this deck. It was a double bunked cabin and situated directly opposite the door to the onboard Barber's Shop. Here, a selection of chocolates could be obtained by signing a chit. It didn't matter that the chocolates were invariably covered in a white fungus-like mildew or that the chits could not immediately be honored! The less than pristine chocs were victims of the tropical heat as these ships had no air conditioning. The apprentices cabin had a small oscillating fan and a metal scoop for the porthole but life in port could be very clammy.

It was a life of leisurely sea passages punctuated by hectic and often noisy spells in port. The itinerary varied little, starting in Calcutta and ending in Durban, Natal, a few weeks later before commencing the return journey northwards. The usual ports southbound were Rangoon, Colombo, Mombasa, Dar Es Salaam, Beira, and Lourenco Marques before the usual turnaround at Durban. We also called at Pemba, Lindi, Madras and several other ports en route according to inducement. On board, life for apprentices consisted of two halves. One, in working gear of dungarees or shorts, doing the usual apprentice chores of chipping, painting, helping the carpenter, or stocking up the lifeboats. The other half was conducted in white shirt and shorts with epaulettes either 'standing by' entering and leaving port, or eating in the huge single dining room that spanned the whole width of the accommodation at the fore end of the maindeck, where passengers and officers ate at round tables. The menus were good and sometimes quite fancy, but there was a suspicion that the expensive and best treats were off limits to apprentices who had their own little table in the corner. It was always a challenge and a chore to scrub up three times a day into 'whites' to get a meal served up.

In common with many ships of that era, a makeshift swimming pool was put up on the longish sea passage between Colombo and Mombasa. It was wood and canvas, and fairly primitive but enjoyed by some of the more adventurous passengers. It was one of the few times when it was possible to socialize with any young females who might be travelling, and we took full advantage. A dip in this pool came with the added surprise of a sudden surge of water if the ship met a swell or rough seas, and in extreme cases it sloshed straight over the side into the ocean, which added a frisson of excitement as we all clung on!

Before turning 17, I was suddenly informed that I was to be the acting third mate, shifting myself and kit to a cabin on the bridge deck. The pay took a huge leap, but I was less than happy with this added responsibility not being very sure of myself. Both northbound and southbound the course called for us to pass through one of the Maldiv Islands channels. Easy with radar, but there was none. Sometimes it was pitch dark, which meant relying on dead reckoning from the last fix, and it fell to me to be on watch on a dark night as we swished along with phosphorescent bow waves, the low lying unlit islands unseen either side. On that particular 8 to 12 watch, I recall being alone with the Seacunny silent behind the wheel. My inclination was to stay out on the bridge wing, straining my eyes and ears for sight or sound of surf. Down below a party was in full swing and the muted music and laughter wafted up to the bridge. I felt lonely and vulnerable. From such moments lasting memories are burned into the subconscious forever.

As a young apprentice the rapid in and out of ports on the East African coast meant a lot of time on the foc'sle head on anchor work. These ships depended a lot on their anchors both in Indian and East African ports, and sometimes it was necessary to hang them off to enable chain mooring



to buoys. A small wooden painted anchor buoy was part of the kit, and this was attached to one of the anchor flukes by a long thin wire to show the location of the anchor when it was on the bottom.

Sometimes it worked but not always, depending on the depth of water, and also on the debris around. Frequent painting, changing, or rewiring of the wood blocks was necessary, and it was something of an art form to attach the coiled wire to the rail with twine so that it easily ripped away as the anchor splashed down. Anchors occasionally fouled others in the area and heaving up in a fast-flowing river like the Hooghly could produce many surprises. There was debris of all sorts. Life out on the river had a tempo and an ambiance of its own. The fast flow of water was unforgiving, and the skillful manoeuvring of the dozens of sampans was constant entertainment. We watched it with a mix of fascination and admiration. With a single oar over the stern the sampans manoeuvred

around making full use of the current to crab their way from ship to shore.

A longish stay of weeks in Calcutta was normal. We used the Kiddapore and King George V docks but often moored in the river. Drydocking meant a host of things - noise, dirt, smells, confusion, as swarms of workmen would board and immediately seek a place to sleep on the decks and in the alleyways! The apprentices usually worked as watchmen during the night which could be an eerie experience. It was a mixture of sleeping bodies and a cacophony of sound from the repairs. Welding, hammering, and burning, painting, spraying, and polishing. All these things went on together and it was not unusual to seek out any quiet spot to get some relief. The passenger accommodation lay unused and deserted but it was strictly off limits to apprentices. The nights could be long, wandering round the decks and with occasional visits down the holds, either to adjust or fix the cluster lights, or maybe to secure the beams with makeshift bolts. Tallying was called for when special cargo was being loaded, and there were 4 small refrigerated lockers situated in number 4 tween deck which were used for this, and they had very heavy, thick reinforced doors which opened out into the tweendeck hatchway. Chilled or frozen cargo was monitored in and a memory is strong of the musty unpleasant odor that always emanated from these lockers when the doors were swung open. The contrast between the humid outside air and frozen conditions inside also left us shivering.

As the night wore on, cargo work became less hectic and barges in the river took longer to position. The raucous shouting grew less. Even more bodies curled up around the decks, and the clatter of the steam winches became less regular. The pace of work slowed. Just before dawn however, a berth out on the river buoys would mean a special moment or two when all was silent, and the first rays of light started to creep across the water. It was cooler, and the Hooghly panorama offered a rare glimpse of peace and calm.

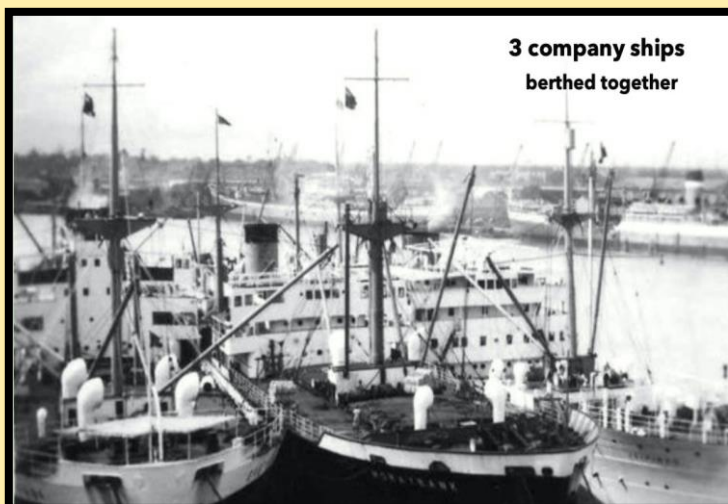
During these long stays up the Hooghly a run ashore could be a tonic. It was possible to get lost in the dream world of a Hollywood movie such as "Singing in the Rain" which was shown at a cinema in Chowringhee in 1952. The magic of a beer garden with a resident band and singers was

also a treat, and it provided a little relief from the somewhat crazy world on board. If berthed in the docks, a trip ashore meant a walk past the native compounds with high walls usually with smoke curling up and lovely evocative lilting music. Smells were always present, and they added to the unforgettable experience. Children of all sizes chanted, "One Anna, One Anna, One Anna, No Poppa, No Mama, No Khana" (food), on the quay and in the dock area, with imploring hands stretched out. In this year, heartache and poverty were always present, and it was not unusual to see bodies floating in the Hooghly in addition to animal corpses. Overhead, scavenging hawks were always a threat, and they often swooped to snatch food, including any



carelessly held bread during breaks on deck. Lining the streets, including the main Chowringhee thoroughfare many roadside Beggars were present plus people offering a plethora of services like barbers and ear cleaners etc.

As a complete contrast, a surreal world awaited us in the "Calcutta Swimming Club", this being a relic from the recent days of the Raj. Silent, clean, white and spacious, this was a haven away from all the dirt and noise both outside in the street and onboard. Invitations to ships of officers were usually delivered on arrival. Once inside, the staff padded around in pristine white outfits and in bare feet, and the large dining room offered a variety of tasty meals at affordable prices. It was a popular stop for hungry apprentices. All the rooms were kept cool by large overhead fans, and the whole experience was like a fantasy before returning to the heat, noise and smells of the streets outside. From the docks to the town there was a choice of taxi, bus, or rickshaw depending on the money available, but we had a limited budget. Walking was not really an option due to the heat and the attention from hundreds of Beggars.



The Hooghly has a life and a fascination of its own, and anyone interested should read the book now out of print but available on line called "On The Hooghly", written by M.H. Beattie who was a pilot some 50 years before my experience on the Inchanga. (<https://www.worldcat.org/title/on-the-hooghly/oclc/551663881>). It was a period when the pilots used sailing brigs just before new steam vessels were purchased. It was also a time of strict discipline and practices which had served the shipping community well, both sail and steam. The account is full of hilarious anecdotes and it gives a strong flavour of the dangerous life on the river.

During the 1950's things had changed little, with brickworks dotted around beyond the banks, and on the fast flowing and turgid waters craft of all descriptions, many of them no more than floating haystacks with hardly room to navigate. What a casual visitor might not appreciate is that the fast-flowing currents constantly carve out new channels which confront the Pilots, and which means that no two passages are exactly the same.

A Bore tide is a regular feature on the Hooghly, and much fuss is made on the oceangoing vessels moored in the river in case the surge causes damage of broken chains and lines or worse. Usually the event, watched with bated breath on the forecastle, turned out to be an anti-climax with only a noticeable surge and clanking of chains. Ashore, the story was different however as the tidal wave swept all the banks in its progress upstream. We stood silently watching the people being swamped or struggling to avoid being washed over for the few seconds that the wave hit.

We frequently saw other ships of the company fleet in Calcutta as it was an important loading and repair port. Services to East, West, and South Africa, and all the west coast ports in S America were regular destinations for the gunny bales loaded from barges. Separations between parcels for the large range of ports in Chile, Peru, and Ecuador was a challenge. Jute fiber bales were also loaded in some quantity, and at Chittagong and Chalna, further East in the Sundarbans which sport the largest mangrove swamps in the world. The trade in these commodities was huge. Rice was occasionally loaded in Rangoon at berths in mid river.

The photo of the author with a fellow apprentice was taken outside the Shwedagon Pagoda on one of those calls.

Probably half of my year onboard was spent in Calcutta. It certainly seemed like that, but many enjoyable days were spent on the East African coast, Mombasa being a favorite.

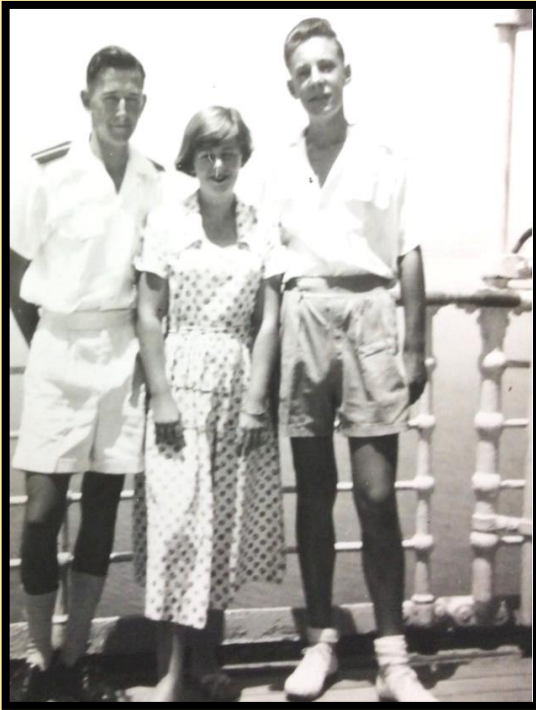
We loaded and discharged a variety of cargo resulting in a longish spell in port. It was less hectic, the rate of loading and discharge almost leisurely, allowing us to enjoy run ashore, also in the lifeboat to the Port Reitz Hotel or to sandbanks for picnics.



All, of the East African ports had something different to offer but Durban always felt the most familiar with its western atmosphere and many seafront bars and hotels. The Playhouse was a big attraction with its ceiling made to look like the sky complete with realistic stars.



Apprentices (author on the right) posing with a Lady passenger



Finally, on one of our regular visits to Durban, I was informed that a passage home was arranged for me on the Westbank now in port undergoing repairs. She had just been dragged off the Juan De Nova reef in the Mozambique Channel, which is another story. My good fortune probably came about because the opportunity of a passage was there, and my 2 years would have been exceeded after yet another round trip up to Calcutta and back. I gladly left the unique microcosm of the INCHANGA world for a trip home, slightly older, and certainly, a lot wiser.

End

Submitted by Alan Rawlinson.