

Preface

A good deal has been written and recorded on the benefits of the successful exploitation of the North Sea Oil Bonanza. Most of the written work covers the technical advances in offshore drilling, platform construction and oil production technology and relates chiefly to the “Boom” years following the Oil Crises of 1973 and 1979. Quite a bit has been said on the economic effects, again mostly covering the hydrocarbon production years from 1975 onwards. Unfortunately, even more newsprint and film footage has been dedicated to the disasters and failures along the way of this great adventure and we must never forget them. Not much attention has been given to the early years of North Sea development and even less to the coverage of activities in the onshore sector.

According to the old adage about the nail, the horseshoe, the steed, the soldier, the army, the battle and the war, every link in a chain is of equal importance to ensure success in any project or campaign. Based on four decades of exposure to the industry and my experiences of the changes within it is my contention is that the links the North Sea supply chain, as represented by the activities in onshore logistics support, are of equal importance to the offshore heroics, but have generally been discounted or overlooked altogether. Future students of the history of the period could be excused for thinking that not much happened during the years of 1965-1975 and that all the most significant events occurred in the cold grey sea far from the sight of land. This is my humble attempt to help redress the balance.

As a proud Aberdonian I have wallowed in the delight that the fantastically successful international oil and gas business eventually arrived on our doorstep and have celebrated the fact that my family, friends and many associates have shared in the considerable economic and cultural success accompanying the

juggernaut. Nowadays I am on first name terms with several millionnaires, which is something I could never have contemplated in 1969; however, in witnessing all that has happened since then, I am disappointed that there are no billionnaires in my wide circle of friends, and that is not intended as a joke. The opportunities existed but, as I hope to explain as I go along, there are a few features of our communal psyche that guide us toward missing out on the main chance and settling within our comfort zone.

“History is written by the winning side.” I think it was Churchill who first made that comment, although others probably have made similar observations. Those who have reaped the greatest benefits in terms of financial rewards and prestigious honours are not always those who have made the most significant efforts and contributions. Life is not fair and we cannot change that. As we watch and listen in despair as the least deserving claim all the credit for the good things that fall into their path by the creativity and labours of others we are conditioned to exercise forbearance and hope the unsung heroes will receive their rewards in heaven. With beatitudes you can expect platitudes. Poppycock.

I believe that the individuals and teams who make the difference deserve the praise and I hope to give an airing to the stories of some unsung heroes who should have earned respect from a wider audience. At the same time I will do my best to deflate some hot-air balloons but it is a sad fact that successful people are persuaded to believe their own publicity and theirs are the books that fly off the shelves.

Another favourite maxim, originally ascribed to Confucius, is that in order to see into the future we must have a good understanding of the past. We are approaching the end of the extremely profitable years of oil and gas production from the North Sea but that need not mean the end of opportunity or the cessation of meaningful employment. On the contrary we are now passing through the gates of a new path to progress and now is the best time to consider the gains we have made along with our mistakes and try to ensure we

establish our region's position as a leading provider of people, goods and services for the still vibrant international energy business.

One of my favourite reads is the autobiographical memoir of the old Hollywood star David Niven. In this most entertaining publication Niven says that there are only two types of book. In the minority are those written to entertain the reader. The majority are written for the entertainment of the writer. As this is my first publication I hope this book stays in the minority.

This is not an autobiography. It is a memoir of my observations and represents my personal view of some of the events that I witnessed in the early days of onshore support for the fledgling North Sea exploration project and I hope that I can convey the significance of the efforts and contribution of the key players without focusing too much on my own involvement.

As it is a personal account and not an attempt at a history book, this has excused me from doing extensive research and I have avoided the painstaking trawl through dusty archives and weighty reference tomes. I have, however, checked my commentary with some of those key individuals in the various episodes and have been assured by them that my recollections are sufficiently accurate to merit their support and I would like to thank them for their honesty and continuing friendship. They know who they are but, as befits the innate modesty of the people of our region, they have asked not to be named.

Although the tale is intended to follow a chronological path from the Spring of 1969 to the end of 1973 and most of the names, places and dates should stand scrutiny, I have used a certain amount of literary licence in combining some disparate events to help convey something of the general tone of the era and the characters involved. Above all I have tried to keep the story entertaining. We should not let adherence to the facts interfere with a good story. As well as learning a lot during this period I had a lot of fun.

I also have had a load of fun in writing these pieces and hope you enjoy reading them.

1. Dubs – Past and Future

“**D**ubs” is a term, used in Aberdeen and the Northeast of Scotland, to describe all types of mud, ranging from “plitory dubs,” the thin, slithery sort that is found in rain puddles and dirties your wellies, to “sharny dubs,” that mix of soil and animal waste that sticks to everything and anything in the farmyard and is the single factor that probably hastened the invention of power washers.

In the Spring break from University in 1969 I was at a loose end. Jobs were hard to find, money was tight and I was wondering where my next pint would come from. As I sauntered into the Students’ Union Beer Bar in Upperkirkgate, I bumped into Alex Forbes, a second cousin of mine and someone I reckoned would have good contacts.

“Fit like, Alex, ony jobs?”

Alex was usually pretty well connected and a sociable type, always scouting out new projects and opportunities. We had worked together previously at Gordon Graham, an old family outfit which ran a drinks distribution business with a beer bottling plant down in the Aberdeen Harbour area. Alex’s half brother Jim Simpson was their Assistant Manager and would usually be amenable to hiring all sorts of help for the menial, sloppy jobs in the Regent Road plant. I’d had a few earlier stints at bottle washing, crate stacking and van deliveries, during the holidays from Aberdeen Grammar School, and had thoroughly enjoyed the varied experiences, the physical exertion and the exposure to working life. Much as I had enjoyed those aspects, however, the rates of pay were dreadful. Three shillings and threepence per hour with time and a quarter for overtime—but you would always have eager schoolboys queuing up to take it.

“Jim’s opened a new business doon in the Regent Road warehouse,” Alex started. “Gordon Graham have stopped the

bottling and sellt a the plant. Jim's set up on his ain and rented the warehouses for storing some kinda stuff for that new oil rig that's working aff shore."

"Fit kinda stuff?" I queried.

"Dubs," said Alex.

"Dubs?" I responded. "Plitery or sharny?"

"Well it's actually caa'd Drilling Mud, some kinda poodery stuff they mix up and send oot tae the oil rig on supply boats an pit it in the well tae drill, apparently."

Neither of us were particularly practical sorts nor given to technical matters. We had been brought up in the age of meritocracy to understand that the way to success and riches lay in brainwork. Self-improvement would come from intellectual pursuits rather than physical effort, which is why we were at University, after all, wasn't it?

"Onywey, Jim's looking for a couple of casual labourers tae handle a load o dubs arriving at his warehouse later this week. D'ye fancy it?"

"Fit's the pey like?"

"Six Bob an oor. Wi time and a half for overtime, but it's jist for a wik."

Setting aside all intellectual aspirations, we proceeded down to the Docks to check out our old haunt at Regent Road and see for ourselves what might be involved in this "Dubs" handling operation. We were to report to the gaffer Jimmy Gallan and make the arrangements. We both knew Jimmy Gallan, though not very well at that time. In the collection of drivers and storemen at Gordon Graham he stood out as the most capable, a dab hand at stowing crates, tying ropes and manoeuvring the lorry into the most inaccessible locations. He had a famous sense of humour and seemed to have a witticism for every event.

On beer deliveries the drivers always loaded full crates at the front and stowed the empty returns at the rear of the lorry. Because of their weight and uniformity the full crates usually held firm with only a light rope over the top. The empties were much more

unpredictable and there were regular incidents when whole loads would be thrown off the back after a sharp corner or sudden stop, which is the reason that every lorry carried a brush and shovel. Jimmy held a proud record of never having dropped a load. On one of the rare occasions when I had been his “lorry loon” on a circuit of the dockside bars, as we pulled away from The Market Arms en route to “Flannie’s Bar” (a distance of only 100 yards,) I remarked to Jimmy that we had not secured the empties.

Deadpan he replied, “It’s aa right, they canna faa, there’s naethin haudin ’em!”

With a flash of a smile he started the motor, slipped it into gear and rolled cautiously downhill to Flannie’s without a jolt, his cargo safe and ten minutes saved by not having to mess with the ropes.

When we reached Regent Road we found the old warehouse, but without its familiar trademarks. Instead of the Gordon Graham sign there was a hastily assembled board announcing “Aberdeen Service Company, Tel 56349.” In the cobbled lane the old Ford Thames flatbed lorry had been repainted in a dusty blue with the new company name handwritten on the fuel tank. All the bottling plant had disappeared and it was quite amazing how much space had been created. In the old returns bay, where we had sorted millions of empty bottles and crates a new tenant, Schlumberger, had installed all manner of sophisticated electronic gadgetry. Next to that, where the antiquated bottle washer had stood, there was an empty hall where BP had assumed occupancy (sharing with Amoco, which was a harbinger of a future association) and in the store we had used for maturing bottles of Bass and Guinness (10-14 days otherwise they were undrinkable, although daily “samples” had been allowed for) there were stacks of wooden pallets with sacks of chemicals in a variety of foreign labels, such as Baroid, Hoechst, and Monsanto.

Going through what had been the secure store, where the full crates of beer were once stacked, there was now a small office with a row of different coloured telephones and more piles of exotic sounding chemicals. It was here we met Jimmy Gallan wearing his trademark black beret and dust covered dungarees.

“Fit are you idle buggers up till?” Not an unfamiliar greeting.

“We’re here to see about a ‘casual’—lifting dubs,” said Alex, reminding Jimmy that he was Jim Simpson’s brother. “Jim said to come and see you about starting.”

“But you twa are students. A yer brains is in yer heid. I tellt Simpson I needed hardy loons tae help us wi this ruck o brighties. Ah’m nae sure you eens can handle it.”

Jimmy mentioned “brighties,” which we subsequently understood to be barytes, a finely powdered form of Barium Sulphate, an extremely heavy compound, insoluble in water and used as a weighting material in the composition of drilling mud (dubs.)

“Ach, well,” Jimmy continued, “There’s naebody else, so ye’ll jist hiv tae dae. Come on through tae the coal hole an hae a shottie.”

The “coal hole” was the front part of the warehouse complex, which had been used up until recently by Aberdeen Coal Company for storing and bagging bulk coal. Not for the first or last time coal was being replaced by oil. As we proceeded gingerly over the uneven cobbles bestrewn with black dross we could see that it was now almost half full of sacks of cement and other materials. Jimmy led us to the lowest pile of barytes and, with a half smile, invited us to pick up a sack.

From previous experience he knew that we could handle beer crates. A full beer crate weighs between 30-40 pounds and with built in grab handles is relatively easy to lift and stow. A sack of barytes comprised 50 Kilogrammes (110 pounds) of powder tightly packed in a multi-layered paper sack stitched on the ends. A reasonable design for storage but problematical for lifting and handling.

As we huffed and hawed, making lame excuses about being out of training, wearing the wrong gear etc, Jimmy asked us to stand back and watch how an expert did it. In 1969 Alex and I were probably as close as we would ever get to our physical prime. Alex was a stocky five foot nine and had been in the running for selection as a prop-forward for Junior Scotland Rugby XV. My frame had stretched to nearly six foot and, through football and beer, had begun to fill out

to man-size proportions.

Although we were both clad fashionably but inappropriately in flares and seersucker shirts, we should have been able to manipulate these innocuous items with ease, but the leaden lump resolutely resisted our initial efforts to budge it, never mind lift it. Jimmy was in his early thirties, a slender five foot seven, about ten stone, soaking wet, but he fairly showed us.

“The secret is to roll the corners till ye get a haud then rug it an humph it an Bob’s yer uncle, or raither, Simpson’s yer uncle, which is how ye’re here. ”

In a flash he had the hundredweight sack off the cobbles, onto his knee and up on to his shoulder before plopping it back it on to the top of the pile.

“An at’s anither thing ye’ll need tae mind. Fan yer lifting this stuff, ye only want tae lift it once—nae double handlin.”

We were both too inexperienced to understand the physical and commercial aspects of ergonomics and isometrics but we had learned right there and then and went on to discover over the years that Jimmy Gallan, with little formal education but a lot of experience, from a mainly agricultural background from Friockheim to Fyvie, had a Ph.D. in common sense and could apply his wits to any mechanical handling problem.

“Richt, ye’ll start the morn at eight o’clock. Pit on yer aul’ claes an bring yer ain piece. There’s nine hunner ton o’ barytes comin in an you twa will hiv tae muck in. Can ony o ye drive...”

“I’ve a licence.” Alex interjected, proudly.

“...a fork-lift?” Jimmy concluded.

We both shook our heads. I had tried to learn to drive in my father’s 1957 Hillman Minx but had yielded to the conclusion that I had insufficient mechanical aptitude. Alex had passed his driving test recently and, though eager to show his prowess in his mother’s Renault Dauphine, was wary at the prospect of handling forklifts, which at that time were fairly rare. We looked at the imposing beast of yellow painted metal with the protruding forks, high mounted seat and a bold “Coventry Climax” emblazoned on the tall mast.

“Aw right, you twa’ll dae the humphin an Jock an me’ll dae the drivin.”

Jock Smith appeared from the depths of the coal hole. A blustering bear of a man, Alex had recognised him and, in an aside, told me that Jock was the fearsome “Bouncer” at the Kingsway Bingo, who had acted as bodyguard for “Swiftly” Rennie, a notable local bookie with many friends but also a few resentful clients seeking recompense for perceived injustices. Jock, reputedly, could handle himself.

“D’ye wint this pile o’ shite shiftin, Jimmy?”

Both Jimmy and Jock gave a sideways glance at Alex and myself then, thankfully, a more considered stare at a pile of old barytes sacks and bits of broken pallets lying in the corner of the Coal Hole.

“Aye,” said Jimmy “We’ll need tae tak thon new pallets inside an get them ready for the nine hunner ton o barytes comin in the morn. If we leave them oot they’ll be ta’en. Ye cannae trust naebody roon hereabouts. Damn Toon Dirt!”

As fork-lift trucks were rare, so too were pallets and, with a limited supply, a shortage of timber and a thriving “black” economy, anything that was not locked up would soon “walk.” Jock was no economist but was well acquainted with most sources and outlets for scarce commodities and, as we would learn over the years, could turn a shilling out of the least likely items. He clambered on to the Coventry Climax, started it up, grabbed at the levers, stamped on the pedals and started to manoeuvre it towards the pile of rubbish. Jimmy winced at the sound of crashing gears and hissing hydraulics and in a smiling admonition cried out.

“Aye, Jock, haud er gaun, ye’ll find a gear in their somewyes. Min’ oot for the reef fan ye’re pickin up the forks.” Then he turned to his new hired hands. “We’ll see you twa the morn,. Eight o’clock, min’ an’ dinna be late.”

We were told that a cargo vessel was due in Aberdeen to discharge a cargo of 900 tons of sacked barytes from Morocco. It was to be berthed early the next day on Blaikie’s Quay, where dockers would

unload from the hold and have the sacks discharged on to lorries at quayside for delivery around the corner (a distance of 200-300yards.) Jimmy Gallan had worked out that the best way to handle the cargo would be for the dockers to “break bulk” and stow the sacks on to the new pallets in the hold, then load by crane direct onto his lorries and offload by fork-lift at the coal hole. But he reckoned without the machinations of the National Dock Labour Board. There was a fair amount of labour unrest in 1969 and disputes arising from restrictive practices were common.

With Jimmy’s upbringing and forward thinking philosophy, he would hold no truck with what he perceived as wasteful handling, and his response was predictable when the dockers opened the hatches and observed that the 900 tonnes of sacks had been loaded individually. They immediately called a meeting to discuss how to handle the discharge. The meeting was convened at 0815 and lasted a little over an hour, taking the dockers close to their “Smoko,” which meant that nothing could start until after 1000. The outcome of the meeting was that, as the cargo had been stowed individually, the dockers decided it would need to be offloaded individually (requiring two squads of eleven men each,) into rope cargo baskets and discharged individually on to the back of lorries (Unionised Transport only—in support of their Brothers.) Jimmy was apopleptic. This meant that his trucks would be idle and his expensive pallets redundant.

“Dockers! Ah’ve shit better!”

I have never been any use at rising in the morning and it was not good timing to toddle in sleepy-eyed at 0900 just as Jimmy was getting the message about the Dockers’ decision. I mumbled some sort of apology and offered to help out where I could.

“Students! Ye’re near as bad as dockers, it’s jist as weel ther’s naethin here yet or youd’ve gotten seckit afore ye startit!” He put his hand in his pocket, took out a Half Crown. “Gaun tae the Café an’ get fower bacon rolls afore the place gets swampit wi’ thon lazy bastards.”

I grasped the coin and ran off to the Oak Tree Tea Rooms, the

quaintly named “Greasy Spoon” masquerading as a restaurant amid the open fish boxes, coal stew and barytes dust of Regent Road. Alex had made the tea by the time I returned to dole out the steaming baps and, as I gave Jimmy his twopence change, anticipating a further rocket, he surprised me with his calm appraisal of the situation.

“Right, if they’re nae gaun tae load thae pallets we’re jist gaun tae dae it oorsels. One o you can help the driver tae affload, the ither ane’ll help Jock tae stow an I’ll dae the forkie. Jock, tak the larry load o pallets back fae Blaikie’s an pit them in the road outside. You twa can lay them oot in a row alongside the pavement. The porters’ll be awa’ hame syne an we’ll need a their car parkin space tae haud the pallets.”

The “porters” that Jimmy referred to were Fish Market Porters, who started their shift very early in the morning and finished about nine or ten o’clock. Aberdeen was still a leading fishing port and with growing affluence, more of the porters had acquired motorcars and usually nabbed the increasingly valuable parking spaces in Regent Road.

Jock returned from Blaikie’s Quay with the Thames laden with new wooden pallets, each carefully stencilled, on the end bars, “A.S.C.” as a deterrent to any keen eyed “recycler.” It was easy to tell from the variety of names on the thousands of fish boxes that lay all over the Aberdeen Harbour district that wooden containers of any type were cherished but not many of them had made it back to their original owners in Arbroath, Pittenweem, Mallaig, Lochinver and other distant fish markets.

A quick scan through the Regent Road warehouse revealed pallets with unfamiliar stencils of ICI, Wiggins Teape, GKN and others. Over the years Jock proved to be as effective a “recycler” of pallets as his fish market cronies had proven in the field of fish boxes. He was fiercely loyal, however, and it was seldom that anyone spotted a pallet emblazoned with the “A.S.C.” logo anywhere but in its rightful place. Alex and I helped to lay out the pallets at Jimmy’s direction as the first load of barytes arrived on the back of a green lorry.

“Damn the bit! They’ve gotten BRS tae dae the haulin’. BRS cairters—they’re a’ Toon Dirt worse ’n dockers. We’ll hiv tae dae that an a’. Right, you twa up on tae the wagon and ca’ them ower.”

The inference was that BRS drivers were all Aberdeen (Toon) based and as members of the Transport & General Workers Union, would not be willing to help with offloading. Jimmy held a view that only “Country Loons” i.e. those from outside the City Limits, were fit for this kind of labour.

This is a prejudice that could not be countenanced in the modern era but, over the piece, it is a judgement that most independent observers would support. Alex and I took comfort that, in our new Gaffer’s eyes, we had achieved a status superior to both dockers and lorry drivers and took to the task with some gusto. We tore into the individually stowed sacks and lowered them on to the shoulders of Jock and Jimmy who placed them carefully on to the pallets we had earlier laid out on the roadside. Within half an hour we had offloaded the twenty tons of sacked barytes on to ten pallets and before the second lorry arrived Jimmy had managed to shift five of those and stacked them neatly in their allotted slot of the warehouse.

The second lorry arrived and, thankfully, according to the Jimmy Gallan rule of fitness, the driver was a “country loon,” working for a non-unionised firm and, therefore, quite willing and able to help us with offloading. This meant that Alex was “promoted” to ground work, helping Jock with palletising while Jimmy concentrated on fork lift duties. As we watched the second lorry pull in to Regent Road, Jimmy handed me a blue note book and pencil.

“Can ye coont?” he inquired, hopefully.

“I’m a mathematical genius,” I replied with cockiness born of the recent success from offloading twenty tons of barytes.

“Right, gaun coont that lot in the coal hole and write it doon in thon book.”

“Four hundred,” I retorted without a movement.

“How d’ye ken?” Jimmy looked quizzically.

“Easy,” I said confidently, as mental arithmetic had always come naturally to me. “Ten pallets, forty sacks each, four hunner.”