

★ The Channel crossings



Tiphaine Hirou

There is no doubt that 1912 forever marked the life of Charles Lightoller, and ironically the *Sundowner* - his future boat and one of his prides - was built the same year.

Formerly a steam pinnacle of the Admiralty, the boat was sold to Lightoller in 1929 for the sum of £40 (equivalent to £2,000 today). Lightoller made arrangements for a man named Charlie Cooper to proceed to Conyer (a Kentish village on the banks of the Swale) and purchase the vessel on his behalf. Cooper lived in Conyer and made his living as a boatbuilder, but because of the depression he was in need and could no longer feed his family. Lightoller - who decided it was time to have his own ship - entrusted him with the restoration of the old boat in order to transform her into an elegant yacht.

The work was done quickly and well, and she was launched on June 28, 1930, in front of a small crowd gathered for the event. The whole family was on board, including Sylvia (Lightoller's wife) who made the christened the vessel by breaking a bottle on the hull. She named the boat *Sundowner*, an Australian term for wanderer. Now it was time to complete the yacht for her new life.

When he was younger, on his first steamship, Lightoller immediately missed feeling the wind in the sails, and experiencing the battle with the marine elements that made men felt like «real» sailors, as was the case on the clippers. However, he had to admit that life was much more comfortable on these new vessels, and the trips faster. It was the end of long months spent across the sea; now he could be back home after a few weeks! But with the *Sundowner*, he was very pleased to be able to reconcile the benefits of these two types of navigation.

In addition to the petrol engine of 60 horsepower - which was installed by Cooper - Lightoller decided to add sails in Bermudan rig style with two masts: a large one fore and a smaller one aft.

Then Lightoller tried his new toy on the Thames, and was pleasantly surprised by her agility. At her full speed of 8 knots, the *Sundowner* was easily able to make a quick and complete turn while maintaining her stability.

As there were no problems to report, the *Sundowner* was now ready to take the sea. The destination of her first trip?

France. During the ten years that followed, the Lightollers embarked on the family yacht every holiday, from spring to autumn, and sailed across the Channel towards the ports of Ostend, the Havre, Fécamp, Boulogne, the Hague, Cherbourg, Dunkirk, Calais, etc.

Including children and friends, there were usually nine to ten people on board, a number which required some amenities. That's why all the necessary comforts were present on the little boat. Aft was the galley connected with a spacious saloon which could be converted at night so as to make several beds.



Charles Lightoller on the Sundowner, 1939.

© Kenneth George Godwin.

Sylvia ensured that this two sections of the boat were arranged according to her recommendations, especially the galley, which became her private domain.

Up forward were three cabins that could accommodate six people in total. As a final amenity, the *Sundowner* boasted the luxury of being equipped with toilets, and even a hip bath.

The length of the *Sundowner's* hull was increased with the addition of a counter stern which provided an extra area of deck, and it was easily accessible to Sylvia from the galley and saloon. It should be noted here that Mrs. Lightoller was born with an abnormality of the feet because her mother fell from a horse while she was pregnant. Sylvia walked with a pronounced limp, but it was thanks to this handicap, that she met Lightoller while on board the *Suevic* in 1903; the officer had offered his help for climbing stairs.

To the great admiration of all, Sylvia was able to move without assistance on the *Sundowner* despite the roll caused by the ocean's swell. Upon arrival in port, she even climbed on deck and helped her husband to moor the yacht. It seemed that Sylvia was perfectly adapted to life at sea, which was not the case for her children. Except for the eldest, Roger - who later joined the Royal Navy - the others apparently did not inherit their father's sea-legs, and seasickness was a constant problem on board the yacht. We can imagine their ordeal when they had to face a storm...

Navigation on the Channel is far from easy, and in spring 1932, after having left the port of Ostend for little more than an hour, a wild gale arose from nowhere and struck over their heads. It appears that Lightoller had never seen such violent winds on the Channel, and the *Sundowner* was soon shaken in all directions, heaving up and down on the swell like a rollercoaster, while he stood at the wheel, trying to stay the course against the waves and avoid capsizing.

The situation of the passengers was no better. A skylight was left ajar and seawater came cascading into the boat, flooding the living-room first. Due to the pressure of the water the skylight was so hard to close that the flood had ample time to spread to all parts of the yacht.

The situation became even more alarming when the engine broke down! It was almost like a bad joke... Since he was the only one on board able to fix it, Lightoller told Edward Davis - a young sea scout who was along for the trip - to take the wheel.

Deprived of her engine and therefore impossible to control, the *Sundowner* was now at the mercy of the elements.

However Lightoller quickly identified the problem: one of the fuel lines was simply blocked. It was not the first time! He put it right and, to the great relief of everyone, engine noise was again heard on board.

Nevertheless, the passengers' ordeal was not yet over... Instead of the planned six or seven hour trip from Ostend to Conyer, the crossing lasted more than thirty hours! In the morning the coast of Kent was finally in view, but the sea was still so rough that they had to wait before entering the River Swale safely. Several hours previously all ferries and fishing boats had been ordered to return in their ports to avoid the storm, so the Coastguards were surprised by the arrival of this small boat shaken by the waves. They even felt it was advisable to raise the alarm and proceeded to launch a lifeboat. But Lightoller reassured them about the *Sundowner's* situation. In the early afternoon he and his family were finally able to reach Conyer without more difficulties, and on page 263 of *Titanic Voyager*¹ there is a picture showing *Sundowner* safe at Conyer after the storm with a mattress drying on the deck.

After that the *Sundowner's* engine was immediately changed and the new one was not only more reliable, but also more powerful. Originally capable of achieving 8 knots, the maximum speed of *Sundowner* was now of 12.

Lightoller became prouder than ever of his yacht, and even asked his wife that, if he should die prematurely, she should place his body on board the yacht, tow the vessel to sea and set fire to her. A scene worthy of the Vikings' ceremonies!

In 1935, Lightoller moved his *Sundowner* from Conyer to Burnham because it was more convenient for many reasons, and also because Jack Duffy, an officer of HMCE², suspected him of using his boat to traffic illegally in tobacco and spirits. According to Duffy, it was strange that Lightoller was often on board the vessel and spent a lot of money on gasoline for pleasure only. These were unfounded accusations, of course, and the officer found nothing during his inspection.

From Burnham the family developed the new habit of venturing into the North Sea to explore the Scandinavian fjords, but the *Sundowner* continued to remain faithful to the ports of France and Belgium. She never missed an appointment at the Pavillon d'Or, a naval

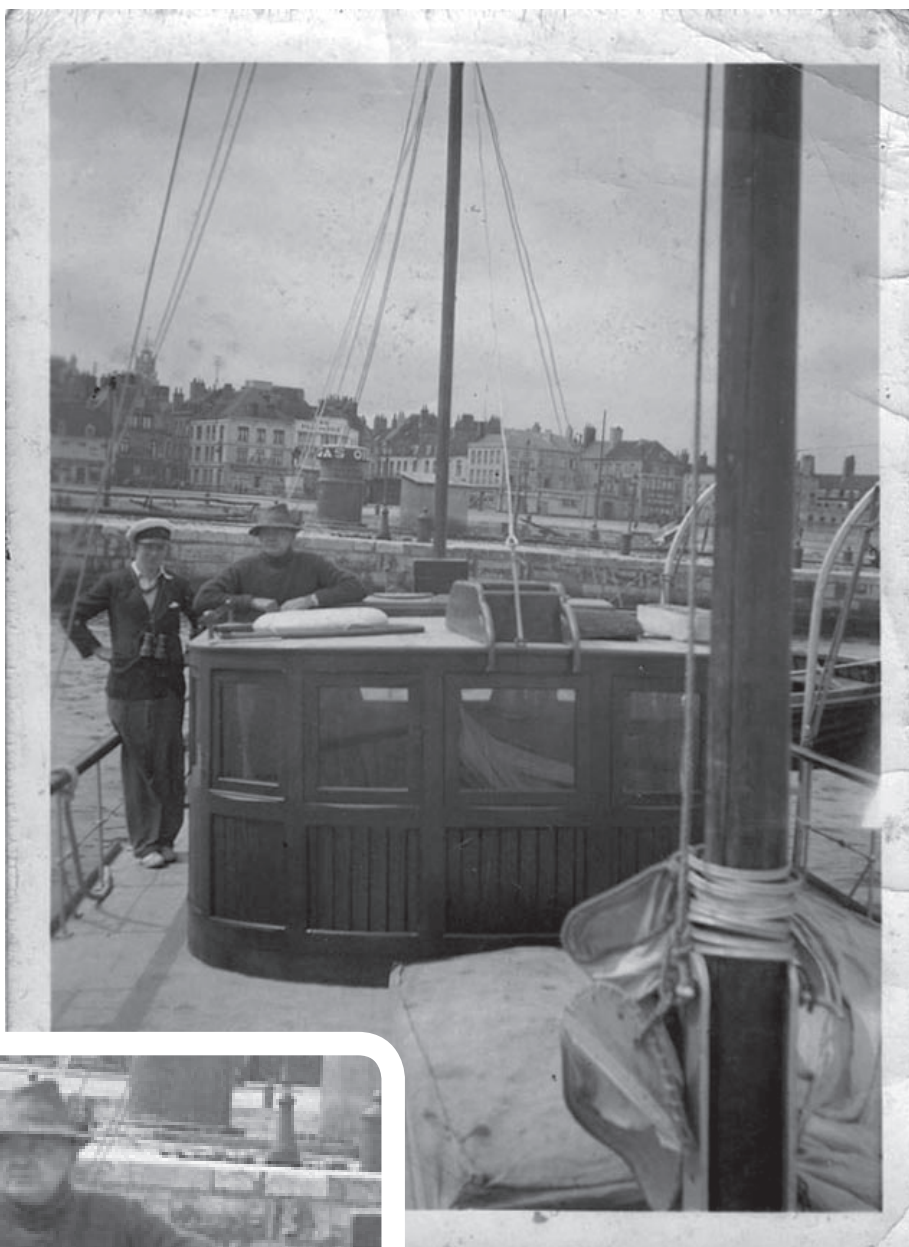
1 - *Titanic Voyager*: Biography of C.H. Lightoller, by Patrick Stenson, 3rd edition.

2 - Her Majesty's Customs and Excise.

rally reserved for pleasure boats which was created in 1936 by the Yacht Club of Paris. In his book, Lightoller's biographer Patrick Stenson says that *Sundowner* won the Pavillon d'Or several times for being the best handled boat.

After all these wonderful years, the darkest hours would soon come that would bring *Sundowner's* name into History. But for now, it was still time for holidays on board, and in 1939 the *Sundowner* paid a visit to the port of Calais. This might have been her last trip to France before the war, and the pictures that illustrate this article were taken on that occasion.

(In April of 2012 Kenneth George Godwin rediscovered these photographs while looking in his mother's photo albums. It is always a pleasure and a moving experience to discover new pictures like these, and one wonders how many others are still lying forgotten in attics or in undiscovered photo albums.)



Geoffrey Godwin and Lightoller on the *Sundowner*.
Calais, 1939.

© Kenneth George Godwin

The young man pictured standing next to Lightoller was Kenneth Godwin's father: Geoffrey Godwin, then aged about 18 years. It seems that Lightoller had the habit of taking sea scouts aboard the *Sundowner* to assist him. Was Geoffrey one of them, or was he just a friend invited on a trip? The answer to this question is presently unknown..

It was at the end of the 30's that Geoffrey Godwin met Charles Lightoller and subsequently sailed with him on the *Sundowner*. After the war, in 1946/47, Godwin and his wife rented a part of the house in Richmond from Lightoller.

Later, they bought a houseboat and moored it in a dock owned by the Lightollers at Twickenham.

Kenneth Godwin never knew Lightoller himself because he was born a few years after the latter's death, but remembered

his mother described Lightoller as a «charming, rather sweet-natured man», and he visited Lightoller's widow, Sylvia, who was known as «Granny Lights». As for Geoffrey, he died prematurely and never had the opportunity to tell his children about his meetings with the old *Titanic* officer, but the pictures are immortal.

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Obviously, the most famous Channel crossing of the *Sundowner* was during the evacuation of Dunkirk on 1 June 1940.

To repatriate the British soldiers the Royal Navy requisitioned many small motor yachts and pleasure boats



that were capable of going where larger ships could not, and the *Sundowner* was no exception. Lightoller agreed to put his yacht in the service of his country, but only on condition that he take her to Dunkirk there himself because he was her captain.

Sundowner arrived at Dunkirk, and when asked how many men he was able to take on his boat, Lightoller replied «a hundred»... *Sundowner* had never previously carried more than 21 passengers at the same time, and that particular instance was not even at sea but on a river! But the day before departure, Lightoller, his son Roger and a sea-scout named Gerald Ashcroft emptied the vessel of everything they could - even masts - in order to maximize the available space, because they were determined to bring as many soldiers as possible to England. In total, 130 men boarded the old yacht - 75 inside (two in the bath), and about 50 on deck, included the crew and five other men that Lightoller had previously saved from a little motor cruiser that caught fire and exploded soon after the men were safely on board the *Sundowner*.

The passages in Stenson's book concerning the evacuation of Dunkirk are quite interesting to read. We must imagine a sea teeming with ships, large craft, small craft... All of which were ideal targets for the Luftwaffe, a race against death.



Godwin and Lightoller at work, with what appears to be a lightship on the background (but I have not been able to found which one). 1939.

© Kenneth George Godwin

Overloaded and threatening to take on water, *Sundowner* slalomed between bombs with Roger at the helm. His father gave orders from the wheelhouse's roof where he was perched to watch for airplanes. On every dodge, when she suddenly turned to avoid a bomb, Lightoller commanded the men on deck to lean right or left just like he did in 1912 on board lifeboat B as it was floating upside down. Sometimes life is about balance.

A rumor was spread on board *Sundowner* that her old captain had been on the *Titanic*. Some of the men were reassured by this news because they felt that if he had survived such a shipwreck, they had nothing to fear in his company. Indeed, they finally arrived alive in Ramsgate and when the authorities asked Lightoller how many men he had on board, they thought he was joking.

The war took the lives of two of Lightoller's sons. Brian, the youngest, was killed in 1939 on the first night of fighting in his RAF airplane, and then Roger, the eldest, who had participated in the evacuation of Dunkirk. He died on the last days of war, leaving a young wife and an orphan baby girl. Called Daphne, this baby - who is now an elderly lady - recently wrote a comment on Kenneth Godwin's website after she discovered the pictures of his grandfather. With the internet the world is small...

This two bereavements certainly made Lightoller older and more tired than ever. There were still Trevor and his sisters, of course, but now the whole family could never be together again on the *Sundowner*. Despite this sad reality, Lightoller continued to spend a lot of time on board, and I learned recently that the last picture of him was taken there and shows the old man reading a book. This photo was published by his descendants twenty years ago in the *Commutator*, the revue of the Titanic Historical Society.

But when he was alone, perhaps Lightoller simply liked doing nothing more than listening to the ticking of the clock in the *Sundowner's* living room while remembering his young years, because this clock was the same one that had kept time on board the *Oceanic*. Apparently Lightoller took the clock from the *Oceanic's* navigation room after she was wrecked off the island of Foula in 1914³.

3 - Requisitioned and converted to armed cruiser by the Royal Navy, the *Oceanic* was wrecked off the island of Foula (Shetland) on the 8th September. As always seemed to happen when he experienced a disaster, Lightoller was sleeping in his cabin at the time. Fortunately there were no victims, but the actions of several officers were judged by the inquiry, including David Blair (the same man who was the former *Titanic's* 2nd officer). Blair was accused of making a mistake in his estimation of the ship's position. Abandoned there, the *Oceanic* was finally dismantled during the 1970s!

The old sailor had always had a weakness for the «Queen of the Ocean»⁴, and he had one piece of his favorite ship in his own boat.

Charles Lightoller finally «took to the open sea» on December 8, 1952, at the age of 78 years. His *Sundowner* still exists and celebrated her 100th anniversary in 2012.

Sylvia continued to take care of the yacht after the death of her husband, and she even participated to the commemoration of the Dunkirk evacuation in 1965. A few years later, in 1990 for the 50th anniversary, this was also done by Captain Tim Lightoller - Charles' grandson - who commanded the *Sundowner* to reach the port of Dunkirk with Gerald Ashcroft, the sea scout who assisted Lightoller and Roger fifty years earlier. The *Sundowner* made several other visits to France since that time, including one in 2000 for the 60th anniversary of the evacuation.⁵

After passing into the hands of various owners, *Sundowner* now spends peaceful days in the port of Ramsgate in front of the Maritime Museum that now owns her, leaving her quiet retreat only on rare occasions. The latest of these was the Queen's Golden Jubilee in June 2012, where the *Sundowner* paraded on the Thames with other «little Dunkirk ships» of the great armada.

To finish, it seems that *Sundowner's* next Channel crossing is planned for 2015, her destination Dunkirk where she is expected to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the evacuation. Let this serve as a notice to those who want to salute the old yacht.



The *Sundowner* at Ramsgate in April 2010.
Wikimedia Commons

4 - One of the surnames given to the RMS *Oceanic*.

5 - Refer to the article, *Le Sundowner - bateau de Lightoller*, by Bob Kerry, which appeared in the *Latitude* No.11 (April/June 2001). Available on the website of the society.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Mr. Kenneth Godwin who had the extreme kindness to allow me to publish the pictures of his father with Lightoller in Latitude.

His article can be read here:

<http://www.cageyfilms.com/2012/04/titanic-a-personal-footnote/>

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Also thanks to Mr. George Behe for taking the time to correct my translation, which was truly helpful.