

## Schoonerman

by Captain Richard England (former master-owner of *Nellie Bywater*, Britain's last fully-rigged merchant schooner).  
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### SCHOONERMAN

ferry his captain ashore and do most of the small-boat work, so it was essential to be able to scull a ship's boat with a single oar over the transom. I learned in record time, for old Weddock ordered me into our work boat, known as the 'punt', which was moored under the stern, cast off and gave the boat a hefty push towards the centre of the dock basin. He shouted that I wasn't to return until I could scull. I soon got the hang of it!

I memorised the running gear by the same rough but effective method. Weddock took me on a tour of the pinrails, named the coils, then capsized them on the deck. By the time we'd completed a circuit, the deck was a tangle of ropes.

'Coil them back, nately, boy!' he wheezed. 'All right-haunded.' Re-coiling all that gear was a long job, but as soon as I'd finished, we began another round of the pinrails; this time I had to name the coils and wherever I was wrong, down went the fathoms of manila or hemp, again to be laboriously re-coiled by a tired but more knowledgeable boy. It wasn't long before I could find any coil in the dark.

Errands to the grocer and chandler made a welcome break to my endless work aboard the *Via*. The mate would send me off with a warning growl of: 'Hurry back, boy!' but when I was out of his sight, I made the most of my brief liberty.

There was plenty to interest me in the busy docks. A fine, white-painted three-masted schooner, the Swedish *Isolda*, had arrived in port and lay just beyond the coal staithes discharging a cargo of sweet-smelling timber. I was first drawn to her by her graceful, yacht-like appearance, and then I was intrigued by the sight of two pretty, sun-tanned, flaxen-haired girls, dressed in sailor's dungarees working on her decks. I was told that they were the daughters of the schooner's master, Captain Ahlgren, and that the ship was their home. I thought they were the finest girls I'd ever seen and never passed the *Isolda*, without trying to catch a glimpse of them. Twenty-five years later, I got to know Captain Ahlgren well and a remarkable man he proved to be, with an equally remarkable family, all born in the *Isolda* in different parts of the world and each named appropriately for the country of origin.

The shunting coal trains on the Dock Road crossing were a good excuse for me if Weddock grumbled about me being away too long.