

Paddle Steamer Waverley, Sunday 6th October 2024



The Waverley paddle steamer, which operates pleasure trips all round the British Isles, had advertised a cruise from Gravesend, via Southend, around the three Thames Estuary forts which were involved with pirate radio broadcasting in the 1960s.



Keith Skues and Tom Edwards

I joined the ship, which was already quite full of Anoraks, at Southend, together with Keith Skues, Tom Edwards, Ray Clark, Steve Scruton and Ian Wyatt. Southend pier is the longest in the world, and has to be so because ships of the size of the Waverley cannot get closer inshore on account of the shallow water. So long is the pier (over a mile) that there is a train along it.

The Waverley duly arrived on time and we dodged the queue up the gangway, on account of our VIP status, and were welcomed on board by Waverley director Tim Wardley, who is himself a very keen offshore radio enthusiast. Tony O'Neill, from the LV18 lightship, had produced some excellent display boards, and these were the focus for people to meet up with Keith and Tom, who were generally besieged by fans throughout the voyage.

Keith told the story of how Philip Birch from Radio London had asked him to visit Shivering Sands, the home of Radio City, with a view to taking it over as a satellite of Radio London. As Keith tells it, he took one look at the spartan conditions on the towers and he decided it was not for him. Tom Edwards, stalwart and 'mother' of Radio City, had not been back to the towers for 57 years and clearly found the nostalgic visit quite emotional.



Tom Edwards has fond memories of his time on Radio City

Good use was made of the ship's PA system, and Steve Scruton conducted excellent interviews with both Keith and Tom. Margaret Flo McEwan of The Maunsell Sea Forts Appreciation Group, gave a very interesting account of the history of the forts, relating stories of her spending time out there taking some superb photographs. There is a Facebook account for the Group.



A surprise guest, for me at least, was the attendance of **Candy Calvert (above)**, the younger daughter of Reg Calvert, who was boss of Radio City until his sad and untimely demise. She told me of the excitement of going onto the forts, aged only 13, and she did actually do some broadcasting both on Radio Sutch and Radio City. I wonder if any recordings exist? She was interviewed on camera by Tony O'Neill. The sea was a little choppy, but nonetheless we were able to get quite close, first to Red Sands fort, home of Radio 390, then on to Shivering Sands, which housed Radio City.



Finally, we sailed to the very different Knock John naval fort, from where Radio Essex operated. Each time, we were treated to a 360 degree circle so as to see the forts from all angles. Very faded paintwork is still just about visible with the station names, but the towers are very rusty, almost sculptural in their unique design. Sadly, there seem to be no viable plans to preserve them, as the logistics of working on them are so challenging. Steaming back, after three hours, we were invited by Tim onto the bridge of the ship, and Keith took a lively interest in the steering of the vessel, whilst another visitor leant on a lever and nearly launched a lifeboat.



Keith visits Waverley's Bridge

We got off back at Southend and took the train back down the pier. It was actually a relief train, as the brand new one we had travelled up on had shortly afterwards had a brake failure and crashed into the buffers, causing quite a bit of damage. Safely back on dry land, both Keith and Tom agreed they had enjoyed a wonderful day out and it had brought back many memories from nigh on 60 years ago.



Knock John – Rust and Concrete

Duke Anthony