Frances B to Spain

By Geoff Walker

Recently, when thumbing through my old discharge book, I noted having made a few trips as Master aboard a UK flagged coaster named the ***Frances B*** during the summer of 1972. Her owners needed someone to take her on a couple of round voyages from Sharpness to Spain, carrying scrap. With some paid leave still up my sleeve, I decided to do a little moonlighting before returning to my usual sailing grounds in Asia.

The ***Frances B*** was built in 1957 as the ***Blisworth*** by Alexander Hall & Co. Ltd. in Aberdeen, for Grand Union (Shipping) Ltd., which owned and operated her, and which I believe may have been a P&O associated company.

She was a relatively small ship, with the following specifications:

- Gross tonnage: 1,031
- Net tonnage: 572
- Deadweight: 1,360 tons
- Length (LOK): 64.92 m
- Beam: 10 m
- Loaded draught: 4.3 m

Main Engine power was a five-cylinder British Polar diesel engine, driving a single screw, giving her a service speed of 10.5 knots; which was still obtainable when I was on her some 15 years after she was built.

In 1965, she was transferred to General Steam Navigation Co. Ltd. (GSNC) of London where she remained until 1971, when she was sold to Chesham Shipping Ltd., London, and renamed ***Frances B***. Briggs Shipbrokers and Agents Ltd. acted as managers, and she was under their management during my time aboard. It was immediately obvious that the ship had been worked very hard and seen better days, as she was starting to show signs of deteriation; enhanced by not having been very well maintained in more recent years, prior to my arrival on board. However, she had been fitted with Radar, which was something at least, since many of the UK coasters of the era still sailed without.

Initially, I joined her in London and did two trips to Rotterdam to bring grain back to the UK, I can't remember which ports, but it may have been somewhere on the Medway or Thames. Then light ship to Sharpness for the first of our scrap cargos to Spain.

Loading scrap metal at Sharpness was a slow business, and I recall that it took several days. As Sharpness was tidal, we loaded with a particular tide in mind. Unfortunately,

the tides fell short of their predictions for several days, leaving us effectively ‘neaped’ until the tide picked up again.

Like all good sailors, we made the most of our unexpected days ashore, doing our best to keep the bar stools warm at a local pub. I particularly remember the hospitality of the local people, who made us so welcome that we felt we had been granted something akin to *squatters’ rights*.

Our first passage to Spain took us to Pasajes, in Spain’s Basque country. Despite heavily overcast skies, the voyage from Sharpness went well, and we made a good landfall.

The narrow port entrance was difficult to pick out from seaward. The surrounding mountainous terrain blended into what appeared to be an uninterrupted coastline, concealing the entrance until we were very close.

The entrance has a dogleg and is flanked by high ground on both sides. It is also the outlet of the Qiartzun Ibaia, the river that meanders through Pasajes. When we arrived, the water around the rocky entrance was very rough, making boarding treacherous for the pilot. Accustomed to these conditions, however, the pilots made it look like a piece of cake.

I recall securing alongside a stone jetty with no fendering. Several dozen old steel spikes protruded about a foot from the wall, posing a serious hazard. As the ship rose and fell with the tide, the spikes could catch on her steelwork and cause considerable damage—a particular concern given the significant tidal range at Pasajes.

Despite our vigilance, one spike caught on a clinker-built lifeboat and tore a six-inch hole in it. We had to engage a professional shipwright to repair the damage and arrange a subsequent survey, as the lifeboat formed part of the ship’s life-saving appliances.

I protested bitterly to the agent, and we shifted to another berth about 150 metres ahead. That resolved the problem.

Our initial visit coincided with the tourist season, giving Pasajes a holiday atmosphere; the cacophony of sounds and smells from rich and engaging setting of the old fisherman’s quarter of the port with its outdoor cafes, made it not only interesting but also welcoming, not to mention the Vino more inviting.

We made one more round-trip to Spanish waters, which I believe was to Santander, then proceeded light ship to Boston, Lincolnshire. Arrival in the marker buoy was in very dense fog, ‘as thick as an old boot’ which caused me to anchor for half a day until it cleared, as the port was closed. There I left the **Frances B** and returned overseas. Although she was very basic in every way, I found her an interesting little ship.

The ship remained with Briggs until 1974, when she was sold to Lebanese interests and renamed Leila I. I believe she finally went for demolition at Tripoli in 1987, after 30 years of useful service.

Frances B captured when ***Blisworth,*** in 'Grand Union' livery, taken whilst transiting the North Sea Canal prior to 1965 when she was transferred to GSNC.

Courtesy Malcolm Cranfield





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The ***Frances B*** seen in the Thames, around about the time I sailed on her, summer 1972.