

Podcast 1 : Containers Changed Everything

You are listening to Port Walks an art project of podcasts creating a temporary link between Dublin Port Workers and Dublin Port Walkers. The workers are the seafarers who pass through Dublin port. The walkers are the people who use Dublin Port & Bay area for recreational walking, particularly on the Great South Wall leading to Poolbeg Lighthouse. All ships entering Dublin Port pass along the channel adjacent to this area. Hence it is at the Great South Wall that we begin, but of course you can listen from anywhere.

The walk from the Sluice house to the lighthouse and back is 4km. The cobbles underfoot are uneven so take care and be aware of prevailing weather and tidal conditions. Wind & tide together can periodically submerge the wall.

Part 1 Orientation: Finding your bearings

Begin at the Sluice House. It's an old stone building with a flat roof standing at the edge of land and sea. Its weathered and worn. The windows bricked and barred. Looking to the South East & South you can see Dun Laoghaire Harbour and the peak of the Sugar Loaf Mountain 500 metres above sea level. To the west are the decommissioned Pigeon House power station Towers standing 200 metres high and dominating the Dublin City skyline. Upstream Port operations can be seen on either side of the river. Looking east you can see at the far end of the wall the bright red paint of Poolbeg Lighthouse 2km away. Just to the left of that is the Green North Bull Lighthouse and beyond the dunes of Bull Island and the shadow of Howth Hill in the distance.

The red and green Lighthouse colours mark the navigational passage to the port. On entry ships keep red to their left and green to the right. Upon exit this rule is reversed. These simple rules of navigation prevent collisions at sea. And just like driving a car these colours are reversed in their meaning in other parts of the world, namely the continent of America, the Eastern pacific. This is a first example of the ungiven nature of life at sea.

Three hundred years have passed since construction began on the Great South Wall. Its purpose was to ease passage of larger ships into the port, which had been endangered due to silting in the shallow estuary. Most of the wall was constructed from large granite blocks brought by barge from quarries in Dalkey. The wall was completed in 1793. The Poolbeg lighthouse had already been completed by then, but it only took its current form after a rebuild in 1820. The Lighthouse is positioned almost equidistant between Howth and Dun Laoghaire and gives a sea view paralleled only by that of passing ships.

The history and beauty of the wall contrive to obscure a broader perspective: that is the everyday activities of ships and seafarers entering Dublin Port daily. So lets imagine the Great South Wall as a probe that will take us into the world of contemporary shipping and seafaring. Its long arching body reaching out into the Irish sea connecting it and those who travel on it with the oceans of the world.

Finding your bearings at sea is complex. There are no landmarks with which to orient yourself. Satellite navigation systems have replaced celestial navigation, so that and particular navigation protocols and agreed conventions of practice make it possible for the almost 100,000 commercial ships to sail safely around the world.

One particular convention is the naming of sea areas for forecast purposes. There are 31 designated sea areas stretching from the Southern coast of Norway down to the Atlantic Coast of Spain and around to the Southern Coast of Iceland. The shipping forecast is a crossover broadcast reaching those standing watch and those ashore tucked up in their beds waiting for sleep. It has often been used too as a cultural motif.

Part 2 The Box that changed the world

The Shipping Forecast is a remnant of a British imperial past based on maritime power. Now that empire has fallen, it has moved east but we remain inured to these changes in the customs and ideas we hold. Ideas of the



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sea revolve around romantic notions of sunsets and storms, of an immersive environment for adventure, a place of caricature and characters, pirates and plots. Think Sinbad, Popeye, Captain Ahab, Captain Nemo, Captain Haddock, Captain Birdseye, Captain Jack Sparrow.

While fiction persists with these archetypes in actuality seafarer life has been changed utterly and in less than half a century by a simple innovation; the box container. Right up to the 1950s and later in Ireland ports still did business much as they had done for centuries. When ships berthed, dockers unloaded breakbulk cargo crammed into the holds. Breakbulk is the term used to refer to cargo that is transported separately. Each item had to be individually stowed and unloaded. Each item ticked off an inventory of thousands. The process was expensive and slow as ships berthed in city centre docks for days.

ships stayed in for 3 / 4 days and all up the North wall that was all dockland they stayed in for 3/4/5 days so at night time they would have dances and all and a lot of ladies from various parishes and places used to come in as hosts because they needed to be dancing with women they needed other people than just themselves there, but I remember Alistair who had come from the UK and he came as a chaplain here. He told me that on one occasion the ships used to dock and the they would be berthed 3 out and he remembers one time bringing his lunch with him and visiting 34 ships in one day 34 ships he'd get on one get onto the next one hop on and he visited 34 on one day, that was the way ships came in because as I say they stayed in for long periods of time. That changed all around the world you know it wouldn't pay ships now to do that it wouldn't pay companies or anything so the whole thing changed

If you watched a ship loading or unloading in the early 1950s, it wouldn't have looked much different than it would have in the 1850s. Dockers milled around to unload holds crammed with cargo. Industrial, construction and retail goods, were all packed together to maximize ship carrying capacity. Dockers worked at unloading cargoes using pallet and crane and their own bodies. It was chaotic, expensive and backbreaking work. By the 1950s Ports would have used forklifts and motorized cranes, but as in the past nearly every piece of cargo passed through human hands.

The simple innovation of the shipping container changed all that. Its origins can be traced to America, to Malcolm P. McLean, who ran a trucking business. Frustrated by increasing highway congestion in the early 1950s McLean developed a scheme to circumvent the bottlenecks. Containers could be driven on trucks aboard specially adapted war-surplus cargo ships. They could be ferried down the coast, unloaded, and hauled away. Realising that trucks took up too much space McLean resolved to transport just the containers that were compact, uniform and stackable. From this idea in less than 50 years came a whole system of intermodal transport. The consequences for transportation costs were massive. At a time when it cost \$5.83 per ton to load loose cargo on a medium-sized ship, the cost of loading a ton onto McLean's container ship, the *Ideal-X*, was just 15.8 cents. Introducing the container had immense repercussions. Entire transportation systems and their regulation would change. Ports, ships, cranes, storage facilities, trucks, trains, ship operations and the lives of seafarers would change dramatically in the following years. Containers transformed everything. They were a silent revolutionary force that changed not only shipping and seafaring but also global trade, production & consumption,

What are you wearing today? Where are your shoes from? On what device are you listening to this podcast? Anything not manufactured in Ireland, was most likely imported in a container. And its not just because Ireland is an island, over 90% of world trade is carried by ship. Containers are the cheapest way to move products around the globe. Containers connect factories in countries with low production costs with worldwide markets. For example, the economic upsurge of China could not have occurred as quickly as it did without container shipping. Three of the four largest containerports in the world—Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Shenzhen—are in China, and 26 percent of containers originate in that country.

Containers brought 2 significant changes to the lives of seafarers. Firstly, ports moved downstream away from centres of population to container ports served by accessible land transportation. This move out of the cities made it more difficult for seafarers to get into city centres and made shipping practices less visible in the public mind.

Secondly, time in port was drastically reduced. Unloading and loading of ships can take place in a matter of hours. Such fast turn around often means that seafarers do not get time ashore. It is one of the sad ironies of contemporary seafaring that when compared to counterparts in the 19th century much less time is spent ashore in port.

Lets say one day 2 ports so 24 hours two ports Malaysia Singapore Malaysia Singapore twas really rushed I was doing early morning Singapore loading 4.5 hours Malaysia discharging coming back drop anchor early morning again Singapore so

when you think that on each of those ships there is anything from say 6 or 8 to 16 or 20 people on board those ships. Some of those will have been on board for maybe 3 or 4 weeks coming from South America with bulk cargo or maybe a couple of days from Rotterdam when they get to Port it is not a question of all done they then have to start work with the unloading nowadays all ships are under pressure of time to unload quickly and the seafarers have v little spare time when they get ashore.

Dublin Port posts information about ships coming in and out of Port on their website and for a while you could even see the ship names on the Gantry across Custom House Quay. Such public notifications draw attention to port activities. But as the port moved down river further and further away from the city, the ships and the crews on board them became less visible like shadows slipping into the background of the huge techno industrial complex of the Port

We consider them the invisible workforce and nowadays they are mostly from the developing countries and mostly they are multicultural multi national multi faith and none.

Since the middle of the last century seafaring has changed entirely. It is an industry emblematic of changes in labour practices that are only now filtering down into onshore workplaces.

One has to bear in mind that the whole pressure of modern shipping is such that the numbers on board are being reduced the time in port is being reduced because the ship owners are charged so much per metre of length per hour tied up alongside so they don't want to stay alongside any longer than they need to for loading and unloading

This puts crews under pressure as they are constantly watching the clock

So everytime you ashore you have to carry watch and every time keep an eye on the time. Once actually, last time we were in Dublin I was late on the ship because of the traffic jams.

Certainly now, the container has streamlined everything where it is loaded at a factory on ship off ship to customer without anyone seeing it which helps with security and safety of the product certainly the whole trend seems to be bigger ships carrying more and more containers

Part 3 : Commercial shipping and the special case of the Philippines

If you consider the scale of the commercial seafaring activity There are over 1.5 million seafarers worldwide , most of them come from countries such as China, Philippines, Indonesia, Russian Federation and the Ukraine. These are the people who pass us closely by we walk on the Great South Wall.

Those great people in reality transit the oceans of the world to provide us with our daily requisites. You know we dont think of them at all computers cars medicine fuel fruit food clothing, practically everything comes by ship they say 90 – 95 % of all world trade is by ship.

Each year, some 86,000 ships move more than 9 billion tons of cargo – more than a ton for each person on the planet – across our seas each year

Philippines has the highest density of seafarers – over 400,000 are registered with the Philippines Overseas Employment Agency Administration. That's over 25% of seafarers worldwide. They also are the majority of seafarers entering Dublin Port

The crews are spread from all over the world the majority of crews in Irish ports are either Eastern European, massive amount of Filipino crews some Indonesian and Cape Verdian would be the majority of the crews that I would meet

These seafarers are an important contributor to the Philippines domestic economy In 2015 they sent \$5.6 billion home. Such large amounts have a tangible effect on the Philippine Balance of Payments.

Most of these Filipino seafarers are employed as junior officers and ratings. Their roles in descending order of frequency are Able Seamen, Oilers, ordinary seamen, chief cook, bosun, second mate, third engineer, messman, third mate & steward

They serve on bulk carriers passenger vessels, container ships, oil/product tankers, chemical tankers, General cargo ships, Supply Vessels, car carriers and Tugboats

All this information is available because the Philippine Government has a policy of encouraging migrant labour through the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration

Helen Sampson & Bin Wu at the Seafarers International Research Centre at Cardiff University highlight the changes in seafarer recruitment. Companies that supply crew are increasingly based in countries such as India, the Philippines, Myanmar, Indonesia, and, most recently, China. They say that movements away from labour markets in the developed world have been accompanied by a “deterioration” in the employment conditions of seafarers. Not only that, but differences exist in the terms and conditions offered to seafarers from different parts of the world. On the same ship you may have officer crew from one country on very different terms to the ratings crew not only in terms of relative pay but also in terms of time at sea. Typically Filipino crews will do a minimum 9 month trip, while the officers on board would do 4 month trips. Many of today's seafarers, including officers, are employed with little or no job security. They are increasingly employed by ship-management companies and paid on a per-voyage basis, as precarious workers. Hence when they do get home on leave they always have an eye to when they next get another contract.

the Filipinos on normally 9 months at sea 2 or 3 month at home but when they return they the majority of them do not have a definite return to work date. They could go on a different ship a different company so they would do there 9 month they go home put their name on a waiting list or whatever it is for a job and get back as soon as they can

9 months on 2 months off, sometime you will get 3 months 4 months 5 months, off which you don't want that the agency doesn't have any lineup for you so you have to find another agency.

When you are on a ship you work everyday, seven days a week. In 2015 Ireland ratified The Maritime Labour Convention which has specified maximum work hours and minimum rest hours.

These prohibit working more than 14 hours in any 24 hour period or more than 72 hours in any 7 day period. Think about it that means working 10 hours a day every day for up to 9 months.

When it comes to rest, the Maritime Labour Convention requires seafarers to take a minimum of 10 rest hours in any 24 hour period or 77 hours in any 7 day period. These rest hours cannot be broken into more than 2 periods and at least one of those must be 6 hours long.

Think about that for a while. How much rest do you actually get if you go off duty at 12 and must be back on duty at 6? Even if you assume the seafarer does not need to eat, and only takes half an hour to get settled and

go to sleep and half an hour to wake up get dressed and return to duty that leaves a maximum 5 hours rest every night. In reality it is much less because each watch is accompanied by a duty handover and most seafarers will need to eat something when they come off watch. Fatigue is a daily battle on board.

A lot of ships that come into Ireland have 2 officers on watch so they are 6 on 6 off 6 on 6 off 6 on 6 off where are you going with that – you are not getting 6 hours rest because when you are on watch and the next officer comes on watch you have a hand over period then u come down and grab a bite to eat and the you go to bed and then 4.5 hours u r up because you have to go up to have a handover period – so there is a lot can be done to improve some vessels automatically have 3 officers some only have 2 but that’s where I believe fatigue has to be regulated to a higher degree

Research conducted by Amante of the Seafarer Inshore Research Centre in Cardiff University indicates that Filipino Seafarers view their job as a way out of poverty. Many seafarers insisted that “good pay” was their main motive but also remarked on personal ambition to be a seafarer . This research disclosed an average length of employment contract for senior and junior officers as 9 months while ratings contracts averaged 10 months. The few cadets surveyed had average contracts of 11 months duration. Overall contracts varied according to vessel type but none were less than 8.5 months long. Filipino seafarers reported general satisfaction with their working conditions. However items of dissatisfaction were noted as: pay, working hours, food and sleep.

I met a Filipino seafarer in the seafarer centre, he was troubled as the ship he was on had gone off charter and was going to be laid up at anchor for up to 6 weeks off the port of Rotterdam. Imagine 6 weeks and no land.

We will wait till we have a new charterer. We don’t know how long we are staying in anchorage. But the company says about one and a half months. One and a half where there is no land - people get crazy because they cant get refreshed

He did not have a technical role and had worked in many jobs in many places as a migrant worker,

I am a cook

I worked from the factories in Filipines, and then I lived in Saudi Arabia as baker

I worked for 2 years in Saudi Arabia, in a bakery making bread

In Saudi Arabia it’s a whole 2 years you have to finish 2 years before you can go.

Well on a ship Maam I can get a bigger salary in Saudi Arabia now this time now small salary you cannot put your students to the good school, if you don’t get some good school if you don’t go to the school you cant find a good job

Relative to local salaries a seafarers wage in the Philippines is very generous. To earn it they make personal sacrifices spending long periods of time away from home to support their own and their extended families.

One seafarer sometime ago and I said to him how are your family, he said well they are all in the Philippines my 2 daughters are at University the reason why I am board this ship and working these long hours is to make sure that they get a university education

Also what I find with many of the Filipinos salary by local Filipino standards seems very high, that money is used to finance there immediate family but also the grand mother father and in some cases cousins, when they go home they are revered for what they are doing and rightly so for what they are doing for their family

There is no leeway for personal and family occasions, births and deaths are celebrated and grieved at a distance.

I just happened to be in a mess having a cup of coffee and chatting to the crew and they all drifted away to do their work and this one man was left and I could see by his dress etc that he was an officer and he happened to be the captain. I asked him had he been into Dublin and he said yes very nice except his reply



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was I don't feel like celebrating very much my father has just died and I wasn't able to get relief to go home for the funeral

Yeah your contract ties you down and that's it and some companies will not sway from you signed on for 9 months and we will not repatriate you until the end if you want to go home early you have to pay for your own ticket it would probably take a months wages so

Its very hard to be far away from your family

There was a seafarer about 2 years ago whose wife back in the Philippines who had had a baby there were complications for the baby and the wife and in the Philippines I was surprised to hear you aren't allowed to be discharged from hospital until you have paid the bill for the hospital so both the mother and the baby were stuck in the hospital because he wasn't able to get the money back quickly enough and luckily enough he was working for Arklow shipping who are very good employers and they were able to give him a serious advance that he was able to have transferred back to the Philippines so that his wife would be allowed to leave hospital.

I'd be very aware from visiting ships that seafarer have extremely difficult working conditions and extremely long hours we find that they are glad to come to a centre like this to escape the boredom of the confinement that they are in 12 – 16 hours a day.

What we in the seafarer centre are trying to provide is a little home from home for them where they can come in and relax we try to help them in any way we can. We have to say most of them are very well fed and looked after so its not that so much as it's a change of atmosphere because if you have been stuck on a ship for quite of few weeks or maybe months its different surrounding sit in a different place one of our favourite things is to get into our TV lounge and enjoy the bean bags a home luxury and gives them something that they don't have on board

It's a very enclosed space, so you meet the same people every time so you and you have to deal with that. The same ship the same cabin the same background everytime the same food its kind of a challenge for a person so I met a lot of guys who just came on board spent 3 4 days and they gave up just saying no this is not my stuff I'm not going to be at sea so I'd rather go back home

Strangely enough such testimony brings to mind sentiments ascribed to Samuel Johnson three centuries ago at the time the Great South Wall was being built. The words are to the effect that *Being in a ship is like being in jail, with the chance of being drowned.*"

Maybe this is not the seaview you expected when you first began listening to this podcast, but when you go to sea there are no certainties, no firm ground on which to tread. There are other views, which will be returned to in following podcasts.

This is the first of a series of podcasts about contemporary seafaring. Please sign up on the website portwalks.ie or follow on Facebook, Twitter & Instagram to get details of further podcasts as they are released..

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