

Grampher



The man in the photograph is my grandfather – Philip Harold Hopkin Rees. He was born in 1887 in Appledore, a small port on the north coast of Devon. He was one of 7 children, 6 boys and 1 girl. The only one of his siblings I remember meeting was that girl – Aunt Claudia. By the time I met her she was an old lady with failing eyesight, who nevertheless was able to crochet beautiful woollen shawls.

Most of the men in Appledore earned a living, at that time, from the sea. There were mariners, fishermen, boat builders, sail makers, and riggers. I don't know how much education he had, but by the time he was 14, Grampher was listed in the census of 1901 as a sailor.

He spent all of his working life at sea, serving in the Royal Naval Reserve during WW1 as a Leading Seaman. He went on to sail all over the world as a merchant seaman, joining the crews of numerous vessels of varying kinds.

As a child I remember hearing him mention some of the places he visited and wondering if I would ever see any of them. He saw places as diverse and interesting as Vancouver, Marseilles, and the Galapagos Islands. I remember tattoos on his forearms of clasped hands and the words "true love". I think there was also a red rose. These fascinated me as I didn't know anyone else with permanent pictures decorating their arms.

To me he was a warm and welcoming presence, always, whenever we visited him as children, interested in us and how we were getting on at school. He had quite a sense of humour too and would read a favourite story book to us putting on the voices of the characters and laughing at his own efforts.

One of the vessels he sailed on was "The Sister Anne", a yacht either owned or chartered by the Duke of Sutherland, some time during the 1930's. The trip was a pleasure cruise with a party of the great and the grand making up the passenger list. One of the guests was the Prince of Wales, later and briefly King Edward VIII. The prince came upon Grampher one day and asked for his help. The shorts the prince was wearing were in need of a belt and he didn't have one. He had perhaps seen Grampher making things with rope, a skill which provided some of the intricately patterned mats I remember seeing in the hallway of his house. Grampher offered to make the prince a belt and when he gave it to him, was rewarded with a packet of cigarettes bearing the prince's crest and the famous motto "Ich Dien". These cigarettes were not smoked but taken home after the cruise to be shown to the family who were, of course, told the story of Grampher's brush with royalty.

He also encountered Winston Churchill, but I'll save that story for another time.....