

“Aye Ma’am”

Women at War when Stepping Forward into Significant New Roles with BOAC !



Poole Flying Boats Celebration



Principally focussed upon: ~

Marinecraft Unit Seawomen
(BOAC's MCU based at Poole)

and . . .

1st Stewardesses with BOAC
(Flying Boats based at Poole
+ Landplanes at Hurn-B'mth)

Poole Flying Boats Celebration (Charity 1123274)



PFBC Archive: *Our Charity is committed to developing and maintaining its Public-Access Archive... For the purpose of this website a brief selection of items together with information have been provided where references in blue indicate further material is available. Á*

Our Project: *‘Women at War when Stepping forward into Significant New Roles with BOAC etc...’
(BOAC’s Women Seamen & Stewardesses at Poole in WW2, through to the postwar era)*

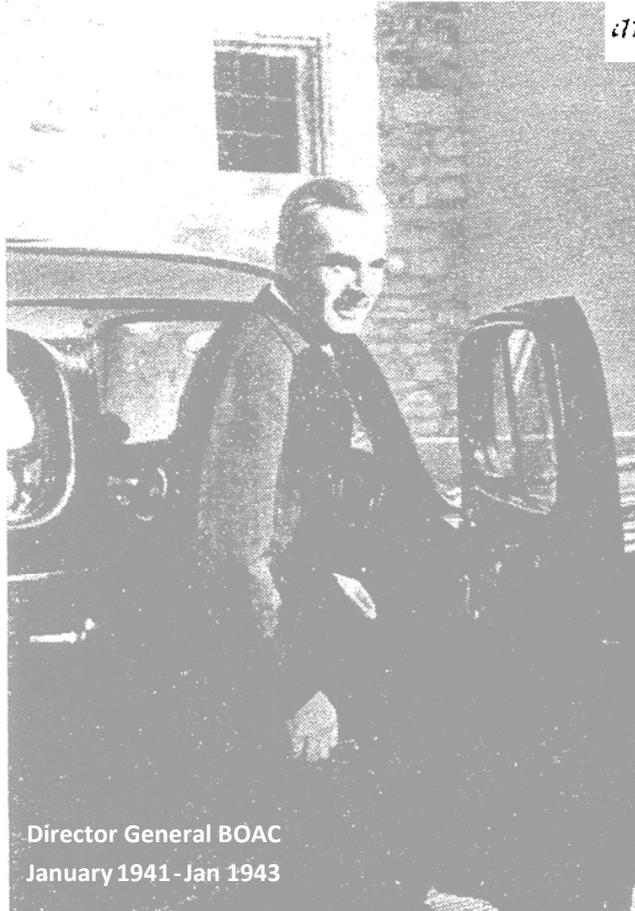
Part Alpha: *“ Ahoy There ~ Women Seamen of BOAC’s Marine School at Poole ! “* **α**

The **AYE MA’AM Project** was conceived, devised and then undertaken by **PFBC** (with Heritage Lottery Funding)

The **AYE MA’AM Project** in researching progress made by Women in WW2 in new roles with BOAC, is focussed on **Women Seamen & Air Stewardesses** from 1943, which at the time were new to BOAC’s British Civil Aviation. By setting up **BOAC’s Marine School** at Poole, the shortages in the **Marinecraft Unit** personnel were addressed in the Spring by recruitment of women to be trained in the skill sets detailed by the comprehensive **Curriculum**. In turn, the handbook *‘Brown’s Signalling: How to Learn The International Code of Signalling (Visual & Sound)’*, was the basis for a significant part of this. Published periodically, it also included special notes on Flying Boats. The **Wrens** had also established Marinecraft components within their training programmes ~ and soon **WAAFs** in a few Flying Boat Squadrons / Units would follow suit. Yet at BOAC, the vocational perspective was specific: This was distinct from military purpose, attending to Flying Boats on moorings, and transporting back-&-forth, being involved (and soon with responsibilities) for the carriage of **Aircrews, Watchmen, Passengers & Cargoes**. At Poole, the Trainers were drawn from experienced members of BOAC’s Marinecraft Unit ~ who were unable to accompany those who had been transferred to operate the Horseshoe Route, or enlisted in the Royal Navy !

THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL

Mr. Runciman has a word with Brown, the stevedore, before leaving the Home Terminal. The D.G. is frequently on the move between one and another of our home stations



Director General BOAC
January 1941 - Jan 1943

Walter Leslie Runciman (1900-89)
(2nd. Viscount Runciman of Doxford)

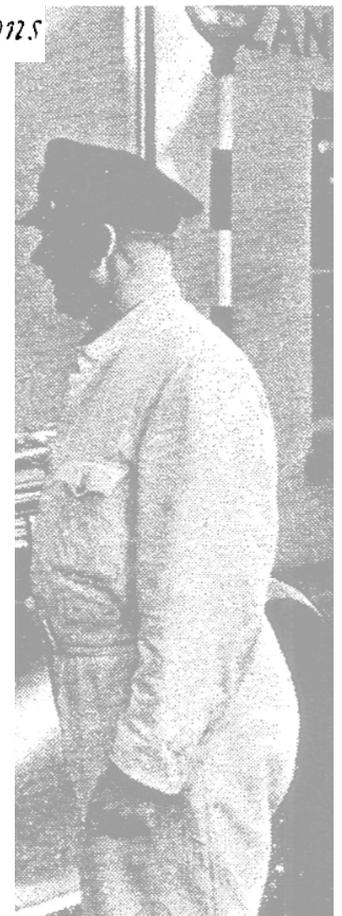
Is pictured outside Airways House in the High Street at Poole (~ likely late in 1940) in BOAC's Newsletter of Jan. 1941, enjoying a quick word with Senior Stevedore S.J Brown...

As the Director General of BOAC, Runciman was a frequent welcome visitor here during his term of office

His sister Margaret Fairweather was sadly killed when serving with ATA

After his stint as DG, he became the Air Attaché in Tehran with the rank of Air Commodore through to 1946

When he took over as the Viscount from his father, he then combined various shipping & air transport in his business interests (*public + private*).



The 'significant decision' to recruit Women to address the shortages in the Marinecraft Unit of BOAC at Poole, lay with the Senior Marine Officer based at Airways House, and was endorsed by Director General, Runciman. This decision in Autumn 1942 required considerable preparation in advance to provide various extra facilities, outfits adapted to meet the needs of the Seawomen (*with a range of sizes*) and the updating of the Curriculum. Notice of the vacancies was *low key*, generally circulated by word of mouth /contacts not *via* Labour Exchange. For example, [Mollie Harman \(née Skinner\)](#) who had been a telephonist with the Fire Service, and also formerly employed in the Paint-shop of Carter's Pottery at Poole, wanted to contribute more directly to the War Effort. She was offered posts at Farnborough (Foreign Office work) and as a bus conductress in Oxford *with good pay*, which made her feel very annoyed with the Labour Exchange for not responding more positively to her wishes.

However, during Sept. 1996 in personal correspondence with Leslie Hayward (Poole Archivist) she later wrote:

" Anyway I met a Marine Officer on Poole Quay whose wife I knew and he told me to get four references, and he'd try to get an interview for me with the BOAC Chief of Operation; having obtained four references, I was duly offered a job on the Marine Section of the Airways... I think all told, there were only about twenty of us doing this job."

This successful route to her new, more worthwhile employment, was fairly typical of the other candidates who were 'networked' in the main from among *Poolesiders* (although Eileen Armstrong came from Southampton)...

Of the 18 'originals': *Betty Archer and Pamela Bate had been Secretaries... Lynette Rowland a Commercial Artist Nora Bevis had raced Yachts... Mrs Pamela Nisbet a former Model, who had been studying for her Yacht Masters Mrs Elizabeth Bainbridge was an RAF Officer's Widow... Mrs Minna Hansford lived on a Houseboat in prewar era*



Courtesy of
Leslie Dawson

BOAC Seawoman Mollie Skinner in 1943 aged 23

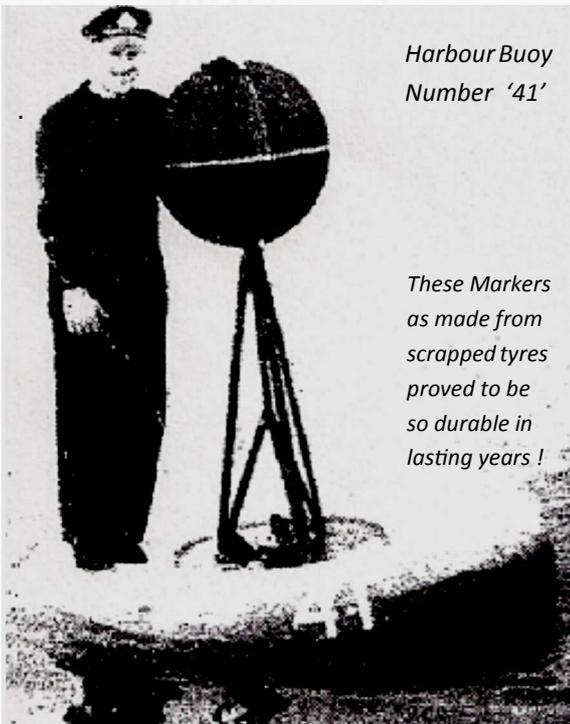
The common thread however, was that there was an ingredient of some marine experience within the recruits, which assisted in those shortlisted, and then interviewed by the Board of Officers that was convened at Airways House, Poole. *Mollie later noted:* “ I had also gone on a course in Lymington to be taught Morse & Semaphore by a Yeoman of Signals in the Royal Navy. This was a voluntary Course and several firewomen applied to go.

[This helped me obtain a job with BOAC.”](#)

The [Marine School Trainees](#) soon realised how exacting the tasks were, especially in approaching Flying Boats with a Launch on the Portside, and to come alongside to be tied-up for the transfer of personnel and cargoes. The Aircraft could be very vulnerable if struck by any vessel, so transfer was always a most delicate operation. Likewise, the procedure to collect the mooring rope attached to buoy could be a demanding & strenuous task.

With the introduction of the larger Flying Boats at Poole with the G-Class pair of [Golden Horn](#) and [Golden Hind](#) when returned to BOAC (the third of the trio, [Golden Fleece](#) had been lost with engine failure off Finnesterre), and the Boeing 314As had influenced [Marine Officer Perry](#) to adapt the Dan Buoy favoured by local yachtsmen.

The Perry Dan buoy, invented by Mr. T. Perry, Marine Section Foreman, to facilitate Boeing operations



Harbour Buoy
Number '41'

*These Markers
as made from
scrapped tyres
proved to be
so durable in
lasting years !*

The [Perry Dan Buoy](#) which was easier to locate, and to haul the mooring rope on board was successfully deployed, where it was accompanied by the new type of buoy fashioned from scrapped bomber tyres, which proved effective. For as with fair-size craft, Flying Boats had to be well-secured fore & aft thereby to prevent swinging whilst on the trotline buoys... To further this [objective](#), the 'best practice' was observed with the Flying Boats' propeller blades being aligned, so that the British-built FBs did not bounce/buck in squalls jeopardising the floats, and to keep an even keel. Whereas the Boeings [Bangor](#), [Berwick](#) and [Bristol](#) had [sponsons](#) ~ short secondary wings, resting upon the water, which aided the docking of an MCU Launch, and had the added benefit of better facilitating 'the transfers' of aircrew, passengers and cargoes etc.

There was also, so much to learn within the Curriculum (- see *Alpha's Part 2*), covering the comprehensive range of aspects of *marinecraft*, from signalling as *Mollie* noted, to the *good seamanship* of the dressing of a Launch, and presenting a vessel coming into the quay (*with oars in salute*) especially to honour an Officer on Inspection. Also, on other special occasions when *VIPs* were travelling on Flying Boats to-&-from Poole as BOAC passengers. Such noteworthy events certainly gave an exciting perspective to the work underway as *Mollie* fondly recalled:

" I saw and met many interesting people whilst on the Launches. King Saud of Arabia, Lord and Lady Wavell on his return from India... Major Brooks the 'White Rajah of Sarawak', whose daughter Princess Pearl married 'Harry Roy' one of the 'Big Band' leaders... including Film Stars off to entertain the troops (eg George Formby)."



Courtesy of
Leslie Dawson

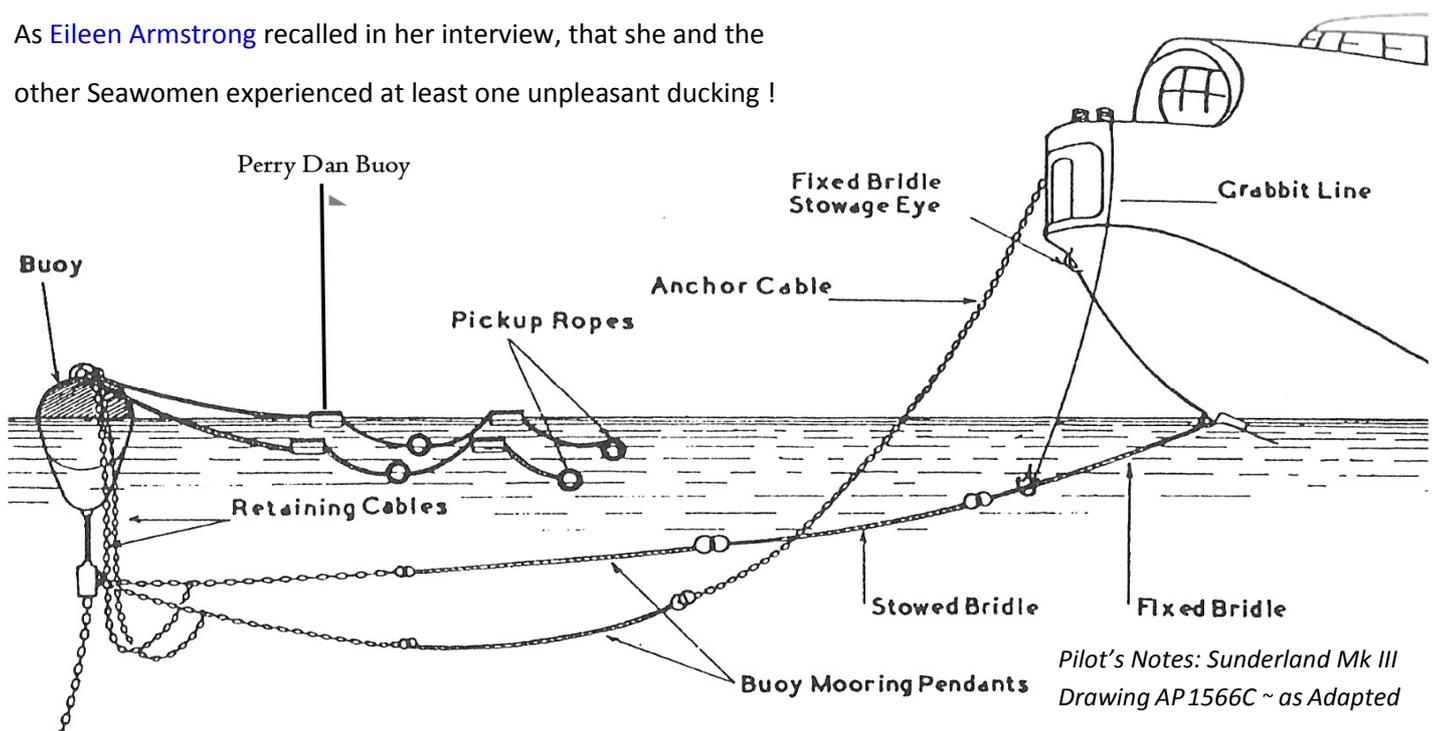
Mollie Skinner in her MCU cap and *British Airways* sweater at the tiller of the Launch with the BOAC *ENSA* Passengers ~ *VIPs George Formby and Beryl Ingham* (husband & wife) due to board a Flying Boat to flyout to entertain the troops

When well-learned the techniques were put to good use often in difficult conditions, unfavourable to the Flying Boats, and to the once novice Seawomen alike, in performing their duties to recognised high standard:

" Life was never dull, although we did get very wet at times, during a storm we would go out to the Sunderlands moored in the Harbour, and having crawled into the nose of the planes we would lift from the Buoys to which the planes were moored (*through*) many feet of storm wires, these had to be lifted and placed over the nose of the aircraft to avoid ropes breaking, and planes going adrift. We were of course slapped in the face by the waves and had to make sure the wires were not dropped to end up at the bottom of the Harbour ~ hence the soaking we got."

Also, in passing from one vessel to another, or in clambering over the smooth fuselage often slippery from rain, or spray from waves, and in choppy conditions, there would be mishaps experienced by most of the Seawomen.

As *Eileen Armstrong* recalled in her interview, that she and the other Seawomen experienced at least one unpleasant ducking !



Pilot's Notes: Sunderland Mk III
Drawing AP1566C ~ as Adapted

(*Aimée* ~ with acknowledgement to Leslie Hayward & the Harman Family, also to B.A Heritage, Leslie Dawson & Jeremy Waters)