

## Preface

In 1964, I went to work for the The Missions to Seamen (now renamed Mission to Seafarers) as a student helper, a very junior pastoral assistant, as a prelude to training for the Anglican ministry. I was told about the possibility of placements in Hong Kong, Mombasa, Capetown and other exciting ports, but sent to London's East End, where The Missions to Seamen had a multi-storey mission, offering chapel, bar, restaurant, dance hall, cinema, and many bedrooms, by the busy Royal Docks. On the River Thames, The Missions to Seamen had a motor vessel named *John Ashley*. The crew comprised a remarkable skipper/chaplain, Padre Freddy Laight, his accent clearly identifying him as coming from the North East, with his young engineer, Douglas. I got to know both better in 1966, when I was sent down-river to Tilbury. Though a Thames trip on the *John Ashley* was popular with parish groups visiting in the summer to discover the work of The Missions to Seamen, the vessel's primary function was to serve the colliers from the North East. These colliers were usually tied up in parts of the river difficult of access, their crews valuing the visits of this floating chapel, library and its chaplain. But, who was John Ashley?

The Missions to Seamen had a network of people publicising the work to raise the funds necessary for its support from parishes around the country. It was quite common for congregations to be told that the society owed its origins to The Rev. John Ashley, a point made with a touching story. The preacher – on occasions it was me – conveyed the received version, one perpetuated in the various histories of the Society, and later included in my book, *One Firm Anchor: The Church and the Merchant Seafarer, An Introductory History*:

In 1835, The Rev. John Ashley and his small son, on holiday at Clevedon, near Bristol, were looking out at the islands of Flat Holm and Steep Holm in the Bristol Channel. His son asked how the islanders went to church.

This short section on Ashley's work continued:

Ashley, having no answer, went to see for himself and, finding fishermen and light-house keepers untended by any church, used the remaining three months of his holiday to continue his visits, holding services for them. From the islands he could see large fleets of wind-bound ships

waiting in the Bristol Channel. On his farewell visit to the islanders, preparatory to taking up a benefice, he asked how the crews of these vessels lived and what were the conditions of their ship-board life; the number of vessels and their neglect revealed in his question's answer determined Ashley to turn down the proffered living and instead try to do something for these men.<sup>1</sup>

A charming picture: picturesque islands, caring father, holiday by the sea, but one, as this book will show, at best, misleading.

My time with *The Missions to Seamen* prompted the spending of many years researching the history of the Church and the seafarer. Early in 1970, I was encouraged in my study by meeting the distinguished maritime missiologist and Lutheran minister, Roald Kverndal, and subsequently interested to see, unsourced but there, a little of my earliest research in his *Seamen's Missions*. Around 1973, Dr Alston Kennerley made contact and has been a wonderful guide to matters maritime ever since. At the same time, I was recruited by Peter Anson, the first popular maritime missiologist of modern times, who based much of his writing on the original work of Fr Goldie SJ, to help with what was intended to be Anson's final book, *Church Maritime*, which was never published. I was shown many years later a typescript of *Church Maritime* in Rome, and in it, duly credited, some of the material I had then sent its author.

*One Firm Anchor* attracted an email from The Rev. Andrew Hockett, a long-time chaplain of *The Missions to Seamen* with a distinguished record of service, who questioned the historicity of the story of Ashley's son prompting his father's interest in those islanders in the Bristol Channel. I realised, when I examined his evidence, that I was guilty of academic laziness, having relied on a received version rather than primary documents.

Andrew's path had crossed mine many years before. In 1966, I went to study for the Anglican ministry. The incumbent of the parish where my mother lived, knowing of my time with *The Missions to Seamen*, contacted me to say that a young man in the parish was hoping to train for ordination, and asking if my experience of *The Missions to Seamen* would lead me to recommend it to this young man, who also had to spend time gaining experience before going to theological college. The young man was Andrew Hockett. At the time, I thought it a fine organisation; Andrew duly went to work for the society.

Andrew's email revealed that he had been researching the life of John Ashley. By his calculation, if the received story was true, Ashley's son would have been two-years old and unlikely to have been able to question his father in the way traditionally told, something with which it is difficult to disagree.<sup>2</sup>

1. R.W.H. Miller, *One Firm Anchor*, Cambridge 2012, 135-8.

2. Mary Walrond, *Launching out into the Deep*, 1904, 21f seems to have been the source of this story, and my original source. Her vague dating could allow son John to be aged four or five. Her father had been Secretary of the Missions to Seamen almost from its inception, so it is possible that she was the vector of an early tradition.

The received version was in need of revision. Following an exchange of emails, Andrew generously offered to make his material available to me, and I agreed to reciprocate; hence this book. The extent of my debt to Andrew for his series of key dates in Ashley's life is immediately obvious (see Appendices three and four). This book is my response to his challenge that I try to produce a *Life* of Ashley.

Ashley's influence extended beyond the foundation of the Bristol Channel Mission, with which his name is always connected, to the Thames Church Mission and the ensuing offspring, the (Royal National) Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen, and thence to the French Catholic *Œuvres de Mer*, also to the St Andrew's Waterside Church Mission. The link with the *Œuvres de Mer* places him in the ancestry of the (Catholic) Apostleship of the Sea, a connection not without irony, given Ashley's views on Catholicism, clearly stated in his tract of 1874 explaining why he was leaving the Church of England; his reason relating to ritualism and the Catholic revival in the Church of England. I shall consider further whether Ashley did leave the Church of England.

Lack of sources makes Ashley difficult to study. Andrew Hockett's initial outline of Ashley and his children (Appendix Four) was most useful as a starting point, though at a few points in need of adjustment. His brother, David, generously shared census and similar details. Andrew further provided, again with the help of David, a detailed list of Ashley's siblings (Appendix Three).

There is some autobiographical material in Ashley's published pamphlets, themselves not easy to obtain, and in newspaper reports of his public appearances on behalf of the Bristol Channel Mission. A subject is not always his own best witness; on occasions Ashley's version of events is at variance with reliable information sourced elsewhere. I had access many years ago to what seem to have been the only two surviving of Ashley's logs for his years on the *Eirene*. The logs were kept at The Missions to Seamen's Headquarters. When the society's records were transferred to the Hull History Centre, Ashley's logs were not among them – their whereabouts remains unknown. The Mission to Seafarers' helpful Press and Digital Media Officer provided two pictures of the *Eirene*.

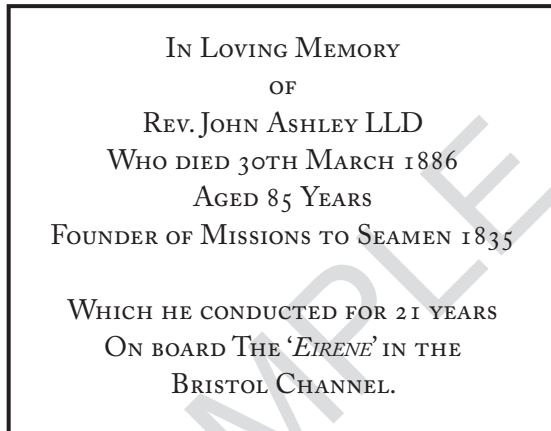
Bristol Records Office holds a Minute book for the Bristol Channel Mission Committee. The Bristol Reference Library has a Bristol Channel Mission Report, Ashley's published account of his disagreement with his Committee, and microfilm of *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* (1742-7) which contains the letter behind that disagreement. Unfortunately, silence obtrudes just at that point at which Ashley and his committee were at loggerheads; he first and then his committee members resigning for opposing reasons. The Reports of the

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M.R. Kingsford, *The Mersey Mission to Seamen*, 1957, (139) implies that The Rev. C.D. Strong was responsible for the story of Ashley's son, but gave no indication of his source; he was aware (140) of its doubtful authenticity: 'it is unlikely that . . . the Missions to Seamen will ever sacrifice to accuracy . . . Dr Ashley's little son.' The story is perpetuated in G.A. Gollock, *At the Sign of the Flying Angel*, 1930, 56; L.A.G. Strong, *Flying Angel*, 1956, 20; Michael Jacob, *The Flying Angel Story*, 1973, 19; Roald Kverndal, *Seamen's Missions*, 1986, 382.

Bristol Channel Seamen's Mission (which rose from the ashes of the Bristol Channel Mission), and Ashley's 1870s pamphlets, are in the British Library. The Winchester College archivist was particularly helpful on his education there. As the various pieces of the jigsaw began to connect, a picture of Ashley emerged. Strangely, it was easier to discover material about Ashley's early life than anything referring to his later years.

The inscription on Ashley's grave stone, reproduced here, is an interesting testament to what somebody, probably his widow, believed of him at the time of his burial.<sup>1</sup> Useful as it is, the inscription raises a number of questions. These I try to answer in this book.



I have mentioned that my first experience of The Missions to Seamen in 1964 was at its Victoria Dock Road Mission, London E16. As a student helper, I served under The Rev. George Thexton Morphet (Agnes, his wife, his great support). He had been a chaplain to the Australian Forces, then to The Missions to Seamen in Townsville. In 1962, he was appointed its Senior Chaplain in the Port of London for a five-year stint, before returning to Australia. The London mission was probably the Society's most difficult assignment, and its various problems required a tough man to resolve them; chaplains before and after Morphet rarely stayed 5 years. The mission then comprised the large 150-bed Victoria Dock Road hostel, a Chinese chaplaincy, the MV *John Ashley*, and at Tilbury a 30-bed hostel and a day centre in Tilbury's West Africa House. Morphet's team included assistant chaplains, stipendiary lay readers, a full hotel staff, and always 1 or 2 student helpers, the latter often, like me, straight from school. Ship-visiting was conducted throughout London's docks. I shall always be in his debt, which this book allows me to acknowledge.

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1. Ashley's grave is in Holy Trinity Cemetery, East Finchley, London. It lies a few paces to the right as the visitor enters the main church gate. A copy of the Holy Trinity burial register is held by the London Metropolitan Archive.