

The *Holmdale* loads cargo at Lyttelton shortly before being fumigated with coal smoke



Almost the end of the line. The *Holmdale* sails for the Chatham Islands for the last time

SHIP HELPED CHATHAM ISLANDERS **FEEL AT HOME**

The article by Michael Pignégué on his service in *MV Holmdale* prompted R. Lea Clough to write a sequel.

My first encounter with the *Holmdale* was when I took over as manager of the Wrightson NMA fish factory at Kaingaroa in the Chatham Islands in late 1978. The *Holmdale*'s agent, WB "Bos'n" Day would ring to advise a load-out date and the Black family's trucks would arrive. Our cartons of frozen paua, crayfish (rock lobster) and finfish were driven 64km to the principal settlement of Waitangi covered with a tarpaulin (one of many practices that would not be allowed today) and loaded into the ship's freezer hold.

I would take the company Land Rover and trailer to Waitangi, collect incoming cargo for the factory and company clients, and deliver it to Kaingaroa. Although she normally sailed from Lyttelton, she loaded cargo in Wellington, conveniently, when I shifted my family from Featherston to Kaingaroa in January 1979.

The *Holmdale* had by then been on the Chatham Island run for 12 years, having replaced the slightly smaller *Holmburn* in 1968. It was a period of drastic change for the New Zealand coastal shipping industry.

Improved road access to remote ports, the introduction of the Cook Strait rail ferries in 1962 and the arrival of the roll-on, roll-off coastal ships *Hawea* and *Seaway Princess* in 1968 were driving small, general cargo coasters out of existence. The Union Steam Ship Company absorbed the Holm, Richardson and Canterbury Steam companies and disposed of the unwanted vessels over the years, leaving the *Holmdale* as almost the sole survivor of her type.

Built by Bodewes at Martenshoek, Holland, Holm's preferred builder, in 1961, she served the Chathams for 22 years. Her 12-knot speed meant she could sail, typically, from Lyttelton on a Saturday afternoon and arrive at Waitangi to

begin working cargo at 0800 on a Monday.

The special needs of the Chathams trade meant she was kept on long after advances in cargo ships consigned similar ships to the knacker's yard. She was fitted with nine derricks, one jumbo derrick on the foremast for heavy cargo items, two each working from the cross-trees on each mast and one from each samson post built into the four corners of the bridge superstructure.

Normally, each pair of derricks would have their purchases joined to a common hook, with one derrick plumbing the hold and the other plumbing the wharf or lighter alongside. The ship's crew manned the winch on each derrick, and local labour worked as "wharfies" in the holds, attaching strops and slings and hooking on, then standing well clear.

As a new boy, I was not popular when I shouted, in vain, that they should not lift one bundle of wood, as it was not secure. After it had slid out and crashed into the hold, my comment, "What did I b... well say?" did not go down well, either.

The *Holmdale* had three holds. No 1, for'ard of the bridge, was the largest and was joined by a large passage on the port side to No 2. A temporary freezer, carried when the meat works was killing stock, sometimes filled this passage.

The No 2 hold also occasionally carried portable fuel tanks to supplement the diesel pumped out of the ship's tanks, through a pipeline to the island's main storage tank a few hundred metres away. In another practice that Occupational Safety and Health would have a hernia about these days, petrol was carried in 250 to 300 209-litre drums in the No 1 hold. These were slung, two at a time, hoisted out to a truck on the wharf, taken away and decanted into underground tanks at the two outlets. The empty drums, full of petrol vapour, were taken back to Lyttelton to be refilled for the

The *Holmdale* is assisted away from her berth at Lyttelton with a typical cargo of a fishing vessel on the No. 1 hatch and vehicles on the No. 2 and No. 3 hatches



next voyage. The No 3 hold, furthest aft, was the freezer. It had 'tween decks and wooden hatch covers.

Deck cargo, mainly vehicles, was carried on the hatch tops. For a higher freight rate, a vehicle could be stowed below decks, away from the salt spray. The drawbacks associated with this choice were that other cargo could chafe against the sides, something harmful could be stowed on top and, as I observed once, someone could walk across the roof wearing hobnailed boots. Smaller fishing vessels were also carried on the hatch tops.

Ministry of Transport Maritime Division (now Maritime New Zealand) rules did not permit vessels smaller than 12.5m to steam between mainland New Zealand and the Chatham Islands.

Another incentive to use the *Holmdale*, even for larger boats, was the sheer cost of hiring the crew needed – two deep-sea skippers/mates, one deep-sea engineer and either an AB or a QFD – and flying them the other way. Later, with the advent of GPS, a simpler system was adopted. Switch on the GPS, steam out to New Zealand and hope no-one noticed. The only person not to get away with this is said to have steamed into a mainland port, run aground and fallen overboard. Not surprisingly, he got caught.

The Chatham Islands infrastructure was the responsibility of the Department of Internal Affairs, and it ended up chartering the *Holmdale* under a contract that called for 10 voyages per year, two of which were to include a call at Pitt Island.

Although she did occasional voyages to other islands, such as Raoul and the Antipodes, she spent much time in between Chatham's trips idle in Lyttelton. In those days, the powerful Seamen's Union had generous manning scales and the labour bill was huge. To keep such an uneconomic service going, the Union Co was paid a subsidy, the largest component of the \$3 million plus that kept the Chathams going. The meat works and SAFE Air Ltd absorbed the remainder. The watersiders in Lyttelton, reputed to be the most militant in the country, were said to have made major concessions for the Chathams, going out of their way to ensure the *Holmdale* was loaded and able to sail when industrial action was pending.

As the wharf at Waitangi was rather exposed, the ship was protected by log fenders threaded through old tyres, and hurricane hawsers supplemented her berthing lines. Each consisted of two short, heavy wire ropes with a very large diameter fibre rope to provide some spring. The crew never complained, but the noise as the lines and fenders creaked and groaned must have made sleep difficult. ▶



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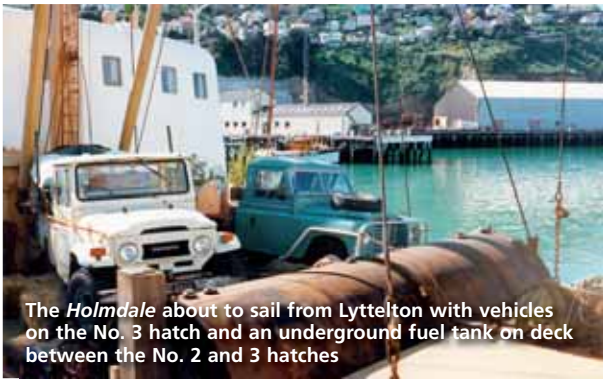
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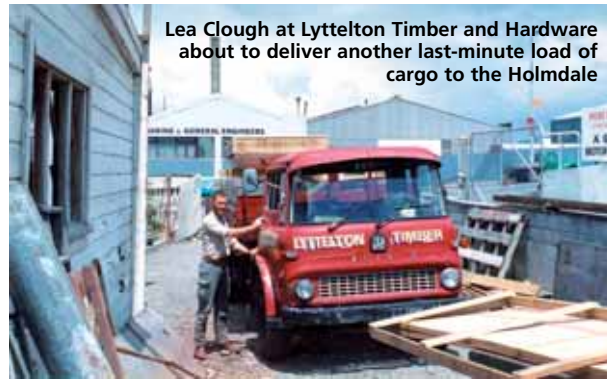
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The *Holmdale* about to sail from Lyttelton with vehicles on the No. 3 hatch and an underground fuel tank on deck between the No. 2 and 3 hatches



Lea Clough at Lyttelton Timber and Hardware about to deliver another last-minute load of cargo to the *Holmdale*



At Flower Pot, on Pitt Island, cargo was ferried ashore in two massively built teak surf boats powered by three-cylinder Lister diesels. Vehicles were transferred on a particularly shaky looking raft.

The *Holmdale* would call first at Waitangi, discharge cargo, embark the surfboats and extra hands, sail to Pitt to work cargo there, then return to Waitangi to discharge boats and hands, load cargo for Lyttelton and sail. The exposed nature of both ports meant the crew often spent days waiting for good weather. She would anchor at Owenga in the east, Taupeka in the north or in Port Hutt, the most sheltered harbour in the Chathams.

Although her cargo was mainly break bulk items loaded loose or on pallets but separated by dunnage (scrap timber), there was some early containerisation. The Union Co used 4cu m W containers and slightly larger H containers. Like other suppliers, Arthur Erdman, of Lyttelton Timber and Hardware, would fill these and ferry them down to the ship's side.

Loading took place in a leisurely fashion from Tuesday onwards. On Friday, Arthur would be deluged with a flood of last-minute orders, some of which involved truckloads of fencing materials from Kaiapoi, stretching patience to the limit.

Arthur usually got everything down to the ship and loaded. One Saturday morning, his daughter and I delivered a load of beehives (complete with occupants) to the ship's side, provoking the immediate disappearance of all the wharfies and crew.

On another occasion, the ancient (1907-vintage) steam tug

to sail in about four days. In stark contrast, her successor, the Cook Islands National Line's larger *MV Ngamaru III*, with a smaller crew, would arrive at 0700, turn around and sail by 2100 that night or by midday the following day at the latest. Today the *MV Rangatira* works to a similar schedule.

Another client of the Union Company was SAFE Air Ltd. The Bristol Freighter was inadequate for the service and a large backlog of air freight would often accumulate at Christchurch. Shortly before the ship sailed, SAFE would truck it all to Lyttelton and send it by sea. On one occasion, the hatch on No 2 hold rolled back to reveal a high-tech wave-measuring buoy with Priority Air Freight stickers on it.

Chatham Islanders developed friendships with crew members, who would shop for things and bring them in, avoiding freight charges and county dues. These are like customs duties and supplement rates to fund the county council.

In return, locals would deliver the islands' bounties of home-killed meat, wild pork, weka (as they are not native to the Chathams they are hunted quite legally), fish, paua and rock lobsters. Again, the latter trade would not be allowed these days, as it amounts to extra quota management system trading, incurring draconian penalties.

The crew were always welcome at the pub, and local business owners and others were often seen during the evenings in the officer's lounge on board. A sign over the bar proclaimed it was The Strangler's Arms, named, I was told, after a very hot-tempered former master of the ship who earned the nickname "The Napier Strangler" after he had to be restrained from doing serious harm to a crew member who had annoyed him.

The good relationship with the crew was not matched by similar relations with the company. Cargo was often damaged or lost, a typical case being pallets of cartons of fruit being stowed under pallets of cement. One Kaingaroa resident collected his car, only to find it had been carried all the way from Lyttelton with the driver's window (facing south) open. The interior had been drenched with seawater.

My neighbour's truck, inadequately secured, was lost over the side just short of the Chathams. He received \$400. The First Mate subsequently asked me if I had written the truck owner's letter to the company for him. When I said I had and asked how he knew, he said he recognised the style. The Union Co hardly ever compensated shippers and usually ignored complaints. Internal Affairs staff were even less use. Complaints to them were rebuffed with the answer that the New Zealand taxpayer spent a fortune to provide the service, so Chatham Islanders had no option but to lump it.

Islanders were not only dissatisfied with the *Holmdale*. Most can tell horror stories of what passed for service to the islands from Christchurch firms. A previous company manager had a head-on

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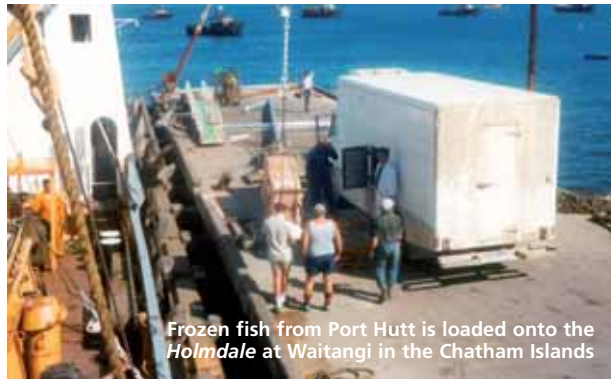
Lyttelton was being prepared for the weekend's excursions. As the stokers raised steam, clouds of coal smoke drifted over the *Holmdale*, berthed astern, provoking a walk-off by wharfies, who could be delicate souls.

Stud animals were shipped in and well looked after by the crew. The first shipment of goats did not go quite so well. Kept in the same pens as those used for sheep, they demonstrated they were not as hardy when half of them died.

The turn-around at Waitangi was carried out in a similar, unhurried fashion. By the time I joined Bos'n Day's team of wharfies I was a self-employed paua diver, working 12 to 14 hour days in fine weather, then doing some casual work for the *Holmdale* when it was offered. The 0800 start usually meant actually working from about 0820, taking a half-hour smoko, then a 90-minute lunch break.

In favourable weather, the ship would discharge and load, ready

It's better if the owner doesn't watch. A car is unloaded at Waitangi



Frozen fish from Port Hutt is loaded onto the *Holmdale* at Waitangi in the Chatham Islands



A hurricane hawser holds the *Holmdale* securely alongside at Waitangi

collision with a steer while driving the Land Rover. The agents supplied the parts ordered – a radiator, a front mounting plate and two left wings.

A wholesaler found they had omitted eggs from an order, so they posted them in a brown paper bag with stamps on. Islanders, rather than order by part and model numbers, which are usually misread, often sent out broken or worn parts as samples for replacements.

My neighbour showed me the four-bladed cutter and perforated disc from his butcher shop mincer. It was strung on a cord with the replacements, all of which were a different size and shape, hence quite unusable.

I actually stopped one firm from sending a Chatham Islands client a bag of peanuts. He did not help by asking for “a large bag of peanuts”, but common sense should have told them that a family would have a hard time consuming a 50kg sack.

As the decade progressed, the ship's age began to tell on her,

and political developments heralded a major change. Various committees and study teams appointed by the government to recommend solutions for the Chathams' problems found themselves having to cope also with the new policy of the total abolition of subsidies.

The upshot was the end of the *Holmdale* service. In late 1990 she was replaced by an interim tug and barge service, which was in turn superseded by the *Ngamaru III* service. The latter, unsubsidised, and charging the same freight rates as the Union Co, provided a superior service.

The *Holmdale* had been ordered as a replacement for the coaster *MV Holmglen*, which sank with all hands near Timaru in November 1959.

In a sad repeat of this tragedy, the *Holmdale*, under her new name, the *Celtic Kiwi*, was bound for Norfolk Island with a full cargo when she sank some 100 miles nor'west of Cape Reinga in October 1991, fortunately with no loss of life. ⚓

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