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4 - Sydney Chaplin and the Grays Connection



Sydney John Chaplin, elder half brother of the better known film comedy actor Charlie Chaplin, was an 'Exmouth boy'. Having spent some time on the Grays based training ship T.S. Exmouth, being taught in the way of the sea, at the turn of the century, he never actually lost contact with his old training ship, making a number of return visits throughout his life.

Syd was born in 1885, approximately four months before his mother married Charles Chaplin, and four years before his brother Charlie was born in 1889. The name of Syd's own father was not given when his birth was registered, nor when he was baptised. Charlie admired and looked up to his elder brother who acted as a father figure during the family's troubled up-bringing. Mother and the boys had been residing in Lambeth Workhouse for three weeks when the boys were transferred on the 18th June, 1896 to the Hanwell Schools for Orphans and Destitute Children some 12 miles out from the centre of London. Sydney was in the senior school and worked in the kitchens, rarely seeing his younger brother.

On the 18th November 1896, when Syd was 11 years old, he was transferred to the training ship Exmouth, an old wooden-walled line of battle ship which was moored off the town of Grays in Essex. The Exmouth had seen service at Balaclava and had been used by the

Metropolitan Asylum Board 'for training for sea-service poor boys chargeable to Metropolitan parishes and unions' since 1876. It was the second boat on this station, replacing the 'Goliath' which was lost in an accidental fire that destroyed the ship in 1875.

Once aboard the Exmouth, Syd's first task was to learn how to patch and mend his clothes, as well as washing his own clothes and learning to keep his locker and possessions in good condition and order. As well as his own locker, each boy had his own hammock to sleep on, which had to be neatly stowed away during the day. In addition to the general schooling Syd received, he would also have learned seamanship, gunnery and first aid. During his time on the Exmouth, he also learned to be a bugler.

After leaving the Exmouth at the age of sixteen, Sydney first got a job as a telegraph messenger boy at the West Strand Post Office, then joined a theatrical Company requiring a bugler, before decided to go to sea. However, he appears to have added three years to his age in order to better his prospects, his personal documents incorrectly giving his date of birth as 1882 instead of 1885 all through his seagoing career. On 6th April 1901 Syd was engaged as an assistant steward and bandsman on the Union Castle Mail Steamship Company line's S.S. Norman, as a bugler, embarking on the Cape Mail run. In total he made seven voyages, his work and conduct being recorded on his Continuous Certificate of Discharge as 'Very Good'. He succeeded in impressing his Captain with his conscientiousness and hard work, and when the Master of the Norman transferred to the Kingfairns Castle and was engaged for four successive voyages on that ship.

Sydney then spent some time ashore, during which both him and his brother Charlie appeared on the stage, in pantomimes or revenues, etc., before Syd again signed on as a steward, this time on the Haverford bound for New York. However, he was put ashore on account of sickness and later made the return trip on the St Louis. Once again he signed on as an assistant steward and bugler on the Dover Castle.

Returning to England he joined up with Charlie again on tour with "Sherlock Holmes" and when that ended he tried his hand as a comedian in music hall sketches, interestingly Charlie tried his hand at anything but comedy work which he frowned upon, Sydney said to him "You'll finish up as a red-nosed comedian anyway, so you might as well begin now" As Sydney developed his theatrical talents, after realising that this was where his future lay, he developed his acting skills and was taken on by Fred Karno, the king of music-hall sketches. Karno's empire stretched throughout Britain in fair grounds, music-hall and as far afield as Europe and America as he sent troupes far afield to entertain the public. It was Syd who eventually got Charlie taken on by

Fred Karno who was not impressed with Charlie's theatrical skills. However by 1910, Sydney was the talk of the town in London and contracted for some time to work here so was not released to go to America when Fred Karno succeeded in supplying a proposed American variety circuit tour, so Charlie was sent to fill his place.

Later on Sydney also transferred across to America and as Charlie's film career blossomed, he arrived in Hollywood and was soon signed up by Mack Sennett as a Keystone comic. He also helped to manage his younger brother, seeking, negotiating and advising on film contracts. Sydney can often be seen playing second fiddle in many of Charlie's films as a supporting actor and it was in this way the family kept together.

It was later on in Sydney's life having succeeded in the film world as a director and actor that he returned to visit the T.S. Exmouth, the most memorable visit being in 1927 when he organised a performance of his latest film, "The Better 'ole" based on the Bains Fainweather 1st World war cartoon character and tea at Lyons Corner House afterwards for 430 boys. The same treat was arranged for a further 200 boys on a separate occasion as they could not all be accommodated for at the same time.

Every boy was presented with a brand new florin piece and the boy bearing Syd's own old number (no.151) was presented with a watch by Miss Binnie Hale, the Music Hall star, as Sydney was unable to personally present the watch due to work commitments. There was some disagreement as to whether the watch was made from gold or silver, and also the boy's name; the Daily Mail named him as Richard Cave, The Star as Richard Care and the Daily News as Richard Caird.

Bibliography

- Charles Chaplin, My Autobiography;
- Chaplin the Immortal Tramp, R.J. Minney;
- Chaplin, His Life And Art, David Robinson;
- Archives of the Exmouth Training Ship, Thurrock Museum.