

Onboard

VOYAGES • SEAMANSHIP • EQUIPMENT



Charles W Morgan
Having a
whale
of a time

A first-hand account of what it was like to sail on board this American whaler on one leg of her 38th Voyage this year

STORY **LESLEY WALKER** PHOTOGRAPHY **MYSTIC SEAPORT**





New Bedford appeared through the afternoon haze at 1430 on 25 June 2014. We were tacking across Buzzards Bay towards *Charles W Morgan's* home port for the first time in 73 years and she was flying through the water at 8 knots under all sails apart from the royal. Like others on board this historic ship, I wanted this moment to last forever. "Let's head for the Azores," we joked, referring to her traditional first port of call after New Bedford.

At 1520 the slowing down process started; the main yards were backed, the fore and main yards squared and braced up. The topline was passed to the waiting tug *Sirius*, with the tug *Jaguar* made fast on the port side. The fore topsail was braced in, the jib taken in, the inner and upper topsails lowered and *Charles W Morgan* approached the hurricane gates, still wearing her lower topsails accompanied by a flotilla of more than 40 boats and a local press helicopter. Crowds of people lined the

two shores as we heard a sudden boom and saw smoke rising from the cannon fired from Fort Phoenix on our starboard side to welcome us back. The *Charles W Morgan* was almost home. Though not the end of her 38th Voyage, this was in many ways the culmination of a five-year restoration of the last wooden American whaling ship. Built at the Hillman Shipyard and launched in New Bedford on 21 July 1841, she is the only survivor from over 270 whaling ships that sailed the world from New Bedford, Massachusetts, which, by 1839, had overtaken Nantucket as America's leading port. Although the whaling industry peaked in 1859, the *Charles W Morgan* kept on whaling until 1921 when her final (brief) whaling voyage was from San Francisco to the Arctic and then back to New Bedford.

To those familiar with the debates that raged around the restoration of the *Cutty Sark*, it is interesting to know the story behind how another (and older) museum ship has found her way back to sea once more. The *Charles W Morgan* has been a static exhibit in

PHOTO MONTAGE BY PETER SMITH USING IMAGES COURTESY OF MYSTIC SEAPORT

Mystic Seaport: the Museum of America and the Sea ever since she was towed out of New Bedford in 1941. The museum board's policy was that the *Charles W Morgan* would never sail again. But during planning for a major restoration project, the new president of the museum, Steve White, posed the question: "What would we need to do for the *Charles W Morgan* to go to sea?" The resulting debate saw the words 'never again' change to 'maybe we should'. After a feasibility study and conversations with the US Coast Guard, a vision started to take shape. Five years and \$US7.5m dollars later, the 38th Voyage became a reality. A major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities helped to make the '38th Voyagers and Stowaway public history programme' possible. The grant meant the museum could invite people from a range of disciplines to participate in the 38th Voyage, and I was one of those 85 people, one of only two from the UK.

MY CONNECTION

My *Charles W Morgan* adventure began after reading in the December 2013 issue of *Classic Boat* about the proposed 38th Voyage and Voyager programme. I had known about her existence at Mystic Seaport. Along with many other New Bedford whalers, she had sailed off the remote Pacific islands that my family lived on from the late 1870s. My great-great-grandparents (who had individually emigrated from Britain years before) had sailed from New Zealand to the Kermadec Islands via Tonga and Samoa in the late 1870s and, with their six small children, literally beached themselves on the uninhabited volcanic island known as Sunday or Raoul Island, more than 600 miles northeast of New Zealand. My great-grandmother Bessie, aged nine at the time, was

"I won't forget the exhilaration of seeing her keel slice through the green water"

the second eldest. Five more children were born during their 30 years on the island. From the beginning they were beset by problems. As the coastal trader *Norval* sailed away from them, they discovered that the food supplies they had bought from the ship's captain to see them through the first year were inedible. Poor weather followed and rats ate everything they planted. A year after their arrival they were in dire straits, when the New Bedford whaleship, the *Canton*, sister ship to the *Charles W Morgan*, saw their smoke and sent a whaleboat ashore to investigate. What the *Canton* found is recorded in the log on 11 July 1879: "When we got in quite handy, we discovered smoke and a signal as though someone was in distress. Lowered a boat and went inshore but could not get near enough to hail them on account of the heavy sea and heavy gusts of wind coming from off the mountain. We lay off and on until dark... there appeared to be five or six persons..."

Due to bad weather it was another four days before the ship could again approach the island. "We worked up to 'Sunday Island' again at 3pm and found the people there are a family named 'Bell', Mr & Mrs Bell & six children in destitute circumstances, their crops having been destroyed by rats."

The following day the ship provided them with bread, flour and "a few small articles from the crew to the people ashore".

More than 130 years later I would board, explore, sleep and sail on *Charles W Morgan*, which had whaled off the island and was one of the ships that my great-grandmother had recalled in her memoirs and also the ship on which her family's long-standing friend, Parkin Christian, great-grandson of Fletcher Christian, served as first and second mate for 25 years.



Far left: en route to Newport, Rhode Island. Top left: hands going aloft. Bottom left: the 38th Voyagers each had a project to pursue while sailing on the voyage



THE CREW

In her whaling days she had a core crew of between 30 and 36, including boat headers, boat steerers and deckhands, or green hands, many of whom were taken on and/or discharged at various ports including the Azores, Cape Verde Islands and New Zealand. Each of the four (later five) whaleboats required a crew of six. There were also the 'idlers', including the carpenter, cooper, steward and cabin boy, cook and blacksmith. For our 38th Voyage the ship was sailed by 15 professional paid crew, most with US Coast Guard qualifications and experience on wooden ships. As well as the captain, Richard "Kip" Files and Chief Mate Sam Sikkema, there were two other mates, three senior deckhands, six deckhands, a steward and an engineer. In addition there were seven sailing deckhands, rotating staff members from Mystic Seaport Museum with knowledge and experience. There was also Ryan Leighton, the 'stowaway' from Maine who won his place on the 38th Voyage through a competitive application process. Ryan shared his daily experiences through a blog and social media, as well as doing his part as a member of the crew, taking watches, handling sails and taking the wheel.

THE CAPTAIN

Richard "Kip" Files is the 22nd captain of the *Charles W Morgan*. He's a native of Maine and has spent most of the past 25 years captaining Tall Ships.

Kip stands tall with a commanding handlebar moustache. He is the primary captain of the 207ft (63m) barque *Elissa*, based in Galveston, Texas, and part owner and captain of the 132ft (40m) schooner *Victory Chimes*, which sails out of Rockland, Maine.

Like the *Charles W Morgan*, *Victory Chimes* is a National Historic Landmark. Neither have an engine though, meaning "you have to figure out how you are going to manoeuvre her at all times", Kip says.

The *Charles W Morgan* is an irreplaceable artefact of America's maritime heritage and because of this, Kip's most important task has been to achieve a safe voyage for the ship and all of her crew on board. Before she set out, Kip predicted that, given her lines, "she will sail better than we think she will".

He has since been proved right. "The only way the vessel can be understood is to actually move her," he said. "She was never designed to be a static symbol at the dock because we can't read about her and expect to learn anything about her, we need to do it."

Above: looking forward down the deck of the Charles W. Morgan, showing the tangle of braces, lines and halyards



RUNNING THE SHIP

Before the voyage, the crew (and the Voyagers) were organised into Starboard and Port Watches (not the more traditional Larboard the whalers used). The officers slept in the aft cabins, as they would have done when the ship was whaling. The captain's stateroom, with its gimballed bed, was kept free for public access so the captain slept in the First Mate's cabin. The 'Idlers' stayed in the midships and the deckhands, green hands and 38th Voyagers were in the fo'c's'le.

Little food was cooked on board as the cast iron stove in the deck galley could not be used. Breakfast on my voyage day exceeded all expectations – eggs Benedict, muffins, pastries, cereals, bread and fruit. Organised by the steward, pre-prepared food taken out of freezers in the hold was warmed and set out on trestles in the blubber room between decks. Lunches on voyage days were delivered dockside with tea, coffee and fresh water available on deck.

READY TO BOARD

At Vineyard Haven on Martha's Vineyard I gathered with my cohort of nine other 38th Voyagers, sharing stories and projects. After a BBQ and beer, we were ready to board. My group included an artist, a Melville historian, Melville's great-great-grandson, the fourth great-grandson of the first owner of *Charles W Morgan*, the New Bedford Whaling Museum Research Library curator, the great-nephew of one of the 1918 crew, a teacher and an ethnomusicologist.

Above left: lowering the boats to go after whales in the Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary. *Above right:* off Cape Cod. *Below:* under sail in 1920

We were to sleep in the fo'c's'le and after selecting our narrow berths we were back up on deck for a safety briefing from the third mate Roxanne 'Rocky' Hadler and a tour of the ship. We were then at liberty until lights out at 2200. That evening I listened to Mystic Seaport's shanty-man Geoff Kaufman sing sea shanties, play the accordion and the sound of a haunting bamboo nose flute. Too excited to sleep, and because the 21st century fan in the fo'c's'le was noisy, I climbed down out of my berth at dawn, went on deck and watched the sun rise over the bowsprit and jib-boom. Alone on deck except for the watch, this was a special moment. By 0700 all was bustle and activity as the ship prepared for sea. We were directed ashore to meet the 12 guests who would be joining us, including the president of Mystic Seaport, the mayor of New Bedford and the editor of the *New Bedford Standard Times*. Suddenly the ship seemed very crowded. The two tugs, *Sirius* and *Jaguar*, moved into position and we were allocated to a watch. The gangplank was removed and the fifth whaleboat was hoisted onto derricks on the port side. At 0930 the lines were let go, the fenders stowed and the ship started to move slowly away from Tisbury Wharf, assisted by one of the tugs alongside and a rib at the stern. It was cloudy with fair visibility, southwest winds at 17 knots gusting 20-23 knots. As foresails were hauled then lowered and a towline passed to the waiting tug, Captain Files explained that he had intended to try sailing off and tacking down Vineyard Sound, but a strong 3-knot tide meant a tow was necessary. There was little option, other than waiting for the tide to turn as we wouldn't even make Woods Hole on this tack. Staysails were raised to help pick up speed, the crew taking their rhythm from shanties. At 1130, still under tow down Vineyard Sound, a decision was made to go through Quick's Hole between Nashawena and Pasque Islands rather than around Cuttyhunk Island, the original planned route. That way we could go under sail much sooner.

For more on the *Charles W Morgan* go to www.classicboat.co.uk

TACKING ACROSS BUZZARDS BAY

Once through Quick's Hole at 1200 we broke the tow and we were sailing. Starting with inner and outer foresails, mizzen and main staysails and two mainsails raised, then the top gallants, we heeled over as the sails filled. I have to agree with Ryan who said that, "one of the greatest things about sailing aboard the *Charles W Morgan* is watching her tack."





As we tacked across Buzzards Bay, at one point reaching 8 knots, I watched in awe as the crew responded to the call: "Stand by the main braces", and performed a well-rehearsed dance at the working braces. With boyish enthusiasm and the help of a model ship on the deck, Captain Files demonstrated the art of tacking. Down on his knees he moved the model's yards as he explained how the foremast sails affect those on the main and mizzen and demonstrated the systematic manoeuvres that (apparently effortlessly) turn the ship.

I won't forget the sheer exhilaration of leaning over the bow and watching the keel slice through the green water or standing on deck and feeling the ship lift and pull, or listening to the wind filling the canvas sails and hearing the traditional language of sail handling, watched over by Captain Files on the hurricane deck.

As we approached the State Pier in New Bedford I felt both elated and sad. I had climbed the rigging twice during the voyage, savouring the joy of being on the mainmast as the ship was sailing. I had spent the night in a narrow berth in the fo'c's'le, listened to the settling of the ship, spent a night watch on deck and felt the almost imperceptible movements of the ship in the water. I had hauled halyards and freed off lines and watched the sun rise over the bowsprit. And now it was time to leave.

A few days later at the opening ceremony on the State Pier, Steve White, Mystic Seaport's president, said that the *Charles W Morgan* was not the museum's ship, nor New Bedford's ship, but America's ship. He said: "We undertake this voyage to teach and to help America understand its maritime heritage more fully."

I would add that the *Morgan*, having crossed three oceans connecting many people and served by crews of many cultures, is the world's ship too. ☺

Above left: the 1841 whaling ship meets a whale but this time, it's 2014.

Top right: deckhands hauling a line.

Above right: the brick and iron try works where blubber was once rendered into oil

CHARLES W MORGAN

LOD
106ft 11in
(32.6m)

BEAM
27ft 9in
(8.5m)

SAIL AREA
7,134sqft
(663m²)

DRAUGHT
13ft 3in
(4m)

DISPLACEMENT
313 tons

Her five-year rebuild

2008 Masts, rigging and concrete and lead ballast removed, hull emptied, hauled out, interior and exterior laser measurement begins. Sheathing removed, hull supported to remove 11in (280mm) of hog and keel realigned.

2009 Rotten inner hull ceiling planks and frames are removed (many original), exterior supports shore up 'tween decks; windlass and day cabin, copper sheathing removed and stored; hull irrigated with misting fans; all materials removed catalogued; milling exterior planking & ceiling; rot found in stem and some frames; paint stripping, main deck caulking removed; sonic testing of hull & fastenings; decision to sail the ship announced.

2012 Rudder (c1970s) removed and pintles X-rayed (c1886); strakes refastened; live oak (ex-Hurricane Katrina) apron installed; white oak and longleaf lower planking replaced; transom work; forging metal block components, blocks fabricated; culling and sorting planking continues; new transom cross timber beam installed (from tree felled in 1868); 10 knees need to be replaced.

2013 New wormshoe placed; two new deck beams scarphed to old beams; planking completed; catheads installed; hawse pipes reinstalled, copper sheathing replaced; rigging made in ropewalk; (July) relaunched, new bowsprit and lower foremast (both her 5th) installed, lower main and mizzen masts (1997) stepped, reballasting, ironwork; new spars and yards shaped.

2014 Recaulking and painting; bilge pumps and fire retardation system installed; forward topmast placed and re-rigged; 19 new sails are made by Nat Wilson of Maine (feature about him on p78). The restoration is completed in August and she undertakes her 38th Voyage from Mystic Seaport to Boston and back.

See CB's full restoration feature (from June 2010 online).
www.classicboat.co.uk