

One Man

& His Lightship

Tony O'Neil has had a passion for boats and broadcasting for as long as he can remember, and now he runs LV18 in Harwich, a fitting reminder of how marine safety and music went hand in hand off the Essex coast

WORDS BY MIKE TRIPPITT

MOST MORNINGS from March to October, at 11am, Tony O'Neil opens a steel gate and walks the 15m gangway on to LV18, the last manned lightship of the Trinity House Fleet. He would not want to be anywhere else.

'Being on here enables me to meet lots of people, which is a great joy to me. I am a people person,' says Tony, as he makes himself comfortable at the ship's bow in a moment of warm sunshine.

For the curator of the LV18 museum, and trustee of the Pharos Trust that owns it, the short walk from his home across Harwich Quay is the symbolic end of a 13-year journey to restore the vessel, turn it into a tourist attraction and bring it to a permanent berth. His own belief that you can do anything if you set your mind to it is something he admires in others.

'This light vessel being here is a very good example of an almost unachievable project, that can be delivered by one or a very few people if you have got the staying power, and you really do believe what you are doing is right,' Tony adds.

Tony grew up in Walton on the Naze enjoying, 'an Arthur Ransome childhood bimbbling about in the Backwaters on boats'. At an early age, he became fascinated with wireless and broadcasting. His father worked in wireless and was part of the pioneering days of radar and early warning systems, both in the RAF during the war and afterwards with Marconi. It was inevitable that when 'pirates' came to the Suffolk and Essex coast, Tony became hooked.

'I lived and breathed offshore radio,' he recounts. 'I thought all little boys had pirate radio stations at the bottom of their gardens. I certainly did. And it wasn't long before I went out and met up with them.'

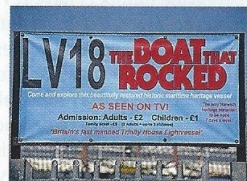
Tony recalls trips out to the pirate ships in the tripper boat *Lady Kent* and getting to know the men who worked at the stations. Offshore radio has been in his blood ever since. Tony has collected vintage wireless sets and offshore radio artefacts most of his life. He first opened his collection of radios to the public in 1990, when he was offered a lease of Harwich's High Lighthouse.



A LV18 crew member's cabin



The mess room in LV18



LV18 starred in *The Boat That Rocked*

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Maybe he was destined to take it.

'My dad said that when I was a kid I always wanted to have a tower to sit at the top to look out at the panorama. I remember thinking that my father would be amused when I told him of my decision to rent and restore the disused lighthouse.

The restoration, something he had never attempted before, took Tony four and a half years, but is significant in the story of the LV18 lightship. With typical determination and enthusiasm, he immersed himself in lighthouses, Trinity House and pharology. Tony sees an inextricable link between lighthouses, light vessels, wireless and offshore radio. Trinity House was one of the first users of wireless transmissions, improving safety at sea hugely. The parallels between men working and living on a light vessel for weeks at a time and men living and working on a pirate radio ship are obvious, even though, as Tony admits, they are at opposite ends of the establishment spectrum. When the opportunity to acquire LV18 arose in 1999, he saw the potential.

'I thought it would be perfect. We can have a pirate radio museum and a Trinity House lightship museum together,' says Tony. Today, one side of the ship is dedicated to men working at sea protecting the mariner, while the opposite side is dedicated to men working together on a pirate radio ship.

In 2002 ownership of the vessel was formally transferred to the Pharos Trust, a charity set up to restore, operate and maintain it. Former Radio Caroline DJ and legendary BBC broadcaster Johnnie Walker is its patron.

The trust relied on fundraising and volunteers to begin the restoration work. Although the ship had been out of commission for only four years, much work needed to be done and the external restoration was a particularly big task.

'We carried on painting it, but we didn't have any power tools. So, it was hand stuff. Scraping it, hitting rust with a chipping hammer, priming it. It was really, really hard work,' says Tony. 'It doesn't cost a fortune to run this ship, but physically it does. I am living proof of that!'



Tony O'Neil looking towards the River Stour

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Pirate radio memorabilia onboard LV18

There have been several radio broadcasts from LV18 over the years; some by BBC Pirate Radio Essex and others by Radio Mi Amigo, a community radio station broadcasting once a year on a Restricted Service Licence. The ship was also used in the making of the 2007 film *The Boat That Rocked*.

In 2011, Tony and the Pharos Trust realised their dreams. Grant aid and voluntary work allowed for new piles at Harwich Quay. Tendring District Council and The Crown Estate agreed to leases of the quay and riverbed.

Finally, on a blustery day in 2011, LV18 arrived at her new, permanent home at Harwich Quay. As the tug manoeuvred her alongside, Tony purposefully took a photograph. It was a special moment.

'My father was 91. He'd had a stroke the week before and although he was not able to speak, I showed it to him sitting in his hospital bed. He gave me the thumbs up. For me, I'd done it. What more could I want? He was my driving force and also probably my inspiration for being involved in radio and ultimately lighthouses and lightships.'

It was 50 years ago, on August 14, 1967, that offshore radio in the UK became illegal. Some 'pirates' continued to broadcast from the North Sea, undaunted by the taint of criminality. Meanwhile, just across the waves, the men of Trinity House lightships, the very essence of the establishment, worked to keep mariners, including the 'pirates' and those who supplied them, safe. The Pharos Trust has, in LV18, achieved a fitting memorial to both.

Perhaps it is the same spirit and passion that brought pirate radio to the 1960s that brought LV18 to Harwich. As Tony says: 'If you really do believe what you are doing is right, and righteous, and it is not doing anyone any harm, and it is going to bring benefit to people, and it is honest and it is decent, then why not champion it?'