



The Felixstowe man with saltwater in his veins

Charlie Brinkley was a legendary seaman, never more at home than when he was ferrying RAF Bawdsey staff across the Deben, fishing the North Sea or volunteering on Royal Navy minesweepers

WORDS: Mike Trippitt

“**W**hat do they want to give me a medal for?” said Charlie Brinkley. It was 1970, and the ferryman was to be a celebrity... at least for one day. Charles Gordon Brinkley was awarded the British Empire Medal in the New Year’s Honours List of 1971 ‘for services to the RAF’. Across the swirling tides of the River Deben, Charlie had been ferrying staff from the RAF station at Bawdsey Manor for years. His medal was a reward for his toil.

The humility that led him

to question why he had been nominated for the decoration also made the award ceremony on May 21, 1971 something of an uncomfortable affair. “Dad was a nervous wreck,” says Charlie’s daughter, Lilian Miles. “He was shaking and was right out of his comfort zone. I remember going over there on the ferry all dolled-up. It was the only time I ever went into the manor.” But, she adds, once Air Vice Marshall Ivor Broom presented Charlie with his medal he started to relax and chat. “He was all right once we got him to the reception.”

For many, Charlie Brinkley

ABOVE: Robert and Charlie Brinkley at the time Charlie retired as ferryman

is synonymous with the iconic ferry across the Deben, but he was every bit a fisherman. Born at Quay Cottages at Bawdsey Quay in 1906, he attended the village school to the age of 14. He decided to earn his keep lobster fishing from the Deben, using a boat that was already in the family. “Grandfather had it built when he was on Havergate Island,” says Charlie’s son, Robert. “When it was built – boat, mast, sails, oars and rowlocks – it cost £13. He gave it to Dad. It was called Lizzie after great-grandmother.”

Lizzie was the first of a long



Charlie Brinkley in his later years.



ABOVE: Felixstowe Ferry looking towards Bawdsey Quay

line of fishing vessels and ferry boats that Charlie would own through the next eight decades. By 1929, he had the 33ft shrimp boat Silver Cloud built at Harry King's yard at Pin Mill for the princely sum of £300. He fished from her out of Felixstowe Ferry for 10 years, until the outbreak of war, when Silver Cloud and Charlie Brinkley went their separate ways for king and country.

The Admiralty compulsorily purchased the vessel for use at Felixstowe Docks, and whilst Charlie briefly owned two more vessels, restrictions on movement in east coast waters made fishing unviable. Charlie volunteered for the Royal Navy. "He was on a minesweeper based at Dover most of the time, having done petty officer training at Lowestoft," says son Robert. "He was at Harwich for a time, and also went to Dieppe to do minesweeping after the allied invasion."

Once the war was over, in a serendipitous turn of fate, Silver Cloud and 39-year-old Charlie were reunited. Charlie bought the boat back from The Admiralty for a fraction of what it had originally paid, and with two

more boats – Silver Wave Bird and Silver Surf coming later – the fisherman harvested Dover sole, skate, plaice and shrimps from waters as far north as Boston, Lincolnshire, and to Rye in the south. Charlie's was never a nine-to-five job, and spending many days with his boats away from home in Felixstowe Ferry was normal.

In 1950, Charlie was appointed the first harbourmaster of Felixstowe Ferry. He learned of local tides, shifting sands and perilous winds from his father, and whilst he took it for granted, his knowledge impressed and assisted many a visiting yachtsman.

In 1962, The RAF station at Bawdsey Manor awarded the contract for the running of the official RAF ferry across The Deben to Charlie Brinkley. It was like coming home. His father, Charlie Brinkley senior, or 'Hookie' as he was known locally, had been a ferryman at Bawdsey for 40 years before the war and still lived in the house where Charlie junior was born.

Although Charlie's first ferry was a former fishing boat called Delia, he soon commissioned the

building of three purpose-built ferries whose names still resonate around the little hamlet at the river mouth. "Odd Times, a 28ft clinker boat, was built in Ipswich in 1963," says Robert Brinkley. "Odd Times was a bit too long and awkward to get away from the jetty. It was also narrow. Our Times was built here, at Felixstowe Ferry in 1966, and was more or less a replacement for Odd Times."

Robert recalls one Christmas when Charlie, keen to get RAF staff quickly across the river and on their way for the holidays, loaded the boat – licensed to

BELOW: From left, Ann White, Robert Brinkley and Lilian Miles



Photo: Mike Tripitt

carry under 40 – with as many people and kit bags as he could. “When they got to the other side 62 got off.”

Charlie’s last ferry, Late Times, continued the theme, and to this day the line remains associated with the family. Charlie’s son-in-law, John White, who became Felixstowe Ferry harbourmaster after him, uses call sign Odd Times and Charlie’s granddaughter’s houseboat, Another Times, rises and falls on the Deben tide.

Charlie’s work on the ferries made him popular with RAF personnel, which led to him being awarded the British Empire Medal. He was proud of his award, but his day of fame in 1971 did not change the humble, yet renowned, ferryman. Daughter Ann White

RIGHT: Charlie Brinkley (right), Harry Wilson (left) and Barrie White painting Silver Cloud



Photo: Courtesy Brinkley family

BELOW: Charlie Brinkley in his trademark cap, mackintosh and ‘Board of Trade belt’ (a piece of string)

recalls: “It was the same when they named a road after him, Brinkley Way in Felixstowe. He said he could not think why the council wanted to name a road after him. I told him it was an honour. ‘Is it?’ he said.”

Ann says her father had a dry sense of humour and, like many in the fishing community, was superstitious. He wouldn’t allow the family to take an umbrella on any of his boats, believing they brought bad luck. And there was also to be no talk of rabbits. Wearing his trademark cap and a mackintosh held together by a ‘Board of Trade belt’ (his name for a piece of string), Charlie became as much a part of Felixstowe Ferry as the shingle banks, the village pub and the blackened fishing sheds.

Even after his retirement from the ferry at the age of 72 he returned to the sea to fish commercially. By then he had featured in newspaper articles and on Christmas cards. He can even be seen in the work of his friend, cartoonist Carl Giles.

Charlie died aged 91. In his twilight years he had become frustrated that his body’s failings curtailed the physical activities he had taken in his stride as a younger man. He had an unhappy relationship with two replacement hips that he regarded as useless and would often say that they would “work better if they were made out of wood”.

But it was not metal or wood but seawater that held Charlie Brinkley together – seawater was his life and blood. Around 1980, when an accident severed an artery in his wrist, he was rushed to Ipswich for repairs. When daughter Lilian arrived at the hospital she learned that Charlie was to be put on a saline drip. “Would you believe it,” he said to her. “They’re putting saltwater into my veins. I don’t need any of that.” ♦

Photo: Courtesy Brinkley family

