

The First Voyage of Lumina – post 11

Sailing in Svalbard

Thought you have had enough history?

As we turned the corner at the top left of Svalbard to come back in a southward direction we come to a couple of notable sites. The first being probably the busiest whaling operation on the island and the second, home to more whacky attempts to reach the North Pole.

We anchored one windy night off an island called Amsterdamoya. This was home to probably the largest onshore whaling operation in Svalbard. There were a number of Dutch and a Danish company operating from the same place during the 1620s. Upwards of 200 men lived on the site converting the whales caught in the vicinity into oil by cutting the blubber into chunks and boiling it in huge vats known as blubber ovens. These can be found all over Svalbard but this place was the biggest concentration. One report talks of something like a wild west town with liquor shops and frontier saloons, a bakery making fresh bread, a church and fort, and many ships at anchor in the bay. Each year it operated for just 6 weeks but soon the whales near the shore either became shy of the men in rowing boats (surprising really) or they had been fished out. Either way within 20 year the whole place was abandoned, and little is to be seen today. After this short life the whaling moved offshore onto larger ships where the whole process was carried out at sea and blubbertown became just a memory.

Across the sound and just a mile away is Svalbard's most prized historical site. To land here you need to apply to the Sysselmann for a permit months in advance and of course being the organised chap that I am, I forgot. No, only joking its all in hand and we have the permit and 4 pages of instructions and a map showing where you can walk.



Virgohamna has been described as the Cape Canaveral of the Arctic amongst polar historians but should you have just stumbled upon it you might have thought it was just another site strewn with rubbish and scrap. However, it was from this unassuming bay sheltering behind the mountains that both Andree and Wellman made two different attempts to reach the North Pole. In 1896 the Swede, Andre built a hydrogen

manufacturing plant, shelter for his balloon and associated buildings at Virgohamna. Unfortunately that year the wind did not blow from the south and the attempt was

abandoned. The following year he returned and was more successful and the balloon was launched. How he thought he was ever going to get home is a mystery as the balloon was like the hot air balloons of today and would just drift with the wind. Anyway, off he went with two companions and apart from news sent via homing pigeons nothing was heard from them again – that is until 1930 when their remains were found on Kvitoya in NE Svalbard. They had crashed on the ice when the balloon got too heavy due to icing, struggled across the ice and eventually made camp where they died. The story was pieced together from notes found together with negatives that were developed 33 years later.



The frame for Wellman's hanger



And as it was back in the day

Wellman, an American journalist was another North Pole dreamer, having failed to reach it by ship and sledge on two attempts, put his faith in the latest technology – the airship. In 1906 he built a large hangar. Unfortunately, the engine proved unable to propel the airship, he returned the following year presumably with a bigger engine, but crash landed on a glacier nearby. The final attempt was in 1909 when he managed to make it out onto the ice north of Svalbard where it crash landed again and was towed back by an icebreaker. He did not make any further attempts as by then Peary had reached the pole by sledge. Wellmans

last attempt was 15 years before Amundsen and Nobile were in Ny-Alesund.



Memorial to Andre's Expedition

The site is really just a jumble of equipment from the two projects. It appears that the process of making the hydrogen was complex although how it was actually made is not clear on the ground. I am not sure if Wellman made his hydrogen on site or brought it in by cylinders as was done with the later airships. The frames of the hangar are all there in a collapsed state and surprisingly have not been re-used as was the case at Ny-

Alesund. Maybe the absence of a pier would have made reloading onto a boat too difficult. Apart from that, there are the foundations of a few buildings and not a lot else, Oh and a few graves from earlier whalers, but sadly they are everywhere. Life expectancy in those



days was not good, and not helped by them not understanding scurvy at that time. One thing that was interesting was great piles of metal filings all rusted together. Whether this was part of the hydrogen making process I am not sure and if anyone knows chemical processes do let me know, but much of it appeared not to have been used as was in wooden boxes with the wood disintegrating now.

Remains of a seal meal for a bear

The other problem with Virgohamna is that it is on a bit of a bear highway, being a pinch point for bears moving up the coast. The area is full of rocky outcrops and hummocks making it a bit unnerving for bear newbies like us. That said, we did not see a bear there, didn't need to show our permit and otherwise escaped unscathed. It was our bumpiest dinghy ride, especially coming back as the wind was kicking up quite a swell. Luckily there was a sheltered place we could land otherwise it could have been a very wet experience. So, we picked up the anchor and got the sails up, sailed round the corner and saw a couple of yachts moored that we know. For the past 6 months we have been in a Whatsapp group of sailors who had Svalbard in their sights. It has been a very useful experience and saved everybody re-inventing the wheel as we all tried to navigate our way round the regulations for travel reporting, hiring of guns and simple things like where is the cheapest diesel. Unfortunately, we have tended to be about a week ahead of the pack which meant that we did miss out on a few meals out in Tromso together but at least we have had more time up North.

After our shortest sail of about a quarter of an hour we were anchored again and chatting on the radio to people we knew but had never met. A visit to Lumina was arranged and so we spent the afternoon exchanging yarns over the odd glass of wine or two. They told us of other boats and we had a good catch up, because of course, since we left Longyearbyn three weeks ago and lost our phone signal and Whatsapp we also lost contact with the group.



Lloyd Hotel, another rather unusual hut.



Interesting piece of timber used inside one of the huts.

With our shortest days sailing yet behind us we set off the following day to get back to Ny-Alesund as Saturday is Pub night. The wind that would have speeded us there the previous day had gone so we had to motor with a bit of sail assistance all the way. We did, however, manage to do some fishing and caught 3 pretty good sized cod.

At Ny-Alesund we filled up with diesel – the cheapest we have seen so far and retired to the pub later in the evening. It was a jolly night with 4 yachts in harbour. Since we had been away they had finished the concreting on the pier and I went over to congratulate the guys on the quality of the repair (They must have been pushing their luck last year as the last panel they poured had got frosted on the surface so now were repairing it). They introduced me to another chap who turned out to be the last trapper in Svalbard. We had heard about him and it was amazing to come across him as he was a good 70 miles away from his base. He was in the area to collect eider down from the nests after the chicks had fledged and this is a major part of his income. The main work it seems is cleaning and processing the down

before sale. We finished the evening with him having coffee on our boat at 3am as we looked at maps and discussed the history of Svalbard that was of great interest to him as well. One thing he did say which is of interest to anyone trying to buy natural or ethical products – Goose down apparently mainly comes from China where it is plucked from live geese over and over so maybe not the natural good product we thought it was.

We woke at noon as seems then norm in Ny-Alesund on a Sunday and had a walk down to the old power plant where I had been promised by the Harbour Master that the door was unlocked and the steam boilers were still in place. Indeed this was true and we edged between some snow mobiles someone was working on to pay homage to these goliaths of a previous age. Just like the coal boilers I have at home, they have had their last ton of coal. Power for the village these days comes from a sparkling new power plant running diesel engines.



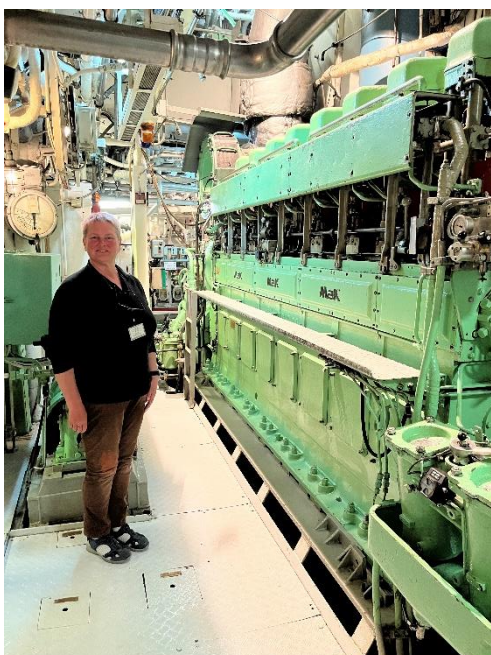
One for the growers reading this - the coal boilers in the old power plant – the most northerly steam boilers in the world!

Later on, the Norsdtjernen, one of the old Hurtigruten ships came in. After the passengers had got off one of the officers and a girl came across the pier to our side and were looking at the yachts below. Hello she said, It was was the girl we had met in the hut at Sallyhamna a week ago and she was hitching a ride back to Longyearbyen. We exchanged pleasantries about neither of us being eaten by bears, as you do up here, and I asked would the captain



On the bridge with Ellie, the guide we met at Sallyhammer hut

let us have a look over his ship. Five minutes later we were on the gangway being ushered up to the bridge to meet the Captain and assembled officers. Now running heritage cruises, this ship is one of two saved from the breakers yard for posterity. However this one has a preservation order on it from the Norwegians and cannot be changed, meaning that it is caught in between that and another rule brought in by the Svalbard authorities banning ships burning heavy oil. Thus, it will, from next year be unable to ply these waters. The sister ship, currently in the shipyard in Gdansk for some reason does not have the preservation order and so can have a new engine burning diesel installed so the heritage cruises will return at some time.



Apart from some new navigation and safety equipment the ship was pretty much all original 1956 and we had the full tour, from the bridge, through the public areas to the engine room where the Chief Engineer proudly showed us the cylinder head that they had replaced the previous day. The engine is a straight 8 configuration and can run quite happily if a little roughly on 6 cylinders if necessary, however he was happy to have 8 again.

Now that's an engine - 8 Cylinders from 1956 and still in daily use



That's what a proper ship should look like



Beautifully maintained too

So now we head back down to Longyearbyen to pick up crew, Claire and Miles. Brave souls...