

## **Plain sailing with Bill on the Royal Yacht Britannia**

In April Woodhouse Eaves WI members welcomed Bill Haley, BEM, to our meeting. He served in the Royal Navy for 27 years and has written a book about his experiences as a navigator. Bill travelled the world exploring continents for many years. After a rigorous selection process, he was appointed as one of the 220 crew of the Royal Yacht Britannia. An entertaining speaker, Bill was able to bring to life the history and ups and downs of this beautiful vessel, his personal experiences, and of course, the royal personages who travelled in her. He had many interesting stories to tell, including a fascinating account of a single cruise in 1970, which had followed the route taken by Captain Cook's voyage to Australia two hundred years previously.

Altogether there have been 83 Royal Yachts, acting as global ambassadors for the United Kingdom, the first in 1660. The Victoria and Albert III, which was decommissioned in 1939, was the first Royal Yacht to be fuel driven, rather than solely by sail. In its time it served and carried four sovereigns. However, Queen Victoria did not take to the waters on it, as she was too nervous.

The Royal Yacht Britannia, the last in the line of Royal Yachts, was built by John Brown and Co in Clydebank, Glasgow, and launched by Queen Elizabeth on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1953. Instead of the traditional smashing of a champagne bottle on the ships' side and in the light of post war austerity, a bottle of Empire wine was chosen instead. After fine-tuning, the yacht finally sailed on 11 January 1954. It was expected that, in times of need, the Britannia could be used as a war hospital. In the event this did not happen as it was felt that the yacht would prove a key target in any time of conflict. During 44 years of service, the Britannia sailed a million nautical miles, and visited 135 countries. During "sea days" the yacht was used as a vehicle for promoting trade and industry including entente relationships, attracting world leaders and diplomats in the process.

Of course the Royal family also used the yacht for private holidays. These included 4 royal honeymoons... unfortunately each marriage failed years further on! Bill told us that the Britannia was one place that the Queen and Prince Philip were able to relax, away from public scrutiny and it was clear that the whole family had very fond memories of their times on board.

Finally decommissioned in 1997, the yacht was taken to Leith in Edinburgh where it opened as a very popular attraction in 1998 and where it still welcomes visitors today.

With the days getting longer and, we hope warmer, we are looking forward to a summer of activity and friendship. Why not come along to our June meeting where Ruth Austin will be talking about Herbal Medicine in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (check the What's On page). We are a welcoming bunch and our members and committee make sure that there is something for everyone at the WI. Contact President, Hilja, via our website: [www.woodhouseeaveswi.uk](http://www.woodhouseeaveswi.uk) for more information.



The Royal Yacht Britannia.