

# Keith Paull: The Bottle in Houseboat Bay

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## The Bottle in Houseboat Bay

*Keith Paull reports on the launch of the Society*

Sixty years have passed since across a northern lake Captain Flint's cannon roared defiance against the Allies bent on the capture of his houseboat. In the minds of several generations of Ransome readers that cannonade has never ceased.

The Society also went off with a tremendous bang from a cannon which echoed around the hills of Windermere, no doubt startling many unsuspecting residents of Rio. Had they looked towards the Steamboat Museum they would have seen an unexpected flag hoisted at the yard-arm, a yellow flag blazoned with a blue Swallow and a Jolly Roger grinning from ear to ear. Those whose childhood had been blessed with the correct reading matter would have known at once that the spirit of Arthur Ransome had returned to his beloved lake.

If Captain Nancy would have approved of the bang then Captain John would have been glad to see the Ship's Papers properly set in order as the formal inaugural meeting created The Arthur Ransome Society. Telegrams of congratulations were read out. 'Three Million Banzais from the Arthur Ransome Club of Japan'; 'Greetings from the South China Seas. No Pirates Sighted – all at Windermere?' from Alistair Leslie and (sixty years late!), 'Better Drowned than Duffers.'

Susan, always the perfect mate taking good care of the crew's victualling, would have been most interested in the preparation of the buffet supper. The cakes with their semaphore message and the grog (well, wine really) would have been just what she would have liked to have produced at such an important celebration. It was a feast that any Pirate or Explorer would have been delighted to attend, and even Roger might have found his stowage capacity more than a little stretched after sampling all that was on offer. The only things missing were buttered eggs and bunloaf!

All the members of the ships company enjoyed themselves immensely. Many had travelled hundreds, some thousands, of miles to be there. Where else in this world would it have been possible to turn to someone who up to that moment had been almost a stranger and say 'Karabadangbaraka' in the reasonable assumption that the reply would be 'Akarabgnadabarak!'

In addition to the main exhibits there were all sorts of little treasures to be discovered by dedicated Ransomaniacs. What would casual visitors to the museum have made of the notice 'To The North Pole' or the mysterious combination of squares and triangles which invited those in the know to 'Come to the Island!' At one moment during the evening two serious-looking gentlemen were seen examining a certain piece of hazel twig. Was it Titty's dowsing rod or a patteran?

Weaving through the throng at waist level an occasional red stocking cap could be spotted, entrants in the costume competition. For those with a desire to learn more of the work done on *Mavis* or who wished to experience Windermere as it was at the turn of the century, two illustrated talks were presented in the lecture room.

Everyone chattered away to each other in a manner that would have put even Peggy to shame. Speeches were made, flags were hoisted, and Captain Flint walked the plank, much to the delight of the assembly.

Even the Houseboat, or at least *Esperance* who may well have been her inspiration, played a part by taking members for a cruise around Rio bay, including a completely unscheduled trip round the only remaining airworthy Sunderland flying boat which had by a happy chance landed on the lake. Roger would have been delighted, but with his wicked sense of humour might have queried the ability of an aircraft to 'land' on water!

The only member of the society who didn't behave like a good Ransomite was the green parrot. He stuffed himself with all the goodies he was offered but not once would he screech or even whisper 'Pieces of Eight!' But he looked beautiful and who could ask more of a parrot than that?

Titty, always sensitive and aware of atmosphere, would have felt more than a little sad for *Mavis* or *Amazon* as she is known to millions. She is a very elderly little boat and had suffered more over the years than anyone had imagined when her restoration was first planned. She rested on trestles, her partly restored hull covered by the Union Flag until the re-naming ceremony took place, whilst nearby stood the notice which Roger Altounyan had painted for her at her moorings, explaining that she was a very old boat in peaceful retirement and asking people to respect her.

Several of those present admitted to a lump in the throat as the Ship's Baby (now promoted Admiral), together with a keen young member, Katy Jennings, sent the bottle of grog crashing against *Amazon's* well protected bow. But, one day, when work is complete, she will be like a new little ship again, with the best of both worlds, her memories and her restored youth.

Even for Pirates and Explorers the holiday had to end. After a final firework (provided by Greg Palmer), exploded over the lake, the members drifted away into the night, leaving the Steamboat Museum to silence and *Amazon* to her memories.

Once everyone had gone and the lights were switched out it wouldn't have been surprising if a hint of the smell of pipe tobacco hadn't drifted about the much-loved old boat and a gentle chuckle softly echoed through the darkened hall.