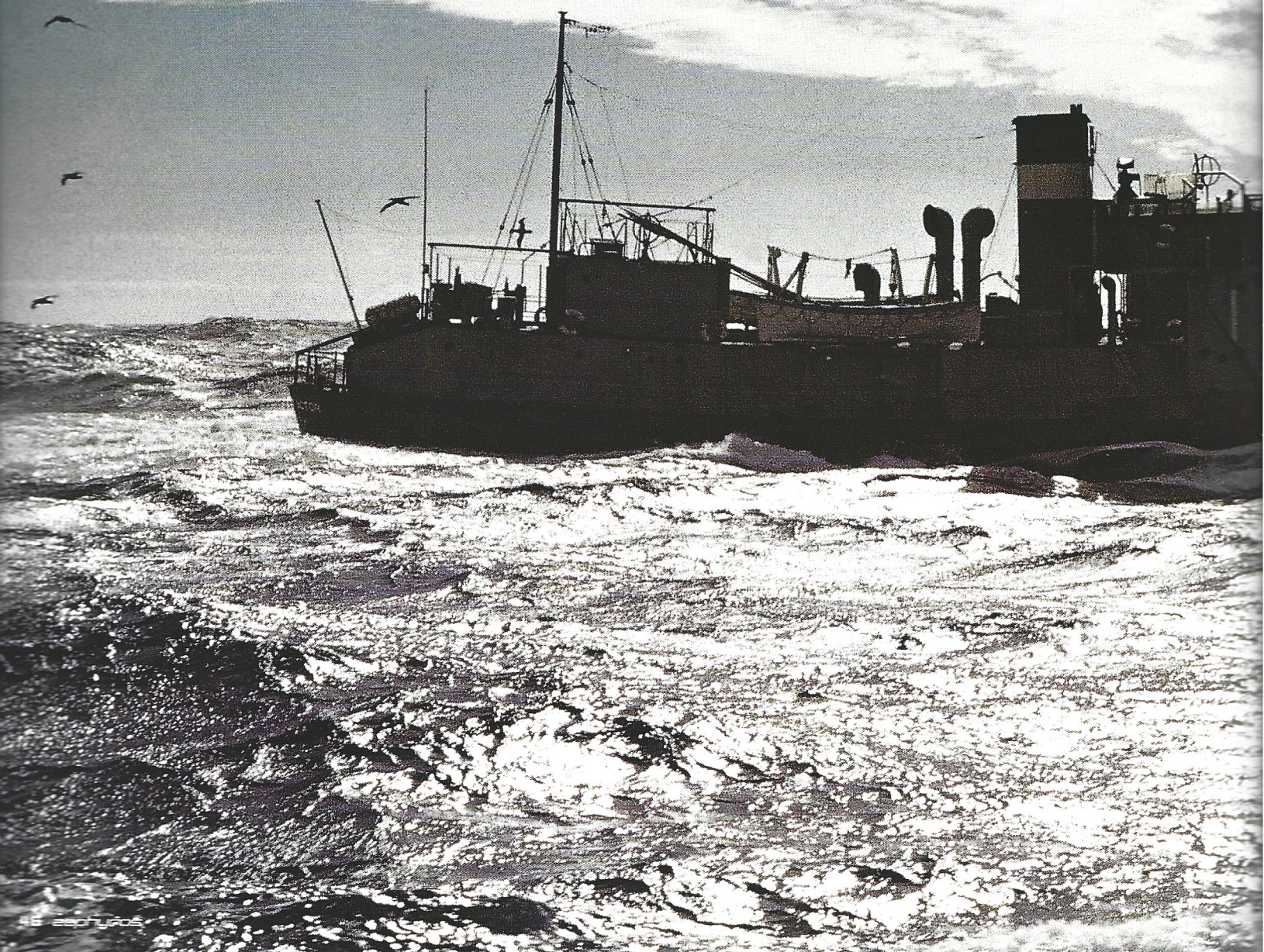


it was another era, when the southern ocean teemed with whales - and whalers.
a young english engineer set off to join them words alan harper photographs john alexander

The far side of the world



To a young engineer with prospects in the early 1950s, post-war Britain was a land of opportunity. Civil reconstruction work was gathering pace, hand in hand with the new 'town planning'. The country held a lead in aircraft design, yet the shipyards still echoed to the din of heavy industry. Coal mining employed nearly a million men, but the world's first nuclear power station was already under construction. It was a time of change – but briefly, the old world and the new could co-exist.

For Neil Jephcott, newly graduated in 1953 from Cambridge University with an honours degree in mechanical sciences, it was ships which gave a focus to his talents. The second son of a wealthy industrialist, he already had a two-year Thornycroft apprenticeship behind him, as well as two years' sea time aboard the tankers of the Anglo Saxon Petroleum Co, mainly in the West Indies and Persian Gulf.

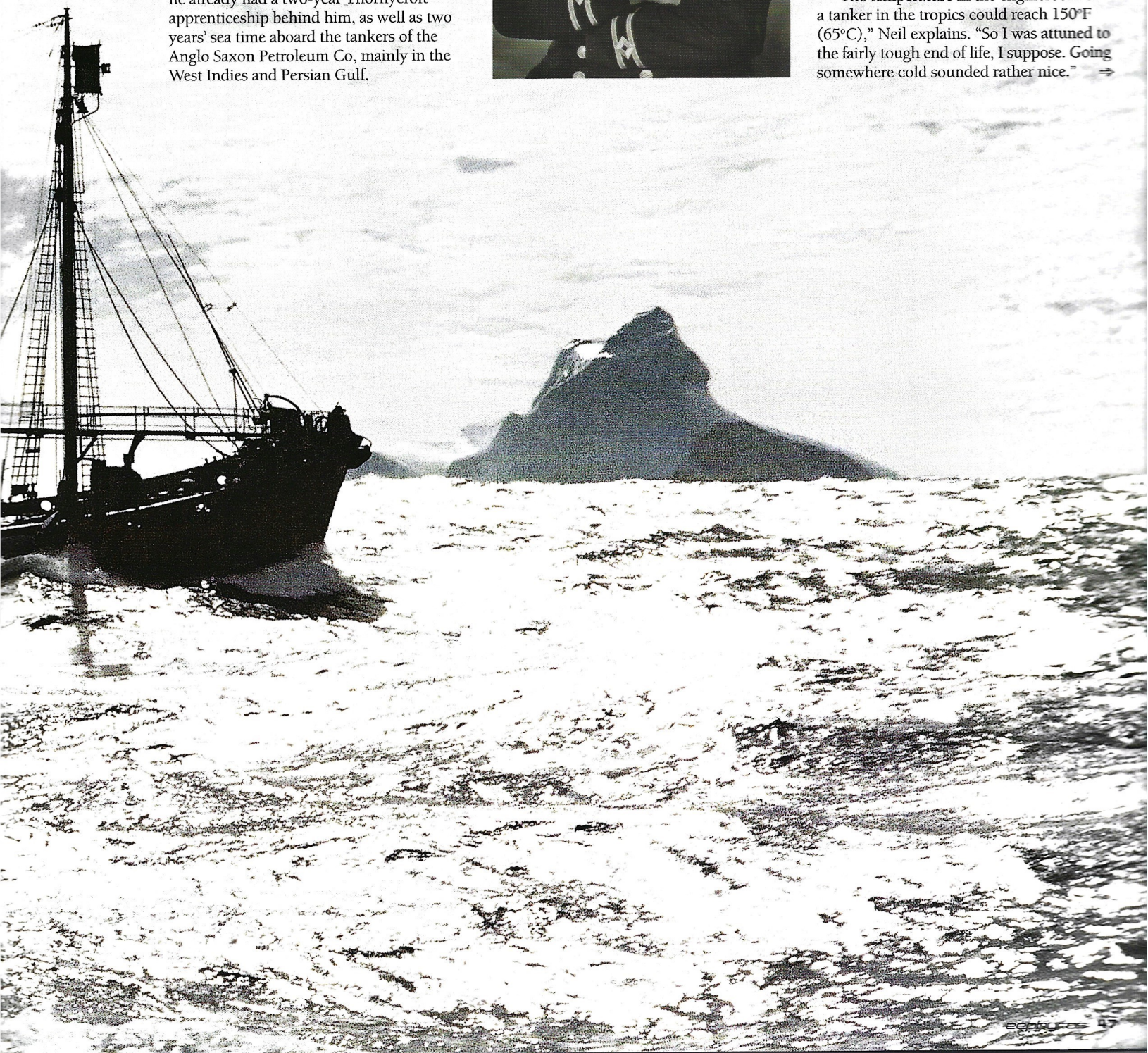
Second engineer
Neil Jephcott,
1953.



No doubt with his qualifications and background he could have found a comfortable billet aboard a Cunarder and enjoyed the transatlantic cocktail parties while they lasted. But the young Englishman was made of sterner stuff. He forsook the decadent comforts of one vanishing world for the primeval rigours of another, and applied for a job aboard a whaler in the south Atlantic.

It was partly a question of money. Newly married, he could earn £600 a year in the merchant navy, but although the basic wage aboard a whalecatcher was just £38 a month, it was the tantalising prospect of a £1,000 end-of-season bonus that drew most young men to the gale-lashed fastnesses of the far side of the world. But that wasn't all.

"The temperature in the engineroom of a tanker in the tropics could reach 150°F (65°C)," Neil explains. "So I was attuned to the fairly tough end of life, I suppose. Going somewhere cold sounded rather nice." ➔



Southern Joker,
mid-1950s, moored
at Leith Harbour,
South Georgia.



'This shanty town':
Leith Harbour seen
from Corunda Peak.



southern joker

Length	48.16m (158ft 0in)
Beam	7.01m (29ft 0in)
Draught	5.12m (16ft 10in)
Tonnage	486 Gross, 156 Net
Engine	1,856ihp compound 4-cyl twin Foster Wheeler oil-fired boilers
Owner	South Georgia Co, Leith Harbour, S. Georgia
Manager	Christian Salvesen Ltd, Leith, Edinburgh
Builder	Pusnaes MV, Arendal, 1951
Fitted out	Kaldnes MV, Tonsberg

Southern Joker, 2007:
the Malcolm Darch
model commissioned
by Jephcott.



THE ULTIMATE MEMENTO

Now 78 and comfortably retired to a waterfront house in Salcombe in southern England, Neil can look back on a long and eventful career – at sea, ashore, as a big-ship surveyor, even running his own waterfront boatyard. But nothing comes close to a season's whaling more than 50 years ago with Christian Salvesen's South Georgia Company.

"You can't really feel nostalgic about four months of seasickness," he says. "But it was definitely character-building."

He shows a sperm whale's tooth, and a whale's eardrum, picked up as souvenirs in South Georgia. But in an alcove in his study, protected by a glass case, sits perhaps the ultimate memento of those months spent 'somewhere cold': a hand-built scale model of his old ship, the *Southern Joker*, just 47cm (18.5in) long. It has all the qualities

of a fine watch, seemingly becoming more perfect as you look more closely – yet it was built in a studio just across the harbour from Jephcott's house.

Model shipwright Malcolm Darch, 57, has developed a reputation as one of the world's most accomplished model shipwrights. His studio is like a miniature shipyard, with neat racks of wood in different sizes, stacks of wire and sheets of metal, and shelves of diminutive pots of paint, glue and varnish. There is a dentist's drill, and three lathes of different sizes, the smallest from a watchmaker's workshop.

"I knew of Malcolm, of course, but I didn't know him personally," says Neil. "And when I started talking to him about what I wanted, I was a bit surprised when he told me how long it would take. But I am very pleased with it."

It is often said that a model by Malcolm

Darch takes longer to build than the original vessel, and one reason for that is his painstaking attention to research and historical accuracy. While parts of his studio might resemble a Lilliputian shipyard, most of it has been taken over by what must be one of the most impressive privately-owned maritime libraries in the country. Each model is presented along with a historical dossier, up to 200 pages long, of documentation and photographs.

In the end, the whalecatcher took Malcolm nine months, or 1,400 hours, from shaping the core of the hull to building the perfectly scaled guardrails. The hull is plated with brass – Malcolm sourced a 1939 copy of DNV's *Rules & Scantling Tables for Steel Vessels* to ensure he got the rivet spacing right. "It was only supposed to take a thousand hours," he says ruefully. "It went on longer than I expected."

TO THE END OF THE EARTH

South Georgia, claimed for Britain by Captain Cook in 1775, lies 1,000 nautical miles east of Tierra del Fuego at latitude 54°S. Measuring 170km long by 29km wide (106 miles by 18), it is spectacularly

the model has all the qualities of a fine watch, becoming more perfect as you look more closely. it took malcolm darch nine months to build – perhaps longer than the original ship



southern capital of whaling

The first whaling station in South Georgia was set up at Grytviken in 1904 by the Norwegian Carl Anton Larsen. Within a few years six more stations had been opened, and whalecatching operations soon moved offshore, with factory ships, in pursuit of the diminishing whale populations.

Grytviken in winter.



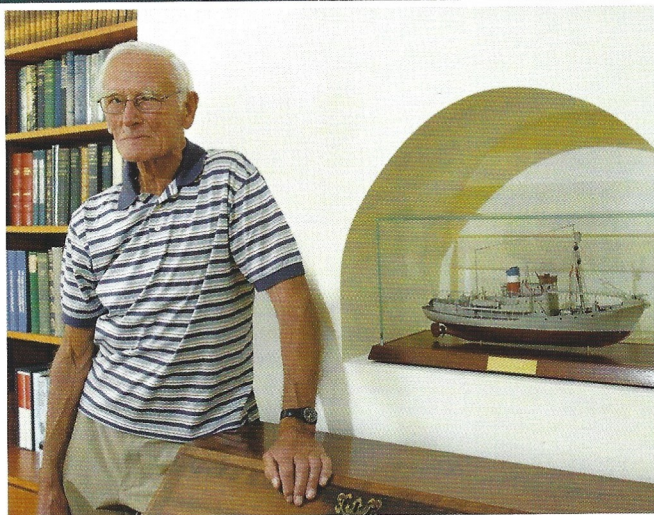
It was the oil in the blubber – extracted by boiling under pressure – which made whaling so profitable. It was used for heating and light as well as in cosmetics, lubricants and pharmaceuticals. The International Whaling Commission imposed a moratorium on commercial whaling in 1982 – whales caught now are supposed to be hunted for scientific research. Today, whale meat is occasionally seen for sale in Norway, but the main market is Japan.

The largest whale ever recorded was landed at South Georgia in 1912 – a blue measuring 33.58m (110ft 2in). In 1932/3, 18,624 blue whales were processed by factory ships in the Antarctic. The worldwide population today is estimated at 3,500.

inhospitable, with a range of steep, glaciated peaks rising more than 2,000m (6,500ft) from the sea.

Neil Jephcott arrived in Leith Harbour in October 1953, after a six-week voyage from Glasgow aboard an ancient company steamer. "Woke up this morning to brilliant sunshine and looked through the port to see the towering mountain of Corunda Peak only a few hundred yards away," he wrote in his diary. Set at the end of a steep-sided inlet, Leith Harbour was a makeshift settlement of wooden buildings roofed with corrugated iron. The headquarters of the South Georgia Co was not designed for favourable first impressions.

"We walked the 300 yards that constitute Leith Harbour" the entry continues, "until we ran out of this shanty town – on to a space about the size of four large tennis courts, all covered by a giant parquet floor." This was the 'flensing plan'. Once caught, the dead whales were pumped full of compressed air and marked by a flagpole, with a radar reflector, to be collected and towed in later. The carcasses were then winched onto the flensing plan for processing. South Georgia was 'the



Neil Jephcott at his Salcombe home today, with the model in pride of place.

southern capital of whaling' – yet in ten years the whaling fleets would be gone.

"Wednesday 28 October: We got in shortly after midday yesterday, deposited our whales on the buoys. There was a quite a healthy collection there, and Leith Harbour was beginning to smell pretty ripe..."

Another Briton who remembers Leith Harbour in the 1950s is John Alexander of Dundee, a keen photographer, who worked

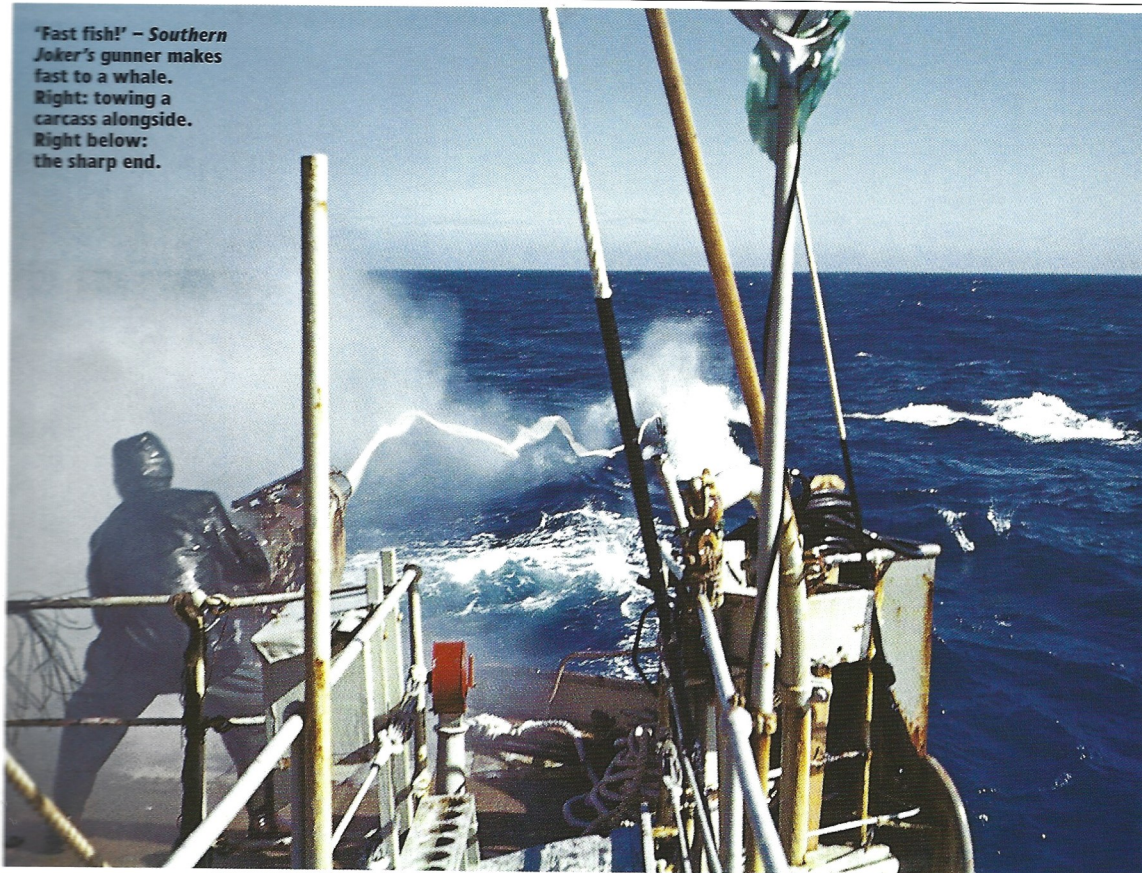
as an electrician at the power station and aboard South Georgia Co factory ships in the Antarctic. "We worked long hours, but the worst was that the sun would disappear for four months over the winter behind Corunda Peak," he says. "And we'd maybe get mail five times in a year. We had a cinema – the Kino – but it was a great day when the sun reappeared."

A CHRISTMAS PRESENT

Out at sea, it was a great day when there were whales to be caught. As second engineer aboard the 48m (158ft) *Southern Joker*, Neil was on watch 12 hours a day in the engineroom, reacting to the clang of the coxswain's calls over the telegraph. The senior man aboard was the gunner, Oscar Carlsen, whose perch on the bow, with the harpoon, was linked directly to the bridge by a long raised walkway.

"Thursday 22 December: What a Christmas present: a flat calm day, three whales in flag and we are chasing. I have never seen so many whales..." Later: "We now have six alongside, and we are going flat out below, and making about five knots – not surprising when one considers what we are towing..." Such days were few. ➡

"Fast fish!" – Southern Joker's gunner makes fast to a whale.
Right: towing a carcass alongside.
Right below: the sharp end.



With the constant pressure to make their bonuses, ships often went out in extreme conditions. one heeled hard over during a chase and never came up – one crewman survived

With their high superstructure, low freeboard and tall masts, the whalecatchers were notoriously tender. It was not uncommon for hardened seamen with years of sea time to be invalidated home with seasickness after a few weeks on catchers. "This is no longer funny or entertaining," reads an early diary entry. According to one of the deckhands the *Joker* could roll more than 40 degrees each way: "He swears there was water in the barrel (at the top of the mast) when he went up for lookout duty..."

Any other ship is going to be like dry land after this one."

With the constant pressure to make their bonuses, ships frequently went out in extreme conditions. Just the previous summer, the *Joker's* gunner was lost overboard. A few years earlier, a South Georgia catcher was lost altogether when she heeled hard over during a chase, and never came up – one crewman survived. Neil was luckier – the whalecatchers made their quotas, the company made its targets, and the men made their bonuses.

The young engineer's season in the southern ocean left him not just with extraordinary memories of another time – a time which would soon come to seem like another world – but with a fascination for the Antarctic. "Men swear they will not return," he says in his final entry. "But they do – there is the compelling force of the ice and the mountains. So they return to gamble on making a living, for the wages are pitifully small. It is the bonus that makes the hardship worthwhile – if you get a good season."

He ends by dedicating his diary – his 'Whaler's Log' – to these men, "who gambled hard, who staked their lives trusting in their skill, courage, judgement and luck – and who lost".

christian salvesen

Christian Salvesen was born in Mandal, Norway, in 1827 and trained as a shipbroker in Stettin and Glasgow. Moving to Leith, near Edinburgh, in 1851, he worked for his brother's import-export and shipbroking partnership, Turnbull, Salvesen & Co, before setting up on his own in 1872. Having bought his first ship in 1855, he developed the steamship side of the business seriously throughout the 1880s, eventually establishing a regular service to Stavanger.

In 1906 Christian Salvesen & Co established Norwegian-style shore whaling stations in the Faeroes, Iceland, and at Olua Firth in Shetland, before setting up in Leith Harbour, South Georgia, in 1909, at the instigation of Salvesen's fourth son, Theodore.

Although based in Britain and naturalised in 1859, Salvesen maintained strong links with the old country, and the family spoke Norwegian at home. When he died in 1911, Christian Salvesen & Co was the largest whaling company in the world, and it maintained its standing as the dominant operator in the Antarctic for the next 50 years.

The company pulled out of Leith Harbour in 1961, and sold its last factory ship in 1963.

The flensing plan – setting to work on blue whale.

