Big L '97 – The Walton Time-warp
a knee-jerking account by Mary Payne

Part 6 – It's August 14th - Lil's final day aboard the Yeoman Rose. VIP guests arrive from Texas, tears are shed at 3.00pm and a DJ Lap of Honour prompts cheers on the pier.

Sunset from the Yeoman Rose, 13/08/97

Thursday August 14th

Shortly after midnight, I descended the vertical ladder to the ship's hold, convinced that it was growing longer every time I used it. Bidding Mark and Chris B goodnight, I retired to my Guest Suite in the caravan. I lay down on my bunk bed and shut my eyes for the remaining hours of darkness, but I couldn't really say I slept. I was up again at one of those hours in the morning that are rumoured to exist, but are never as much as glimpsed in ordinary life.

Already in the galley was Allan, attempting to cook breakfast whilst compiling a news bulletin from the TV at the same time. He decided to hand the news job over to me. The object of the exercise was to select several of the most important stories currently displayed on Teletext and rewrite them. The following is Mary's recipe for a pretty naff bulletin.

1. Take one woman who has some broadcasting experience, but has never produced news bulletins.
2. Choose an ungodly hour in the morning.
3. Ensure the woman hasn't really slept all night, or much at all lately for that matter.
4. Provide her with a TV set that has very slow Teletext response, accessed by a remote control device with an operation system totally unfamiliar to her .
5. Give her a naff portable manual typewriter.
6. Make sure the woman selected for the task has poor eyesight and isn't a typist. She will then find she can't read the Teletext at the same time as the words she's attempting to type without having to swap between two pairs of specs, as the TV screen is too far away.
7. Give her a minimum amount of time in which to produce the finished product.

If all this resulted in the world's worst-ever news bulletin, all I can say is, "I did my best."

In fact, my typing was so appalling that John was hastily rewriting the stories in capital letters on scrappy bits of paper, just so that there might be a slim chance of their being legible. And was it my fault that somebody in the news had a Greek surname? Poor Chris had to struggle to read all this.

After this fiasco, Mark came in to take over and ensure that the next edition of the news would be a great improvement. He dictated the stories and I typed them. Even so, the typewriter ribbon was so worn that the finished stories were still not really sufficiently legible for on-air reading. It was at this stage that I think Mark came to realise exactly what John and I had been up against.

A little later, Chris played *Knees* from the *Anorax Trax* CD, so I decided this had to be the most appropriate moment to present him with his Knees Club card. I must confess I bent the club rules here, as I had not yet inspected Mr. Elliot's patellas. He had assured me he had nothing to hide, but I sensed he was using delaying tactics. Was he afflicted with something *worse* than cardboard knees syndrome? I was becoming a *little* suspicious of our new member 378…

One of Chris's final Bulova time-checks was something of a departure from the norm. It went: "B-U-L-O-V-A. When you know what makes a watch tick you'll buy – a TIMEX!" Our Programme Director felt somewhat piqued that the Bulova Watch company had declined Ray's terrific offer of paying 1967 prices to sponsor the Big L '97 time-checks. The firm had still benefited from 28 days' worth of free commercials, because the Bulova name remained inextricably linked to the original Radio London sound. Due to the Big L '97 quest for authenticity in recreating the old station output, time-checks were performed in the same format as thirty years ago. Hopefully, Bulova company officials would now feel they had received just compensation in the form of this unexpected additional advertising. After all, in 1966 Bulova had contracted *five years* worth of sponsored time-checks, so the Government actions at the time which caused Radio London's subsequent closure, must have left the clock and watch firm feeling considerably short-changed by the deal.

From then onwards on that Anniversary Day, the events that occurred are a little blurred in my memory. In 1967 Hippietalk it was 'all happenin', man,' or to translate into Kenny Everett speak, there was 'much more stuff going on'. If I have placed any of the occurrences slightly out of sequence, perhaps it doesn't matter overmuch.

We were all delighted when it was announced that the *Lady Gwen* had pulled alongside, bearing Ray and our first Texan guest, Tom Danaher.

A TV crew from CNN was also expected at any time and the head count problem was clearly going to cause more headaches, but first priority was to welcome our guest.

'Roman on the Yeoman', with our first guest from Texas, Tom Danaher.

After I had met the truly endearing Tom, and taken some photos of him, including shots where he is holding the original jingle cartridge containing the London Song, I went back with the tender to the pier to collect Ben Toney and his daughter Raquel. Ben proved to be the original long, tall Texan, complete with Lone Star drawl and boot-lace tie. I can safely say that Ben and Tom were as thrilled to be on the ship as we were to see them. Raquel had, of course, heard all about her father's involvement with Radio London, but had never expected to be able to see and hear a facsimile of the station for herself.

Photo: It really IS The London Song

I made drinks for the guests, took photos, made more drinks, took more photos. Alas, some journalists had now arrived and if they came aboard, they would cause the head-count to reach critical.

Right: Reunited – Ben Toney and Chris Elliot
Below: Ben stands tall in the galley

Right: Chris Baird says, "Stop the World! I want to sunbathe!"

Chris Baird, Allan and myself went to stand down in the tender. It was a scorching day, with the now perfectly placid sea shimmering like quicksilver in the Walton heatwave. From the *Lady Gwen*'s radio we could hear Ben and Tom on Ray's programme, talking about how they had created Big Lil back in the 'Sixties. Chris concluded then, that this would be a perfect moment to stop the world. We would be happy to remain in that permanently sunny 1967 time capsule with Big L broadcasting eternally.

After a few trips back and forth from the ship on the *Lady Gwen*, I ended up back at the pier with her, awaiting the arrival of the expected television crew. There were to be no sight-seeing boat-trips to the station today unless people still expressed an interest to go out after 3.00pm, so until the CNN crew turned up, the tender would stay put. I decided I needed some things from my car, so I trekked off down the long and winding planks.

"Morning, Anoraks!" I called to the fans assembled adjacent to the Radio London shop.

"Morning, Mary!" came a joyful chorus.

Geoff Cook and Mandie King had assembled their deckchair camp beside the shop as soon as the pier opened at around 6.30am. This was despite the fact that they confessed to having spent half the night flashing beside the aforementioned planked structure, accompanied by the third member of the team, pal Colin Lees. I was disappointed to hear from them that my frantic arm-waving the previous night had not been visible after all.

When I arrived at the shop, Abbie asked anxiously how I had got on during my overnight stay on the ship. I told her solemnly that she had no need to worry – I was still a virgin.

"I'm sorry, Mary, I don't believe you!" she replied, equally solemnly.

It's nice to know people have such confidence in me!

While I was talking to someone (Colin, if I remember correctly), Trevor Sturgess from the Kent Messenger Newspaper Group came up and introduced himself. Trevor is actually the Business Manager for the group, but being a fully-paid-up Radio London Anorak and having managed to unearth several important Big L '97 Kent connections, he had switched to reporter mode for the occasion. Trevor was writing a review of *The Wonderful Radio London Story*, and (recognising me as a person of influence) asked what were the chances of him getting out to the ship. He wanted to photograph Chris Elliot with his book, using the *Yeoman Rose* as the backdrop. Knowing very well that what Chris and his 'offspring' needed most right now was some good publicity, Superknees Payne sprang into action. I appreciated that with the head count already standing at twelve, we would have to contend with the stand-down problem, but reasoned that there must surely be one person who would be willing to come aboard the *Lady Gwen* for ten minutes or so while Trevor snapped his shutter on the ship. Trevor's other (very thoughtful) reason for wanting to visit the *Yeoman Rose* was to bring a large bottle of champagne to congratulate everyone on a successful broadcast, and to cheer us all up. Lil's family of fans comprises a host of incredibly generous individuals.

Right: Trevor's masterpiece: "Love knees tender"!

With the CNN film crew now looking to be a lost cause, Chris Harvey, the tender's owner was getting pretty bored with hanging about and was quite amenable to taking us out to the *Yeoman Rose*. En route, intrepid newshound Trevor took the photo exclusive of the year. He lay down on the deck of the *Lady Gwen* in order to achieve the definitive shot of my knees in all their glory.

Trevor's pictures resulting from the on-ship session proved a resounding success. A terrific shot of Chris holding his book and standing on the deck of the *Yeoman Rose*, was to grace the pages of *Kent Today* later in the month. Unfortunately, the only connection linking my patellas with the county of Kent was that, for many years, during childhood holidays, they had graced the beach at Margate. Trevor's photo of the mid-leg joints in question was very flattering, and he had also conducted an excellent in-depth interview with them (he's fluent in Chi-KNEES). However, the Margate beach link was too tenuous for a Kentish newspaper to allow them a Page 3 glamour-spot appearance. Maybe Trevor should have tried a different tack, such as comparing the contents of Knees Monthly with those of another publication with the initials KM, the Kent Messenger?

Suddenly, the morning had gone. I'd been awake for hours, yet it seemed minutes since I'd clawed my way up the ladder from the hold like some primeval creature emerging from the swamp. Yes, I admit, I looked like one too. The final hour was approaching all too swiftly, and I was on the *Lady Gwen* moored alongside the pier. We awaited the arrival of Roger Day, who was to do a Radio Caroline tribute show beginning after a respectful gap when Big Lil vacated the airwaves for the second time, at 3.00pm. Ray was, quite rightly, giving himself the privilege of being the last person allowed to play with his 'ultimate train set' up to the expiry of the 28-day licence at midnight.

Some of the team members had chosen not to remain aboard the *Yeoman Rose* for the final sixty minutes, when we were to retransmit the original Radio London final hour. Paul Graham had left the ship a couple of days before, and Mark had already disembarked, telling everyone there was no way he was going to be hung twice for the same crime.

Roger 'Twiggy' Day, Dave 'Li-lo' Windsor and star author, Chris Elliot (Photo: Peter Herring)

Roger arrived to catch the tender in the company of the now-infamous Dave Windsor. Needless to say, nobody was in the best of spirits. As it transpired, I was never again to shin up the Jacob's ladder to the *Yeoman Rose* . There were too many bodies aboard, and I had to ask for all the gear I'd left behind to be passed down to me.

Meanwhile, I mentioned to Allan that we ought to be wearing black armbands. Shortly before closedown, he passed me down a beer with black camera tape wrapped around the bottle so that I could manufacture a sticky armband. He was already looking the height of funereal fashion in his.

During the last few minutes of Big L '97, I was alone with Chris Harvey aboard the *Lady Gwen*. We were moored beside the *Yeoman Rose*, listening via the tender's radio to the recording that, over all these years, had never failed to bring tears to my eyes. Chris saw that I was crying and asked if I was all right.

"Not really," I replied.

Then came ‘A Day In the Life,’ followed by Paul Kaye’s closing announcement, and Big Lil; then Radio London was gone.

Soon, Chris E, Chris B, and Allan descended the rope ladder to leave the ship, the two Chrises, for the last time. Compared to me, they seemed to have managed to remain relatively unaffected by the repeat of the closedown. Admittedly, it wasn’t as bad as the first time around, because the RSL had been so successful that we all held high hopes of Lil reappearing. The guys had also had the advantage of sharing each other’s company, and the distraction of plenty of things happening on the ship during the closedown.

Chris E told Chris Harvey (there were now *three* Chrises on board – very confusing) we wanted to sail a nice, slow lap of honour around the *Yeoman Rose* before returning to the pier. It lifted our hearts tremendously to see crowds of people waiting there to welcome us. Ray, Dave Windsor and the others remaining on board the ship, came out to wave us goodbye. Then everyone aboard the tender was overcome by a spontaneous outbreak of hugging.

As we pulled into the pier, on the steps leading to the landing stage, were Paul Graham, Vivien Barnard and Diana, poised with their stills cameras, and Maxine with her video camera. The good old Roman Emperor was there at the bottom to catch the mooring rope and to lead us in singing an edited version of *London My Hometown;* I was disappointed to note that he hadn’t changed into his toga for this momentous occasion.

Right: They were shooting us....Allan, Mary, Chris Elliot, Tom and Chris Baird on the tender (Photo: Melvin Johnson)
Below: We were shooting them... unidentified photographer, Donut Di, Maxine, Paul Graham and the Roman Emperor

At the top of the steps there was much milling about. The first person I encountered and embraced there was Hugo, and Ben had come down to the end of that very long pier to meet us too.

The object now was to control the milling about and herd everyone and their belongings onto the waiting Big Lil express to carry them back to the shop where more fans awaited and additional autographs were to be signed.

Right: Always welcoming: Tom, Mark and Ben (Photo: Peter Herring)

Raquel was amazed to discover that she was now a celebrity. People asked for her autograph because she appeared in Chris's book, although she pointed out that she had only got her mention in there via the act of having been born! Raquel and I had some photos taken together as the 'Page 118' girls, both of our names being featured on that very page. The other thing we had in common was that we are both half-American. No doubt Raquel gets asked the same question as me when she mentions this fact: "Which half?"

Left: Mary and Raquel – the 'Page 118' girls

A highly amusing moment occurred when someone advanced towards myself and Mr Roman with outstretched autograph album. Mark made to take the book, but the person concerned swept past him and asked for *my* signature! Serves the Roman right for being such a cocky devil!

Eventually, the crowds (all queuing for *my* autograph, naturally) thinned and it was time to go back to my comfortable accommodation for a refreshing shower. (By this time I looked and felt like the Wreck of the Hesperus.) It was arranged that I would meet Mark, Chris E and Ben later at the Chinese Garden.

Listening to Ray's show during my drive from Wix to the restaurant, it was clear that our loyal listeners had not switched off after 3.00pm. Ray had once again broadcast the numbers of a couple of mobile phones on board, and was in the process of being swamped with calls for dedications. As darkness fell, he also had the company of the loyal on-shore presence of representatives from the Walton and Frinton Flashers' Society to keep him company.

I'd only stayed aboard the *Yeoman Rose* for one night, and yet that short spell on the North Sea was causing me to experience the weird sensation that the restaurant was moving. (Chris did assure me that it *was* moving, but then he'd not only been at sea for much longer than me but was also consuming alcohol.)

It was a memorably entertaining evening, with both Ben and Mark relating some incredible tales from Big L days in the ’Sixties. Many were so scandalous that Chris had, unfortunately, been obliged to omit them from *The Wonderful Radio London Story*. All I can say is, I’m positive that Kenny Everett would have gained tremendous satisfaction from learning of the come-uppance of the sanctimonious Garner Ted Armstrong.

Many thanks to Peter Herring and Melvin Johnson for the use of their photographs

RADIO LONDON
...still wonderful

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