

THE MASTER AND HIS SHIP

CAPTAIN JASON MUGFORD AND MV OLDENBURG

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Frances and Michael Howorth meet with Captain Jason Mugford, the captain of MV Oldenburg, the ship that provides the essential passenger and cargo link with Lundy Island.

THE MASTER

Jason Mugford first fell in love with the tiny passenger ship **Oldenburg** when he was a youngster. Brought up in the riverside town of Bideford in North Devon, he had watched the ship sail past his home overlooking the River Torridge on a regular basis and had always dreamed of sailing in her. However, it was in the Royal Navy that he first went to sea, serving as a radio operator in Type 21 frigates. He left the Navy in 1990 and went walkabout, visiting the Far East and Australia, before returning to Britain in 1993.

As luck would have it, there was a crew vacancy on board **Oldenburg** just as he began searching for a sea-going job, and he signed on in the seasonal role of AB. When the season ended, he set sail again, quite literally! He signed on with what is now Sail Training International as a deckhand and served under canvas on board the three-masted barques **Kaskelot** (now **Le Français**) and **Earl of Pembroke**. It was while sailing aboard these tall ships as an AB that he decided he needed to gain some MCA certificates. Jason attended Fleetwood College and, in 1996, after graduating, sailed as a Second Mate and then as Mate on coastal tankers with Shell. Every so often, while on leave, he would sail as relief crew on **Oldenburg**. When he left Shell,

he worked on anchor-handling ships based in the Falkland Islands and on log-carrying landing craft in the islands of Scotland. With the required foreign-going sea time and watchkeeping logged, he sat and passed his Master's certificate in 2014.

Through the grapevine, he learned of a permanent vacancy aboard **Oldenburg** and became the ship's relief master. Eventually, he was awarded the permanent position he now holds as the ship's master. Over the years, his fondness for his ageing command has grown into a full-bodied love affair. He says of **Oldenburg**, "She is one of a kind and has become part of my family. She is fun to drive, and I particularly like how manoeuvrable she is in tight quarters." When talking about the trade he and his ship are engaged in, he says nonchalantly, "Easterly winds can make going alongside the jetty at Lundy a little difficult. When it's a force five from the East, that can be tricky."

Sailings from the mainland are from either Ilfracombe or Bideford. Jason prefers working cargo in Bideford simply because there is a bigger quay on which to store and sort cargo. Passengers prefer sailing to Bideford because they get a longer time ashore, which, when you're paying £52 per person for a round trip, is an important factor.





HIS SHIP

To call **Oldenburg** a ferry is somewhat dismissive. She is, without doubt, a passenger-cargo liner in that she carries both and sails to a pre-advertised schedule. She may only carry six tons of general cargo and a total of 267 passengers, but she is an essential link for those who work on and visit Lundy Island. The diminutive liner (254 GT) has a load line length of just 40.29 metres and a beam of 7.8 metres. Flat-bottomed and quite capable of drying out, she draws just 1.65 metres and has an air draught of 5 metres, which allows her to pass under the 24-metre-high Torrridge Bridge that spans the river in Bideford.

Built by Rolandwerft GmbH in Bremen, Germany, she was delivered in August 1958 to Deutsche Bundesbahn Schiffsdienst Wangerooge. The railway employed her as a ferry plying between mainland Germany and the off-lying, traffic-free Frisian Island of Wangerooge. She was named after the former grand duchy of Oldenburg in Saxony, Germany. She performed well in her passenger ferry role, carrying just over 350 passengers, but in 1975 was replaced by a newer ship. She was chartered to the German shipping company Reederei Warrings, which used her on what they called the 'butter run,' essentially duty-free shopping cruises to nowhere off the coasts of East Frisia. In 1982, Reederei Warrings purchased her outright and continued to operate her in that role until 1985.

Around this time, The Landmark Trust, the charity that leases Lundy Island from the National Trust and operates it as a tourist destination, was beginning to fret about the long-term viability of the passenger-cargo trade to the island. Their Danish-built **Polar Bear** (ex-**Agdleg**) had a twelve-passenger carrying capacity and they wanted to replace her.

Oldenburg fitted the trade but was not in class for British waters. Having purchased the little ship for £200,000, the Trust then spent another £200,000 on a refit at Appledore Shipyard where, among other things, she was fitted with a cargo handling crane on the foredeck. She entered service undertaking voyages carrying passengers and supplies to Lundy Island in May 1986.

Her original engines were German-built 8-cylinder MWMs. In 1999, the Lundy Co. Ltd received a Heritage Lottery Fund grant, which they used to replace them with two new 6-cylinder Cummins KT19-M425 diesel engines. Each is capable of producing 317 kW (425 HP) at 1800 RPM. The new engines increased her top speed from 11.5 to 12.5 knots. The grant was also used to construct a new aft canopy and undertake an accommodation refurbishment programme, bringing the total passenger capacity to 267. In 2019, she was fitted with a new rudder stock and an improved foredeck crane, replacing the one installed at the beginning of her Lundy tenure in 1986.





Below decks, she retains her original panelling and classic brass fittings. There are two heated saloons, housing a bar, buffet, shop, and information centre. Passenger seating is either inside the saloons or out on deck, but it is only the first passengers in the queue who get the choice of where to sit! Sailings can be very full in fine weather, and passengers generally form a line to board the little ship an hour or more before departure time. The ship operates a year-round service, save when she is in Sharpness for refitting, and can, when not carrying passengers, lift 20 tons of freight to keep the island supplied. In the peak of the summer season, she operates her liner service up to four days a week.

THEIR DESTINATION

Lundy lies 10 miles off the coast of North Devon and the sailing each way takes two hours. Three miles long and half a mile wide, Lundy is

peaceful and unspoilt, with wide spaces, big skies, and without roads, cars, or pollution. The sea is clear, the landscape spectacular, and at night, without the competition from streetlights, the stars shine with unfamiliar brilliance. Lundy also has a milder climate than the mainland, with more sunshine and less rain.

The character of Lundy derives from its varied terrain: on the west and south sides, there are high and rugged cliffs topped with grass and heather; on the east, sheltered from the prevailing wind, the coastline is gentler with trees, shrubs, bracken, and wildflowers. This contrast explains the rich diversity of the island's animal and plant life and its attraction to walkers, climbers, and divers. ●

