

Subject: Scholes Cabin 5: The bridge

19 December 2009 0540 UTM 59.7656 S 9.2632 E

Dear Stirling,

The bridge is the command centre of the ship. That is where the duty officer stands - who is not usually the captain except in tricky situations. They share the job out among the first, second and third mates. The bridge is at the top of the superstructure, looking forward, and stretches from one side of the ship to the other. That way they can see all around. It is a lovely quiet place, tidy and well-organised. Passengers have to ask permission to be there, but they are usually welcomed if they don't get in the way, especially in the lonely hours of the midnight watch.

You expect to see a great big ship's wheel behind a compass binnacle. Actually the wheel is small, since it no longer connects directly to the rudder. It may as well be a computer joystick. Mostly the ship is on autopilot. There are several compasses - an old-fashioned magnetic one, and then a gyroscopic one which is not sensitive to drift in the Earth's magnetic field. The magnetic one has 'compensators', big balls of iron that balance out the magnetic field of the iron ship itself. There are also several Global Positioning Systems, but the navigator is careful not to rely on them alone. In the chart room at the back of the bridge they still mark up our position on a big paper map every hour, using dividers, parallel rules and a pencil. They also keep a logbook there.

The main panels of controls on the bridge are for the engines, the thrusters (extra propulsion systems fore and aft that allow us to manoeuvre precisely in small spaces) and the fire-control system. No, we don't have any cannons. That is for putting OUT fires. There is a complicated system for balancing the ship by pumping water between various ballast tanks. We don't always sail perfectly upright - for instance, if there are waves from one side, we might lean a bit into them, and in the ice we make the stern a bit lower than the prow, to help us push through.

There are at least two radar systems - big glowing screens covered with information. We can see icebergs and other ships from many kilometres away. Naturally there are radios, and telephones leading everywhere on the ship, but the main communications centre is the radio room (from where this email will be sent) just aft of the bridge.

The sea is very calm now, and although it is very cold there is hardly any wind. We still see icebergs every few hours, and are now among broken pack-ice. I have just been reading about Ernest Shackleton's adventure on the pack-ice, so I have new respect for it. We saw a whale really close by (perhaps 5 m away). I think it was a small sperm whale.

Love,

Dad