

The Saga of Captain Eric Pickles - The Story in Full

I was discussing the increasingly confused and unexplained future for planning with a colleague recently and he happened to refer to Eric Pickles (our planning supremo) as 'Captain Pickles'. I quickly Googled that and found that Captain Pickles is in fact a super-hero; who'd have known? And he even has his own theme tune:

I'm Captain Pickles - what a guy!

I can run and jump and fly!

I'm a hero, through and through.

Pretend that you are too!

Well. My flabber has never been so ghastruck.

The unholy mess currently being made of the town planning system must be part of some super-cunning plan that we mere mortals cannot even begin to comprehend. Much respect therefore to Captain Pickles and I take it all back - or maybe the word 'pretend' has more than a little relevance!

Captain Pickles is a character in the children's TV show Barney the Dinosaur - and he's a pirate!!!!!!

The Continuing Adventures of Captain Pickles

Captain Pickles wiped a dribble of pie gravy from his cheek with the back of his wrist and surveyed the paperwork on his chart table. This super-hero work was all well and good, but the attendant admin seriously interrupted a continuing series of speaking engagements whilst in harbour, that primarily involved the consumption of at least three courses in the finest taverns. His interim petite dejeuner didn't even get close to filling the rumbling void.

Five months in and he'd already completed a great deal of '*The Masterplan*'. True, in the coming week his senior ratings would have to put down some pesky uprisings about the legality of removing Regular Seaside Sojourns and he'd had word that some of the fleet were beginning to rebel about his changes to housing crews in multiple occupation. Just what was all the fuss about? Surely they could see that this was all for the greater good, the delivery of the Big Society.

No matter. The unwashed masses clearly could not begin to comprehend the scale and cunning elegance of '*The Masterplan*' and he wasn't about to go cap in hand to the Admiral of the Fleet with his petty problems. Truth to tell he was a tad worried about the impression the growing noises from some of the smaller ships might be making back at the fleet anchorage. He didn't want to give the impression he couldn't control these scurvy crews. He'd just have to be tougher - lash a few of the more vociferous to the yard arm - wield the cat to corral the mutineers - run another series of restrictive flags up the mast. He banged his hooked fist on the ship's bell.

First Officer Scrapps heard the bell and instinctively leaped out of his hammock. What now? He had only just returned from shore-side after the debacle over trying to convince the dockyard that they needed a period of ship price stability. The lack of orders over the last few years had put the price of shipbuilding through the proverbial cabin roof. That was the trouble with clearing the shipping lanes of privateers, there were just too few left to keep the market going.

He'd tried to persuade them that by scrapping shipbuilding targets and co-operating with the fleet auxiliary they could begin to deliver meaningful quantities of new ships that would be snapped up immediately. They were not convinced. The previous problems of rafting fleets of rotten hulks together and flogging them off to unsuspecting pirates looking to make a fast buck on the high seas had led to

very stormy waters and they weren't about to go back to making sea going vessels that didn't deliver enough gold to cover their shareholders demands.

The Captain's voice bellowed down the passageway - "Scrapps, get in here. I have another cunning plan". Scrapps winced, pulled on his sea boots and scuttled into the captain's cabin. "I need you to go and tell the fleet that they're going to have to amalgamate their crews - fewer, larger ships is the way ahead with fewer Captains. That way the landlubbers don't get a chance to divide and rule".

Scrapps alert mind went immediately to the heart of that idea. "Surely Captain, in our shallow and shoally waters we need smaller craft, able to manoeuvre at speed. If we build larger ships they'll be unable to get into harbour".

"Exactly" pronounced Captain Pickles. "We keep the unwashed masses on shore, away from the crews, so we don't get any of that landlubber dissent creeping up the mooring ropes". Scrapps was not convinced.

"How does this play with *"The Masterplan"* captain?" he queried. "I thought the idea was to return the control of the fleet to the people?"

Captain Pickles popped a small sweetmeat into his mouth and surveyed his junior officer with a mixture of pity and annoyance. "What we tell the landlubbers and what we actually aim to achieve are not necessarily coincident", he said conspiratorially. "It's all about the interpretation of the flag messages, not exactly what they say". Scrapps held his piece. He knew enough not to contradict his Captain. "Certainly Sir", he said, saluted, turned smartly on his heel and left.

Scrapps returned to his cabin and took a fortifying swig from a nearby bottle of grog. Grabbing his newly sharpened cutlass he made haste for the gang plank. Instinctively he knew this was going to be the start of another lousy week in the dockyard.

Ahoy, Alors

Captain E Pickles was furious. You could say apoplectic. It was difficult to tell exactly how upset he was as a third helping of plum duff was masking his increasingly blue language.

"Fwhatft doth te blithwering idiioth thin heth do in", he sprayed unapologetically into the face of his First Officer, Scrapps, who was trying to duck the worst of the pudding shower.

"I'm sorry Captain, to whom are you referring" said Scrapps in his rather public school voice. Given the twists and turns of the last week or so his Captain could be referring to any one of a number of shipmates.

Commander Cables' outburst earlier in the week - that fleet vessels should *'get their act together'* if they wanted to benefit from the recently pirated doubloons - had not been helpful. Quite why the smaller ships were being encouraged to raft up together was beyond Scrapps. Yes, they might be able to share a smaller crew to keep them in repair, but that would be as good as useless if they had to go to sea in a hurry. And this was meant to help grow the fleet back to full strength! He didn't get it. The reference to a 'begging bowl culture' was equally insensitive - it was a natural state of affairs for many of the low status ships in the outer harbour. Ravaged constantly by the worst of the weather, a begging bowl would be a positive aid to some of them.

Pickles lurched out of his chair staring incredulously at Scrapps, eyes widening to the size of saucers. *"Whoom, Whooom, vu bwiverin irriot"* he screeched, *"Ver breedin fking, vats whooom"*. A mix of masticated dough and sauce oozed from between clenched brown teeth as he stared fixedly at his evidently cretinous second in command.

"Aye Captain I follow your drift now; the King".

Only that morning King David had sent message to the fleet that henceforth they would be part of a new rapid response force jointly with - he winced - the French. Saving money was one thing, but sailing into battle with the Frenchies was definitely off the Beaufort Scale, and the Captain of the Fleet was not pleased. Not pleased at all.

Captain Pickles threw back another flagon of mead. *"Correct me if I'm wrong Scrapps, but didn't we stuff the French Fleet in the Battle of Sluys in 1340".*

"Yes Captain your naval history is correct" Scrapps confirmed, fawningly. The slaughter was appalling apparently.

"And, if I'm not much mistaken Scrapps, the recent Cup match at Trafalgar went no better for em, even with the bloody Spanish running onto the pitch at half time". Scrapps nodded.

"So what in all that's holy does our glorious leader think he's doing? he opined sarcastically, as he slumped back into his chair - the large lunch beginning to take effect. "Why don't they just sail what's left of their flea bitten scows over here and save wasting our powder and shot?" It was evidently a rhetorical question.

Captain Pickles sighed and speared an apple from the fruit bowl with his hook. *"Do we have a decision from the assizes yet?"* Earlier in the year he'd been a bit rash with the keel hauling of some crews who rebelled against the removal of Regular Seaside Sojourns and now some smartass scribe had taken his decision to the courts. Was he just being used to do the dirty work of the Silent Court? Could he get out of this quartering sea without shipping too much water?

Surely the outcome was a foregone conclusion though. Even if the Judge found him guilty there was little the unwashed masses could do about it. The *Masterplan* had to be delivered, at any price. Only Pickles new the real truth and it preyed on his mind.

Captain Pickles and the Ghost of Christmas Future - Part One

Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the ship not a creature was stirring, not even a cabin boy, the stockings were hung by the deck hatch with care in hopes that St Nicholas soon would be there.

First Officer Scrapps was not as blissfully comatose as the rest of his shipmates. Last night's Christmas party had left him feeling very ill, a combination of grog shots and some dodgy hard tack that had been served up as nibbles. He wrestled around in his bunk trying to get comfortable as the boiling, roiling tempest in his stomach did its best to inflate him to the size of a small cutter. *'This was going to end badly'* he thought and calculated his fastest route to the heads.

And what was worse he was evidently hallucinating. He was sure he could hear the Captain laughing just a few cabins away in his stateroom. He'd never seen or heard Captain Pickles laugh. Ever. The slightest crinkle of a hint of a wry smile as another Frenchy went to Davy Jones locker, but never a laugh. And here he was listening to a belly laugh that seemed to be going on and on. Was the Captain as ill as he? Had he finally gone mad? Scrapps wouldn't blame him mind you, given the grief he'd been getting from all quarters in the last few months about the shipyard cutbacks. Perhaps he should go and see?

At that moment Scrapps digestive system decided to reach Peak Gas and, with a time honoured call of *'Thar she blows'* he threw himself out of his cot and off toward the aptly named poop deck.

Captain Pickles was indeed laughing. He couldn't help himself. It did slightly bother him that he may not be able to stop, as it was not an emotion he had any real experience of. Yet he was thoroughly enjoying the lack of control.

The day had gone well. Finally. He'd been trying to launch the Masterplan for weeks and speculation was rife throughout the fleet. Even the pre-launch guidance parchment gave little or nothing away, and when he finally rose to address the Admiralty the sad old duffers failed to realise exactly what he was doing. Just as he planned. And this was funny, oh so funny. They had absolutely no concept of what he had in store and their lack of prescience (or even simple cynicism for that matter) showed just how stupid they all were. They applauded what they wanted to hear and failed to read the small print. The thought of their lapdog faces all eager to receive the benefit of his wisdom set him off again and he had to cram another fish pie into his mouth to stop from guffawing so loudly he'd wake the ship.

Victory was always sweet but the coup he had just pulled off was even sweeter; made positively sugar coated with a syrup finish over rotten pineapple because they just didn't get it. Oh, the sheer, unadulterated shardenfreude.

The Masterplan, (which can now be revealed in all its glorious simplicity) was no more or less than a simple double bluff. The new wallahs at the Admiralty had been pushing him hard to make cutbacks here and savings there. Decimating the fleet. His capital fleet ships had been removed to safe anchorage to be broken up for timber to make homes for paupers and those on order would be finished but supplied with no sails. Fat lot of good that was going to do; unless he could row the buggers into battle like the old Norse boats. And what was worse, so much worse, each ship of the fleet would be allowed to make its own decisions. No more direct and unarguable orders from his flagship by running up a message or three, they could each have a cosy parlay and reach a collective crew decision by majority vote. Sick. And he knew where that would all end. Did turkey's vote for Christmas?

No more raids on foreign soil, no dashes over the channel to plunder a French winery or two and outwit the revenue men on the way back - he loved doing that - and no war making, dammit. It was all going to be fuzzy and warm and fluffy and delightful and *"oh ever so begging your pardon but would you mind very much if I lay a cannonade down you port side and loot your ship"*. Dam and blast and unholy thoughts. He was a fighting seaman and was just about to have his raison detre surgically removed, and it was going to hurt.

But the Plan was oh so clever. Surprisingly, to most in the fleet, he went along with the idea, promoting the project as his own, passing the word around that, *"Yes, Localism would be a fine way to go. Never mind the threats at our door, lets all have a group hug and make a reasoned and well thought through programme of actions, that would deliver untold riches to all and a society to bring up our scurvy brats in that would be the envy of the gods"* or words to that effect. His emergent bonhomie was acknowledged and after a while crews began to think he had become a new man. The Christmas party was itself a first, and he'd even stopped the regular floggings for overspends on crew comforts.

But Pickles knew in his heart that this new age of enlightenment was no more than a false dawn (he'd read that somewhere and it sounded fitting). It was in fact no more than a Nimby's Charter (Not in My Boat Yard). If there was one thing he knew and that was his men of the line. And he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that this was all going to end in tears before bedtime. Some ships had already professed a wish to become traders and ditch all their cannon in the interests of establishing better relations with foreign lands. BETTER RELATIONS! they might as well open the dock gates and let any tom, dick or louse ridden harry, come sailing in without a by your leave.

Let the motley crews try and deliver this new fleet order. It was not going to be as easy as they thought. Funnily enough (and very sadly he proffered - with a look of abject regret on his face - to any who asked) there was little or no money in the coffers left to implement all the changes. The boatyards were not going to make all the necessary adaptations and alterations for the price of a pint of porter. Oh no. And, for those captains whose ships had already been mortgaged up to the hilt, any rise in the penal interest rates already being charged by those mercenaries at the banks would cripple them - and then who would they turn to. Hmmm?

Captain Pickles knew that letting crews do what they wanted was a recipe for disaster. Always had been and always would be. So he would employ the simple logic of divide and rule. He would positively encourage division in the ranks and 'Local Ships' to the point where the whole operational edifice became so monstrously unwieldy and wrought with in-fighting that the call would go up for a firm hand

on the tiller again and his would be first to the helm. Combine that with 'a little local difficulty' re-emerging in the south seas (he wondered how that would happen - ho, ho, ho) and if the plan worked he'd be back in charge of the fleet within the year.

The candle by his side flickered briefly. A stray draft perhaps. No matter. He had his girth to keep him warm. There it was again and now the cabin began to spin in front of him. Damn those sweetmeats, he guessed they had been rat all along. His laughter ceased as a spiral of ectoplasm apparated at his side. A ghostly figure shimmied within a cloud of mist that turned the cabin stone cold. Icicles formed instantly on the rafters and the candles guttered out.

The insubstantial form spoke. *"Pickles" it said, "Pickles, we know what you are about and I have been sent to warn you that nothing good can come of it". "Rescind your orders, make good new ways and your soul will be spared the everlasting torment of vegetarian dining and nouvelle cuisine".*

If there was one thing that really captured Captain Pickles attention and that was any issue concerning food. *"Who are yee matey and what do yer want with me?"* Quavered the Captain.

"I am the ghost of Christmas Future. A spirit from years to come. I will show you the outcome of your foolish desires and make you change your ways".

Rapidly recovering some of his composure the Captain rose from his seat to look eyeball to eyeball with the transient form in front of him. He cocked his head and stared, squinting slightly to see if he could recognise the ghostly face, *"You don't go by the name of Gummer do yee?"*

To be continued.....

Part 2 of Captain Pickles and the Ghost of Christmas Future

The Ghost of Christmas Future has apparated unexpectedly in the cabin of Captain Pickles, interrupting what was otherwise a thoroughly hearty guffaw over the emergence of his masterplan for recovering the fleet from the dreaded Localism Bill. The story continues.....

"Gummer, GUMMER!!" the ghost bellowed. "What do you take me for laddy, can't you see by my hair I'm bloody Lord Heseltine?". "I will be a Minister for the Environment again in the Future despite what anyone might say".

Pickles was un-phased by the outburst, which did nothing more in fact than help him to recover any composure he might have lost at this unexpected arrival. *"You need to watch your temper matey it will get you into trouble".* The ghost was about to launch another outburst with the words, *"How in god's name did you know about that ..."* but thought better of it and returned to the reason for his visit.

"Pickles, we know what you're about and I have been sent to warn you that you're dastardly plan is doomed to fail. I will show you the future and the trials and tribulations that will flow from your actions: repent now and spare yourself".

At that, the cabin grew dim and a mist rose that swirled around and enveloped them both. *"Just like the gun deck on a good day"* thought Captain Pickles as the mist rapidly evaporated again to reveal a meeting in progress at the 'Bowsprit and Strumpet' Inn in the dockyard. The room was full of ships crews with all their captains sat at a top table. Pickles was noticeable by his absence.

"I call this meeting to Order" said Commander Cables (evidently the Chairman). *"We are here to discuss the application by your fleet commander Captain Pickles for the laying of a keel for a new Flag Ship and to release community dockyard funds to build the vessel".* A murmuring amongst the men rose, Pickles

could hear comments such as:

"What's in it for us?..said one; We need more affordable tenders before we get more battleships... said another; What about the bats in the sea cliffs. Their flight routes might be affected by the mast heights...wailed an old hag; And the seagulls, shouted another. Cables raised his hand for silence.

"What's all this?" asked Pickles. "Its a neighbourhood community forum", said the ghost," convened to discuss a proposal by you. They all have a vote and if you get more than 97.63% support your proposal then moves up to the next decision deck".

"How many decks are there in this confounded process?" grunted Pickles. "Oh, only seven at the moment, but when the new Dockyard Plan is finally approved there will be another ten". The ghost seemed to be quite pleased about this. Pickles decided to keep his counsel on the matter.

"We have the applicants agent First Officer Scrapps who will speak about the application but first I would like to hear from the assembled crews about their thoughts and wishes. Remember that we must concentrate on the key issues here - do we need a new Flag Ship, where should it be harboured and what benefits will it bring to the fleet both now and for the longer term, bearing in mind sustainability, wind energy conservation, environmental amenity and national guidance documents on war wageing, looting on the high seas and the like".

"I would now like your community planning officer Seaman Clegg to outline the last two years statutory consultation process and set out the policy position".

Two hours later Clegg reached his conclusion; *"...and therefore it is with the humblest of beg you're pardons and by your leaves that I conclude the application must be denied and re-submitted in full, because no detailed assessment of the means of drainage from the scuppers and heads was submitted with the application. This was brought to our attention at the last minute by the new 'Scuppers and Head Cleaners' QUANGO in the light of a recent letter from the Minister for NightSoil and BioWaste which we consider to be a material consideration in the matter".* Clegg bowed even lower than his grovelling stance already provided and sat down again.

Scrapps shot to his feet, *"Mr Chairman, we were advised at the pre-application meeting that no such requirement was necessary at this stage and could be dealt with by conditions. We paid twenty doubloons for that meeting!"*.

"As you know Scrapps, the dockyard cannot be held responsible for anything it says, does, thinks, excretes or otherwise passes off as advice, guidance, recommendations, instructions, demands or threats. We are simply here to help. Now, does anyone have anything else to say?" Cables eyes swept the room.

A hand rose slowly at the back of the room. From his position beside the Ghost Pickles saw himself rising to his feet and walk forward to the front.

"The Dockyard Community Decision-Making and Localism Policy Collective recognises Captain Pickles", announced one of the fifteen supporting consultation advisors.

"You have three minutes Captain Pickles, we will let you know when the hourglass has 30 seconds of sand left".

Pickles turned to the seamen and his eyes swept the room.

"So, defeated on a technicality eh. What next, 'Save the Barnacles', 'Spare the Wind', You can only go to sea on a full moon in the month of September? Don't you remember that sending our capital fleet to the ships graveyard cost us the south-seas and all that lovely gold? When was the last time any of you drank real rum, not this eco-friendly weasel piss". There was a murmur of acknowledgement around the room.

"And what about all those dusky maidens awaiting to be grabbed off a lee shore in the caribee, Eh? Your puny little traders won't make it past Wolf Rock let alone across the oceans". Nods of recognition from some crews. *"And then there's the EU....."* He left the point hanging.

"That's all well and good" - preened one Captain - "but we have agreed as a local community not to do anything to upset our wider Community associates and to trade peacefully with them. That's what we pay all that Community Indifference Levy for every year".

"And what, pray tell, do they spend all that silver on, me fine fellow?" smiled Pickles.

Turning directly toward the Ghost (and of course himself) he appeared to the assembly to be looking out of the Inn window toward the harbour entrance.

"If I may indulge ye a moment longer gentlemen yer might just want to raise your telescopes to the horizon. If I'm not much mistaken that's the Spaniards".

They all looked. The horizon was full of ships sails. *"And unless they've run for home, you can expect the Frenchies to be bringing up the rear, so to speak".* Pickles smiled straight at the Ghost and winked.

"Didn't expect that one did yer Hesser! Never trust yer so-called colleagues laddy, least of all those you pay to be friends with; you of all people ought to have remembered that after the East Land fiasco".

"Bugger, didn't see that one coming" said the ghost of Christmas Future and with a flick of his hair he evaporated.

Captain Pickles found himself alone in his cabin, the ghost was gone and everything was just as he had left it seemingly hours ago, or was it only seconds?

He smiled. The smile of all smiles. Then began to smirk, to stifle a laugh and without any control left whatsoever began to guffaw at the top of his bellowing voice. Even Scrapps, still unavoidably engaged on the poop deck, heard the Captain as if he was stood next to him.

"A Merry Christmas and a Very Happy New Year to all my crews", laughed the Captain. For he knew it would be a VERY Happy New Year.