

PIONEERS OF DIFFICULT PRESERVATION

MARITIME

PART
THREE

Chair of the Maritime Heritage Trust, **Henry Cleary**, concludes his look at the very tough world of preserving historic vessels.

Maritime preservationists are never short of big challenges but we can be encouraged by how far the sector has come over the last 50 years, as discussed in the previous two articles. This series can only highlight a few examples in the story but, through its role in Maritime Festivals, Conferences and members' projects, Maritime Heritage Trust (MHT) – created in 2011 by merging Heritage Afloat with the former Maritime Trust – has been close to many of the big issues.

The Queen's Diamond Jubilee Pageant in 2012, which included 200 plus heritage vessels, was something of a high point, celebrating the extraordinary variety of maritime preservation activity being achieved, as well as the Queen's rowbarge *Gloriana*, a replica whose building was



The late Queen's Rowbarge *Gloriana* at the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Parade in 2012. Richard Beet

managed through MHT. As Lottery funding and support from National Historic Ships UK reached a wider range of projects, and with many of the original preservationists still actively involved, the Pageant not only celebrated great enterprise but engaged (despite the BBC coverage) an enormous wider world.

An important if unexpected ally for maritime preservation had emerged in the

form of the House of Commons Select Committee on Heritage Media & Sport. It had spotted the hole in the Government's heritage policies; unlike other heritage sectors, there was no fund for supporting for historic ships other than through open competition in the Heritage Lottery and vessels owned by the major museums. When the creation of National Historic Ships as an advisory body was eventually



HMS *Cavalier* at Chatham Dockyard.
Henry Cleary



De Wadden at the Merseyside Maritime Museum in happier times – 1987. Henry Cleary

announced in 2005, it was welcomed but the Committee was severely critical of its lack of funding to support the sector, a position even worse today.

One of the Select Committee's achievements was to come to the aid of HMS *Cavalier*, holding an urgent one day hearing on 17th February 1998, attended by a Government Minister, Heritage Lottery Fund, National Historic

Ships Committee (NHSC) and others (including Heritage Afloat). *Cavalier* was the only surviving WW2 destroyer, acquired from the Navy for preservation in 1977 but then failed as a visitor attraction in Southampton and Brighton, while her inclusion in an ambitious regeneration project on Tyneside which then collapsed left every prospect of her then being scrapped. None of the official

bodies gave the ship their top priority but the Select Committee Report gave a huge boost to her case. Supported by a new Trust, she moved to Chatham Historic Dockyard with £2m HLF and NHMF funding over the next five years, and is a great success.

In 1998 the Select Committee also pressed NHSC to urgently complete its national registers project which currently indicates a total of around 1,300 registered historic vessels but also an archive list of around 500 which have been lost, broken up or are no longer in contact. Looking back at the lists considered in the Select Committee proceedings, it is salutary to see how many survivors have since been broken up such as the tug tender *Calshot*.

Part of the problem is that museums with their changing presentation demands are not a good home for old ships unless they have a sustainable role in their display. A vessel in a museum without this is "At Risk". As an illustration, on Merseyside the Irish Sea schooner and World War One veteran, *De Wadden* is about to be broken up, and the collections at Ellesmere Port Museum include several historic vessels whose advanced deterioration makes them unsafe to access. The Scottish Maritime Museum has moved some of their vessels for display ashore – a sensible option.



Bristol with the SS Great Britain in the dock where she was built.

On the positive side, some museum projects have provided real leadership through imaginative display, as for example at SS *Great Britain* and M Shed, also in Bristol, with its policy of regular steaming and working of large objects (tugs, the harbour railway, crane). More generally there has been a new buzz in the sector with bright young professionals and a warm visitor welcome; museums are less about machinery and more about people and discovery with the “detective” appeal of marine archaeology doing particularly well. Vessels needed to learn from this. At the MHT Cardiff Conference in 2012, the Director of Mystic Seaport, a pioneering

US maritime museum, gave a frank assessment of how, to survive, we need to engage with visitors using whatever little experience of the sea they may have (e.g. a ferry crossing) rather than expect them to have enthusiast levels of knowledge and commitment.

The MHT organised Cardiff Conferences in 2012 and 2018, and successors in Swansea 2013 and Liverpool 2015 (all with local authority support) also flagged up the benefits of looking at marine heritage in a much wider cultural, environmental and business setting and that need is growing as we face up to climate change. Bringing historic vessels

back to old waterfronts and restoring maritime features has a real business value in helping to animate areas, attract footfall and support property investment, a good example being the Titanic Quarter in Belfast.

Finding ways that such regeneration can provide real help to vessels needs more work. Although only launched recently, the potential of the Heritage Harbour concept backed by National Historic Ships UK, Historic England and MHT (for more see maritimeheritage.org.uk) shows the enthusiasm and local support for our traditional harbours, which are vitally important to operation

of smaller vessels such as Thames Sailing Barges, fishing, coastal and inland small craft.

Heritage Afloat was united around the principle that the best way to preserve a vessel is to keep it operational and the experience of sailing on a working vessel as a trainee or volunteer is unique and can be life changing in terms of personal development. Currently many sail training operations are under threat through withdrawal of education and other funding. This adds to the familiar challenges of increasing maintenance costs, higher safety requirements, age diminishing the first generation preservers and, more recently, post Covid impacts on income, fund-raising and reduced volunteering.

As grant support becomes more competitive, funders are more likely to back projects that are doing most to help themselves and reach into the wider community. While continued operation, probably on shorter more local routes, and using sustainable fuels, remains a goal, this will not work in every situation. How else can historic vessels widen their appeal?

A wider public may know less about ships but still be inspired by their part in a bigger story. Public arts events and local history will reach a wide audience and vessels can give powerful identity. In 2013 the 1513-A Ship’s Opera nighttime event (Zatorski and Zatorski) brought out many thousands of people around Tower Bridge drawn by the sound of 32 steam whistles (on two VICs), foghorns and light displays. Ships and boats are



The ‘1513 Ships Opera’ event at Tower Bridge in 2013. Zatorski & Zatorski

natural actors and platforms for stories. A vessel such as the SS *Robin* had a mainly humble career carrying cargo but is ideal to help tell the much bigger history of the creation of the Port of London and Britain’s dominance of global maritime trade at the beginning of the 20th century.

Equally important is the on board potential for a static community or commercial role which may have little or nothing to do with the vessel’s original purpose. Preserved lightships and vessels with large holds or saloons now support an extraordinary variety of community activities including education and

training, community, social and craft activities – all enjoying the unique setting, materials and character of the vessel. If we want to see our old vessels survive we will need to become ever more creative in how they can be used and go on recruiting a wider audience to our cause. ■

If you have views on these issues and how our maritime heritage can best be used and supported, Maritime Heritage Trust would be delighted to hear them. info@maritimeheritage.org.uk



Bristol M Shed’s steam tug *Mayflower* is steamed periodically. It is seen on the Floating Harbour back in 1989. Brian Gooding



The 1902 Clyde Puffer *Basuto* has been at the National Waterways Museum at Ellesmere Port since 1981. Lizzie Glithero-West, Heritage Alliance



Albion Dock, Bristol, which will form the basis of SS Great Britain Trust’s plans to continue ship repair and create a thriving, working shipyard to include a learning environment for families and schools and recreation of a full size replica of Brunel’s first ship, the paddle steamer *Great Western*. Henry Cleary



Seen in June 2023, another unique survivor is the SS *Freshspring*, built in 1946 as a fresh water carrier for the Admiralty. She is the sole survivor of her class and was rescued from near oblivion and is now based in Bideford in north Devon and is lovingly looked after by a team of volunteers who hope one day to return her to sea again. Brian Gooding