

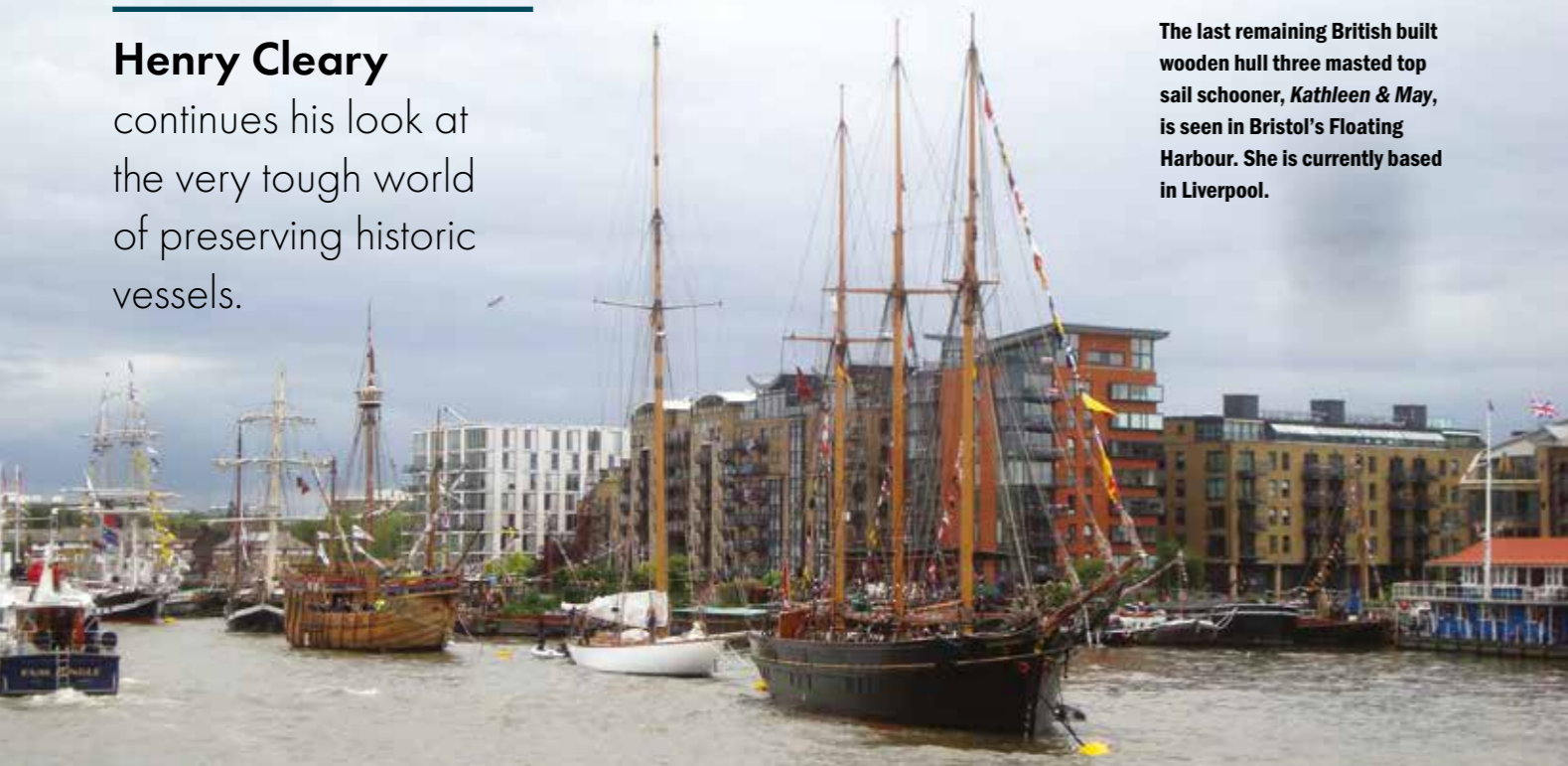
PIONEERS OF DIFFICULT PRESERVATION

MARITIME

PART TWO

Henry Cleary

continues his look at the very tough world of preserving historic vessels.



The last remaining British built wooden hull three masted top sail schooner, *Kathleen & May*, is seen in Bristol's Floating Harbour. She is currently based in Liverpool.

As set out in Part 1, before the 1970s, ship preservation was discouraged by officialdom as just too difficult due to high maintenance costs and doubtful income. However, backed by influential supporters, the Maritime Trust (MT) had by 1986 shown that vessels could be rescued, restored and displayed, although

the challenge of funding their future maintenance remained. To find more viable solutions, from the mid-1980s, the Trust's St Katharine's collection of historic vessels was dispersed to locations where each had a stronger identity and could more easily raise funds. An early example was the Brixham sailing trawler *Provident* acquired by the Maritime Trust

in 1971 and after restoration, chartered for sail training at Salcombe with MT meeting maintenance costs. Continued operation (with a viable business plan) was one of several new approaches to keeping old vessels going. An increasing number of wooden sailing vessels were restored and followed this path. A good example is the



WW2 motor launch *HMS Medusa*.



The barge *Blue Mermaid* under way.



HMS Warrior in Portsmouth's Historic Dockyard.



HMS Gannet is popular with visitors at Chatham Dockyard.

Excelsior, a 75ft Lowestoft fishing sailing smack, found in Sweden as a motor coaster, and restored for sail training 1983-9 and operating very successfully since. Far-sightedly the *Excelsior* Trust acquired its own shipyard in 2000 to make future maintenance easier and obtained regeneration grants with partners to offer yard skills training and shipyard services.

Currently Classic Sail lists 12 traditional sailing vessels offering sailing holidays or sail training (including *Provident*, now based in Oban), some in distant waters. There are others, particularly smaller vessels, but it is still a challenging business – in 2019, the sail training charity Trinity Sailing, operating three historic vessels from Brixham, ceased operations. Thames sailing barges have been some of the most innovative and successful in offering trips and venues for special events such as Topsail Charters, operating three barges based in Maldon (motto: “Market the experience, not your vessel”) while *Blue Mermaid* (Sea-Change Sailing Trust) is a newly constructed (and so easier to maintain) replica barge also based in Maldon which provides opportunities for young people and vulnerable adults to learn and develop. Remarkably *Blue Mermaid* has no engine and must manoeuvre under sail. Uniquely she also has a Load Line Exemption allowing her to carry cargo for training purposes.

Many barges and similarly sized vessels, including narrowboats, tugs, former lifeboats and smaller sailing vessels, have survived entirely through private ownership and without any grant support, partly a reflection of increasing affluence and growing leisure activity. Many historic hulls have survived



The steam tug *Brent* is moored at Maldon in Essex.

as houseboats or “live aboards” and National Historic Ships UK Registers in total now include over 2,000 vessels. Some of these long term survivors reflect the sell off of thousands of surplus Government craft after 1945 – usually the only way to “get afloat” in the post war years. HMS *Medusa*, a WW2 motor launch that played a critical role on D-Day, was sold by the Admiralty to a group of enthusiasts in 1968 and later restored to the highest standards by the *Medusa* Trust formed in 2002. She now undertakes a range of training and film work and is MCA Coded for Category 3 waters for commercial operation but needs to raise £20k per annum to keep in good condition.

Other groups of enthusiasts started coming together to rescue and operate craft that were beyond the resources of an individual owner, through an

Association or Friends Group. One of the first was the Steam Tug *Kerne*, rescued by a group of Merseyside enthusiasts in 1971 and still active. They created an innovative share ownership structure which balanced incentives to get involved with ability to manage responsibly. The *Kerne* engineer team, drawing on their own shipping and land steam experience, became the go-to people for steam vessel preservation projects across the UK, helping vessels as varied as the puffers VIC32 and VIC56, larger steam tugs such as *Challenge* and many other projects over several decades. They are highly deserving recipients of the Queen’s Award for Voluntary Service (2018). Another example is the former Dartmouth steam tug *Portwey*, originally saved in 1967 by Richard Dobson and gifted to the Maritime Trust in 1982, then supported by a Friends group (many drawn from professional seafarers then



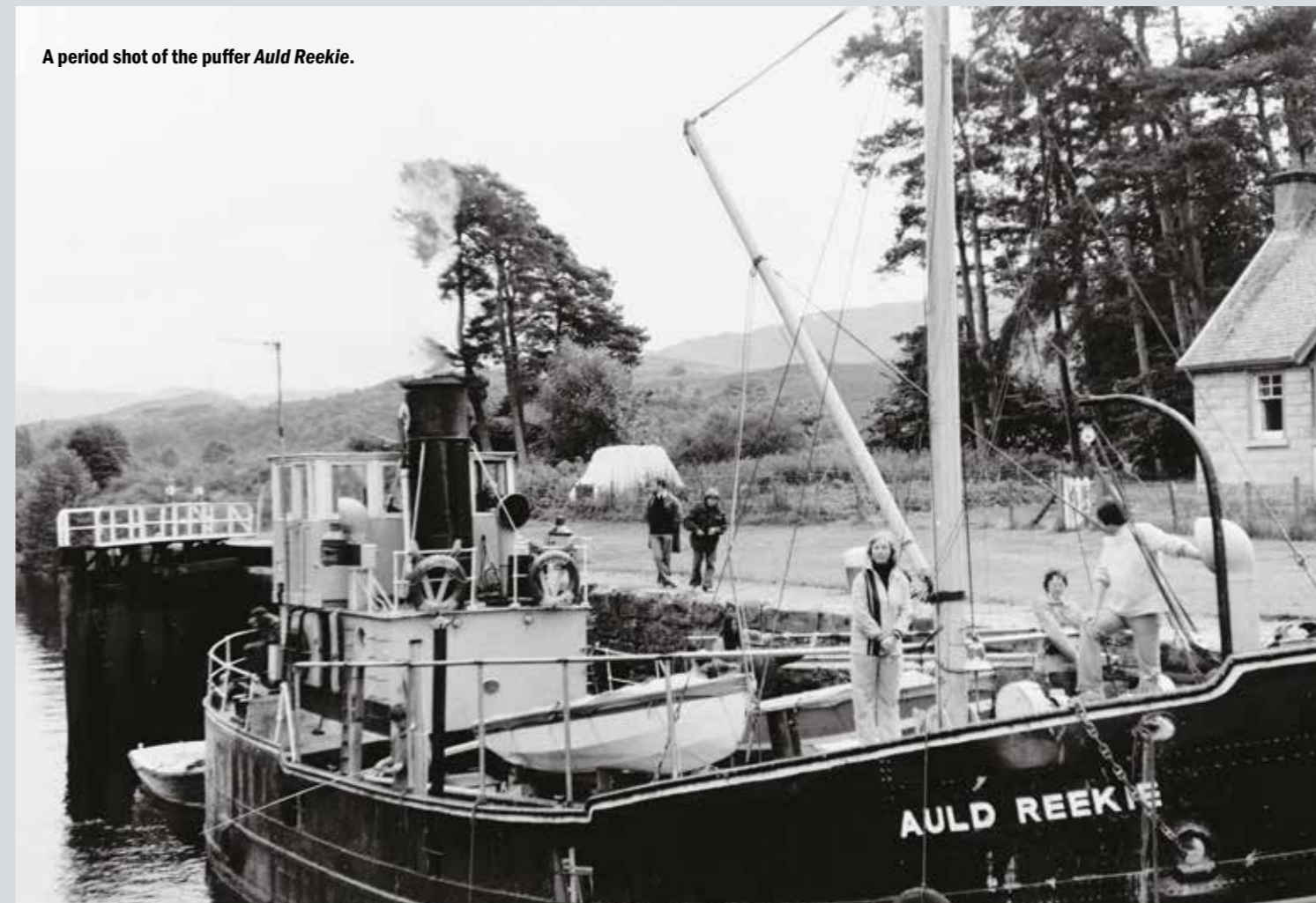
The steam tug *Kerne* pictured in June 2017. Courtesy Steam Tug *Kerne* Preservation Society



The *Kerne* team received the Queen’s Award for Voluntary Service in 2018.



Thames Barge *Niagara* passes VIC 56.



A period shot of the puffer *Auld Reekie*.



The paddle steamer *Waverley* turning off the Tower of London.

lecturing at Poplar College in London's East End) and acquired by them in 2000, remaining fully operational throughout.

A forgotten pioneer is Sir James Miller, an Edinburgh businessman, housebuilder and former Lord Provost of the city, who in 1968 acquired a naval coal burning puffer, VIC27, which he renamed *Auld Reekie*, converting the hold to accommodate groups of young people and carrying sailing dinghies for a scout camp style week's trip out of Oban. When the intended youth groups from deprived areas proved too high risk the eligibility was extended to students and provided enthusiasts with rich instruction in puffers. *Auld Reekie* came with a crew of two ex-seafarers, Tom and Frank (who were from opposite Glasgow cultures so generating a rich exchange of dark banter); a trip was not only great fun but Frank, the engineer, readily welcomed trainee assistance in the engine room.

Going much further was the Paddle Steamer Preservation Society which, having purchased PS *Waverley* in 1974 and kept her in service, also backed the courageous decision in 1985 to return the smaller PS *Kingswear Castle* to passenger carrying standard. Now sailing on the river Dart, she is one of the few vessels able to earn enough to contribute to long term maintenance. While there continued to be high profile projects that did not succeed (eg SS *Uganda*, CS *John W Mackay*, TSS *Manxman*), there were inspiring exceptions

such as SS *Shieldhall*, saved in 1985 and operating as a 1753 grt passenger vessel crewed entirely by volunteers – an extraordinary achievement.

Despite the difficulty of fund-raising for maritime, philanthropists did come forward. Perhaps the most exceptional example was Sir John Smith who funded the £7m cost of restoring HMS *Warrior* at Hartlepool between 1979 and 1987, before her move to Portsmouth. However, before the late 1990s public funding for operational historic vessels was in effect non-existent, apart from a handful of small grants from the Science Museum Prism fund. Between 1980 and 1997 the National Heritage Memorial Fund made grants and loans to maritime heritage of £3m but these were almost entirely to museums and museum vessels such as the *Mary Rose*. So creation of the Heritage Lottery Fund in HLF was a major development and between 1994 and 2012 a total of around £115M was allocated to maritime heritage. Again museum ships and museum projects received the bulk of this funding but working vessels secured around £24m, the largest of these grants being to *Waverley* (£5.7m).

As funding support began to improve, the issue of priorities particularly for the largest projects began to cause concern. There were often several examples of a particular vessel type but the local support, quality of project management and ability to raise funds varied hugely.

Government and the official heritage bodies continued to be very reluctant to get involved. Admiral of the Fleet, Lord Lewin, then Chair at the National Maritime Museum (NMM) convened a wide ranging seminar in 1987 on historic ships policy. From this a museum-based steering group created what became the National Historic Ships Committee (NHSC) launched in 1992, gaining grants from Government and HLF 1995-97 for research to compile historic vessel registers and advice on a national core collection.

Since the 1970s the Maritime Trust had provided advice and support on preservation projects widely, often acting as broker and manager for vessels such as *Gannet* and *Warrior*, helping them find a home. But by the late 1990s the MT had to prioritise managing and restoring *Cutty Sark* and could no longer help others. Creation of the NHSC and Lottery Funding were welcome, professional and brought maritime heritage in from the cold in terms of public policy. But where was the voice of the volunteer and enthusiast, usually the spark that kicked any successful project into life? This was the background to creation in 1994 of Heritage Afloat, the first membership umbrella body for the sector.

As the 21st century opened maritime heritage was doing better but the basic challenges remained: Can it be preserved? Will it attract funding? Can it tell a story, benefit and inspire a community? ■