

PIONEERS OF DIFFICULT PRESERVATION

MARITIME

PART ONE

Henry Cleary, who is well known in maritime preservation as saviour of the wartime 'VIC56', takes a look at the very tough world of preserving historic vessels.



Implacable – the Nelson touch for Sea Scouts – in peril. Wikimedia Commons, *The Illustrated London News*, unknown photographer

Preservation projects naturally look forward – the next challenge is good for fund raising and morale. Pioneers get overlooked but now with storm clouds ahead for the mobile heritage sector, it is worth looking at the history – many of the challenges are the same. Victorians helped to build interest and goodwill towards vessels as part of our “Island Story” but struggled hard to raise funds, as do we. Ships are the most difficult type of transport preservation – even the largest aircraft can be housed in a hangar – but anything larger than a fishing boat is likely to be subject to weather with unrelenting loss through corrosion and wear requiring costly and continuous maintenance. What is sustainable?

Officialdom – the Admiralty, Government Departments and the predecessors of English Heritage – tended in the past to write off ship preservation proposals as hopelessly costly and impractical once the vessel was obsolete for its main purpose. The Navy cares seriously about its people but equipment, once outmoded, is not something to get sentimental about, with the exception of HMS *Victory*, which is a national shrine. When HMS *Reclaim*, the last vessel flying the White Ensign to be powered by steam reciprocating engines, was withdrawn in 1979, the tributes

The 'Fighting Temeraire' being tugged to her last berth to be broken up, a famous painting by JMW Turner. Wikimedia Commons, National Gallery

marked only a job well done before moving on to the replacement, rather than celebrating steam.

The artist JMW Turner was one of the first to respond to the emotional power of great vessels as exemplified in his painting 'The Fighting Temeraire' (1838). This painting was his favourite and he refused to sell it. Turner was highly patriotic and he viewed the “wooden walls”, whose victory at Trafalgar had seen off the threat of Napoleonic control, in the same way that we think about the Battle of Britain. When exhibiting he added to the title “The flag which braved the battle and the breeze no longer owns her”.

In 1816 even HMS *Victory* had been condemned to withdrawal and breaking by the Admiralty but the intense public outcry converted that decision to her retention on special moorings as flagship of the Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth. In Turner's era there was no shortage of demand for withdrawn vessels mainly for recycling their valuable materials. There was also a demand for hulks as training schools, prisons and worker accommodation in the Dockyards.

Many of these survived for long periods with hulls largely intact such as HMS *Cornwallis*, built of teak in Bombay in 1813 and hulked as a jetty at Sheerness Dockyard in 1865, surviving until 1960.

Much more high profile was the case of HMS *Implacable*, formerly the



SS Robin when in St Katharine Docks. Geograph.org.uk - 606637 Creative Commons Attribution – Share Alike 2.0 Chris Allen

French *Duguay-Trouin*, built in 1800 in Rochefort, captured by the British in November 1805 and refitted and renamed as HMS *Implacable*. Having survived withdrawal in 1855, through conversion to a naval training vessel until 1904, she then became a sea training school funded partly by a wealthy industrialist, Geoffrey Wheatly Cobb. Plagued by financial problems due to the costs of repair and maintenance, her survival was only possible through the support of influential backers and fund raisers such as Sir Robert Baden-Powell, Sir James Caird and in particular the Society for Nautical Research.

By 1947 preservation of *Implacable*, as the only survivor from Trafalgar other than *Victory*, had many strong supporters, led by Frank Carr, Director of the National Maritime Museum, but no organisation was willing to take her on with costs then estimated at up £0.5M (£16M today). With the post war Treasury empty, public funding was impossible and the Admiralty (still the owner) had to dispose. After removal of the figurehead and stern gallery carving (still to be seen

at the National Maritime Museum), *Implacable* was towed out of Portsmouth for sinking, having to be finished off by gunfire when the prepared explosives proved insufficient.

The loss of *Implacable* created a “Never Again” movement and, rather as the loss of the old Euston helped save St Pancras, the campaign to save the last surviving tea clipper *Cutty Sark* was much better resourced. After her commercial cargo carrying career ended in 1922, the *Cutty Sark* had also survived as a sea training vessel, initially at Falmouth, then Greenhithe on the Thames but by the early 1950s this role was unviable. Frank Carr formed the *Cutty Sark* Society and with support from Prince Phillip and others raised £250,000 by public appeal, allowing her to be moved to a specially constructed dry dock at Greenwich and then restored before opening by the Queen to the public in 1957. *Cutty Sark*, the first ship to be “saved for the nation” has now had over 15 million visitors and for over 30 years earned sufficient revenue to cover her operating costs.

Cutty Sark was to remain an exception as other schemes to save important ships failed to make headway. While the 1960s were hostile to heritage in terms of public policy, they also generated a wider appreciation of what was being lost through modernisation such as containerisation in the docks. This inspired setting up the Maritime Trust in 1969, again with Prince Philip as a prime mover. The idea was to establish a “National Trust but for maritime heritage”. This was a top down initiative with some big hitters – the Duke of Westminster chaired the Council – and leading names from the shipping industry and the museum world meant that the Trust could not be fobbed off as enthusiastic amateurs with little experience. In particular, Vice-Admiral Patrick Bayly, who had had a distinguished naval career, proved an inspired leader over his 17 year stint as Director, firmly establishing the Trust as the go-to organisation in the field.

The great achievement of the Trust was that it was able to acquire – usually in the nick of time – the last examples of many types of vessel hugely important in terms of UK history. This included the coastal sailing schooner *Kathleen and May*, the SS *Robin*, dating from 1890 and only survivor of thousands of cargo steamers from the high point of British seaborne trade, and the *Lydia*



Kathleen and May at Bristol Harbour Festival. National Historic Ships UK



The Nore lightship at St Katharine Docks, 1979. Geograph.org.uk - M J Richardson 2133665 Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0



Cutty Sark as a restored attraction. Henry Cleary



An October 2023 picture of SS *Robin* on her pontoon in London's former Royal Docks and opposite the ExCel Centre. Henry Cleary

Eva, the only surviving steam fishing drifter. With others representing coastal fishing and trades, the Trust had by 1990 helped to save 20 vessels and brought many of them together in a historic ship collection at St Katharine Docks, London. The Trust had also helped manage, broker and help find future homes for vessels such as the *Discovery*, *Gannet* and *Warrior* as well as helping many smaller local projects. From 1973 the Maritime Trust became managers of the *Cutty Sark* with full merger following in 1989 and became the *Cutty Sark* Trust in 2000. In 2012 the ship was transferred to Royal Museums Greenwich.

The Maritime Trust also found fund raising for ships hard going but nevertheless raised over £1M for the

founding fund by 1972 and used this to help restore many of its vessels. The *Cutty Sark* contributed a similar amount from its surplus revenues before 1985. But by 1991 it was the *Cutty Sark* that needed support and a £2M appeal was launched and largely achieved. However, by 2006 a much more fundamental restoration project was considered necessary with further work needed due to the damaging fire in 2007 after work had begun. By 2012 when the ship re-opened the total cost was £50M including £25.5M from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The enormous costs experienced in the *Cutty Sark* restoration were not the only challenge. By 1986 it had become clear that the collection of historic vessels at St Katharine's was not financially

viable. If the landlord had provided better terms recognising their value in drawing visitors, the project might have covered its operating costs but the contribution for restoration was well below what was needed. Visitors could enjoy much of the display by walking around the quaysides rather than paying to go on board – a point painfully experienced by other maritime projects.

The Trust began a dispersal policy for the St Katharine's collection looking for realistic local partners and fortunately there were some new ideas coming forward around the country and these were to point a different path forward for sustainable ship preservation at all levels.

To be continued... ■