

Our History Your Heritage



Maritime Musings – an Update for all Ulster Maritime Heritage Members (October 2020)

Introduction

As secretary of Ulster Maritime Heritage, I had drafted an Update in late March which I regret was never fully issued. This Update covers several topics:

- a. Where things stand on establishing Ulster Maritime Heritage (UMH) as an organisation, with our draft Constitution and privacy policy attached,
- b. The Harry Madill Archive project,
- c. Two developments in our relationship with National Historic Ships,
- d. A recent historical note on the main shipyard in Bangor.

Inevitably, Covid-19 will impact detrimentally on all our maritime heritage activities, and on the progress that we can make towards establishing Ulster Maritime Heritage as an organisation. It is very frustrating, not least because good progress was being made. Moreover, we know that many of you had an exciting programme of events and activities in the coming months which we were looking forward to promoting as part of our wider maritime heritage.

The establishment of Ulster Maritime Heritage as an organisation

Organisationally, we created a management committee at the last full meeting of UMH in January this year. That committee met in February and was due to do so again in late March.

We had prepared a draft Constitution for UMH which we were planning to sign off and circulate to all members, together with a draft Privacy Policy.

The constitution tries to follow a middle course, broadly in keeping with the Charity Commission of Northern Ireland's model for small charities, without – at this stage – including all the provisions relating to the responsibilities of charity trustees etc.

Given the unlikelihood of our meeting together in the wider group for some months, can I invite any comments on the two documents by email, before the end of November.

We were also working positively towards the creation of a brand/logo for UMH, and a stakeholder communications plan. As you can see we do have a logo. We are very grateful to Kerrie Sweeney and, through her, to McCadden (graphic designers) for this.

Given the uncertainties created by covid, the communications plan is not yet complete, but it is only parked temporarily. We had of course been hoping to launch UMH as a public organisation during the summer, perhaps at an event on the North Coast. Alas that had to be postponed. But we are determined to maintain the momentum towards completing the establishment of UMH as an

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organisation, as soon as practicable. Members of the management committee are looking at possible opportunities for funding to enable us to take some next steps at least.

The Harry Madill Archive project

Some of you will be aware that Wes Forsythe, in the Centre for Maritime Archaeology at the University of Ulster, had been successful in obtaining a significant grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. This was to promote, preserve and make digitally available the unique archive of maritime heritage material built up by Harry Madill; and a group of us had a very encouraging start-up meeting in Coleraine early in March. The post of project officer was about to be filled, but unfortunately due to covid-imposed restrictions the post will have to be re-advertised with inevitable delay.

The main project partner, PRONI closed for some months and is not yet operating normally, and the planned events over the summer had to be cancelled. Fortunately the National Lottery Heritage Fund has extended the timescale by 18 months to end September 2022. It is still hoped that this project will make a great contribution to the aims of Ulster Maritime Heritage and all members will be invited to take part in its activities.

National Historic Ships Shipshape Web Pages

We have been working to establish closer links with National Historic Ships (NHS) and there are two positive developments. On their main website is a dedicated page for the Northern Ireland region, as a Shipshape hub, at <https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/shipshape-network/region/northern-ireland>.

We are working to provide NHS with a range of relevant material to include there, to publicise our unique Ulster Maritime Heritage. We currently plan to add at least the following items to those already on it (*HMS Caroline*, *SS Nomadic* and *Sir Samuel Kelly*): an introduction to UMH, the Harry Madill Archive project, *TMS Result*. If you have further items that you feel would fit with this approach, please contact the UMH Secretary.

Belfast Maritime Festival Review

The Titanic Foundation are working with Belfast City Council and Belfast Harbour to review the Belfast Titanic Maritime Festival. A team of consultants led by USI (Urban Scale Interventions) have been appointed and it is their job to identify new concepts to elevate the festival into something truly international.

Obviously given these uncertain times, in the short term, it is difficult to know what will happen with large scale events, but we still wish to progress our ideas, so when the time comes we are ready to deliver on a new vision.

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Jak Spencer from USI has been in contact with some UMH members to find out how some of us could support the festival in the future. At this stage it is idea sharing – what ships / boats do you have that could come along, could you do demonstrations – on and off the water, are there any maritime events that you have attended previously that you could reference as good practice, could you do some boat racing on the Lagan, could there be training sessions offered to people to go out on a boat as part of the festival. Are there any craft skills that we could use to do other activity for the festival – build wooden sculptures etc. Any ideas and all ideas are welcome.

The Pericles Project

Some of you know about the Pericles project. Pericles (an acronym based on the title about preserving cultural heritage in coastal and other areas) is EU-funded (Horizon 2020), with 15 partners. It started in May 2018, and the funding ends on 30 April 2021, although the project may continue for 6 months after that. After that, its future is uncertain.

Queen's University Belfast is one of the partners, and members of the UMH Committee had been liaising with them to see what synergy there may be. The Pericles team are trying to populate a portal, at <https://mapyourheritage.eu>

Progress has been slow, both overall and in Northern Ireland, held back partly by the limitations of the IT element and then by covid. The portal's future after the project ends is, as yet, uncertain.

In theory, Pericles provides a facility which UMH members could use; for example, work stream 7 includes the creation of trails and 'sustainable exploitation' of the maritime cultural heritage. A 'risk assessment' framework is being created - this could be useful in identifying and prioritising the preservation individual items of maritime heritage. There are two ongoing case studies in the island of Ireland, one focusing on the Titanic Quarter, the other in Galway.

The Pericles project website is <https://www.pericles-heritage.eu>

Shipbuilding in Bangor, County Down

Betty Armstrong has recently put together the attached article, in connection with an exhibition in the North Down Museum. It tells the story of the Shipyard Company, in Bangor – a very wee yard in comparison with the ones in Belfast, but nevertheless fascinating.

Fred Ternan comments a propos of Betty's article:

MV Trasna built in Bangor shipyard is still afloat at this time but in need of restoration. MV Enniskillen, launched before the war was used during the war to tow targets for the RAF to practise their bombing. Sadly one was too close and she was sunk. We began a search last winter and hope to get back to that soon. We know where the bombing ranges were so some remains may be found.

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And Finally

As an organisation UMH exists for its members. If you have news or any information that you would like to share with UMH, do please contact Robin Masefield at rmasefield@hotmail.com or ring 07966 589091.

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Appendix

Shipbuilding at Ballyholme, by Betty Armstrong

Did you know that before Enrico Caproni built his famous 'Palais de Dance' in 1928 on Seacliff Road that there was a shipyard on that site on the corner of Seaforth Road?

In fact, there were two businesses carrying out shipbuilding and associated work in Ballyholme. In March 1919 Chesney McCormick and Francis J B Connolly together applied for permission to build a 'Workshop or shed of brick, roofed with slates' on the west side of Seacliff Road. Connolly was an architect and civil engineer and the 1911 Census shows he lived on Bryansburn Road when he was 23. There are also reports of him being elected as a student member of the Ulster Society of Architects in 1906. In December 1919 McCormick lodged plans for a temporary 'Boat house and Spar shed' on Seacliff Road near College Gardens, a terrace part of which became the Ballyholme Hotel.

In 1920 and 1921 Connolly was advertising under the name Bangor Boat Building Works and in April 1923 McCormick and the Bangor Boat Building Works applied to build a 'Wooden shop and dwelling' on the south side of Seaforth Road. The launching slip for the yard was opposite and can still be seen today beside Ballyholme Yacht Club.



Pictorial records show that McCormick & Co had a shed where Kingsland Nursing Home is today, and this appears to be the location where the Shipyard business carried on into the future. It provided winter storage for the local racing yachts such as Dancers and Rivers and for yachts and motorboats up to 20 tons and built a launching slip opposite. It had a distinctive curve and is still there today. McCormick & Co didn't last long and on 30 October 1924 the business was

advertised for sale. The reason for the demise can be seen in a letter of reference from McCormick

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& Co in the Public Record Office in respect of a Robert Eddys of Ballymagee Street (High Street) Bangor, which shows that he was an ex-seaman and a rigger and was dismissed owing to shortage of work (on 24 October).

Enrico Caproni may have foreseen the demise of the business on the corner of Seaforth Road for in June 1923 he submitted plans for 'Refreshment Rooms and a temporary shop'. The Bangor Boat Building Works faded from record, but it is known that the slip was transferred to the sailing club at Ballyholme which at the time met in the clubhouse on Kingsland which is now the Table Tennis club. The slip can still be seen today at low tide.

The McCormick business was bought by a Mr. W J Lovett, who was one of the Senior Naval Architects and a Director in the Workman Clark & Co shipyard in Belfast. He called the business The Shipyard Company Ltd and in 1925 added a store. In 1926 Mr. Lovett asked Robert (Bertie) Slater, a naval architect in Workman Clark's, to manage the yard. Prior to the liquidation of the company McCormick was building yachts of the Dancing class for Royal Ulster Yacht Club. The completion of two Dancing Class yachts which had been abandoned was Bertie Slater's first job. The yard also built ships lifeboats for the Port Line whose liners were being constructed by Workman Clark.



In 1930 the yard built one of the largest boats, a 50 ft passenger-carrying cabin launch for the Lough Erne Boat Co. It made the passage to Belfast under its own power and was then lifted onto a special railway truck and transported to Enniskillen where it was launched into Lower Lough Erne. The shipyard also built six cabin cruisers for Hyland Ltd and in 1934 a 35ft Motor Yacht, the Moya, for Mr. Lovett and to his own design.

In 1932 Bertie Slater lodged plans for an 'Iron Shed'. He had married and settled in

Ballyholme in 1928 and by 1937 he owned the yard. The late Thirties was a time of slump and little money and the yard struggled to survive, but during the war the yard was very busy with Admiralty work. In addition to maintaining a large fleet of patrol boats and trawlers, the yard built Torpedo Recovery Boats for Lough Neagh. Some of the boats in Bangor had escaped from occupied Norway, Holland, France and Belgium.

Towards the end of the war Slater built 50-foot-long flat-bottomed Scows for magnetic mine sweeping and 36-foot Harbour Launches, some of which were used at Arromanches, one of the D Day beaches. He was also asked by the Admiralty if he could build 112-foot wooden Minesweepers. For this he identified a suitable site at nearby Groomsport and requested a grant of £10k for a slip, shed, winch and machinery, but was refused. Years later he was told if he had asked

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for £100k he would have got it! Slater's upper yard had a large shed for boat building and repairs. The rest was used for winter storage and spring fitting out of yachts and motorboats. The fact that boats could be driven ashore from their moorings in the Bay in onshore gales, provided the yard with extra business for repairs.

Slater subsequently built a sheet metal workshop to cope with Ventilation Trunking for mills and factories. The shipyard installed the ventilation ducting in The Tonic Cinema in the late Thirties. A second building shed was constructed alongside the original shed to cope with RNLI repairs and maintenance. After the war Slater designed the S Class cruiser, a superb affordable sailing yacht built in the traditional way by skilled craftsmen. The S Class boats are sturdy cruisers, well suited to Irish and Scottish waters. Many of these yachts are still sailing today.

In 1958 Bruce Cowley, who had retired from HMRC, bought the yard. Cowley continued the S Class production, making a total of 22 built in Bangor between 1946 and 1964. He also built well-known large cruising yachts; *Jaynor* for Ivan Selig built with the Fastnet race in mind, the famous *Duncrue* for Sean McNeill, and *Trasna of Ely* for the Duke of Westminster on Lough Erne.

In 1969 the yard was in receivership and Frank Smyth, who at this time owned a small boat yard in Donaghadee and a chandlery in Bangor, bought the business and for a time traded as Bangor Yacht Supply Co. In 1975 it became Bangor Shipyard Ltd. When Frank started the workshop had an earthen floor and very old equipment which he replaced with gear from the Donaghadee workshop. His venture into boat building began with three small wooden punts and then with the introduction of fibreglass, Smyth made his own small dinghy moulds and began producing them. He subsequently shipped in fibreglass hulls from England and fitted them out. These he sold in the small chandlery in Bangor. The first big job in the Shipyard was repairing *Velia* for the well-known hotelier, George Ralston and the yard was also recognized for the repair of the Donaghadee, Aranmore, Cloughey and Portrush lifeboats. The lifeboat work was suspended by the RNLI for fear of terrorist action (this was during the Troubles) but Smyth grasped the opportunity and obtained the contract for repairing two pilot boats from Carrickfergus which were damaged by an explosion.

Up until this time Smyth had to lay rails in sections on the road on which to make the transfer from the yard to the slip, which took at least an hour. Frank approached the then Town Surveyor, Martin Gray, who persuaded the Council to allow rails to be embedded in concrete in the road to make the movement smoother and easier. On one notable occasion the Seacliff Road had been blocked when the concrete rail bedding collapsed due to the fish plates not having been fitted properly! Another improvement resulted from the purchase of a second-hand winch (which was to have been scrapped) from the Belfast aerospace company Short Bros for £25 and an ex RAF tractor bought in an auction for £100. Frank also acquired a hydraulic crane and for several years, Fred, the crane driver was in demand across the country for lifting boats.

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Building and repairing fishing boats formed a substantial part of the business. This developed into a full-blown boat building business with a sizeable workforce. Many of the names will be familiar to seafarers – Elias Scott (Scottie) who was awarded a BEM, Willie Harvey, Ken Bewley, Jimmy Hamilton and Norman Henry. Government grants for fishing boats made the financial situation easier and this part of the yard flourished for about ten years. At this point Smyth was building larger fishing boats of 70 feet in

length and to accommodate these he demolished the old shed and built a larger one. The maintenance and refurbishment of RNLI lifeboats also formed a large part of the business.

Among the many fishing boats Smyth fitted out was the 30-ton *Ros Mor* for local fisherman, the late Jack Miller. The *Fragrant Cloud*, *Xmas Star* (shown being launched) and the *Jubilee Star*, the *Sarna* and the *Iona* were other craft among many. The latter was built for Tommy Cecil of Rathlin. It was the first fully decked ferry boat built for trade between Ballycastle and Rathlin. Subsequently, to Frank's surprise, Tommy asked for the decks to be strengthened. It turned out he was carrying cattle, cars and caravans!

By this time the Government had built sophisticated slips at Kilkeel and Portavogie, wooden construction was diminishing, and grants were cut, all making boatbuilding difficult. Then came Bangor Marina. Smyth was invited to tender for the Bangor boatyard contract, but for him this was unworkable and as boatbuilding at Ballyholme was no longer viable, the yard closed in 1991.

Betty Armstrong

PS I would like to acknowledge the help in gathering this information of Ronnie Slater, son of one of the owners and Frank Smyth, the last owner of the yard. Also, of Leanne Briggs of North Down Museum, and of the Public Record Office.