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"THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF SHIPS OF WAR"

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TOO MANY PRESERVED SHIPS THREATEN THE HERITAGE

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1. Introduction

In view of my somewhat provocative title, I think it is important that I should make it clear that I am not against ship preservation. I believe that the preservation of large ships, provided that it is done in moderation - always in moderation - is a thoroughly worthwhile endeavour. After all, the ship is the definitive maritime artefact. To step on board the VICTORY, the CONSTITUTION, the JYLLAND or the BUFFEL is always a powerful experience which gives the visitor a chance to appreciate the entire composition of these vessels in all their complexity; to feel their texture and to sense something of their character. Such an experience goes some small way towards answering that deep lonely longing for the sea which is such a potent element in the the lives of all of us brought up

in these islands. It follows, therefore, that in order to present our maritime story properly, we must be able to show future generations at least some examples of the large ships that were such key characters in that story. So, I am not a complete heretic!

The key to my thesis lies in the second half of my title: the words "threaten the heritage". I believe that in our enthusiasm to preserve the past we are in danger of going too far; that in attempting to save more than is actually feasible, we are in grave danger of threatening those projects that are already up and running. In this paper, I will first take a glance at the potent mythology surrounding the subject and briefly outline the problems that I can see before us. I will then go on to try to explain how we have got into the present difficult situation; and, finally, I will offer some suggestions as to how we might tackle the problems and ensure a secure future for our preserved ships.

2. The IMPLACABLE Myth

Sooner or later, in any discussion about ship preservation, the name of the IMPLACABLE will be mentioned. The powerful image of that fine old ship, sinking gracefully deck by deck, her flag still flying proudly, is etched on the memory of a generation. To this day, the World Ships' Trust's logo features a picture

of her stern and the defiant motto "Implacable, never again". In the mythology of ship preservation the sinking has become a potent symbol of unthinking philistinism.

But was it?

The Royal Naval Museum has in its archives the papers of the late Colonel Harold Wyllie who, with Frank Carr (of revered memory) was a key player in the fight to save the IMPLACABLE (1). Among the papers are the minutes of The IMPLACABLE Committee, a panel of experts (including both Wyllie and Carr) which sat regularly throughout 1948 and early 1949, trying to find a way to save the old ship. Reading those minutes, one can trace the growing realisation, even among the IMPLACABLE's most passionate supporters, that her plight was hopeless.

On 2nd February, the Foreman of Portsmouth Dockyard, who had been asked to survey her, reported "I do not consider the vessel to be repairable" and went on to give a long and depressing list of defects; including, for example, timbers and futtocks in the hold that were "just a mass of decayed wood, which can be pulled apart by hand." A later and more detailed survey revealed even more decay; so much indeed that one of the panel-members, P. Maddox from Green and Silley Weir remarked, "I am quite convinced that the whole of the structure above the waterline would need rebuilding with new material." Even Harold Wyllie, in a letter written a few weeks later to the Portsmouth

Evening News, talked of "a complete reconstruction from the waterline upward." The estimate was that such a major rebuilding, including rerigging would cost at least £250,000 (or well over £3 million in today's prices).

Where on earth was that sort of money going to be found in the straitened circumstances of post-war England? Again, even if the initial restoration costs had been raised, how would the IMPLACABLE have been managed and financed in the future? And, in view of all the other ships competing for the very scarce funds, was there really any justification for spending that amount of money to produce what would have been, in Maddox's words, "...a vessel only bearing the slightest relationship to the original."?

Seen in the light of this evidence, the story of the IMPLACABLE is far from being just a straightforward example of unthinking iconoclasm. Rather, it provides us with a dramatic demonstration of the point that, in the end, it is regular running costs that cripple ship preservation projects and threaten their success. The stark facts and figures in the Wyllie papers show that the Committee's regretful but unanimous decision, that "the decay in the IMPLACABLE has proceeded so far that the only course open to (the Committee) is to report against the proposal for reconditioning and placing the ship in a permanent berth", was the only responsible conclusion possible. Destruction of some kind, therefore, was inevitable

and scuttling was at least a more dignified and honourable end for the old ship than the available alternatives. Those who eventually carried out the unenviable task of sinking her have, unfairly, borne the guilt for a decision whose roots must, more properly, be sought in the earlier failure to find the money to dock and repair the ship regularly in the 20s and 30s.

3. The Current Problem

Since 1949, ship preservation has gone wild. The International Register of Ships lists more than 700 vessels over 40 feet and the number is growing every year (2). In Great Britain alone, there are at least 15 different warship preservation projects; all competing for funds and most of them, in their own way, in financial difficulties. Most significant, of those 15 no less than nine - nearly two-thirds - are twentieth century ships (3) - surely, an unbalanced ratio by any criteria? Ships are seen, rightly or wrongly, as crowd-pullers and so every entrepreneur, seeking to tack some heritage onto his latest waterfront development so as to please the planners, is anxious to acquire one. As a result, History is being ransacked to provide reasons for preservation.

You think I'm exaggerating? Well let us pause to consider the point. At the moment two 'O' class submarines are being preserved: one at Chatham and one at Birkenhead. Now the 'O'

class was a successful but fairly run-of-the-mill design; apart from the fact that they were the first class of truly silent British submarines there was nothing particularly notable about them; they were the workhorses of the 1960s and 70s submarine fleet. There is no compelling reason for preserving any of them, let alone two.

'Ah', but we are told, 'the OCELOT was the last warship to be built at Chatham' (She was in fact the last British warship; the last ship launched there was her Canadian sister, the OKANAGAN!). But, even if we allow this as a fair reason for preserving her, why then is it necessary to preserve the ONYX as well? 'Because she is a Falklands veteran', comes the answer. But we already have a Falklands veteran rusting at her moorings in the shape of HMS PLYMOUTH. Do we really need two veterans of a war that will eventually be little more than a paragraph of history? Using that criteria, we should have two from the Boer war; four from the Crimean War and at least one from the War of Jenkin's Ear. I exaggerate to make my point; which is that however compelling the reasons for saving these ships may be to those who now own them, it is clear that the decisions to save them were taken locally and without an assessment of the wider scene.

I use these particular projects simply as examples and do not wish to single them out. For the truth is that, on any objective assessment, almost all the ship preservation projects

in this country have been mainly the result of private initiative and personal commitment with little reference to any overall plan or scheme. And the inevitable result has been that the limited resources available to support ship preservation are already spread far too thinly.

4. The Scarce Resources

First, the financial resources. As Sir Philip Goodheart reminds us in his paper (Pp XXX-YYY), the cake is very small indeed. The sad truth is that in Britain maritime heritage just isn't as attractive as, say, Grand Opera and the low level of public funding reflects this. However much we may regret this attitude - and I certainly do - we have to be realistic and accept that we are unlikely to change it - and especially not in the current economic climate, when even private money is in markedly short supply. A second-class economy such as Britain now possesses cannot hope to sustain a first-class maritime heritage network. There are some lean years ahead, and the sooner we face up to this grim truth and make our plans accordingly, the better it will be for the preservation and interpretation of maritime heritage in this country. As Dr Roger Knight, Chief Curator of the National Maritime Museum recently remarked in different but related context, "The age of expansion is over; the age of house-keeping is upon us." (4)

Mention of housekeeping leads us, secondly, to the problem of maintenance. As every sailor learns within days of joining up, never-ending, repetitious maintenance is an essential part of the daily grind, at sea as much as in port. Ships, to use Basil Greenhill's characteristically trenchant phrase are "exceptionally biodegradable" and need constant, daily and detailed attention. But how many of our preserved ships actually receive the same amount of attention as they would have been given when on active service?

The answer, of course, is none of them; because maintenance is necessarily labour-intensive. Which brings us to the third and possibly the most problematic of the resources upon which all our efforts, especially in the field of maintenance, depend: manpower. I say "problematic" because, as you will all be very well aware, expense is not the only factor; we have also to find the necessary knowledge, skill, expertise and enthusiasm. And experienced ship repairers are in increasingly short supply as their traditional skills become less and less relevant to our mass-produced, throw-away society. As Peter Spectre wrote in Wooden Boat in 1981: "You can raise sea-chests full of money, and fill our ports and museums with newly acquired historic ships, but if you don't have the people to take care of them and the desire to do the job right you will wind up with ships that are caricatures and not floating symbols of our proud heritage" (5). Look around some of our maritime centres today and you will see just how prophetic those words were!

Finally, and more subtly, we have to contend with the problem of the sharp decline in the support services that are needed to maintain ships. With the dramatic run-down in British shipping, the ship building and repair yards are disappearing too, together with the skilled people who worked in them. At the same time, our docks are disappearing fast, swallowed up by modern developments; whether a new shopping mall in Hull, a housing complex in Birkenhead or a new maintenance shop in Portsmouth Naval Base. Inevitably, the essential regular docking of those ships that are still afloat will become an increasingly difficult process, involving long-distance tows - which will add still more noughts to those regular maintenance bills.

And yet, despite the shortage of funds; despite the widely recognised shortage of skilled labour and infrastructure; despite the conspicuous and embarrassing failure of some projects; still new candidates for preservation are put forward, almost monthly. According to The Independent of 15 August 1992, the people involved with the Alderney Elizabethan ship are already saying, "If the money is available, it may be possible to excavate, conserve and ultimately to raise it" (my italics). Not content with having Holland One in the bag, submariner enthusiasts are hoping to find and raise the RESURGAM.....and the Al.....and the K1. As Sir Philip Goodheart mentioned, pressure is growing for the preservation and public display of two nuclear submarines - one with Polaris

and one without. Whispers are beginning to go around that the Royal Yacht BRITANNIA should be preserved. An Isle of Wight Project is seeking to raise King George V's racing yacht BRITANNIA, despite the fact that she was scuttled at his express wish. And, most bizarre of all, the Royal Navy is currently being asked to sanction an official American expedition to locate and raise Drake's coffin - in order to prevent the grave from being pillaged by treasure hunters! It is a mad, mad world my masters and we must accept some of the guilt for having helped to create it by the force of our own enthusiasm in recent years.

5. How did we get into this mess?

If we are to deal with those problems properly, we need to try to understand how we have got into this mess in the first place. I would suggest that there are two main causes of our present dilemma.

First, we have succumbed to the myth of reality. Nothing, we are always told when we question the preservation of yet another ship, can beat the magic of the real thing! Indeed, nothing can. But what exactly is "real" in this context?

- Is the VICTORY real, with her teak sides, synthetic rigging and her steel masts anchored firmly in their concrete beds on the floor of her dry dock?

- Is the ALLIANCE real, stuck in midair on her concrete stilts and with large access holes cut in her sides?

- Is even the MARY ROSE real, in her dank spray-filled tent, separated from her visitors by a yawning chasm so that no-one can touch her, let alone walk on her unless they happen to be archaeologists.....or the heir to the throne?

The truth is that we need to be a little more careful in our definition of real. Surely the only real ship, the only truly authentic vessel, is one that is plunging through the seas, the wind whistling through the rigging, with her ship's company going about their tasks. As John Gardner wrote in the Wooden Boat in 1975, "Large vessels, no longer in use on the sea are, to a considerable extent, no longer vessels, and the experience they provide can only be a faint and distorted reflection of our maritime past" (6). Reality then, is an unattainable ideal and we have to accept that, however good our research, however thorough our restoration, in the end we are still only offering our visitors a product of compromise and artifice.

Second, we have got into trouble because we have allowed ourselves to become swept up and exploited by the current cult

of Heritage: that romantic and emotional worship of the past which is so distinctive a feature of our fin de siecle society. Heritage has replaced religion as the opium of the masses; it offers us a pretty-pretty, over-simplified view of the past as we would like it to have been - a picture exemplified in those sugary Hovis advertisements. The true synonym for 'heritage' is 'inheritance' - which is, of course, the sense in which I used the word in my title. But lately the word has been misused and progressively debased, so that we now have tourist information offices and shopping malls masquerading as "heritage centres". As that acerbic critic of Heritage, Robert Hewison, has put it, "The open page of History has become the closed book of Heritage" (7).

An essential part of this dangerous cult is the worship of objects. Longing to be immortal and doomed to die, we anthropomorphise objects in a desperate attempt to convince ourselves that it is we who are living on through them. We have come to believe that objects do not decay as we do, we have invested them with almost magical properties of survival; and as a result we have become obsessed with conserving them, even to the point of absurdity: forgetting that, as Robert Herrick put it, "Putrefaction is the end/ of all that Nature doth intend".

Now, the idea that ships have personalities is deeply embedded in the human psyche and so preserved ships have been

particularly susceptible to this misguided romanticism. As good historians, we must resist this trend. We must remind ourselves constantly that ships are not people; that the concept of a ship's personality is a myth - attractive indeed even seductive, but a myth nonetheless. Even the VICTORY, that great icon of British maritime pride - and deservedly so - even she did not herself "make history"; it was the people who sailed and fought her. In the end, it is they and not the artefact who are actually important.

If we can discipline ourselves to look at our subject in this dispassionate way; if, on the one hand, we can come out of the closet of "reality" and admit that every single ship preservation programme is a compromise between conservation and authenticity; and if, on the other, we can bring ourselves to acknowledge that, in the very last analysis they are only objects and treat them accordingly; then, I think, and only then, we can begin to talk sensibly about the rights and wrongs of preserving ships.

It is right that I should emphasise at this point that I am not decrying emotion and enthusiasm. I acknowledge that they are indispensable ingredients in any ship preservation programme. The commitment of individuals to a particular project is a priceless asset which must not be thrown away. But I am also convinced that, if it is to realise its full potential, such enthusiasm has to be channelled, to be guided by a detached

professionalism. Otherwise, we will end up with too many projects chasing too few resources and all that precious enthusiasm will be wasted.

6. Some solutions

So, finally, what then should we do? I suggest that we ought to commit ourselves to three main steps.

First, we should set about the task of redefining what we mean by "preservation". 100 years ago physical preservation, or drawings and paintings, were the only options open to our predecessors. But nowadays there are a number of other ways of preserving the past and we need to investigate them: whether it is by recording historic ships on film and in still photographs, or by taking detailed plans and converting them to computer graphics, or by taping the reminiscences of the people who actually sailed in them.

So far as wrecks are concerned, I suggest we need to be very wary indeed nowadays of raising them. The fact is that underwater camera and satellite-link technology now exists which renders the tearing of wrecks from their sea-beds as obsolete an operation as the ripping out of infected tonsils. Dr Robert Ballard (working, ironically, with Dr Margaret Rule of the MARY ROSE Trust!), has shown how these exciting new

gadgets can bring deep-sea wrecks right into the home or classroom in a most vivid and effective manner.

In the face of all these developments, to insist that "preservation" still means only the physical preservation of the ship in as close to its original form as possible, is as eccentric as it would be to claim that the only means of travelling from London to Brighton is on horseback! We need to embrace these alternative methods with open arms and to commit ourselves to finding out more about them and to investigating how they might, in some cases, be preferable to preserving the actual ship. Perhaps a future conference could be devoted to a exploration of these newer forms of preservation? *See N. Costum*

Second, I suggest that must all put our full support behind the new Historic Ships Preservation Committee, even if such support may lead to the questioning of a project that happens to be close to our own hearts. The Committee has two main purposes. First, it is preparing a national list of historic vessels and a national policy on ship preservation. Both are essential tools: for, only when we know exactly what is available for preservation, and how these available ships fit into the national picture, can we begin to make sensible judgements about what should be preserved. Second, the Committee is assembling the expertise that will enable them to give financial and technical advice to approved preservation projects and to support them in their attempts to raise funds.

I believe (and I realise that this will be a controversial suggestion) that until the Committee's list and policy have been prepared and agreed, there should be a moratorium on all new ship preservation projects.

Finally, I suggest that this national approach to ship preservation should be seen as only the first stage in the formulation of an international approach. The "Little Englander" attitude, which demands that Britain must have its own example of each type of ship must be thrown overboard along with all the other legacies of the misguided insularity of the Thatcher years. Telecommunications and air travel have made the world a small enough place for all countries to share in each other's heritage. In view of the WW2 destroyers that are preserved worldwide, we need to ask ourselves very carefully whether we need another one in Britain; as the USA has already saved the world's first nuclear-powered submarine, the USS NAUTILUS, we most certainly do not need to go through all the political and practical trauma of preserving an SSN in Britain - let alone a Polaris submarine as well! Our proceedings this weekend are held in association with of the World Ship Trust. If that title has any real meaning, we must promote a world view of our subject. In short, we must, each of us, be prepared to put our enthusiasm and our emotional commitment at the service of a greater and broader vision that looks far beyond the confines of our own pet project.

IMPLACABLE never again? I agree. Never again should we waste the time and talents of hard-pressed academics and the drive and enthusiasm of gifted volunteers on projects that have not been properly evaluated within the context of an agreed national policy. Never again should scarce and precious resources be poured down the throats of projects that have developed unquenchable thirsts for funds, because they were not first meticulously tested for their viability against agreed standards. And never again should we find ourselves forced to sink a historic ship, because we have taken her on without first ensuring that we have the means to provide not only for her restoration but for her long-term maintenance as well.

Colin White

Portsmouth, 29 October 1992

Notes

1. The quotations in this section are all from the Harold
Wyllie Papers: RNM 607/86 (91)
2. In fact, it was revealed during the lively discussion
following this paper that the World Ship Trust has a
further list of 400 names which it wishes to add!
3. These are HMS CAROLINE, HM Monitor M33 (MINERVA),
HMS BELFAST, HMS CAVALIER, HMS ALLIANCE,
HMS BRONINGTON, HMS ONYX, HMS OCELOT,
HMS PLYMOUTH.
4. In an unpublished address to the Maritime Curators' Group,
Hull, October 1992.
5. SPECTRE, P.H. 1981: The Issues of Maritime Preservation.
Wooden Boat 38, 37-45
6. GARDNER, J. 1975: Maritime Museums: obligations and
objectives. Wooden Boat 1 35-42
7. From an unpublished lecture given to the "Interpretation
in Museums" Conference, Warwick University, September
1988.