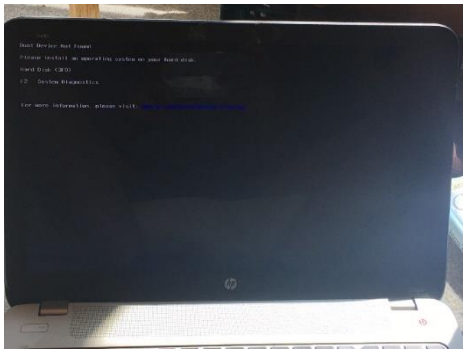
Charlie Carman, April to the start of May 2020

Living with lockdown and staying focussed.

I've learnt a lot about dear Bertha's modest history as a dragboat, and the world that she was built for. For example, Bridgwater docks used to have horizontally faced propellers at the bottom of the water that with the opening of the lower flood gates would help stimulate and move the mud towards the river. This in combination with Bertha's role would have led to a very efficient running dock.

From her connections to the great Brunel, to her role during the industrial revolution -which was a key part of the smooth and efficient running of Britain's trading ports- Bertha has proven exceedingly interesting to research.

I had nearly finished working on my Unit 1 draft when, due to some technical difficulties, I lost the majority of my work and was unable to make the deadline. This also caused multiple issues on the work front, but luckily, I was able to borrow my Sister's laptop to help me pick up the pieces and continue despite this hurdle.



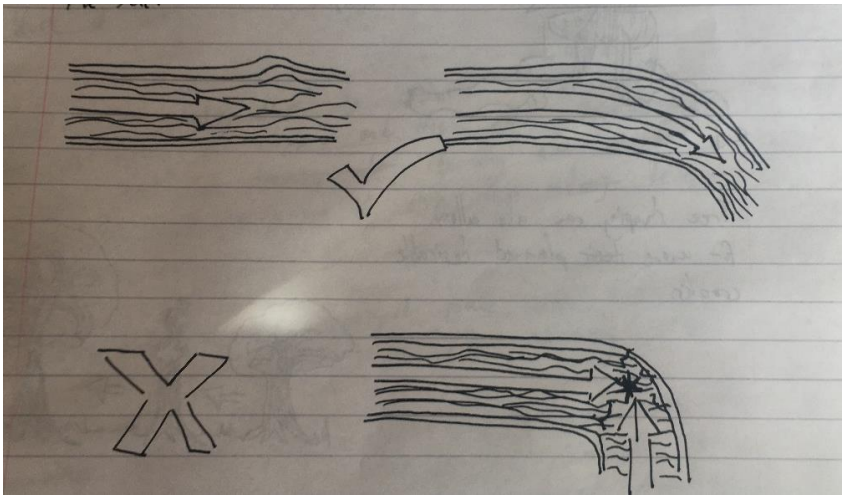
To help supplement my unit 1 research I also managed to read all of the Statement of Significance documents from the online suggested reading list on Blackboard. Coming across interesting vessels such as Massey Shaw, who saw service as a fire float on the Thames preventing huge amounts of damage in a 1936 fire.

I also learnt about the Cutty Sark's design and how she is just one of two composite ships left in the world. Composite meaning the combination of wood over a wrought iron frame. The wrought iron was made from 'Glasgow's best' which ironically was one of the worst types. I also learnt about how her designer, Hercules Linton, took inspiration from The Tweed, another clipper from the Willis trading fleet. The resemblance can be seen here.

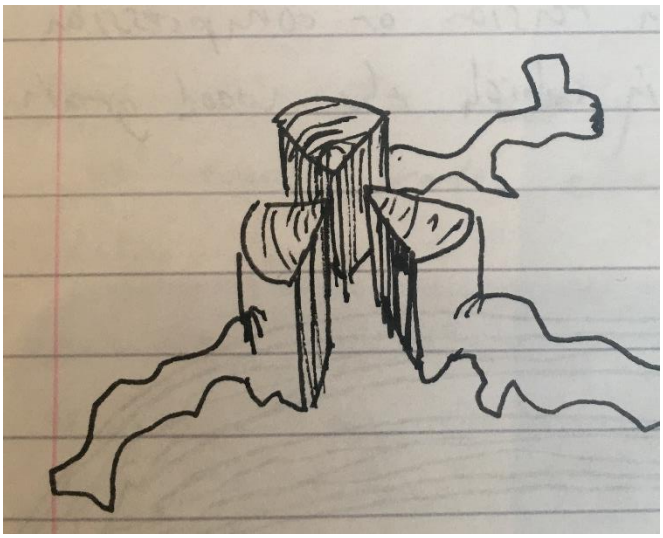
This has helped me understand what kind of structure and language is required to examine a vessel, in a detailed and precise manner. Very different to what I'm used to as a History student and something that requires some adjusting to on the literal front.

I was also prompted to investigate the vessel SS Shieldhall, which at first glance did not appeal to me. However, upon researching the vessel, learning about her past and the interesting route that her conservation has taken, I now think she is a fascinating case study that I will certainly be using for future units.

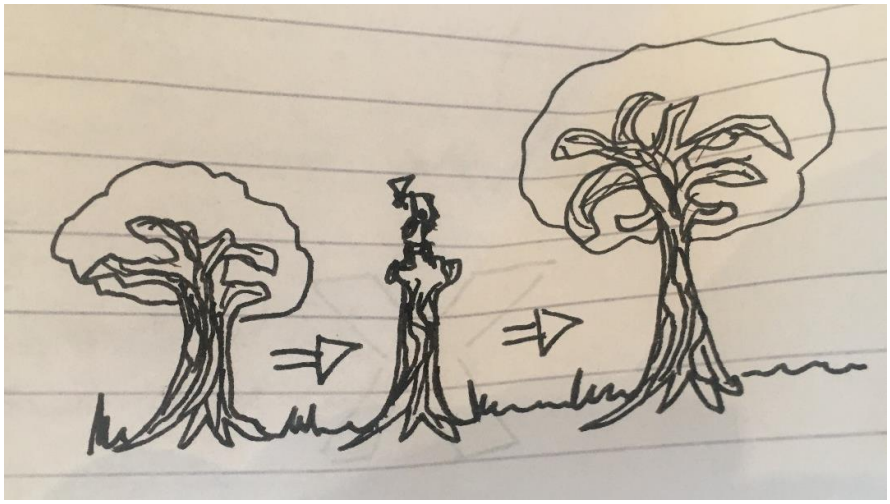
We were given the opportunity to meet and talk to the head engineer of SS Shieldhall, which was a great learning experience. We discussed how the conservation team decided to make SS Shieldhall an operational vessel and how this formed the central factor by which all future decisions would be made by. Decisions such as whether it was ok to use more practical and affordable alternatives as opposed to more traditional materials on the vessel. The key phrase being to ‘avoid irreversible’ decisions at all costs. Their goal is to keep her afloat and running for the next twenty-five years or more, so that many going forward can enjoy her.



I have also found myself pursuing odd and interesting areas that caught my curiosity. For example, after watching a short video on boat building during Nelsons day, I did some digging into knees, or ships knees. As the name suggests, these are sections of wood that naturally (or forcibly) curve to fit the changing shape of a ship's hull. Grown knees are the most sought after, as the natural curvature of the grain means that the wood can hold and take much more pressure when under stress.



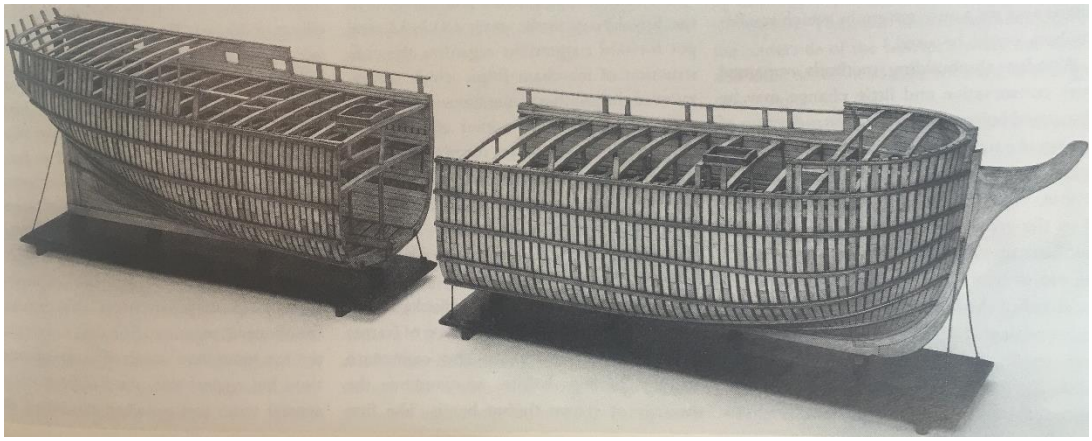
There are several different ways of obtaining grown knees, that often depend on the wood type. Oaks for example can ideally be split at the sump into sections, as its roots bend and curve in the required fashion.



Alternatively, as was a common practise in Nelsons day trees can be adopted for future use. This process is called tree shaping. An adopted tree would have its branches chopped off in order to encourage more curving branches to sprout from the top of the tree. This tree, however, would only yield its benefits three or four generations into the future. Meaning this process was naturally a very forward thinking one, as it provided and made sure future generations would have what they may need, rather than only considering what is needed for the now.

This research really appealed to me and I hope to further my understanding of this process. It also seems relevant now more than ever that we are careful about what we chop down for today, thinking about future generations and what they might need.

In the background I have also started reading David MacGregors Fast Sailing Ships, which has been an interesting read. Something that stood out for me is how restrictions had to be placed on privately built vessels during the 18th century, to combat the rise in small and fast smuggler ships, which as MacGregor argues, were the first Clippers. This is fascinating to learn about and something that I had never thought about prior to this project. The current section I am reading looks at the evolution of ship designs. Which came about mainly through the building of models, as most ship builders could not understand the complicated Lines Planes produced by the admiralty.



Following all my reading, I figured that maybe a more research based future role or work in a museum may suit me. This led me to join two online courses on just that. One focussing on handling a collection, and how to go about making and preparing an exhibition. The second on museums as learning spaces, focusing on areas such as how the public perceive exhibits and why they come in the first place. It's interesting to look into, and I think an essential part that must be taken seriously if we are to engage the next generation with the maritime world.

Not all good news however, although my workbench finally arrived… the nuts and bolts to hold it together had not been included. I'm now in the process of returning it. However, a

couple of weeks ago I received a care package from home, containing spare blocks of wood, some gouges and a handmade mallet which all belonged to my Grandad. I hope to use these with a (functioning) workbench to make some half models of ships from their line's plans. This is to help me understand ship designs better, so as I read about them, I can hopefully knock up a few standout designs. I've always liked carving and given the circumstances, this is the closest I may get for some time to genuine woodwork, so I'll take it gladly.

I am now in the process of waiting for a second workbench to arrive, so in the meantime I tried out some carving. Only basic mind. After searching through many (American) tutorials I felt I had a fair understanding and so started sharpening a few gouges with a small wet stone. This was certainly a trial and error process, trying to find the bevel took some getting used to and required a sixth sense to reach. But eventually I had (semi) sharpened tools so I started tapping away at a block of wood. Without a work bench, I tried to invent a get around alternative to some mixed success… the chair now no longer stands.

Going forward, I plan to keep on working with the online courses, to finally get Unit 1 completed and to continue carving (hopefully with an actual workbench).

09/05/2020