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Ship and Boat Preservation - A place for original fabric

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In this paper I would like to make a few points about what seems to be an apparent move away from treating important ships and boats in the manner of traditional museum objects. I believe it is possible that the pendulum has swung too far and that original parts of our maritime heritage may have come under threat. There is a need for recognition of the value of a range of different approaches to preserving the maritime past.

Recent decades have seen an explosion in the number of heritage preservation projects, and ships are no exception to this. Only a glance at the rise in the numbers listed between the two editions of the International Register of Historic Ships will support this, and in addition to these "registered" craft there are a very large number of smaller craft which have been restored and are sailed by amateur enthusiasts. It is true, as you are no doubt aware, that standards for the preservation of large object and ships are being set. The United States now has the admirable "Standards for Historic Vessel Preservation Projects" from the National Park Service Maritime Initiative. The Australian National Maritime Museum has adapted the ICOMOS charter for the "Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance" to work for their historic craft in a similar manner. While in the United Kingdom the Museum and Galleries Commission has recently produced the "Standards in the Museum Care of Larger and Working Objects" which within a broad scope attempts to cater for the needs of ships and boats. All of these documents call for thorough and objective assessment of the historical significance of the ship or object before a decision for its future treatment is taken.

This call has been made before, For example by Basil Greenhill and Revell Carr at the 1981 ICMM conference. Without such prior planning many enthusiastic preservation projects can and have foundered with the loss of money, enthusiasm and often of the ship herself. This process of careful prior planning and assessment for any project is one which most people here would certainly encourage and I know that the new National Historic Ships Committee in the UK is looking to formalise such a process to help it with its deliberations as a national advisory body. This is very welcome.

However, using a formal system like this is not nearly as straightforward as it may seem. Any historic ship project must seek to justify itself fully, and some measure of just how important a vessel may be should serve to drive the course of the ensuing preservation programme. Determining an objective way of measuring the historic significance of a ship or boat is indeed a difficult and invidious task, but it is no longer sufficient to claim significance and therefore importance for any one vessel on the basis of one or two parameters only. A ship is not necessarily significant because she is old, or because she is the first or last or the sole survivor of a type. None of these parameters can stand alone. Significant ships can be young as well as old, and, unless other special factors are involved, the first or last vessel of a class of similar ships is no more or less significant than any of her sisters in between. Moreover, the sole survivor of a type of vessel is only significant if it can be shown both that the type itself is significant, and that the vessel is truly representative of that type.

Every vessel should be subjected to a small range of key questions, and it is only the combined result of these which can give a less subjective view of their significance and thus move towards a national or maybe even an international standard for significance. At Liverpool we are introducing an assessment formula based around nine key questions. The

first seven help to identify the significance of a ship or boat, while the last two seek to judge how feasible a preservation plan might be. The questions are:

1. Does the vessel have a known national or regional role in British maritime history?
2. Does the vessel have important intrinsic historical associations?
3. Has the vessel made a contribution to maritime technological, commercial or social development?
4. Is the vessel unique or rare?
5. Is the vessel truly representative of a type, and how important is the type?
6. How much fabric survives that is original to the working life of the vessel?
7. Has the vessel been subject to good quality authentic restoration or conservation?

8. Are there any external factors which affect the likelihood of the long-term survival of the vessel?
9. Does the vessel contain features and/or materials which make her survival more difficult?

Only the overall combination of answers, and not any single answer, can actually govern an acquisition or conservation decision for any individual vessel. This approach can be formalised further by scoring the vessel for each question on a scale of 1-10. If required, the relative importance of a question can be decided by giving each a numerical weight and the result of multiplying the score with the weight can be used to find a total numerical assessment score for every vessel.

This may seem to some an excessively rigid and pedantic way of looking at historic ships. However, it is only through a standardised process such as this that an element of objectivity can creep into the way we assess them and so begin to compare the relative significance of each. Furthermore, no such scheme can be run by a machine, for it will always depend upon the individual curator or their equivalent to express an informed opinion on each question. The system allows us to express opinions in a standard way and on a standard basis, but they will always be opinions.

Once a ship or boat has been subjected to this interrogation, decisions have to be made about her future. Should she be preserved, or restored, or conserved? But just what do we mean by "preservation", or "restoration" or "conservation"? The title for this conference is "Technical Aspects of Maintaining, Repairing and Preserving Historically Significant Ships". This suggests that maintenance, repair and preservation are three distinct aspects of the treatment of historic ships. I suspect that we are all frequently guilty of using such terms as these indiscriminately and without real thought as to what each might imply. There are a number of different ways in which a museum or other organisation can deal with a ship. Some ships are resurrected into operational life, others may become floating harbourside exhibits, while others may be given the full status of museum objects and perhaps housed under cover. Each of these types of treatment are frequently described as preservation or restoration but they are often very different activities. The process of returning an old ship to operational status requires extensive re-building, particularly if she is to comply with all the necessary safety standards which have been introduced in recent years. The result may not necessarily be truly authentic, nor contain very much of the original. By contrast in a national museum, a great premium is placed upon the preservation of the maximum amount of unaltered original material. The resulting vessels are very different in their ethos and probably in their long term future too. Is it fair therefore to consider these examples all as "preserved ships"? I suggest that we need to be able to distinguish these different approaches to ship

preservation more publicly, for this may increase understanding of the justification for each type of approach.

Each of the published standards includes a definition of terms for the various types of ship preservation activity. For example, the US "Standards for Historic Vessel Preservation Projects" defines *preservation* as "the act or process of applying measures to sustain the existing form, integrity, and material of a vessel. It may include initial stabilisation work, where necessary, as well as on-going maintenance." By necessity each of the terms used within the definition have to be further defined separately. For example, "integrity" is defined as "the authenticity of a vessel's historic identity, as evidenced by the survival of characteristics such as plan, hull form, rigging, use of materials and/or craftsmanship, which existed during the vessel's historic period." I find these standards extremely useful, but although available to people in the non-museum sector, from the esoteric tone and style it seems clear that they are aimed primarily at the professional curator or conservator. These academic definitions do seem to work well for the larger institutions and I would be the last person to suggest their removal, but the non-professional can easily be alienated, and there is a need for a simpler and more popular definition of the basic ship preservation concepts. Only when a set of terms is accepted which can be widely understood and remembered will there be greater understanding between the aims of museum staff and the non-institution based preservationists. It is important to know just what everybody means when they use a particular term. I would like to suggest that there should be three basic terms whose meaning is generally logical and implicit within themselves. The terms could be *preservation*, *restoration*, and *reconstruction* and they might be defined thus:

Preservation means	to maintain the existing fabric of a vessel as it stands
Restoration means	to return the existing fabric to a known earlier state without introducing any new material
Reconstruction means	to return the existing fabric to a known earlier state by introducing new material or old but non-original material

These definitions require no further definition of their parts and can be easily remembered. Using them can describe the essential differences in the alternative approaches to historic ship projects. They are not mutually exclusive in any one vessel, and they can stand alongside the existing museum based definitions. They are intended as definitions for everybody, for it is outside the world of the larger museum that most controversy seems to arise. Fundamental differences in approaches to ship preservation are hidden by misuse of terms. It seems to me that there are two main stumbling blocks to improved understanding between ship preservationists. These are the concept of traditional on-going maintenance, and the definition of what it is that we are trying to preserve.

The first of these hinges on the future maintenance of a vessel whether in private or museum hands. Many organisations maintain historic vessels using traditional boatbuilding and related skills, and often such vessels are intended to be displayed afloat or even operate. Accordingly they usually require extensive reconstruction. However extensive work programmes along these lines are often based upon the common idea that since a ship or boat would have been constantly repaired and maintained throughout its working life, then it is quite natural that this process should be continued.

The very nature of on-going repair during the working life of a ship required the removal and replacement of weak and substandard material. Gradually less and less of the ship as built by her builder survives within the structure and thus an old and much repaired ship can contain little or nothing of the ship as built. HMS Victory is probably a good example of this when the relationship between the vessel that was launched in 1765, the

vessel which fought at Trafalgar and the vessel which was dry-docked in Portsmouth is examined. This calls into question the "originality" of the much repaired vessel and is often used to justify the continuation of traditional maintenance. However, it is important to remember that although some points in the history of an individual ship may become dominant factors in their preservation, such as the Battle of Trafalgar for HMS Victory, in many cases the whole of the working life of a vessel is important. Changes and adaptations apparent in the structure all bear witness to the role and use of the vessel throughout her lifetime in the "real world". Even when they are not documented elsewhere, these aspects should form an integral part of the history of any vessel. It is only when the vessel moves out of the context of her working environment and into the ship preservation world that a great change occurs in her status. The vessel crosses the threshold into an artificial world and becomes a museum object, an item for preservation and interpretation, even when she is not owned by a museum as such. In effect once this threshold has been crossed she starts a new life and builds up a new history. Such a break is real, however strongly the intention to keep a vessel in her original role.

In strict museum terms the "original" vessel is the vessel in whatever condition she entered the museum collection. However it has to be recognised that it is always desirable but not always possible to collect a ship or boat at the very moment when she retires from active life. Many ships and boats are acquired by museums and others some time after they have finished their main working lives. They may have been abandoned for some years or perhaps purchased by a potential restorer who then failed to raise sufficient funds for the project. At Liverpool we have examples from both ends of the scale. The museum has been very fortunate in acquiring the Pilot Cutter Edmund Gardner after her last service directly from the Liverpool pilotage authority and she is essentially untouched and entirely original. Her conservation programme is geared to preserving the maximum amount of original material as possible.

On the other hand our schooner De Wadden has faced a more chequered career. She worked in the Irish Sea trades for forty years and her owners and crews maintained her to a high standard throughout that time. In the early 1960s however she was sold to a Scottish owner who proceeded to alter her extensively so that she could load and carry sand for a building business; she was also used for angling trips and made a number of television appearances. In fact her outward appearance when she first came to the museum thoroughly belied her origins and the largest, most significant part of her history. For the final twenty years of her life in the real world she was poorly maintained and intermittently used in various nondescript roles. The museum made the decision accordingly that her working life would be considered to run from 1917 until the end of 1961 when she was sold out of trade. This means that the alterations and remains of twenty years of neglect and rust are not considered to be part of her history but consequences of a period of limbo before she could be acquired by the museum. In fact if the museum had existed in 1961 then it is likely that attempts would have been made to acquire her then. In this way we try to identify the significant working lives of our vessels upon which the conservation plan is operated rather than have a blanket rule which treats everything prior to entry into the museum as part of the vessel's significance. This course of action has allowed us to restore and reconstruct the full masts and rigging of De Wadden while preserving within the dry dock the maximum amount of original hull material and interior fittings.

However, after crossing the threshold into the museum the De Wadden can no longer be subject to the traditional on-going maintenance process. All the pre 1961 material is treated as an original and intrinsic part of the object and any changes to that material are only undertaken after very careful consideration. Such decisions can only be based upon the

previously undertaken assessment of the vessels historic significance according to the more objective criteria mentioned above, and not upon a dogmatic adherence to the traditional maintenance process. Such adherence is essentially a sentimental approach which does not really address the question of just what is it that we are trying to preserve? Are we trying to preserve a maintenance tradition or an original object? It is not true that the preservation of the on-going repair process constitutes the preservation of the ship itself. For in the main structural survey of the schooner it was estimated that at least 70% of the surviving steelwork would have to be replaced if she were to be returned to operational condition.

It is not the method employed but this original material which is our true link between the past and the present. Continual repair and replacement in this manner leaves vessels bereft of material original to their working lives. Such vessels are essentially rebuilt within the same space which the original once occupied. To treat an extensive rebuild as if it were the original vessel is, I believe, difficult to justify. At my last museum the Shetland fourern Swallow was offered to the collection. She dated from 1895 and the owner, who was the grandson of the original builder, proudly explained to me how she was still in perfect working order. In fact he had rebuilt her to the extent that only one plank and a part of one frame existed from the working life of the original vessel. My explanation to the museum trustees for the refusal of the offer consisted of asking this question - If the restorer had independently built a new fourern into which he had subsequently inserted one plank and one frame from an original fourern, should the result be considered as a vessel eligible for the museum collection? For this is essentially what had happened to Swallow. The only difference being that Swallow occupied the same space as the original. The answer was that she should not be accepted into the collection of original vessels, but that she should be owned by the museum and operated as a demonstration craft without restriction on her subsequent maintenance treatment.

Frequently it is said, and I am sure that you have all heard people say, that the only way to preserve historic ships and especially small boats is to rebuild and use them. This is essentially fallacious and begs the question of just what is it that we are trying to preserve. It is here that I believe that the pendulum has swung too far away from the strict preservation of maritime artefacts. For what is actually being said is that central to the preservation of a ship or boat is the idea or the cultural concept behind her. That is to say preserving the activity and not the object. Nothing can exist in a vacuum and ships and boats like any other historic object can only be judged in terms of the requirements for which they were built and the resources with which they were built. Yet the artificial world of the restored ship or boat whether in a museum or not can never entirely recreate the world for which the vessel was made. Can a museum really represent the extreme working conditions of a beach launched fishing lugger landing in the teeth of a gale? Perhaps to render such conditions accurately within a museum would provide such an unpleasant experience that no public would dream of paying for it! Using an original boat rather than an accurate replica does not significantly add to the authenticity or effectiveness of this interpretation, while in the process it frequently destroys large parts of the only real link with the past, which is that of the original material within the object.

There is no real basis for saying that operational or even floating craft are more valuable than originals. We need truly original craft for what they can show us about the past and for their ability to excite the public. Only original vessels can provide the solid evidence for understanding the way they have been created and how they might be recreated. From this evidence, especially in the absence of "as built" plans, spring the authentic replicas which can help make a contribution to the interpretation of the original.

We have a duty to preserve significant aspects of the maritime past as much as to interpret it. The preservation of important boats in museum collections has often been described disparagingly as "fossilisation". I would prefer to call it "suspended animation" and do not believe static displays need to be so negatively described. Some of the finest examples of preserved ships would fall into this category. The best examples must be Wasa in Stockholm and Mary Rose at Portsmouth. The famous Viking ships at Roskilde and in Oslo are also displayed in this way, as is the Kyrenia ship. The Roskilde vessels are particularly interesting because they have been displayed within a framework which immediately indicates how the vessels may have looked when they were complete, while outside in the fjord replica vessels are regularly sailed. This is surely close to achieving good interpretation without compromising the integrity of the original craft. It should be remembered too that a floating vessel can only be seen down to the waterline, while the important underwater shape of a vessel can be seen in its entirety when she is ashore.

A common deniminator among these examples is that they are all from underwater sites. Waterlogged wood does of course require very particular conservation treatment and none of these vessels has any material which would serve as a foundation for re-building them. However this is not the reason that they have been housed as preserved objects under cover. They are there because they have been assessed as sufficiently important to warrant such care, for that is why the vessels were raised from the seabed in the first place.

It is no longer the case that degraded vessels that are not from an underwater context cannot be preserved in a meaningful way. At Liverpool we have preserved a late nineteenth century pulling boat from North Wales in a rigorous conservation based manner. The Ladies Gig has been painstakingly dismantled and reassembled. The very minimum of material has been replaced in order to maintain her structural integrity and the new material is clearly differentiated from the original by a different colour. These techniques are a long way from traditional repair and maintenance skills and she is 95% original. The eighteenth century pulling boat in the collection will be treated in the same way and both are destined for display in a new gallery.

It is important to understand that there is no suggestion that major reconstruction and the preservation of skills rather than of original objects is in any way invalid. Instead there needs to be a balance between the different approaches to ship preservation. It should be clear that different ships require different solutions for their preservation, each of which is based entirely upon the assessment made of their historical significance. I believe the Finnish model could be very useful. The Museum Ship Committee of the Finnish Ministry of Education has proposed that eight vessels should be declared as "museum" ships. These are vessels of national importance which will be preserved out of government funds to the highest standards. In parallel, a "tradition" ship register has been set up. This term is applied to privately owned vessels of valuable maritime historical interest that are being used and kept in a state of repair in keeping with their status. Close on 200 ships are earmarked for the register all of which will have been assessed according to a range of criteria to determine their significance in Finnish maritime history. Once on the register these vessels are eligible for financial support to help with maintenance and restoration supplemented by tax concessions. The committee also proposes to provide training courses for the repair of wood and metal vessels. Thus in Finland the distinction between the museum based ships and the tradition ships is based entirely on historic significance.

We should then provide a balance of approaches to the presentation of important artefacts, and we should make room in our collections for reconstructed, restored, and preserved ships and boats.

Summary of points:

1 The importance of basing ship projects upon objective assessment of historic significance
2 The need for popular and widely understood terminology
3 The real links with the past provided by original vessels
4 The significance of the working life of a vessel
5 The need for a balance between preserving objects and preserving skills and activities