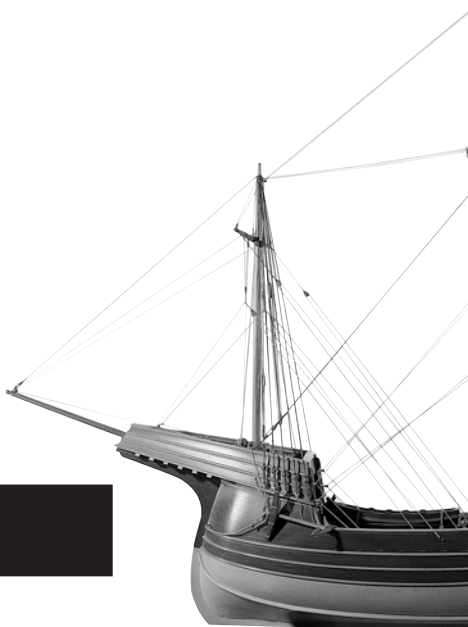


## Historic and Significant Ships and Boats. Preservation versus Use

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There is a subject that almost inevitably causes righteous passion in those holding opposing opinions whenever it is discussed. The subject is «should historic and significant vessels be restored so they can continue sailing, or should they be conserved and displayed indoors or in dry-docks». There is usually no middle ground on this issue, with arguments both for and against presented in barely suppressed fury. I know, having been involved for several years in what may become the most thorough and exhaustive inquiry regarding how we should treat a historic and significant vessel. I speak of the *Asgard*, that evocative wooden ketch, designed and built by Colin Archer in 1905. Her history is well known to those who sail, or are familiar with European maritime and political history. She has particular historic relevance in Ireland. Her owner, Erskine Childers, author of *The Riddle of the Sands*, superb yachtsman, war-hero, patriot and ultimately a martyr in the struggle for Irish independence, saw to that. For the few brief years, between 1969 and 1974, *Asgard* also served as Ireland's first national sail training vessel. From 1979 to this year, she has been displayed under cover in a courtyard at Kilmainham Jail Museum, Dublin.

The issues that surround *Asgard* apply also to most vessels deemed significant, and a consideration of those issues will strike a chord amongst all who care for unique and historic craft. *Asgard* is suffused with history and has survived with a hull that is approximately 90% original, including her wooden deck, in place now almost a century. A passionate debate has ensued over the past decade on whether she should be conserved ashore or restored to sailing condition. Two opposing groups continue to make their sincere appeals, and each are claiming that they are right. A decision, in 2000, to release her from Government control to the group advocating restoration to sail has led to a growing and vocal opposition to her proposed restoration as the reality of what will happen to her becomes known.

In *Asgard's* case, it would seem obvious that she be conserved. She is both historically and structurally important, and is a designated significant archaeological object. She retains the great majority of her original built

structure. If she is conserved, all that original material would be saved. With missing components replicated, she has the potential to become the majestic and evocative centrepiece of a gallery dedicated to her fascinating history.

If *Asgard* is restored to sail, she will, by necessity, lose the majority of her original structure. The issue has focused the minds of many in Ireland, even to the highest political levels. Government Ministers and civil servants alike have, for the first time, engaged with the horrors of that scourge of sailors (and bread-winner of shipwrights), the dreaded «Nail Sickness» -the destructive result of the interaction of wood and metal in water. Survey reports have soberly focused minds on the reality behind the deceptively sound appearance of her structure -a reality of corroding, disintegrating metal and degraded wood.

Over-riding all is the engagement with the words conservation and restoration. One would never foresee such confusion as caused by these two words. Many believe them both to mean the same thing, a protective process perhaps, or what is done to works of art and other important objects to save them. Conservation does indeed signify protection and care, and is the overriding approach taken in museums to protect and preserve objects. Restoration, however, is a much-misused word that, in reality, can mean destruction. But, usually destruction smothered with soothing words and cloaked actions, particularly when concerning ships and boats. Now, you see the old boat being taken to a boat-yard, then, you see the wonderful restored boat emerging. The reality that there may be no more than a few pieces of the original structure left is seldom considered. Restoration is replication by stealth.

Those of us who care for old vessels know the reality of restoration; the sobering effect of finding the optimistic estimates of material replacement escalating, as reality dawns amidst the removal of planks, the opening up of frames or on the arrival of the plating ultrasonic tests. The rusted fastenings and fittings, the wood and metal that are beyond saving, finally become reality. A reality far from the preceding optimistic and heady discussions that saw only the vessel sail on a sparkling sea. The last

Arklow trading schooner, *De Wadden*, a steel vessel built in the Netherlands in 1917, now conserved at Merseyside Maritime Museum, was considered for restoration to sail amidst enthusiastic and optimistic forecasts. Ultrasonic tests of her hull and deck suggested a replacement of some 80% of her plating. We changed our minds.

Restoring old ships and boats and continuing to use them is a commendable practice that must be encouraged. It helps promote and keep alive the related archaic skills in an increasingly technologically complex world. The practice also keeps alive the skills engaged in using these vessels and in caring for them, as can be seen from the many Festivals of the Sea that keep tradition alive around our coasts. Vessels such as the Liverpool tug *Brocklebank*, based at Merseyside Maritime Museum and run entirely by volunteers, is typical of craft that are not in themselves important, but represent a genre and encourage and keep alive traditional maritime skills. A contrasting example is the barque *Kaskalot*, a commercially run vessel that is available for charter. Both vessels are working beyond what would be seen as their natural lifespan through committed volunteers and owners who maintain them and keep them sailing. They, and many others, have an important role to play in presenting, in a working context, the many ships and boats that typify maritime technology.

However, there must be careful thought given to vessels that are more than just old and interesting, and from which some further use can be gleaned. By all means, restore old ships and boats, but think very carefully indeed of doing the same to craft that we, as museum conservators and curators, have designated as being unique and historically or structurally significant. If we continue to promote the restoration and use of such vessels, we will eventually lose that which we set out to preserve and protect. For one thing is certain, in virtually all restoration projects carried out on both wooden and metal craft, a great deal of original material is lost and replaced with new. This is not done simply to make a sounder vessel or for aesthetic reasons. It is done because marine safety demands it. The desire to retain as much original material as possible can be over-ridden by the

reality of vessels in which wood has degraded or metal plating is worn and pitted. It is reality that causes the loss of original material. The reality of a degradable object having spent too long in an inhospitable and destructive environment.

Some would say that such loss of material does not really matter -that ships and boats have material replaced throughout their lives. This is only partly true; a great many of the vessels that form museum collections are predominately original. It is that originality that confers status on craft that are historically or structurally important. In a historic context, the original material provides a direct physical link to the period or events with which it is associated. In structurally important craft, that same material is the means by which we gain knowledge of form and usage and of the development of maritime technology, be it national or regional. If we alter or remove original material, we compromise uniqueness and authenticity and profoundly alter the status of the vessel

concerned. We can also lose a wealth of information contained in a vessel's original fabric. This can include the human element of those who built the vessel. Doubt over the authenticity of several deck-beams in *Asgard* was resolved by the finding of faded, pencilled text on an almost inaccessible beam surface, proclaiming 'Pall Gunlarsen, Laurvik 1905'. This person proved, through the Colin Archer archive, to be a shipwright in the Archer yard a century ago. Other markings found identify periods of alteration and maintenance from 1929 to 1972. The belief that a Victorian gig at Merseyside Maritime Museum was an unaltered original was proven incorrect

by the finding, on the removal of layers of coatings, that seating and rowing positions had been altered. All such information can be lost or not realised during a process of restoration.

In the case of *Asgard*, restoration will mean the removal of all hull-planking, 80% of which is original, including the bronze nails and juniper treenail fastenings. The potential for frame loss is also great, given the effect of corroding metal. Some of you may ask how a vessel fixed with bronze could have serious corrosion problems. Unfortunately, over her life, she was thrice re-fastened with galvanised steel nails. This mix of different metals, unbelievable

in a vessel of *Asgard's* status, has led to each plank on each frame having some four or five fastenings. The bronze, zinc and steel, all in close proximity, have, with the addition of seawater during her time afloat, produced hundreds of active and destructive batteries throughout the hull. Furthermore, her double frames have iron straps across each butt joint, all have degraded extensively. Such a scenario is depressingly common.

One just has to read the many articles in yachting magazines, detailing the restoration of an abundance of craft, to realise how destructive a threat to original material restoration can be.

An example is the Isle of Man half-decker *Master Frank*, the last of her type. The heading of the article on her restoration says that the vessel was formed of 582 separate parts and all but 32 have been replaced. The final ironic sentence says that she is now 102 years old and ready to enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The question of what she might be entering it as is neither asked nor answered. The last Irish Sea wooden trading schooner,



The Liverpool tug *Brocklebank* is maintained and sailed by The Friends of Merseyside Maritime Museum Volunteers.

*Kathleen & May*, is presently in the final stages of her second major restoration in 25 years. A restoration that will see very little of the original vessel left. Many of us are concerned over what is happening to such important vessels. Max Vinner, in a recent article on the working boat collection at Roskilde in *Maritime Life and Traditions* magazine, wonders if it is right to restore old boats and worries that we might well reduce or ruin the source value for posterity. Such concerns are growing as we see the effects of even occasional use on old important vessels. The point is ironically made when considering another Archer vessel, *Frithjof*, of 1891, which has lost virtually all of her original structure through restoration. Her original iron keel, the largest remaining part of her, stands abandoned on the site of Colin Archer's slipway at Larvik.

The loss of original material is not confined to vessels being restored to use. Most of the larger boats and ships being protected are permanently in the open, either ashore or in dry-docks, largely at the mercy of the weather. *HMS Victory*, has sustained a continuous loss of material through restoration. Such 18th Century ships of war are among the most complex wooden structures ever built, and contain an enormous amount of material. The fashion in which they are formed, of large wooden components, overlapping, converging, layered and bent to shape, with a complicated criss-cross of metal fastenings, creates enormous problems when rot and infestation occur.

When in commission, extensive refits and repairs would have reduced considerably the amount of original material present. However, replacement of material,

whether necessary through either damage or decay, would mainly have been carried out using materials and methods in keeping with the original specification. Given the materials involved -predominately oak, and in astounding quantities- it is now exceedingly difficult, and often impossible, to acquire the same specification material today, simply because of de-forestation in the past.

Modern methods of wood usage, such as glued laminations, are then resorted to in order to retain structural integrity. The *Victory* has undergone extensive replacement of her structure, mainly in the form of laminated components, often not of the same species of wood originally used. In such practice, we begin to tread a path that alters fundamentally the original specification for the ship. Over time, though visually correct, the structure and fabric of the vessel is altered. In essence, the 18<sup>th</sup> century ship is rebuilt using 20<sup>th</sup> century technology and materials.

This process may be unavoidable when dealing with very large wooden ships that are deteriorating, and perhaps, that must be accepted. However, it is of the utmost importance that sight of the original aim -to preserve the ship- is not lost and that fundamental changes to structural integrity are recorded fully, otherwise we eventually present as original what has, in fact, become a replica.

There are no easy options where ship conservation is concerned. Even the medium-sized, structurally sound 700 ton steel Liverpool Pilot cutter, *Edmund Gardner*, which is permanently dry-docked at Merseyside Maritime Museum, requires constant and continuous care just to prevent deterioration.



When compared to a large sailing ship such as the Clipper *Cutty Sark*, similarly dry-docked at Greenwich, the problems of care escalate enormously and extend across a greater range of expertise. The level of care necessary to stabilise and treat a ship can vary greatly from vessel to vessel and is much affected by condition and type. The *Cutty Sark*, for example, is a composite-built ship, with iron frames onto which her wooden planking is fixed, a form of construction that can cause seemingly irresolvable problems with wood/metal interaction, further aggravated by her outer copper sheathing.

The ideal solution for successfully conserving vessels is that taken with ships such as *Vasa*, in Sweden, *Mary Rose*, in England and *Fram*, in Norway, all of which are protected indoors. These large significant ships are housed in purpose-built buildings that can be exorbitantly expensive. Such structures are often beyond the reach of most museums, which, in reality, often struggle with inadequate funding and a dearth of conservator-craftspeople. However, there remains the wish to sail or motor a vessel – to see it alive on water, and this is our dilemma. How to sail and analyse unique, original and often fragile vessels and still meet our responsibilities in protecting them for the future.

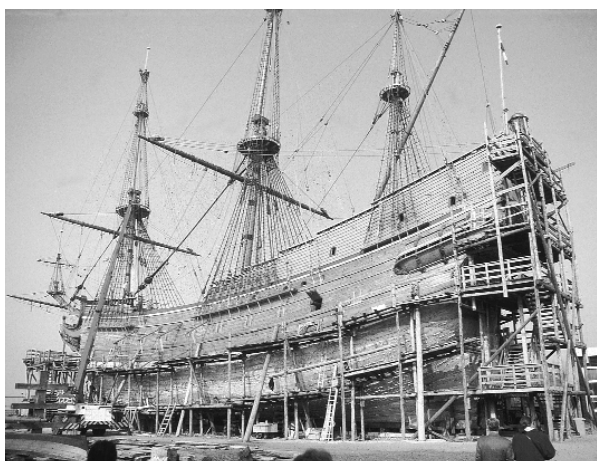
Vessels that fall into the unique and historically, or structurally significant category, are of the type that comprise the bulk of Maritime Museum Ship and Boat Collections. They collectively provide physical evidence of the development of maritime technology and of man as an innovator and wanderer. Examples in an International context include the Egyptian *Royal Barge of Cheops*, the oldest surviving intact wooden boat; the *Botik*, in St Pe-

tersburg, Peter the Great's boat that is said to have inspired the foundation of the Russian Navy; the several and varied Viking ships at Roskilde, in Denmark, and in Ireland, the unique 18<sup>th</sup> century French gig known as the *Bantry Boat*, in the Irish National Maritime Museum. Individually unique, they all have one thing in common – they are preserved indoors and on display; and more significantly, most have had replicas built for use. Indeed, one of the most prolific replica building programs is based on the *Bantry Boat*, with over 40 built internationally, as part of the Atlantic Challenge Foundation programme.

The approach of preserving original vessels and replicating them for analysis and use is best served at the Viking Ship Museum at Roskilde, Denmark, where an energetic policy of replication is pursued. In our own museums, and with our own unique craft, we need to consider emulating Roskilde's example, even if only on a small scale. For example, Merseyside Maritime Museum have built a replica of a small sailing dinghy that has local significance and was built at a once thriving Liverpool

boatyard, now long gone. By protecting and preserving the original craft, and using it as a data base from which to take lines, we created a replica that, by its existence, allows the original vessel to be protected without controversy.

Many will say that it is relatively easy to replicate small craft, but extremely costly to do so with large vessels where often the necessary infrastructure has to be created before building can begin. However, we need just consider the several large wooden replica ship projects completed throughout Europe, from the *Batavia* in Holland to the *Dunbrody* in Ireland, over the past two



decades. Each have greatly enhanced our knowledge of traditional ship-building and, more importantly, have promoted and popularised the skills that in some regions were close to being lost. Many of us will have witnessed the decline and loss of both ship and boat building yards over the past decades, and the decimation of associated skills and expertise, once regarded as timeless.

So what should we do about the vexed question of whether to restore or not? We should, without question continue to encourage the restoring of old ships and boats of character, particularly those that have further life in them and that will enhance our seafaring environment. But, we must also consider more carefully what we do with vessels that are more than just old or evocative. Those relatively few vessels, that are genuinely unique, are historically or structurally important or are, perhaps, the only survivor of a type, whether of local, national or international importance, we must protect. We must endeavour to protect them in the fullest sense, with particular emphasis put on conserving their original structural integrity. We must move away from restoring to use significant and historically irreplaceable vessels, typified by the *Asgard*, otherwise we diminish irreversibly their status and make them ordinary and irrelevant, with originality and integrity lost to posterity forever.

