Just how old is ICMM? One would think it is a question with a straightforward answer, but not so. Thanks to scattered archives and conflicting dates the actual birth date of ICMM was drifting in a fog of uncertainty until 2011 when then ICMM Secretary General Stuart Parnes was put on the trail.

Here is the interesting tale he uncovered.

Revell Carr, former President of both Mystic Seaport and ICMM, provided this first account, and this accompanying photo.

“I can indeed recount the conception, gestation, and somewhat awkward birth of the ICMM. Waldo Johnston, then Director of Mystic Seaport, had made a trip to Europe during the late 60’s to study ship preservation as the future care of the Charles W. Morgan was being determined.

During that trip Waldo had met Basil Greenhill and later invited him to be the guest speaker at the 1969 Annual Meeting of Members of Mystic Seaport. Basil stayed with Waldo and his wife Ellie prior to the meeting and the two men discussed the idea of an international maritime museum organization. They determined that it had a chance of succeeding IF the National Maritime Museum on one side of the Atlantic and Mystic Seaport on the other sponsored the development of the organisation. Basil and Waldo unveiled the concept at the Mystic meeting. August, 1969. It was determined that the first gathering of museums, sponsored by Mystic Seaport and NMM Greenwich, should be held in Greenwich three years later, in 1972, and so the gestation took those three years.

And now, for the awkward birth. At that time NMM Greenwich was in a seething controversy with the San Francisco Maritime Museum over the paddle-tug RELIANT. The essence of the feud was that Greenwich was supposed to take possession of RELIANT when she concluded service at the end of 1969.

On Christmas Day 1969, while the Greenwich staff were enjoying their Christmas holiday, some people showed up at the residence of RELIANT ‘s owner with a briefcase full of cash and saying they were there to execute the purchase. The owner thought things were irregular and contacted Greenwich, which said: “NO, those were not their representatives.” They turned out to be agents for the San Francisco Maritime Museum who wanted to spirit the vessel out of England and eventually to San Francisco. VERY hard feelings lingered long after that event.

Basil/Greenwich refused to have anything to do with the San Francisco Maritime Museum. Therefore, that first meeting in 1972, co-sponsored by NMM Greenwich and Mystic Seaport, was restricted to ‘the maritime museums of the Atlantic basin’, thus keeping the San Francisco contingent at bay (San Francisco Bay, that is). I, as Mystic Seaport Curator, attended that first meeting along with Waldo, Maynard Bray and John Gardner.

At that first meeting, the real organisation of the ICMM took place and the issue of being global rather than restricted to the Atlantic Basin determined. That is why the ICMM by-laws show a date of 1973, as they were drawn-up subsequent to the 1972 gathering and adopted by the ICMM Executive Committee in 1974. The first formal meeting of the International Congress of Maritime Museums as we know it now took place in Oslo in 1975, and the following meeting was at Mystic Seaport in 1978.”

And then John Robinson, who for decades has been a leader in British and European ship preservation, added another piece of the puzzle:

“I was privileged to be at that Greenwich gathering, since it opened on the very day that I joined the staff at Glasgow Museums as Deputy Keeper of Technology, and hence reported for duty several hundred miles away in Greenwich. My future Head of Dept in Glasgow, Tony Browning, was there, as were Alan Pearsall, Philip Annis, John Munday and Alan McGowan, all of NMM, plus of course Waldo Johnson and Basil Greenhill. The latter had invited various Scandinavian specialists including as I recall, Ole Crumlin-Petersen and Arne-Emil Christensen. Howard Chapelle was also there.

Among those with more than a rudimentary sense of geography, there was polite amusement that the ‘Atlantic Basin’ that defined the catchment for the conference was stretched to embrace the Israeli Maritime Museum in Haifa. Its Director, Ari ben Ali, amused us with his anecdote of the two young Israeli men reporting for conscription into the Israeli Navy. When the recruiting officer briskly asked one of them “Can you swim, lad?” his friend quipped “There, I told you they haven’t any ships.”

In the margins of the conference, we heard one side of the paddle tug saga summarised by Revell. Knowing that two such tugs were then ceasing service on the River Tyne, and that Greenwich’s interest was in modifying one for indoor display as what Basil Greenhill described as ‘the world’s largest ship in a bottle’, it seemed reasonable to some of us that the tug in better condition (RELIANT), should be made available to San Francisco, where Karl Kortum had been supportive of UK efforts to recover the remains of SS GREAT BRITAIN from the Falklands.

Instead, RELIANT went to the Thames to be partially dismantled for installation within the Neptune Hall at Greenwich. The San Francisco team boldly took possession of EPPLETON HALL, loaded her with coal and sailed/steamed her across to Panama and on to San Francisco, where I was happy to see her in 1997. RELIANT is no more (apart from a section of one paddle wheel), having been scrapped when the Neptune Hall was redeveloped a few years ago.

To someone like me, then comparatively new to the world of international museum hospitality, the closing dinner made a lasting impression. Within one of the display galleries we ate generous helpings of roast beef, accompanied by distinguished claret. I remember listening to the eloquent after-dinner musings of Baron Rubin de Cervin, director of the Naval Museum in Venice. Within gravy-splashing range of my table, the twin balance arms of the Harrison No. 2 chronometer oscillated hypnotically, and there may even have been a string trio playing in the background. Conservators' orthodoxies would probably forbid such an event today. But I am reminded of that memorable evening whenever I hear of Harrison's chronometers. It provided euphoria for all the senses – as any museum should."

Past Presidents of ICMM *(and year of election)*:

Basil Greenhill 1975
Jules Van Beylen 1981
Revell Carr 1984
Bard Kolltveit 1987
Richard Foster 1993
Kevin Fewster 1996
Peter Neill 1999
Klas Helmerson 2002
Morten Hahn-Pedersen 2005
Frits Loomeijer 2009