

## ICMM 2009 - Esbjerg

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**Title: *Operational heritage – economic millstone or opportunity for reaching new audiences***

The World Ship Trust has on its international register of historic ships over 2,000 vessels, worldwide.

Not all are in maritime museums, of course, but a good number are. That's a lot of vessels!

There was a period, which really got going in the second half of the 20th Century, when it seemed everyone wanted to exhibit historic vessels. They were regarded by maritime museums as ideal and, indeed, necessary instruments for telling the maritime story and attracting audiences.

The result was that many vessels were acquired and 'parked' at maritime museums around the world; some brought ashore, many others afloat.

For the purposes of our discussion today, I am going to divide those vessels into two groups; the first I will call 'passive' vessels, the second 'operational' vessels.

Before looking at operational vessels, which is my brief today, let me touch quickly on the passive group, which make up by far and away the majority of maritime museum craft. Many of them are out of the water, some successfully integrated within museum galleries. Others are exhibited outside, again successfully integrated into the museum's themes.

But there is another group of passive vessels. They are tied up at wharves or pontoons, and they are on display as examples of this type, or that era. Curatorially, they tick all the significance boxes; from an audience perspective I suggest that, in many cases, they achieve little.

Many are too small to enable museum visitors to go aboard - so visitors can only walk around them, or stand on a pontoon and look, or if they are lucky, peer into the interior from a particular vantage point. It is often hard to present these vessels in such a way that they achieve the initial purpose behind their acquisition - to be necessary instruments for telling the maritime story and attracting audiences.

One has to ask: What is attractive to a museum audience about a small boat - let's say it was once a harbour master's launch - which is now tied up at a wharf, out of context and dead?

Yes, I did say, dead! It doesn't go anywhere, it is unable to demonstrate how it operated when in service and although its significance is undoubted in a curatorial sense, it's just possible that in many cases a well interpreted gallery exhibit, without the boat, could evoke more reaction from museum audiences and teach them more.

And of course those with floating collections know that after a time the gloss, very literally, goes off. The paint begins to peel and the rust begins to eat through hulls, and rigging begins to sag. And if that isn't bad enough, historic vessels need skills, trades and maintenance facilities, all of which require skilled personnel, or the use of expensive external resources.

The result is that the focus of museum management towards their floating collections can switch, from attracting audiences to see their ships, to ways of reducing an increasing strain on resources, as preservation and maintenance requirements increase, and costs escalate.

How many of you here today would agree that what you set out to present as "compelling floating artefacts" have become economic burdens?

I think it is fair to say that as purse strings continue to tighten, and floating collections age further, and preservation and maintenance costs compound at an alarming rate, we will begin to see the rationalisation of small-boat floating collections. It's a sombre thought.

But on now to 'operational vessels' - and these I need to divide into two broad categories; the first is static vessels large enough to allow visitor access and interpreted as an historical ship exhibit. The second is historical vessels which are operational in the real sense - whether, sail, steam or motor ships. I also include replicas in museum hands.

You may ask why I describe static vessels as 'operational'. I believe that, properly presented, it is possible to evoke in the visitor a response which allows the imagination full play. It cannot match the real thing, of course, but it is the next best thing. And size does matter. Most of the really successful static vessels are ships.

It is interesting to consider what motivated the 'ship savers' of the 20th century. People like Frank Carr of *Cutty Sark* fame:

*"I want the child to go aboard . . . and be able to stand by the wheel . . . and imagine her at sea. That is why, to me, preserved historic ships, if they are exhibited with imagination, are the cathedrals of the sea . . ."*

Another was Karl Kortum, square-rig sailor and director of the San Francisco Maritime Museum :

*"A ship properly invested as a museum or set up as a display sends out emanations of lore, humanity, history, adventure, geography, art, literature and so on. These elements have brought me pleasure and they seem capable of doing the same for other people . . ."*

And dreamers like Peter Stanford of New York's South Street Seaport:

*"Does it matter to save an old hulk? You have to see the ships, and walk their decks, to know the answer to this question. These old ships gain power past their time when they are, in fact, preserved and men come to walk their decks as other men walked them in another time."*

*“A sailing ship built for ocean voyaging is an artefact of compelling power. She is an expression of purpose, will and work in which men invested more than we generally invest in the furniture of our lives – how much more! That is what hits and staggers the bored suburbanite, or the child who comes to such a ship. It doesn’t hit people with words, it comes with the mute testimony of the thing itself.”*

I should add here that I identify with the likes of Carr, Kortum and Stanford. A State Government challenge, almost 40 years ago, to find “just one tall ship for Sydney” set me off on the search for a square-rigger which – eventually – resulted in the 1874 barque *James Craig*’s restoration. Not to mention the rest of the Sydney Heritage Fleet.

There is drama in ship saving. And it catches the imagination of museum audiences.

Who would have thought that *Great Britain* could ever be rescued from that sand bank in the Falkland Islands, towed on a barge thousands of miles to Avonmouth, near Bristol, then towed on her own bottom up the river Avon and back into the Bristol dry dock in which she was built?

And *Balclutha*, a sad circus ship, sitting in the mud in San Francisco. Restored by recruiting the maritime unions to donate time and materials to return her to an exhibition state.

*Vasa* and *Mary Rose* - who could forget the drama in their recoveries?

The naval vessels on display in many countries - with dramatic lives of service behind them; and proud former crewmembers to see them live on.

There is no doubt that static ships, well presented as Frank Carr says, with imagination, have the potential to attract new audiences and repeat visitors.

And then there’s the off-the-wharf breed of operational heritage. Ships like Sydney’s 1874 barque *James Craig*, abandoned in a Tasmanian bay sheltered from the fury of the Southern Ocean; salvaged from the mud, holes patched, and towed to Hobart for further repairs before going on to Sydney and the long restoration to a fully-operational square-rigger.

But operational ships like *James Craig* also have a static role. They sit alongside, as a museum ship, open for daily visitors. But then they go sailing and it is in this role that the audience pulling power of ships like *James Craig* come to the fore.

Here’s a taste of what I am talking about: [JC Melbourne 2006 clip]

A voyage on a restored ship - sail, steam, or any other motive power - not only demonstrates its significance, it stimulates the imagination and curiosity to learn what went on in a ship’s operational life. Following historically authentic operation as far as possible, and maintaining original traditions and skills, heightens the experience and involves the visitor. Many come back for more.

But let's look at some cold hard realities connected to operational historic ships

1: Not all historic ships are successful.

I am going to pick on *Falls of Clyde* in Honolulu as an example, because she was a recent high-profile case. The significance of this ship to Hawaii is undoubted and she deserved to be preserved. But she gradually fell into disrepair and now her future hangs in the balance and in the hands of an enthusiastic, but poor, amateur group.

What went wrong?

First, I believe that the ship was not part of the museum's core collections. As a result, visitor programs were basic and not enough was done to capture the interest of the Hawaiian tourist market, and tourist dollar, without which she could not survive.

Lack of revenue meant lack of maintenance. I don't know this, but I am willing to bet there was no professionally planned on-going maintenance program to deal with deterioration bit by bit, rather than waiting until it was too late, and the bill was simply too great. Or if there was a program, it was deferred due to other pressing demands. Either way, when the ship became unsafe, the costs could not be justified and scuttling her became, for the museum, the only real option.

I hope *Falls of Clyde* survives, but I have my doubts.

2: Historic ships, static or operational are expensive to maintain

An historic ship, in the water, is deteriorating fast. A detailed survey of the entire ship from stem to stern and mast truck to keel is an essential first step in prudent ship management. What, precisely, is the condition of the vessel? I suggest that if you have an historic ship and don't have a detailed condition survey, make it a priority.

The survey needs to be done by a marine surveyor who knows what he or she is looking at. A surveyor used to examining modern aluminium-hulled ships is of little use when your ship's built of iron or old timber. It's experience that counts here, not the letters after the name.

From the survey, a detailed work plan is developed. This needs to take account of normal marine maintenance requirements - paint, rust, electrolysis and the like, but it also needs to have regard to the historic fabric and its preservation.

Then look at the berth. Is it your responsibility to maintain the wharf? What are the conditions surrounding the berth - tide, current, waves? All will have an affect on both the ship and the structure it is secured to.

Again, you need a survey by a competent engineer - one who knows about wharves. And again, you need a maintenance work plan.

Then cost the plans. And if you can't afford it, get rid of the ship – find it another home. Because unlike building or other artefact maintenance which can be ignored or deferred way past the point of prudent care, ship's can't. They sink!

### 3: Historic ships can be expensive to run

It's easy to undervalue staff and other overhead requirements for a historic ship. Quite apart from exhibition costs - and remember a ship with multiple decks will often be far larger than a museum gallery - there are guides for the ship, security, maintenance, education staff, visitor reception staff and, for an off-the-wharf operational ship - crew.

Here volunteers can be a godsend and a money saver, but they require recruitment, supervision, guidance, roster planning and amenities.

If a ship is to go off-the-wharf, then there are the authorities to satisfy; survey certificates to obtain, safety management systems to prepare. Not to mention the gear a ship needs to put to sea, from mooring lines to lifejackets - and of course, high cost items such as fuel.

### 4: Audience pulling power

I made the statement earlier that historic ships have audience pulling power. I believe they do, but it clearly doesn't happen by itself.

Land-based location is a vital factor for all operational ships in getting visitors aboard. Wharves should be accessible and inviting, even if close by a museum building. Families, particularly those with young children can balk at gangways. And often, at walking a distance they consider to be too far.

Sydney Heritage Fleet provides a case study here. *James Craig* shares the Australian National Maritime Museum's precinct, and is one of the visitor attractions promoted by the museum. But *James Craig* is 'around the corner' from the other vessels on display and we lose a considerable number of visitors who either don't find us, or don't want to walk those extra meters - and many of them have paid their admission.

What else have we learned at Sydney Heritage Fleet about attracting audiences in today's world? But before I answer that question you need to know how the Fleet operates:

- Sydney Heritage Fleet is a not-for-profit organisation which receives no subsidy funding from anyone. We survive on what we earn, and on donations we receive. We beg, borrow and not quite steal everything we can and enjoy major support in gifts in kind. But to survive we still need donations, over and above our programmed fundraising activities, to provide some 20% of our annual income needs.
- Sydney Heritage Fleet is a volunteer organisation, with a small support staff reporting to a volunteer Board. About 45% of our total membership - about 550 people - are working volunteers in one way or another around the Fleet and, on average, they donate in excess of 100,000 volunteer hours a year. It is this volunteer effort which is the first key to our success.
- We run our own shipyard which restores and maintains our vessels. We do need to contract out slipping and periodic dry docking of our larger ships, but otherwise, the vast majority of the restoration and maintenance work is done in house. The shipyard is the second key to our success. It also tackles major restoration projects; the bulk of *James Craig's* restoration was carried out by our own shipyard volunteers. We are now restoring

the 1927 coastal steamer *John Oxley* one of the last remaining ships of her type in the world. The *Oxley* will return to full operation and be in survey to carry passengers.

- Sydney Heritage Fleet has five fully operational vessels over 100 years old: barque *James Craig* (1874); Steam launch *Lady Hopetoun* (1902); Steam tug *Waratah* (also 1902); Schooner *Boomerang* (1903); and launch *Protex* (1908).
- There are also other younger small craft in full operational order. In addition, there is a large small boat collection, as well as a maritime records and research centre, model building workshop and other specialist activities.
- *James Craig* is open to the public every day, except when sailing. Offshore public day sails take place every other weekend and there is usually an annual one-month voyage to an interstate port. The ship is also used for alongside functions, including weddings.
- The steamers effectively work as charter vessels, taking pre-booked groups on Sydney Harbour tours. Specialist educational tours are also organised.

All the activities I have described are designed to build audiences for the Fleet, whether it be visitors to the ships, passengers on board them, or members and volunteers who join the Fleet as a result of exposure to its vessels.

- We are increasingly concentrating on activities for young people and have run some very successful courses in conjunction with local schools and colleges. The courses include time on the Fleet's vessels and some include activities in the shipyard. All are designed to introduce young people to maritime heritage and, through the activities undertaken, to promote interest in things maritime, and further involvement with the Fleet.
- The *James Craig* Sleepover program is popular with young people. Designed to give them a unique night aboard a square-rigged ship, the program is also designed to catch their imaginations and draw them, their families, and the groups they belong to, into a closer and longer term relationship with the Fleet. It increases our audience.
- All passengers who travel on a Fleet vessel are encouraged to stay in touch. Collecting their email address with the incentive of a 'gangway draw' prize is building a database of people with experience of the Fleet who are encouraged to visit again, tell their friends, or perhaps become Fleet members, volunteers, or donors.
- Fish n' Ships tours for groups is popular. Visits are often sparked by a Fleet speaking program to clubs and other associations. Word of mouth recommendations often flow from these visits.
- We read the papers, listen to the radio, watch TV and try to react to any news story or item on which we can capitalise. It is surprising how often it is possible to get the Fleet a PR mention. A perfect example of this was at Sydney's recent Boat Show. A depressed year for boat sales led the organisers to do something they haven't done for years - invite the Fleet to put some of our vessels among the hundreds of plastic boats on display. The result was astonishing, both from the level of public interest, and from the media.

- Once a month we run a 'Fleet Discovery Day'. We invite the public to come along, see what we do in the shipyard, tour *James Craig*, enjoy a ride on one of our heritage vessels and, if they like what they see, to join us. The activity brings in a steady stream of (paying) converts.
- We have a revolving artist in residence with one of our vessels under restoration as the studio.
- A shanty group uses *James Craig* as an authentic setting for its music. And we run public courses, again involving the vessels and aimed at increasing awareness of the Fleet in the community.

Does it all work?

The honest answer is - most of the time.

The economically uncertain times are having an impact. But with the new audience base we are building, we are constantly increasing our reach. This can help replace revenue lost in lower visitor numbers through increased donations.

The lesson we have learned is a simple one. Don't try to be too clever. The good old 'keep it simple stupid' rule applies. Our ships do the best promotion job for us.

Is it all worth it?

That is really the question. And the answer is in two parts.

First: Yes, it is worth it. We are, after all, constituted as a museum and we have a duty to share our collections and broaden the knowledge of maritime heritage among our visitors.

Second: Is it worth it financially? Keeping 100-year-old ships operational and up to survey standard, without which we cannot carry passengers, is a constant strain and it is a juggling act between revenue and costs.

A for instance. Last year *James Craig* paid her second visit to Melbourne - a 1200 mile round trip through some of the world's nastiest waters. Before leaving Sydney we had lined up in Melbourne \$100,000 worth of firm day sail bookings - the money was in the bank.

Just as the ship arrived in Melbourne a problem arose. The 1874 bits of the ship were fine - but a near-new engine gearbox failed. Although one engine still worked for manoeuvring, our survey says the ship must have two working engines.

We were grounded and \$100,000 in revenue had to be returned. We salvaged what we could with alongside visitors, but the loss punched a large hole in the year's budget for the ship.

So, yes, it can be worth it financially, but the risks in operating ships are considerable.

Before I close there is a fundamental issue to consider in relation to operating heritage. Many of you will have sat here today and said to yourselves - museums are about their collections. He's concentrating on experiences. So how does that square with being a museum and what is the effect if some of you try to reach new audiences through your floating collections?

For a museum with a static ship set up as a museum exhibit, maintenance and preservation are essential, but they are back-of-house activities. The ship can be seen as simply another form of exhibition gallery.

For a museum like ours which preserves, maintains and operates its collections, things are rather different. We select vessels which are capable of restoration. It is fair to ask how rigorous is the selection process. Do we preserve ships because they can be made operational, or because of their significance as maritime heritage? If I'm honest, I would say a bit of both. Fortunately, the vessels we have in the Fleet at present all have genuine maritime heritage significance, but I confess that there may be an element of luck in that.

And is the experience we give visitors, albeit in a maritime heritage setting, valid in a museum context? My answer is, we try.

It is possible, as we try to do, to operate vessels with regard to historical integrity, replicating the traditions and methods of operation as far as modern regulations will allow.

But there is no getting away from the fact that the second a museum ship leaves the wharf carrying visitors, everything changes. It is a commercial vessel making a passage, no matter how short. Responsibility shifts to the Master of the vessel. Museum practice is no longer paramount. Alongside, the ship is very much part of a museum collection. Off-the-wharf circumstances change.

And if a museum ship - or in our case, ships - is regularly off-the-wharf, it requires a support infrastructure which has little regard for museum practice or for the fact that the ship is part of a collection. It is an object to be maintained, filled with passengers, fuelled, victualled and sent to sea. Just like any other commercial vessel.

It's a compromise, and one which requires discipline from all concerned. We comfort ourselves by using the slogan: 'The Museum that goes to sea'.

It is time now to return to the question I was set in my paper: Operational heritage; an economic millstone, or an opportunity for reaching new audiences?

My answer?

On balance, opportunity wins.

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