



### **Chairman's Introduction**

Welcome to your May edition of the FoNS Newsletter. We are pleased to be able to bring more articles from varied contributors from within the membership, looking at subjects associated with the heart of our society. I find these fascinating and would encourage others to come forward and develop their ideas for the wider audience.

Phil Cox, Chairman

### **Desperately Seeking Secretary**

Many of you will know Sian King, our current Secretary who has brought order to our midst and doubtless hassled and harangued members for their renewal subscriptions as well as providing an excellent administrative service to the committee. Sian is standing down and we are desperately seeking somebody to fill her shoes.

We intend to split the role, so that we are looking for a 'Secretary' to run the administration of the charity and to act as minute-taker. In addition, we are seeking a Membership Secretary to run the database, chase subscriptions, and distribute newsletters and other official papers as agreed by the committee.

If you have the time and the inclination to undertake either or both of these roles, please get in touch with me at [chair@newportship.org](mailto:chair@newportship.org).

I have to say that Sian will be sorely missed at committee and I anticipate that she will continue to advertise the Newport Medieval Ship project through her other works.

### **The Annual FoNS Trip**

This year we are visiting Pembroke Castle, the Sunderland Flying Boat Museum & Milford Haven Maritime Museum on Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> June. During that week there is also a Tall Ships gathering in Milford Haven. More details will follow on the web site and via email. Please register your interest with our Events Coordinator, Rob Kenny ([events@newportship.org](mailto:events@newportship.org)) or call him on 01291 430002.

### **New Library at the Ship Centre (Work in Progress)**

The Newport Ship Project has recently received a generous donation of maritime history and archaeology books from the estate of Colin Green, a noted local maritime historian who wrote numerous articles as well as a book about historical maritime activity in the Bristol Channel called *Severn Traders*. This extraordinary collection of books, numbering in the thousands, has now been stored in archive boxes within the ship centre timber store. We plan to sort through the books and create a catalogue of titles. The books will hopefully someday form the core of a reference collection that will be available to visiting researchers and interested members of the public. If you have any maritime history or archaeology books that you would like to donate to the project, we will gratefully add them to this collection. It promises to be a valuable resource for future researchers.

Dr Toby Jones

*FoNS have so far contributed the boxes in which these books are now being stored and will be actively assisting with the cataloguing process. Those books from the collection that are not history-related have been donated to Maindee Community Library.*



## Feature Article: The Stern Rudder in the North

by Richard Green

The origin of the stern rudder is usually attributed to the Chinese with dissemination taking place via the Arabs through the Mediterranean and then to northern Europe. On examination the story gets more complicated and seems to indicate separate development in all areas, for example it is known that while the Chinese did have the stern rudder, they did not develop the stern post.

The origin of the stern rudder in northern Europe is a little hazy with mention being made that around 1153, Somerled the Thane of Argyll had 80 ships built which were described as *birlinns* and *nyvaigs*, stating that these were the first ships to carry the stern rudder. Some people attribute the invention of the stern rudder to Somerled himself but it is more probable that it is owing to the MacIntyre family who were his shipbuilders. The use of the stern rudder involved straightening the stern post which had the unsought but welcome effect of reducing the leeway. The *birlinn* is recorded as having between 12 and 18 oars.

The first known illustration of a stern rudder is a carving on the baptismal font in Winchester Cathedral (see right). There is however disagreement both about the date of the carving and what it depicts, with the date given variously as 1100 and as 1180, and some scholars holding that in fact it shows a quarter rudder. The next illustration comes from 1200, on the seal of Ipswich (left) which clearly shows a stern rudder post mounted



with a pintle and gudgeon (surely an idea taken from farm gates). It is also recorded in 1252 that ports in Flanders were logging visiting ships and differentiating between those with rudders and those with steering oars.



The grandson of Somerled, Angus Mor MacDhomail (mod MacDonald) who died in 1296 (murdered in his tent) had as his seal a *birlinn* with its stern rudder.

Thus by the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century the stern rudder was well established as the standard form of steering although a woodcut from 1486 taken from 'Peregrinations' by Breydenbach shows a ship with a stern rudder in Venice harbour alongside another which has a steering oar.

The *birlinn* itself became known as the chieftain's galley and from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century was the dominant ship design in the Hebrides. In 1700 it was outlawed by the Statutes of Iona presumably in an attempt to pacify the Isles. There is mention in 1635 that Mac Gille Chonail and Mac Gille Thomhais built a *birlinn* for Campbell of Glenorchy.

The *birlinn* appears again in 1991 when the Lord of the Isles Trust had a replica built which was named the 'Aileach' (see left) She was used to test the sea keeping qualities of the design and was used to round the Hebrides and the Irish Sea for several years. It is worth noting that her rudder head is below the top of the stern post and that steering is by means of two curved tillers. As of 2015 she ended up in Boisdale Museum on South Uist and is unlikely ever to go to sea again.



As far as the archaeological record is concerned, excavations were started in 2014 of a possible *birlinn* on Ballashare beach on the island of Benbecula.



Cutaway drawing of a *birlinn* by Bob Marshall, shown with his permission.

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### **Acknowledgements:**

Denny M. Float Your Boat, 1953

Landstrom B. The Ship 1961

Mott Lawrence V. The Development of the Stern Rudder 100-1600 1991

Williams R. The Lords of the Isles 1984

**BIRLINNS:** During the middle ages, the most common boat in northern waters was the *birlinn*, a hebridean galley. It is said to have been developed from the Norse Galley by Somerled, who led the Kingdom of the Isles in the 1100s. *Birlinns* were clinker-built wooden boats that could be rowed or sailed, with a single mast and square sail. These small but sturdy seagoing vessels were an improvement on the Norse Longship, (Norse *byrðingr* - ship of burden). The most important single difference is the replacement of the steering-board (a large oar) by a stern rudder. Other small variations in size and design were found along the west coast.

During medieval times *birlinns* were the workhorse of the Scottish west coast seas. They were used for everything from ferrying people and cargo to going to war. The design was more manoeuvrable than that of the Norse boats and suited to both rough seas and shallow water. The boats were light, but could be weighted with ballast to make them more stable in rougher conditions and the shallow draught made them easy to haul out of the sea.

### **Newport Transporter Bridge:** *A new permanent exhibition at Newport Museum & Art Gallery*

Born out of Newport's huge success and growth in the late 1800s, the Transporter Bridge has dominated the skyline of the city for 110 years. Built to accommodate the tallest sailing ships, yet also transport motor cars, the Transporter Bridge is one of the last structures of the days of sail but one of the first of the motor age.

Today, the Transporter Bridge is a working monument to Newport's rich maritime and industrial heritage. Described by Cadw as 'a structure of exceptional interest', the Bridge is the best example of a transporter bridge in Britain and one of only eight such bridges left in the world.

The exhibition features a range of items and images from the construction and operation of the Transporter Bridge and artworks inspired by it. Highlights include: photographs documenting the Bridge's construction; an industrial basket used to carry workers; a silver trowel used to lay the foundation stone; film footage of the opening ceremony and digital projections of the original plans.

**Did you know.... about castles?** No doubt you know spiral staircases are 'handed'. So the spiral would be designed so that the (right-handed) defending swordsmen had the wall to their right whilst the attacking (right-handed) swordsmen, attempting to climb the stairs, had the central (more restricted space of the) pillar to their right. The solution; attack with left-handed swordsmen. Coupled to that, if for reasons of symmetric architecture, one had 'paired' spiral staircases (as they did) - one would be **defended** by left-handed swordsmen.

### **Feature Article for July: Coins Hidden within Ancient Ships**

Allan Cook

There is precedent for placing coins in mast steps and the keelson/stem joint. From a Portuguese colleague I have been told that the keel/stem joint was seen as the most vulnerable part of the ship (often hitting things) and ceremonies led by priests would take place (with many blessings etc) while the ship was built to offer some 'divine' protection for this critical area.

**Fundraising: Raffle Tickets** Many thanks go to those members, visitors and passers-by who bought our Newport Uskmouth Rotary raffle tickets. This annual prize draw is a main source of income for FoNS, and this year we raised £1,802. It must be noted that one of our ticket buyers won the first prize of £500, and one of our volunteers won another of the prizes – a book about the Newport Transporter Bridge.

**Did You Know...?** The night before the Suez Canal opened in November 1869, the captain of HMS Newport, navigated, under cover of darkness and without lights, to the front of the queue of vessels waiting to transit the newly constructed waterway. His aim: to ensure that a British ship was the first to formally traverse the French-controlled canal – much to the unofficial pride of the British Admiralty and the annoyance of the French

## **Spotlight on Volunteers – Rhys Brooks**

I suppose my story starts the same as many Friends of the Newport Ship, with the discovery of the Newport Ship. My first view of the ship was when I was taken to see the great new discovery after the dig site first opened to the public by my mum and dad. I distinctly remember peering through the fencing and over the wall to see this brown oval lying the mud with people in hi-vis jackets scurrying across it.



To my young mind the sight was quite underwhelming thinking to myself “That’s it, that’s what all the fuss is about?”

It was later on, after attending a couple of open days and seeing how people would be thrilled to see the ship, laid out in tanks, eager to ask questions about her and the world she sailed in, that I realised my mistake. The ship wasn’t just a few thousand pieces of timber lying at the bottom of a pit by the river. She was a symbol, a physical connection, to Newport’s past that people thought they had lost.

I know the last bit might sound a little melodramatic but the reason I have stayed and fought for the Newport Ship for so long is because I genuinely believe that she is a part of Newport’s history that should not be forgotten, it should be celebrated and shown off to the world to remind everyone that Newport was important before the Industrial revolution and that it can be again.

*If you can tell others what inspires you to support the Newport Ship through the Friends, please send your story and a photo of yourself to me at [chair@newportship.org](mailto:chair@newportship.org) and you can be in the next issue!*

## **Granville Hollister**

It is with regret that we note the passing of Granville Hollister who joined the SOS campaign and became a founder member of FoNS and a constant visitor to our open days at Maesglas. He wrote numerous poems about our Ship whilst walking around the warehouse. He will be sadly missed.



## **FoNS Blog**

Why not keep up to date with all our news as it is pushed out to other media sites? Go to our website ([www.newportship.org](http://www.newportship.org)) and click on ‘Blog’ (on the brown banner top right of the screen) and you can subscribe – that way you get all articles emailed to you as soon as they are published.

Follow us on facebook



(newportship) and twitter (FONSnewportship)!



## **End Note**

It is with sadness that I must report that our cartoonist friend, Tim Harries has left the South Wales Argus. Tim recently talked to the Friends of Newport Museum & Art Gallery and was suitably ‘buttonholed’ to donate his Newport Ship-based cartoon strips to FoNS. So far we have received electronic copies of those done in the last few years which have all been created digitally, but we have been promised some of his originals in hard copy for display in the Ship Centre.

