

Back on the skyline: Cutty Sark reopens

With Cutty Sark now open to the public for the first time since 2006, *The Leisure Review* took advantage of a unique guided tour to report on the rejuvenation of a beautiful ship that is one of London's most revered visitor attractions.

Having recently enjoyed the second royal opening of its career as a visitor attraction, Cutty Sark is now officially back on the map. In 1957 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth had opened Cutty Sark to the public, the first time the already venerable old ship had been made available for close inspection to the non-maritime populace. Her Majesty had been accompanied by Prince Philip, who had played a leading role in securing the ship's future, and in April 2012, more than half a century later, they were both present to repeat the process, this time marking the completion of an extensive restoration and re-presentation of a ship that is among the most recognisable of London's landmarks.

Speaking at this latest opening, Lord Sterling, chair of the Cutty Sark Trust and Royal Museums Greenwich, which own and will be managing the Cutty Sark respectively, was keen to celebrate the ship's return as if from yet another voyage. "Cutty Sark holds a unique place in the heart for the people of Greenwich, Great Britain and indeed the rest of the world," he said. "It is splendid that she is rejoicing the London skyline once again."

Richard Doughty, director of the Cutty Sark Trust, echoed this notion of embrace. "We have been privileged to be involved in conserving Cutty Sark and restoring her to her key position in the Greenwich world heritage site," he said. "Our solution, a world first, will secure Cutty Sark's future so that she can continue to inspire many new generations of adventurers at the heart of the Royal Borough of Greenwich."

This solution to which he referred involved lifting the ship from its previous resting place so raising the keel some three metres to create a viewing gallery beneath the hull. Securely propped, appropriately reinforced and extensively restored, Cutty Sark now appears to float on a domed wave of glass, which, while redolent of the sea as Cutty Sark's rightful home, also serves to provide a roof over the original dry dock and the ship's lower parts, creating for the first time a weather-proof experience for Cutty Sark visitors. After a long career as cargo vessel and museum piece, a career that began with her launch in Dumbarton in 1869 and saw her set a record passage time of 73 days from Sydney to London in 1885, Cutty Sark seems finally to be in a setting and a condition suited to her new role as a viable contemporary visitor attraction.

But however grand the outcome, the catalyst for the scheme was rather more mundane. In 1998 a survey report from a specialist marine consultancy suggested that the ship would remain safe for perhaps only a further ten years were nothing done to conserve its structure. The ship's structural ironwork was corroding, in some places completely, and the timber required extensive work to prevent further decay.

As Andy Bramwell, the architect who served as project manager during the final ten months of the project, explained, doing nothing was not an option. "The keel originally sat one metre below where the floor is now," he said. "The dry berth had been built in the late 1950s and the ship was backed in, the water drained and there it sat propped on the bottom with the keel supported on a concrete plinth, which was nicknamed 'the altar'. Eventually, without the water to support her, the sides of the hull started to spread. Bow and stern were also slowly starting to sag so she was effectively in danger of breaking her back."

While the starting point was the conservation of the ship, the realities of accessing funding for a significant preservation project and generating revenue to make the Cutty Sark Trust a sustainable entity were integral to the design concept developed by the project architects, Grimshaws and structural engineer

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"One of the drivers for lifting the ship is that it gives you a fantastic space underneath it," Bramwell said. "This creates a revenue-generating venue with, let's face it, a pretty knock-out view of the bottom of the ship and a space for banqueting. There is nowhere else like it and the income stream from that space is going to be absolutely vital in managing and funding the operation in the future. Your admission ticket – because this isn't a free admission, unlike the Maritime Museum – your catering, your shop and your venue hire are absolutely vital to the future viability of the place. So there is a really strong functional reason to lift it – it produces this amazing space underneath – but it is also the first time that you can actually sit underneath the hull."

Warming to his theme, Bramwell gets detailed: "A huge number of people ask whether the metal is there as decoration. It was always lined with what was known as Muntz metal but for the first time you can see it in its full glory." Muntz metal was named after George Muntz, the Birmingham-based metal-roller who created an alloy of 60% copper, 40% zinc with a trace of iron that was extensively used as a cheaper alternative to the copper sheathing on the bottom of wooden-hulled boats. While Muntz metal is no longer available, the modern 70/30 copper/zinc alloy used on the hull of Cutty Sark creates a striking centrepiece for this new space. After the raising of the masts and the rigging, it was perhaps the most obvious visible indication of the ship's rejuvenation.

However, there were many stages before the metal could be replaced. In 2006 the Cutty Sark was closed to the public and, with a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) secured, the ship was stripped back to its metal frame. Hull planks were removed along with the masts and rigging. The deck houses were dismantled and the restoration project began in earnest. When a fire, started by electrical malfunction in a vacuum cleaner being used on the job, took hold in 2007 the dramatic images of the ship ablaze dominated news reports. The project was delayed but, with the hull stripped of its timber, only the two timber upper decks were lost. In 2008 the HLF agreed additional funding, taking their input to £25 million, and the Cutty Sark restoration was able to continue, meeting the deadline implied if not imposed by the London Olympic Games and the Queen's diamond jubilee.

As project manager, Andy Bramwell has extensive experience of major cultural projects, including the development of Tate Modern from power station to world-leading art gallery and the recent Sammy Ofer Wing extension to the Maritime Museum at Greenwich, but this is the first time he has been involved with a ship.

"It's a new environment for me," he admitted, "but for anyone involved in historic buildings much of this would be familiar territory. In that context the challenge might be how to enable thousands of people to be guided round a stately home that isn't designed for that purpose, trying to make it feel as authentic as you can but also inform people about it – why it's interesting, why it's significant, or, in the case of Cutty Sark, why it was so fast and why tea was important. You've got to make it exciting and interesting but also not labour the whole thing."

Getting people round a confined space on board a ship that might have had only 20 people on board at any one time also presented challenges. There are awkward spaces, plenty of narrow steps and some areas with tight headroom. Coming into the tween-deck is a 'wow' moment for the Cutty Sark visitor but the beams are quite low; at the time of *The Leisure Review*'s visit, some makeshift signage was drawing visitors' attention to the problem.

Bramwell laughed. "When we were moving around the site in hard hats we were always banging our heads on those beams and we were worried about it but, of course, now not having the height of hard hats makes such a difference and we've not had any incidents so far. Yes it's a ship but it's also a Grade I listed building, a historic monument. It's not really any different to going to the Tower of London and up twisty staircases into cells. You cannot make everything sanitised and totally safe. It has to be safe enough but you're in a historic building; the ceilings are low, the staircases are not as wide as you would find in a public building. It's unique."

But such issues of access, guidance and assistance still have to be recognised and managed. Bramwell was quick to agree. "Absolutely," he said. "Most of this is done through the assistance of the staff who are on hand. It is common practice in heritage environments now. Visitor assistants are not just there to do a security job. They know about the ship, they are keen to answer questions and do any number of things, including looking out for people."

Though not involved in the operation of the Cutty Sark, as project manager and a trained architect for Bramwell these and other management issues are what make heritage projects all the more fascinating. Having only been open to the public for a few weeks and with initial visitor numbers exceeding expectations by up to 50%, the Cutty Sark project team's assumptions and predictions have been put to the test. "It has been a steep learning curve for them," he said, "but there has been a huge amount of positive feedback from visitors. There have been the usual mundane issues – things like the water temperatures in the toilets, comments on some of the interpretation, for example – but there are also the challenges of getting people in and out, monitoring the queues, gauging lengths of stay and working on any pinch points.

"One of the interesting things about any new building or facility is that there are aspects of it that you just cannot predict. There is always something that really surprises you, either something that works better or is more popular than you ever envisaged or something that just doesn't work. Sometimes public buildings have been victims of their own success. At Tate Modern, for instance, I gather that the wear and tear on lifts and escalators was more rapid than they had anticipated just because of the sheer volume of people coming through the building, which had far exceeded original predictions. Simple things like having enough space in the loos and cafes when you get busy, or whether the hinges on the doors are up to the job. More interesting perhaps is how people flow through the building but that again is something you can't predict."

Having spent many years trying to anticipate such things, Bramwell offered a lesson for the prospective heritage project manager: "Don't underestimate what it takes to turn something from a building project to a place that has its own life. In a building contract it is called 'practical completion' but the idea that on a given day you sign a certificate, hand it over to the client and wave good bye is daft really. It takes much longer than a day or a week; these things can take a year. And always leave a budget for things you don't know you're going to have to change. Six months down the line you will definitely find something that needs money spending on it."

In common with most large-scale heritage projects, the overhaul of Cutty Sark has provoked some criticism, something that Bramwell acknowledges. "There has been some negative press from a purist, historic perspective," he said. "Some have written negatively about propping the ship up, that she has been made to look undignified all just to raise some money, and that the new additions are unsympathetic. But I think that's been overshadowed by a lot of praise and an overwhelming sense of relief. Local people have a really strong affection for her. When the masts went back up just before Christmas there was a really emotional response. People were coming along moist-eyed and saying, 'She's back.' It was very touching."

The necessities of fund-raising, business planning, cost constraints, immovable deadlines and all the management issues of the modern leisure industry can quickly drain the emotion from any project for anyone closely involved with it but the reaction of members of the public seeing for the first time something as majestic as Cutty Sark can often serve as a powerful antidote to mission fatigue; an elderly gentleman having his photo taken at the helm of one of the swiftest and most graceful sailing ships ever launched, his face displaying a mixture of pride, wonder and respect, was a case in point during our visit. The number of people queuing under grey skies to follow him aboard suggest that there are many more such moments to come.

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