BRITAIN'S LIVING PAST

A Celebration of Britain's Surviving Traditional Cultural and Working Practices

ANTHONY BURTON AND ROB SCOTT

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A Celebration of Britain's Surviving Traditional Cultural and Working Practices

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INTRODUCTION

There was a time, not so very long ago, when history seemed to consist entirely of kings and queens, famous battles and Acts of Parliament. But there has always been another history, the history of the everyday life of the people, and it can be expressed in many different forms.

There are the industries and crafts that continue to produce all kinds of goods and materials using techniques that, in many cases, have scarcely changed for centuries. At the opposite extreme are the things we do in our spare time, our games and sports – and some have survived unchanged for a very long time indeed. It is this sense of continuity that we have tried to capture in the subjects chosen for this book.

The range is wide, and even so the choice has not always been easy. There were far more subjects that could have been included, but we have tried to select ones that each shed a different light on the past – as well as those that we both found to be intrinsically interesting. After all, if the writer and photographer are bored, why should you, the reader, have any interest in their book? It has sometimes been a journey of discovery for both of us – neither of us, for example, were quite prepared for the mayhem that is the Ashbourne football match. Some subjects were old favourites for one or other of us – Anthony has long been an enthusiastic participant in barge matches, while Rob has known Swaledale for many years. But one overriding rule covered everything: for every site or activity we covered, there had to be a real sense that it was still around because it still served a real need or because it was part of a tradition that no one wanted to see simply die away. There had to be a real feeling that what we were seeing was a real, living tradition, continuing to this day because it had an intrinsic value. It is always a thrill to feel that sense of continuity, and we hope that we have managed to recreate something of the same sensation in the following pages.

A MARITIME NATION

THE SHIPWRIGHT

In this book we are looking at heritage and tradition in many different forms, but there is no tradition that has done more to shape the history of these islands than its long maritime past. This is a heritage that stretches back far beyond written records.

The earliest sailing craft that consisted of anything more than hollowed-out logs were found in the mud of the Humber at North Ferriby, and dating techniques showed them to have been built in around 1500 BC. Over the centuries, vessels were developed and became ever more sophisticated, with the larger ships carrying a vast spread of sail on many masts. These were the vessels that could trade around the world, culminating in the famous fast clipper ships, such as *Cutty Sark*, that were originally built to bring tea from China. This was a luxury commodity, and the first load to be brought home always fetched the highest price – hence the emphasis on speed. But there was also a fascinating array of smaller vessels that never left home waters, trading around the coast. Each region had its own speciality, ranging from the square-rigged Humber keel – the nearest thing we now have to a medieval ship – to more elaborate topsail schooners. But one thing they all have in common is that they were built out of wood by shipwrights.

In our search for a traditional shipwright still working on wooden boats, one of the criteria we chose was that ideally the work would be done in a building that itself had some historic significance. That requirement was met in a way that hardly seemed possible. Stirling & Son work in what might well be the most historically significant surviving dockyard building in Britain: No. 1 Slip at the former Royal Naval Dockyard at Devonport.

When William of Orange came to the throne as William III, one of his early demands was for a brand-new naval dockyard to be created at Plymouth. Work began in 1690 and the original site eventually became the South Yard, mainly developed in the 18th century. Among the new structures was No. 1 Slip, on which work began in the 1770s. It was here that a number of famous warships were built.

← Will Stirling at work on the 'gentleman's cutter' *Integrity*.

→ Applying protective copper sheathing to the hull of *Integrity*.

PREVIOUS PAGES
The magnificent covered slipway at Plymouth dockyard, built in 1814.

But building in the open air creates difficulties, with work often held up by bad weather. So in 1814 it was roofed over and has remained substantially the same ever since. It is the oldest surviving covered slip of any British naval yard, and as a major historical monument it is a listed building. Its rating is the same as that given to Stonehenge, for example, which gives a good idea of just how important it is. And it is in this building that Will Stirling and his men build and repair wooden vessels of up to 200 tons.

The building looks interesting enough as you get nearer to it, but it's only when you step inside that the full majesty of the structure becomes apparent – as well as its complexity. The original slip was built up against the tall stone dockyard wall, which now forms one side of the structure. The opposite side of the slipway is a slatted wooden wall that turns inward towards the two ends, which are both entirely open. The structure was designed by Sir Robert Seppings, a distinguished naval architect who made significant advances in the design of hulls of wooden vessels. The roof itself, with its sheet-metal covering, is extraordinarily complex, with cantilevered rafters, angled braces and horizontal collars. It is perhaps not too fanciful to imagine the whole roof taken off and turned upside down on the ground, at which point it might be mistaken for a rather odd ship's hull. It doesn't seem to matter how many times you come here, it still takes the breath away, and anyone who, like myself, is not a qualified architect can only wonder at how such a thing could ever have been devised.

In the 21st century much of the work that had been carried out by the navy was privatised, and a large part of the complex became available for private companies – and that included the South Yard and No. 1 Slip – so that is when Will Stirling took over the lease. It was only later that he discovered there was already a family connection. One of his ancestors had married an admiral, and in 1798 she was given the honour of launching HMS *Foudroyant* from this very slip shortly after it had been completed. In 1800 *Foudroyant* became the flagship of a comparatively young rear admiral – Horatio Nelson. So Will's connection with the site goes back almost to the day the slip was first built. But his own route into boatbuilding was far from direct.

At the age of 19, Will, already an enthusiastic sailor, bought a 19ft boat, built in 1938, and set about restoring it. It led to a passion for boatbuilding, and he went to college to study the subject. At the end of his studies, he took the engineless 19-footer and sailed her to Norway, returning via the north coast of Scotland and ending the voyage in Cornwall. Here he got an apprenticeship with a Cornish company that specialised in

INTEGRITY

building pilot cutters. As working vessels, the essential feature of these crafts was speed. The pilot's job was to guide a larger ship safely into harbour – and there were usually more pilots than ships requiring help, so it was a case of the first one on board getting the job.

With his training and experience, Will embarked on building his first wooden vessel, a replica of an 1835 smuggler's lugger. He sailed her over to Iceland, came back and sold her, and used the money to set up in business as a builder and restorer of wooden boats. His next major undertaking was a replica of a gentleman's cutter, a popular design of yacht for the wealthy, based on the well-tested design of the old pilot cutters. Will designed her and built her with his team in 2012. In 2017 she was back on the slip, being prepared for a big adventure: she was due to sail to the Arctic to go through the Northwest Passage. But before work on her or any other vessel could begin, Will had to get the slip itself into a usable condition after some 60 years of neglect.

↓ The winch used to haul vessels up and down the slipway.

OVERLEAF Restoration work under way on a 160-ton vessel from Norway.

To do so would require a lot of work, and fortunately a grant was available. So rails were put in place on the slip and a winch acquired from the RNLI. These are essentials if vessels are to be brought in for work and relaunched when the work is completed. There are two tracks, each of which carries a substantial wheeled metal cradle that can be moved up and down the rails, powered by the winch. A vessel can arrive at the foot of the slip at high tide, when it can be floated over the cradle. As the tide retreats, the vessel settles down onto the cradle, where it is secured and can then be hauled up above

the high-tide mark. The process is reversed when it is time to go, the vessel being lowered and floated off.

As I walked into Will's decidedly spartan office, the first thing that caught my eye was a caulking hammer. When you are hoping to find someone who really is using traditional methods, it is an encouraging start to find this fundamental tool of wooden shipbuilding. No matter how well constructed a wooden hull might be, it still has to be treated to make it perfectly watertight. The seams are caulked by pushing a fibrous material between the planks. In the bad old days, oakum was produced by convicts unravelling old rope. That may not be how it is produced these days, but the technique is the same: the caulking tool has a triangular blade that is used to force the material home by hitting it with the caulking hammer. Caulking in one form or another goes back to the earliest wooden boats to take to the water.

Another old technique was in progress on the slip where the cutter *Integrity* was being prepared for her voyage through the Northwest Passage. A problem that beset older wooden vessels on long voyages was that various marine creatures would make their home on the hull beneath the waterline, among them the marine worm that had the unfortunate habit of boring holes in the planking. The answer developed during the 18th century was to cover the affected area with thin copper sheeting. And that is precisely what was being done here. It's a fairly straightforward business along the sides, but where there are awkward shapes, such as around the rudder, a template has to be made first and then the copper cut to fit. And, of course, when you have to cover the bottom of the hull, fixing the sheets while lying flat on your back is not the most comfortable job to undertake.

The *Integrity* is a truly beautiful, elegant craft and, like all cutters, designed to carry a lot of sail for whenever it might be needed. Altogether there are 2,000 square feet available, and her rigging is suitably versatile. The mast can be extended upwards to carry a topsail, and an extra spar can be set up to carry a square sail for running before the wind. As one might expect from a 'gentleman's cutter', the carpentry is all carried out to perfection, and this is a feature of the yard. Everyone is expected to be able to turn their hand to anything: the contract with the work force ends with the catch-all phrase 'and any other shipyard duties that might be required'. So you might find yourself working at the very delicate job of applying decorative gold leaf to the hull in the morning – a job where even small mistakes can prove very expensive – and then bashing out hefty keel bolts in the afternoon. Inevitably, some are better at certain jobs than others, perhaps more skilled at joinery, and they will get the jobs where their particular skills are needed. And a new generation is being trained to follow on – Will currently has two apprentices at work.

Work was also under way on a second boat, a 160-ton Norwegian vessel that required a good deal of work, including replacing planking on the hull. There is a special problem associated with this work, which is that a ship's hull does not consist of convenient straight lines, but instead curves in at bow and stern. So the question is how do you fix a 3-inch-thick wooden plank to a curved section? The answer is that you heat it up in a special steam chest and then, once it has become flexible, it is quickly brought into place and clamped in position, ready to be permanently fixed. This is a job requiring five strong workers.

Will also has his own line in clinker-built sailing dinghies. Clinker construction again takes us back to the very earliest days of sail – perhaps the most famous examples of early clinker-built vessels were the Viking longships. Instead of the planks being nailed to the hull to present a smooth surface as on the Norwegian vessel, they overlap each other. The yard has standard patterns for creating the hull shape, so although it is hardly mass production, it can turn out a string of identical dinghies. There was one in the yard when I visited, and what is striking is that the finish is every bit as fine as it is on the grander yacht. It has a simple lugsail, and it is the sort of vessel that it is really good fun to muck about in, and remarkably seaworthy despite its size.

This is a yard where quality is everything. Will never pays for advertising, but relies entirely on recommendations from his very satisfied customers. It is an attitude that permeates the whole workforce – everyone knows that getting the next job depends on doing the one in hand to the very highest possible standard. I talked about tradition in the introduction, and the whole idea of tradition was reinforced when Will mentioned the next vessel due in for restoration. She was built at the Scott and Linton yard at Dumbarton on the Clyde – the yard that launched one of Britain's most famous sailing ships, the *Cutty Sark.* If the workforce from that yard where she was built in 1869 came down to this dock at Plymouth today, they could probably start work tomorrow with very little further training. And they would certainly recognise the same quality of craftsmanship as had been expected from them a century and a half ago.

THE ROPE WORKS

Building a sailing ship is one thing, but it also had to be rigged, and that involved working with an enormous quantity of rope. Master ropemakers are based at the historic dockyard of Chatham, which certainly earns the name 'historic' as it was established here in 1547, soon becoming the most important dockyard in the kingdom.

A good measure of just how important it was can be gauged from the wage bills for this and the other naval yards for 1584, when Chatham paid out £3,680 and the next highest was Deptford at £205, while Portsmouth lagged far behind at a mere £30. And in all that time the yard was making rope, because sailing ships created a huge demand. The most famous ship ever built at Chatham has to be Nelson's flagship *Victory*, which, it is said, had between 26 and 27 miles of rigging. And producing the rope needed for the maiden voyage would not have been the end of the matter: rope made of natural fibres rots with time and heavy usage, so a lot more replacement rope would have been needed. The ropemakers of Chatham would never have been short of work – and they still make rope here today, even though the Royal Navy no longer has a presence. But although the principles of rope-making have never changed, technology has, not surprisingly, advanced since the 16th century.

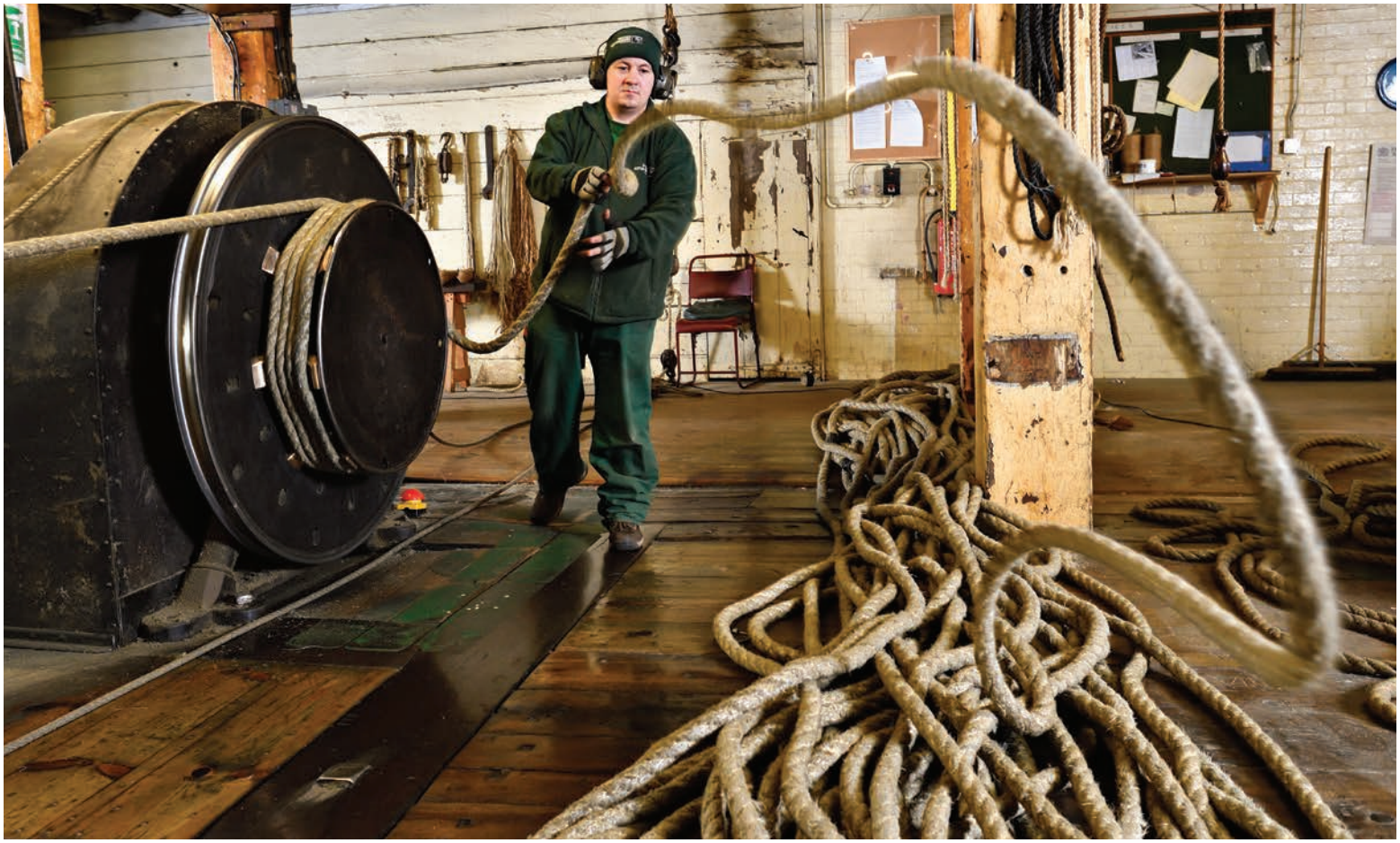
Originally, rope was made from natural fibres, particularly hemp, and the whole process was done by hand. To simplify the process: fibres are attached to hooks on a wheel and the bulk of the fibres are wound round the ropemaker's waist. As the ropemaker walks away from the wheel, paying out the fibres, a boy turns the wheel so that the fibres are twisted together. To get a usable length of rope entailed a long walk back – hence the term 'ropewalk' is still used to this day, even when machines have taken over. That mechanisation did not happen at Chatham until 1811, when the great engineer Henry Maudsley introduced his forming machine. Incredibly, that original machine not only still exists but is still in use at Chatham, doing exactly the same job it was built to do, though on our visit the main work was

being carried out by a more recent machine, built here in 1856.

Arriving at Chatham on a dank, grey morning in January when the mist seemed to blot out all signs of modern life was like stepping into a 19th-century world of gaunt industrial buildings. The rope-making originally took place in two parallel buildings, separated by a cobbled alleyway. On one side was the spinning complex, where the raw material was turned into thread, and where a notice still announces 'Women Spinners Only'. Opposite that is the ropewalk itself, built in 1785, traditionally a male bastion, though there is now the very first female ropemaker here. Stepping inside, one finds an amazing space: rows of windows to either side, but otherwise just one immensely long structure with the far end so far away that it's all but invisible. When it was being built the Admiralty had come to an important decision: the British fleet must be able to anchor anywhere in the world, so each ship had to carry a sufficient length of anchor cable to make this possible (this was in the days before iron chains were used). It was decided that the maximum depth should be 40 fathoms (240 feet to landlubbers), for which they would require 120 fathoms of cable. Making allowance for the space needed at both ends of the building and the fact that the rope reduces in length slightly during the making process, it was decided that the ideal length for the new building would be 440 yards – that is, a quarter of a mile. It's no wonder that these days you see bikes propped up all over the place for the workers to make a quick run from one end to the other.

↓ Pulling off the rope from the capstan used to haul the carriage down the rope walk.

PREVIOUS PAGES
Looking down the quarter-mile-long rope walk at Chatham dockyard – the carriage has rotating hooks that twist the strands to create rope.



↑ Attaching the twisted strands to the moveable carriage.

↑ With a workplace 440 yards long, bikes make it easier to get about.

Mechanisation reversed the process used in the old days. Originally, the man with the yarn walked away from the rotating hooks to twist them together. Now it is the rotating plate with the hooks that is moved, using a wheeled carriage. The start of the process was at the very far end of the walk. The spun fibre, in this case coir from coconuts, arrives wound on to bobbins known as cops that are then arranged on a frame. The individual threads are then fed through holes in a circular plate to keep them separate, the whole setup looking very similar to the traditional warping frame in a weaving mill. The threads are then drawn through a metal tube to form what may look like a rope, but it has no strength because none of the yarn threads have yet been twisted together. The untwisted threads are pulled out of the tube and fastened to one of the hooks on the travelling carriage, the forming machine. This can now be hauled back down the ropewalk by a rope running from a capstan at the far end of the building, where a second worker puts a couple of twists round the large pulley at the side of the machine. Originally the capstan would have been worked by hand, and later by a steam engine, but it is now powered by electricity. As the carriage begins to move, gearing from the axle sets the plate with the hooks spinning round. The third team member has the job of steering the forming machine on its long, slow journey.

It is impossible for the three workers to communicate with each other – even with the lungs of Pavarotti, no one could make themselves heard over such a long distance. Instead there are bells at each end, worked by a simple string pull. A bell tells the man on the capstan that everything's ready to move and he can start the motor. If the bell rings again, that's a message to stop. This happens at regular intervals, as the coir strands are not very strong and are liable to break, so there has to be a pause while the broken ends are located and knotted together again. Rope-making is not a job for the impatient. As it progresses down the walk, supports are put in at regular intervals to stop the rope sagging. Once it has reached the end of its long journey and that strand is complete it is cut at the standing end, and it is only then that you become aware of the tension in the rope that whips away at speed (fortunately the cutter knows from experience which way it's going to fly). It is then hooked up at the far end and tied in place.

This is not yet a complete rope, it is just one strand. The rope being made that day would consist of three strands altogether, so this whole operation has to be repeated again and then again. Now the final stage is reached when the rope is closed by twisting the three strands together, so there is yet one more journey to be made. In the past, the rope would have had a coloured thread down the centre, the 'rogue's thread'. Each dockyard had its own colour, so any rope could be identified. If there was a bad batch, then everyone knew who had made it – and if Chatham housewives suddenly sported