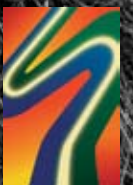


Hot Off The Press

ISSUE 1 SPRING 2009

The Incredible **Purton Hulks**



The following article is the first in a series that seeks out some lesser known features of Gloucester, the Severn and its surroundings. We hope that you will visit the featured site, and when you do, please extend your stay by calling into Severnprint where you will be welcome to meet with us and enjoy a tour of our site.

The Purton Hulks

Adam Edwards – a Fleet Street journalist who lives in Gloucestershire, took some time to visit the Purton Hulks and to speak with marine historian Paul Barnett, especially for Severnprint. Here he writes about these amazing maritime remains.

There are few objects with less soul than a Second World War concrete barge. It was an unloved piece of practical transport that was as anonymous as the muddy tidal waters of the River Severn it traversed. And when it became redundant it should have, to use an apposite cliché, sunk without trace.

And yet on a narrow swathe of scrubland running between the Severn's Waveridge Sands and the Gloucester and Sharpness Canal there is now an embossed plaque celebrating the beached hull of FCB75, technically known as a Ferrous Concrete Barge.

This might at first seem as peculiar as honouring a redundant articulated lorry trailer or canonizing a rotting holiday caravan. But in fact the barge and its neighbouring brethren belong to an extraordinary maritime monument of vessels; a collection of modern megaliths known locally as the 'Purton Hulks'.

Front cover: In spite of 45 years shoring the bank Harriett's name remains for all to see, she is a rare gem being the last Kennet barge of her kind.

Below: Dispatch is the last of the Severn schooners and has lain in her resting place since 1959.

At low water in the winter drizzle these forgotten lighters assume the guise of a contemporary art installation. Bleached ribs from discarded Severn Trows poke from the silt. Derelict concrete grain barges lie abandoned, unscathed by wind or water while the hulls of many of the schooners scuppered in this landlubber's grave are now just outlines in the scrub grass with only an occasional deck house, winch and row of rusting iron nails visible.

"What we have here is the largest boat cemetery in maritime Britain," said local marine historian Paul Barnett who lives in Gloucester. "It is the final resting place of eighty-one vessels of steel, timber and concrete constructions."

It was a hundred years ago this year that the first of these floating blockades was deliberately run aground on a half-mile foreshore between Purton and Sharpness. It was the simple solution to a massive landslide in the winter of 1906



when a fierce storm all but destroyed the high ground separating the river and the canal. Local traders who relied on the canal for transport were desperate to ensure such a disaster could never happen again and the canal company's chief engineer, A J Cullis, came up with idea of plugging the breach with a flotilla of unwanted working boats.

Over the next fifty-six years vessels were towed at speed from the far bank of the river shortly before the onset of high tide and then released so that they thundered into the broken bank. As the tide fell back a hole was smashed into the ship's side to allow in water and, over time mud, silt and sand. The first barge believed to be beached in 1909 was 'The Envoy' and part of her wooden stern is still clearly visible today. The last to be run aground, in 1965, was 'FCB75'.

Unfortunately this unique repository of marine history is vanishing as vandalism destroys it and the tide begins to claim back its own. Paul Barnett, who first visited the site as a teenager in 1976, has watched the remains disappear as remorselessly as he has researched every vessel (he is now confident he can identify seventy-seven boats). All that is left, for example, of the 'Katherine Ellen', seized by the Royal Navy after running guns to the IRA in 1921, is the rusty tube of her bilge pump. Others, such as the 'Harriett', a Kennet barge built in Pewsey in 1905, have fared a bit better - her name is still just about visible on the stern.

"Because the vessels were abandoned with no money changing hands they belonged to no-one," said Barnett, who has spent the past eleven years trying to record, locate and identify as many of the barges as possible. "At first people used them as a free supply of timber for their fires. Then others came and salvaged the semi-precious metals like the phosphor bronze pins that held them together."

Meanwhile this unprotected maritime oddity, which falls between protection under the Wreck Act and protection as a scheduled monument, has in the last few years become a magnet for naval historians, marine archaeologists and photographers.

Last year the recently formed 'Friends of Purton' was presented with an acclaimed Certificate of Merit for its campaign to save the unique collection. It has organised for twenty-two of the boats, including 'FCB75', to have individual plaques placed by them, many of them paid for by those who knew the men who worked on them. The 'Ada', for example, a barge build in 1869 and beached in 1956 has a plaque dedicated to 'the memory of Adrian Gordon, a decendant of Captain James Herbert'. There was a bouquet of pink flowers tied to one of its steel ribs on the day that I visited.



A link with the past! Joseph Barnard's Gloucester built barge the Abbey

And it was while I was standing by The 'Ada' that the mournful toot of the horn from the Gloucester to Chepstow train on the other side of the river reverberated across the water. It added, I thought, an appropriate soundtrack to what is, despite the brutish concrete evidence in front of me, a most soulful place.

For more information contact 'Friends of Purton' at www.friendsofpurton.org.uk. Photography courtesy of Derek Newton Goverd, telephone 01554 775943.

There are a programme of guided tours through the remains of the Purton Hulks led by Paul Barnett, Marine Historian.

Scheduled site tours:

- Sunday 18th January 2009 1pm
- Sunday 15th February 2009 1pm
- Sunday 15th March 2009 1pm
- Sunday 19th April 2009 2pm
- Sunday 17th May 2009 2pm
- Sunday 21st June 2009 2pm
- Sunday 19th July 2009 2pm
- Sunday 16th August 2009 2pm
- Sunday 20th September 2009 2pm
- Sunday 18th October 2009 2pm
- Sunday 15th November 2009 1pm
- Sunday 20th December 2009 1pm

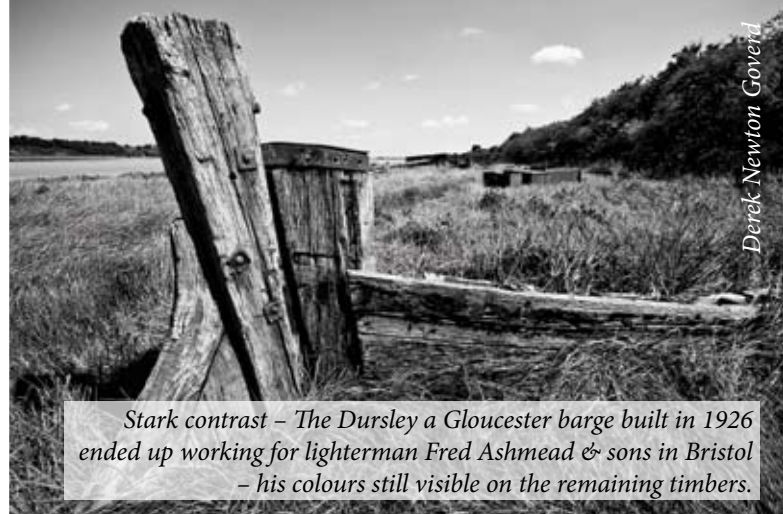
Meet at Purton Lower Bridge.

Donations in aid of Severn Area Rescue Association or £3.00 per person. Approx tour time 2hrs. Weather permitting.

We hope that you found this article of interest – if you would like to be sent the next article in the series please contact davidp@severnprint.co.uk or visit our website where the article appears and you can subscribe to further issues of our newsletter.

Severnprint Limited, Ashville Industrial Estate, Bristol Road, Gloucester GL2 5EU. Tel: 01452 416391. E: sales@severnprint.co.uk.

Designed by Vision (01452 429803). Printed by Severnprint on Revive 50:50 using vegetable inks and electricity from renewable sources.



Stark contrast – The Dursley a Gloucester barge built in 1926 ended up working for lighterman Fred Ashmead & sons in Bristol – his colours still visible on the remaining timbers.

Derek Newton Goverd



The bones of the former Foster Brothers boat King previously the Sally of London

Derek Newton Goverd



Severn Collier dreams of happier days working for Cadbury brothers carrying Lydney coal.

Derek Newton Goverd