

Historic Ships of Southampton

1st February 2024 - Memorial Hall

Well-known local historian, Cheryl Butler, gave a fascinating well illustrated talk about Southampton's long maritime history by highlighting some of the historic liners, warships, ferries and yachts that once graced the docks.

Cheryl started by showing how the port developed at different locations in the town from the Roman period until today. In Roman times the small town was known as Clausentum, that was located in the Bitterne Park area and was a military port. In the Saxon period the St Mary's area was the new centre of the town and its docks. It was the main port of the Kingdom of Wessex with Winchester as its capital and it traded with Europe.

During the Norman period wine was bought from France and it was a premier port until the 1500s. Ferryboats, such as the 'All Saints' in 1293, were used to bring stone and wine to the town.

Henry V was the person to start a British Navy, which was centred at Southampton, to help fight his war with France. He converted a merchant vessel to a warship the 'Holy Ghost' and had a purpose-built ship the 'Grace Dieu' constructed by William Soper in 1417 at Southampton, that was taken to Hamble for fitting out. It was the largest ship ever built in England at that time, although it was not needed as the war with France was over so his great ships were kept on the Hamble River.

During the 14th to 15th century there was a great Italian trade with luxury goods such as spices and ceramics. The St Michael's area became the centre of town and its port in the Tudor period, with exploration of the colonies and bringing back fish from Newfoundland a notable trade. Cheryl mentioned the 'Squirrel' 1583 that took part in this but she sank on her way back to Southampton.

Privateering was important at this time and the 'Angel' was an example of this to raise money from abroad. She was called up to fight the Spanish Armada in 1588 and was eventually used as one of the fire ships that destroyed the Spanish fleet.

The 'Speedwell' was to take the Pilgrims to America with the 'Mayflower' but she leaked too much and had to be repaired at Southampton. They set sail from the town in 1560 but 'Speedwell' became too unseaworthy and they had to return to Plymouth from where the 'Mayflower' left for America by herself.

In 1786 'HMS Elephant' was built at Bursledon that Admiral Lord Nelson captained at the Battle of Copenhagen and later Jane Austen's brother Frank was its captain.

The introduction of steamships at the beginning of the 1820s, with the 'Prince of Coburg' being the first to operate out of Southampton, led to the docks greatly developing. Also, from this time Southampton became important for yacht clubs and yacht construction. The 2nd Marquess of Lansdowne, who lived in the town and was a keen yachtsman, developed one of the first catamarans.

Cheryl then highlighted some of the vessels that were notable in the port's history, such as the Royal Mail ship 'Amazon' that caught fire and sank in 1852, the worst maritime disaster up to that time of a Southampton ship. The 'Mignonette' that left Southampton for Australia was shipwrecked on her voyage and led to the cannibalism of one of her surviving crew. In 1899, 'Stella', one of the first ships with some female crew, sank on her way to the Channel Islands.

Regarding yachting, Sir Thomas Lipton had five large yachts named 'Shamrock'. He took his crew from the local area such as Itchen Village and the Hamble River. When competing for the America Cup he used his gentlemen friends to sail 'Shamrock' rather than using his normal professional crew and he lost.

The 'Titanic' could not be missed in a talk about historic ships of Southampton. She was the largest passenger ship that carried its passengers in the most luxurious conditions, which sank with the death of many of its crew that came from the town and local area. Of course, the later great liner the 'Queen Mary' was also mentioned.

Another type of boat, the flying boats, used Southampton and it was one of the country's important bases for them between 1914 and 1958.

In 1939, the 'Habana' evacuated over 8,000 people from the Spanish Civil War to Southampton, particularly children. The Red Funnel ferry 'Gracy Fields' was used to evacuate troops from Dunkirk and was eventually sank on one of these crossings. In 1947, the 'SS Almanzora' brought immigrants from the West Indies to Southampton, similar to the 'Windrush'.

Moving on to modern times Cheryl spoke about the 'Canberra' and the 1982 Falklands war, then the container docks that is the second largest in the country and Southampton being a destination port for cruise liners with 2.5 million passengers a year.

Another excellent and professional presentation by Cheryl that was very well received by the audience.