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The newly-restored *Kathleen and May*, the last of the west country's wooden, three-masted trading schooners, is currently seeking a permanent berth in Bideford, north Devon. Ideally, she'd be kept afloat in the middle of the town in a purpose-built wet-dock as a draw for tourists – with the added attraction of trips to her old trading ports in southern Ireland when the weather is right.

Kathleen and May returned to Bideford – where she was registered when she last traded as late as 1960 – for rebuilding between 1999 and 2002. Now the rebuild is finished she has sailed again to Ireland, Wales and the south coast of England.

But in order for her to remain at Bideford a bid is being made to raise a lottery grant (see p7). As things stand her owner and saviour, local businessman Steve Clarke, will be forced to sell her in order to recoup some of the £1million debt he has accrued in returning her to full sailing condition.

Since 1960 her fortunes have been mixed; periods of high profile restoration by well-meaning organisations alternating with periods of total neglect. Indeed, throughout the 1960s her future hung in the balance. She was owned by various individuals who were intent on using her for charter work, but the expense of refitting and maintaining a 98ft (30m) three-masted wooden cargo ship had always defeated them.

In 1970 the newly-formed Maritime Trust took her on and restored her in order to display her to the public, first in Plymouth, then in London into the 1990s. But they were unable to keep up with the maintenance and eventually found themselves presiding over a ship that was fast becoming a hulk.

Before beginning this major restoration, Clarke admitted he knew nothing about wooden ships or sailing them but he has shown the sort of vision, tenacity and drive that is reminiscent of those who owned and worked these ships in the days of sail.

Happily, the last merchant schooners and ketches are well documented thanks to a number of people who wrote about them and encouraged those who worked aboard them to record their ways of life. As Michael Bouquet points out in the forward to *No Gallant Ships*, the big bluewater sailing ships were hugely outnumbered by the smaller 60 to 100 ft (20 to 30m) merchant

Trading stories

Thanks to a man with a vision the last wooden trading schooner is sailing again. Peter Rolt meets Steve Clarke for the lowdown on Bideford's best, Kathleen and May



Above: Steve Clarke and the boat off the north Devon coast.



Above: Launching in 2001 following a complete rebuild.

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sailing vessels which plyed their trade from the small ports all around the coasts of the British Isles. "They were financed by local capitalists, built by local craftsmen and commanded and manned by local mariners. They were as integral a part of rural England in many counties as the village churches, the markets, the mills, the farm wagons or the village smithies."

Writing in 1959, Bouquet also noted that the last merchant sailing ships were all trading from the small ports of Bideford, Appledore, Braunton and Barnstaple where the rivers Taw and Torridge disgorge into the sea. These vessels were the wooden three-master *Kathleen and May*, the steel three-master *Result* and the wooden ketch *Irene*.

Launched fully rigged in April 1900, *Kathleen and May* was originally named *Lizzie May* after the two daughters of her main shareholder Captain John Coppack of Coppack Bros & Co on the river Dee near Chester. Measuring 98ft 4in (30m) in length; 23ft 2in beam (7m); depth of hold 10 ft (3m); 136 tons gross



and 99 net, *Kathleen and May* was designed to carry plenty of cargo (226 tons) but with a good run aft elongated into an elegant counter. Her planking was 2½ to 3 inch (7.5cm) pitch pine seasoned for 10 to 12 years. These schooners were heavily built workhorses capable of taking the ground while carrying several hundred tons of cargo.

It was a subsequent owner named Fleming, who owned a fleet carrying coal from England and Wales, that renamed the ship after his own daughters, *Kathleen and May*. The ship was employed under a Captain Joe Aherne in the coal trade between Youghal and the Bristol Channel ports, occasionally making forays to the south coast of England and once to Jersey in the Channel Islands. Capt Aherne finally took his last voyage on her in 1931, before she was sold on, but seventy years after this, his grandson, Brendan Aherne sailed with her in 2001.

In 1931, a time when ships were cheap, she was sold to Captain Tommy Jewell and his father William of Appledore. She

became an auxiliary schooner with the installation of her first engine, a secondhand 80bhp semi-diesel Beardmore. At the same time her topsail yards were removed, her topmasts were shortened and she sailed as a fore and aft schooner. This enabled her to sail closer to the wind and closer still with the engine assisting. Under Captain Tommy Jewell, registered in Bideford, she continued to trade for a further 29 years – man and ship “setting a standard by which other auxiliary schooners were often judged”, according to Richard J. Scott, who sailed in her occasionally between 1954 and 1959. Again her cargoes were predominantly coal to Youghal from Wales and the Forest of Dean and from Garston on the Mersey River. Although coal was the staple she would carry any cargo available, sometimes sailing to the south Devon and Cornish ports with coal, returning to the Mersey with china clay loaded at Par or Fowey.

During the Second World War – when the difficulties included finding good crew and saving the ship from being

requisitioned by the Admiralty – ‘armed only with a Lewis gun and a rifle’ she continued to ply her trade across the Irish Sea. In the same year she made the first of many voyages with china clay from Fremington opposite Braunton on the river Taw to Crosshaven, county Cork for the Carrigaline Pottery.

In 1947, having survived the war when so many others of her ilk were finally put out of business – more often due to lack of maintenance than enemy action – pole masts were fitted along with bigger hatches to accommodate modern machinery for loading and unloading. At the same time the decorative work under her bowsprit was renewed. Her rig was further reduced, with the removal of her topmasts leaving her new 36ft (11m) bowsprit to carry just two jibs.

In 1952 Captain Tommy Jewell demonstrated his continuing faith in his ship by installing a new £3,000 Crossley diesel of 133bhp. Leslie Morrish, the present owner of the Bridgwater ketch *Irene*, bought both ships in 1961, *Kathleen and May* costing him £4,500. With her new owner on board, Tommy Jewell sailed her fully rigged, assisted by Captain Bill Schiller of the *Irene*, using all nine sails including her three gaff topsails, via St Mary’s in the Isles of Scilly and the Channel Islands to Cowes on the Isle of Wight where he said his final goodbyes to her – although he was to see her in Appledore again.

But two ancient wooden ships were too much for one man, so Morrish put *Kathleen and May* back on the market. For three years she lay in Appledore until she was seen by the newly formed Maritime Trust. This was set up under the auspices of HRH the Duke of Edinburgh to preserve for future generations some of the ships that represented Britain’s maritime history and which could be in danger of being forgotten. While *Cutty Sark* was representative of the deepwater sailing craft, *Kathleen and May* was to represent coastal sail trading craft. In 1971 it bought her through the generosity of Sir YK Pao, then the Governing Director of World Wide Shipping of Hong Kong.

The trust began by giving her a major refit, including a new false stem and stern post and replacing 20ft (6.1m) of her keel. Where possible her original fittings were used, or copies made from the originals. The Appledore roller reefing gear on all three booms, for instance, is original.

From 1971 to 1978 she was moored in Plymouth and many people remember visiting her there where she was kept well maintained. In 1978 she was towed to London to form part of the Historic Ship Collection at St Katharine Dock where she remained until 1985 when she was towed across the river Thames to St Mary Overy Dock, Southwark. Here the Maritime Trust lost its way and she was allowed to deteriorate to such a

degree that ‘future generations’ were very soon going to be permanently deprived of the last of the wooden trading schooners.

The Trust decided to sell most of the ships they had tried to save, including the *Kathleen and May*. At that time T Nielsen & Co, at Gloucester Docks, was nearing the end of major rebuilding work on the ketch *Garlandstone*. It felt strongly enough about saving the *Kathleen and May* and keeping her in Britain that it bought her in 1996 making her seaworthy enough to be towed to Gloucester.

Two years later it was still trying to raise funds to save her when, completely by chance, Steve Clarke spotted her in Gloucester Docks under flapping tarpaulins that lifted just enough to reveal the name of the port where she was last registered – Bideford. As president of the Chamber of Commerce in Bideford he was immediately determined to buy her. He thought she would be a great boost for tourism and thus local businesses – as well as adding stature to the town by reminding people of its strong maritime history.

After patching up her seams she was towed down the Sharpness Canal to the Severn, into the Bristol Channel and on to East-the-Water in Bideford, where she was lifted out on to the quay and surveyed by Alan Hinks, whose family has been building wooden vessels in Appledore for 150 years. Most frames had to be replaced at least from the deck to the turn of the bilge, as did the deadwood aft and the frames supporting her counter stern. 3,500 ft (1060m) of new 3in (7.5cm) larch planking was fastened to the frames using trennels and galvanised spikes, which was how she was built at Connah’s Quay.

The intention was to make her strong enough to be displayed as a static exhibit on the quay at Bideford, but after having the stern of the ship completely rebuilt Steve decided that they ought to bite the bullet and restore her to full sailing trim.

When I met Steve in November 2000 the ship was swarming with people: the caulking was almost finished; two men were drilling for keel bolts; waterways were being fastened down; the last trennels were being drilled for; a plank was being spiled forward and new keel blocks were being chainsawed for fitting a steel shoe on the keel. The whole team was enthusiastic and eager to show off the ship. One volunteer worker was John Castle, a master mariner who had previously skippered Greenpeace’s *Rainbow Warrior*. When the ship was relaunched in the summer of 2001 John was the obvious choice of skipper.

Eventually, after all but two of the oak deckbeams had been replaced, and lodging knees fitted on every beam, 10in (25cm) thick waterways were laid followed by new deck planking in 5in by 2½in (13 by 7cm) balau, an Indonesian hardwood. Once the



Above: Steve and volunteers check the fit of the hatch.



Above: In her glory days; she continued trading until the 1960s.

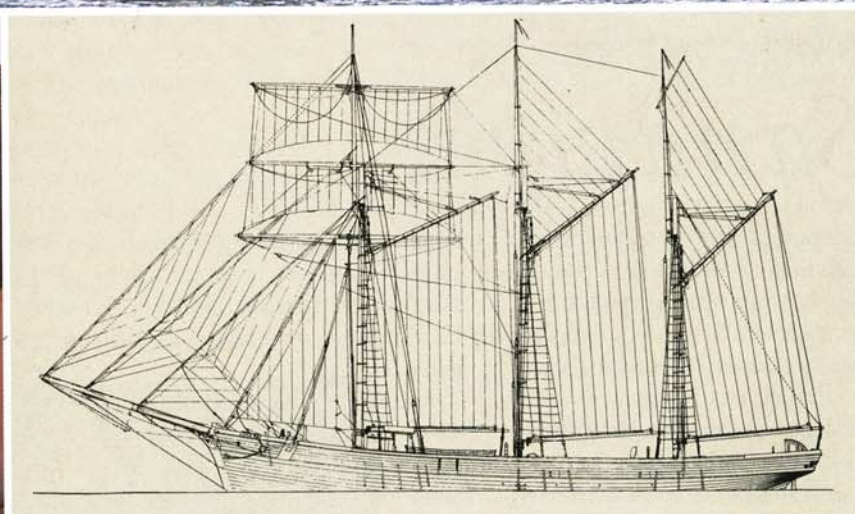


Right: Off Ilfracombe with new Duradon sails.



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Above: Ex-Greenpeace skipper John Castle.



Above: Kathleen and May's original rigging was sturdy and typical of her type.

deck was down and caulked in the traditional manner, the newly renovated hatches, winches and fife rails could be reinstalled while the pinrails and bulwark planking was renewed. "I guess we replaced 85% of the planking and 60% of the frames altogether," said Steve pointing out that much of the keel, the lower frames and the floors were mostly original, as was the ironwork such as hanging knees and other fittings including those on the masts. Tragically, her compass and the ship's bell bearing her original name *Lizzie May* were stolen in Gloucester.

Despite strenuous efforts to secure funding from any likely source in England and Europe, all the financial burden for the rebuild had fallen on Steve Clarke, his wife Maralyn and his bank, although the southern Irish community of Youghal has shown enormous support. Initially he had expected to spend about £50,000 restoring her sufficiently to be a fixed display, but how much more of a tourist attraction is she now as a ship in sailing trim? The £50,000 has become a huge debt of £1million

and it would have been more if the ship had not attracted a flowering of community spirit in Bideford. The rebuild was supported in kind by many local businesses donating such necessities as scaffolding from one firm; expertise and tools from Appledore Shipbuilders Ltd and a rent of £1 for the quay on which she was restored.

Sea trials went well and the ship provisioned at Appledore before sailing to Youghal with sails borrowed from the *Bessie Ellen*. After a 25 hour passage they received a royal welcome and all the crew were reduced to tears by the town's generosity and their enthusiasm for *Kathleen and May*.

The ship now has a complete set of new Duradon fore and aft sails from Alf Readman, the sailmaker at Square Sail Shipyard in Charlestown, Cornwall. In the summer of 2002 she enjoyed six weeks of great sailing in Ireland where she made contact with several of the men who used to sail on her.

For the latest news on *Kathleen and May* see p7.

