

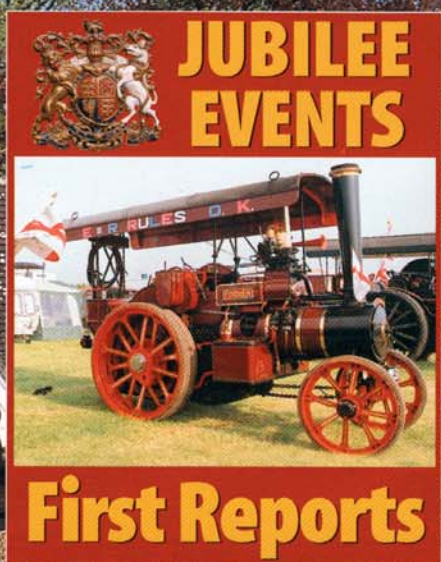
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The *Kathleen & May*, dressed overall, makes a triumphant return to Youghal in the south of Ireland in 2001. Photo: Steve Clarke collection.

Damsels in distress: *Kathleen & May* rescued

When Steve Clarke, president of the Chamber of Commerce in Bideford, Devon, saw a forlorn-looking sailing trader at Gloucester Docks registered to his home town, he decided that, despite knowing nothing about ships, the *Kathleen & May* must 'come home' to be restored as a working centrepiece for the town's proud heritage. **John Hobbs** meets the vessel that he first saw working in 1947 and meets the man that spearheaded its return to glory.

I had first seen and photographed the three-masted topsail schooner *Kathleen & May* when she was loading a cargo of bricks in the railway-owned docks at Bridgwater in 1947. After her trading days were over, I took a look at her again when she was in Sutton Harbour in Plymouth and later in St. Katharine's Dock by Tower Bridge in London, and then felt comfortable in the

knowledge that the future of one of the very few remaining examples of a small British-built near-sea sailing trader, so typical of the type of vessel that could be found in many a port in the West Country, Wales and Ireland in the years between the two world wars, was secure in the hands of the Maritime Trust.

When my wife and I came across the

Kathleen & May in Gloucester Docks in 1998, the old vessel – she was built in wood at Connah's Quay near Chester in 1900 – was a sad sight. Hulked, although protected by lightweight sheeting from the elements, she was almost beyond recognition, but not quite, for her name and Port of Registry – Bideford (in North Devon) – were to be seen on her stern. We made enquiries of those whom we had gone to see, and were pleased to learn that the schooner was to be restored to a sea-going condition – when money was available!

Although an important part of our maritime history, and now recorded with others in the schedule of significant British vessels that ideally should have a place in preservation within the United Kingdom, that money could not be found, and so the future of the *Kathleen & May* looked bleak. Could nothing be done to save her, or at least what could be seen of her characterless form?

Enter Steve Clarke of Bideford, where he was, and still is, president of the town's Chamber of Commerce. "I was by chance in Gloucester Docks one day, and saw this sad looking hulk, with her name and 'Bideford' on her stern, lying there. I knew nothing, absolutely nothing at all, about boats, but decided that here was a restoration project for the Chamber of Commerce, that could be allied to some form of yet-to-be-agreed regeneration activity for our town.

"At the time there seemed to be every

with hand hauled dredges. In the days of working sail the oysters were sorted on the deck, but when the smacks were fitted with engines old tables were used. Some of the smacks, such as **Mayflower** were fitted with tables for this Match.

The event started, following the old working practice of the oyster companies, with the foreman's smack, in this case Donald Rainbird's **Mayflower** hoisting a flag. It should have ended when the flag came down, but in fact the wind died when the flood tide started and the smacks ran back into West Mersea for the prize giving at the restored Packing Shed on a marsh island. Bob Fawkes's **Lizzie Annie** won the Hervey Benham Trophy for the most oysters landed, while Johnnie Milgate's **Boy George** won the prize of the most oysters landed by a winkle brig and Gerrard Swift's **Kate** won the prize for the smack handled in the most professional manner under sail. In the 30th annual Colne Smack and Barge Race from Brightlingsea the smacks completed for the Golden Cockerel, Cock of the Colne Trophy. In the first series of races sailed in the Victorian era the working smacks used to sail for a trophy of this name and it appears that this idea was taken to Wivenhoe, Tasmania. Later Melbourne, Australia picked up on the idea and they also race for a Golden Cockerel trophy.

Eighteen smacks, three bawleys and eight barges raced in the Colne Race and the **Edith Alice**, originally built by Aldous at Brightlingsea in 1897 and totally rebuilt at Hollowshore, Kent in 1994, won the Golden Cockerel. The first bawley home was the **Bona**, built by Aldous in 1903 and taking part in a smack race for the first time was the bawley-rigged cockle boat **Mary Amelia**, built by Heywood at Southend in 1914.

Also in the Colne Race, sailing for the first time after being rebuilt on the original keel by T Neilsen & Co at Gloucester Dock, was the **George & Alice**. The 42ft **George & Alice** was built by Aldous, who built most of the Essex smacks, in 1909 and Malcolm MacGregor worked her as a motor fishing craft until about 1972 when he returned her to sail. The hull of **George & Alice** was taken by road to Maylandsea where Rick Caldry completed the fitting out for the owner Sir Richard MacCormac.

The Colne Race was sailed in a fresh NE. There was only one class for barges and they could set any sail used by traditional working barges and craft were only allowed to set white, cream or tan sails. The two bowsprit barges, **Edme** and then **Xylonite** were first and second, then came the **Marjorie**, which has sailed as a staysail barge for at least the past fifty years. I understand that she is due to be fitted with a bowsprit for next season.



Barque "Earl of Pembroke" and brigantine "Phoenix" docked at Charlestown



The dandy "Our Daddy" entering Looe



Mersea Dredging Match winner, MN 23 "Lizzie Annie"



Colne Smack & Barge race beat back up river, "Edna" and "Repertor"



Barge "Edme" flying her race winning pennants after the Colne Race, Brightlingsea

The **Marjorie**, had a very successful season racing and having sailed in the eight main barge races amassed the most points to become the champion barge of the season. The **Phoenician** had also been in all eight races and was awarded the Seamanship prize in the Colne for rescuing a man overboard under sail and continuing the race.

Owen and Rita Emerson of Upnor have bought the swim head stumpie barge **Whippet**, a former London River lighter, from Reg Coombs. Another former swim head lighter, the **Montreal** has been down to Kent to have some of her rigging renewed.

The stumpie barge **Lady of the Lea** was due to go to Tim Goldsack, at Faversham to have a new quarter and he was also going to take the wheelhouse off **Raybel**. The **Glenway** has been moved to Maldon to be used for static charters until such time as she can be returned to sail. Losing her topmast last year delayed the **Reminder** being fitted with a bowsprit. Also at Maldon the coaster **Johnno** has been cut down to form a dry dock in which the barge **Dawn** will be rebuilt. The **Dawn** should be moved down river to Clint Swan's yard at Heybridge Basin. ■

All photos by Robert Simper

the hull had to be discarded, the replacement area being some 3,700 ft of 9"x3" planks, all cut from slabs of the trunks of European larch obtained from suppliers in Hull. Of course each plank is different, and has to be individually cut to size and shape. However, when you are rebuilding a wooden hull other factors have to be taken into account, not least of which is your inability to offer up a new plank, because it has to be steamed to shape over a period of three hours at 100 degrees. The experience required - and gained - was considerable for, on average, each plank was about 30ft in length. Above deck level redwood, secured to oak stanchions which were a continuation of the frames, replaced the bulwarks. To secure the planks to the frames, we used several thousand trenails (trenails) shaped from air-dried oak.

"We have left much of the hold, lined in 3in larch, in its original state, but that caused us problems during the restoration that would not have arisen during her build. Then external and internal planks would have been clamped together as they were fixed to the frames, whereas, of course, our inboard planks were already in place, and we would not or could not disturb them. That was quite a performance, but one that had to be carried through."

When being prepared for the tow from Kent to Gloucester, the vessel's three masts



The newly-fitted beams that were to support the deck timbers.



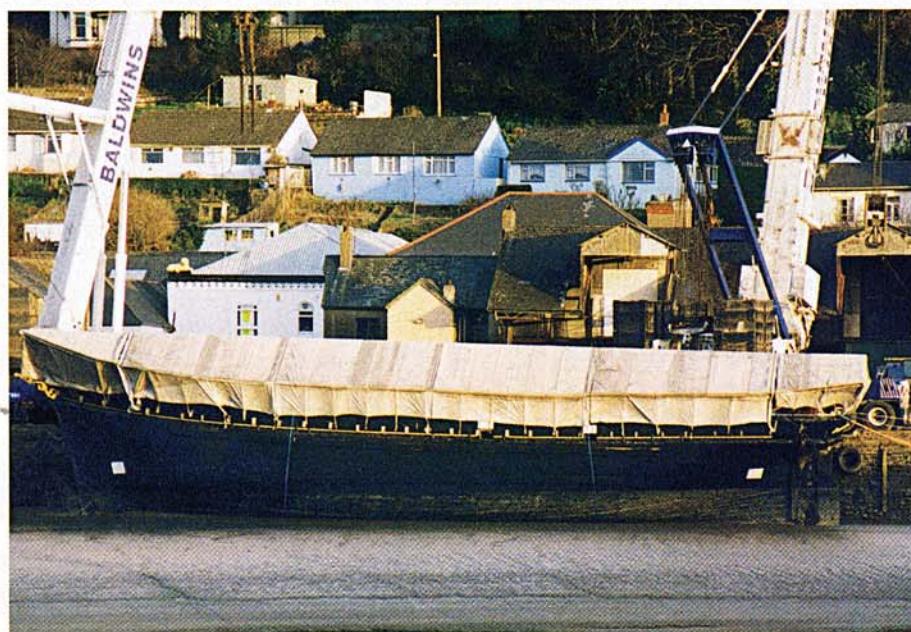
The stern being rebuilt in new timber.



Knocking home the trenails.



The windlass. With a lever inserted in the lefthand end too, one movement raises the anchor just 4in!



Preparations are nearly ready for the hull of the vessel to be lifted from the waters of the River Torridge at Bideford.

and the standing rigging were removed and placed in store within Chatham's Historic Dockyard, from where it was all retrieved as the restoration continued. In Bideford a team of volunteers, and there were plenty representing many of the older shipbuilding skills of North Devon, took on the challenge of removing the varnish from the masts and booms, after which the woodwork was treated to several applications of Danish oil. The associated task was to sort and then locate the standing rigging. The running rigging is new, having been supplied by a specialist firm, and at the time of my visit to the *Kathleen & May* her new sails, appropriately terracotta in colour, were on order.

The air draught of the vessel (distance between waterline and top of the mainmast) is some 86ft, which is greater than the maximum height that can pass under the relatively new bridge that crosses the river up-stream of Appledore. If the vessel was to go to sea

again (and remember that that became the objective of Steve Clarke and his team), then each of the three masts had to be cut some 16ft from the top and then traditionally rigged in such a way that the topmasts can be lowered and then raised again.

I assumed that the vessel's very nostalgic return to her once home port of Youghal on the southern coast of Ireland in July 2001 had been on the motor, and that was confirmed by Steve, although there was much more to it than that. "We were very kindly loaned three sails from another old trader, the *Bessie Ellen*, which is presently being restored in Plymouth by Nikki Alford (whom I had visited a couple of weeks earlier for another tale, in due course, for *Old Glory!* J.H.). When in the middle of the Irish Sea one of them started to rip, and so we hauled that down using what is known as the Appledore Rolling Reefing Gear, once commonly fitted but now thought to be the only working example left.

"When motoring, she handles like a dream, for I have installed a 400hp secondhand Detroit diesel, once in a lifeboat, which is located in a compartment of its own, and that was possible for it is off-centre and drives twin screws each turned by a hydraulic motor driven by a hydraulic pump. We don't have a gearbox, and when we need to go astern we simply reverse the flow of the hydraulic fluids. Having worked with hydraulics for the last thirty years, I designed and installed the system myself.

"Removing the old engine from the keel area has enabled us to strengthen the vessel along the total length of the keel by fixing a steel shoe to it. This was made and donated by Appledore Shipbuilders Ltd. To fix that we had to drill holes along the length of the keel and keelson, each some 5ft deep to take bolts to ensure that the shoe became an integral part of the combined keel and keelson structure of the vessel. The keel was only about 4in deep whereas inboard the keelson is over 4ft deep. The steelwork reduced the need for ballast, but only marginally, because we have about 60 tons of cut-up railway line on board. I was going to use concrete with lifting eyes until I discovered that this material weighs two tons to the cube, whereas the steel rails weigh in at eight tons! Various oil and water tanks and their contents also add to the vessel's stability."

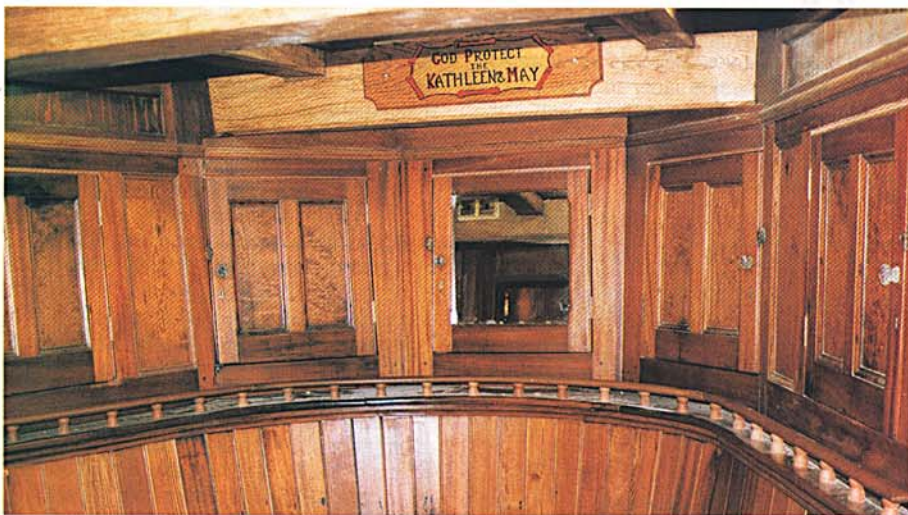
Below decks, and in addition to the captain's cabin and the engine room, the mate has a cabin aft, there are a galley, heads and a dressing room forward of the hold, which itself is approximately 50ft long and 20ft broad, and beyond all of that in the bows is the crew's accommodation. That was where the crew would feel the sea, I suggested, but Steve pleaded ignorance! That prompted me to ask if he was the vessel's skipper on the two voyages of 2001, namely the return to Youghal and, before that, the shake-down cruise around Lundy Island at the mouth of the Bristol Channel.

The answer was "No", because unbeknown to Steve until he started looking for a skipper, one of the volunteers quietly going about various restoration tasks was John Castlewood who is the holder of a Master's ocean-going ticket. "He and the *Kathleen & May* took us to Youghal in fine style in July," Steve told me. "The return to her home port of some thirty years was quite remarkable, with a greeting that none of us can ever forget. In fact, and I am not ashamed to say this, there was not a dry eye amongst us! Thousands were there to welcome the old schooner, and we enjoyed in all senses of that word, quite amazing civic hospitality, including the donation to the vessel of a cheque for £10,000. We thought that we would do some work on her whilst we there, using volunteers who knew the trades, but that proved impossible, for we were mobbed by visitors throughout the three weeks of our visit. The donations from the folk who visited us amounted on average to £600 a day, such was everyone's interest in what we were, and are, doing."

The *Kathleen & May* first arrived in the Irish port in 1908 when she was acquired by M.J. Fleming who renamed her after his daughters, and she remained in his ownership until 1931 when she was bought, for the sum of £700, by Capt. T. Jewell of Appledore, and returned to the British register. Her registered size is 98.4ft at the waterline, 23.2ft in the beam, and she draws 10.1ft when fully



The *Kathleen & May* standing proud again alongside Brunswick Wharf in Bideford.



The superb craftsmanship of the restored captain's cabin.

laden with a cargo capacity of 226 tons.

There is so much more to the *Kathleen & May* than can possibly be recorded in an article within these pages, and a visit – she is open Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday afternoons between 1pm and 4pm – will be very rewarding. For those who are unable to get to Bideford, words about and illustrations of the vessel can be found in *The Story of the Kathleen & May 1900 to 2002*, available from Steve Clarke at New Road, Bideford, Devon,

EX39 5HB, priced at £3.50 including postage. The vessel can be visited on its website www.kathleen-and-may.co.uk ■

■ I'm most grateful to a very busy Steve Clarke for his readiness to talk to me about the *Kathleen & May* and for showing me over the ship. On the other side of Devon another former sailing trader – the *Bessie Ellen* – is undergoing restoration, but that is another, and, from what I have already discovered, rather different, tale.