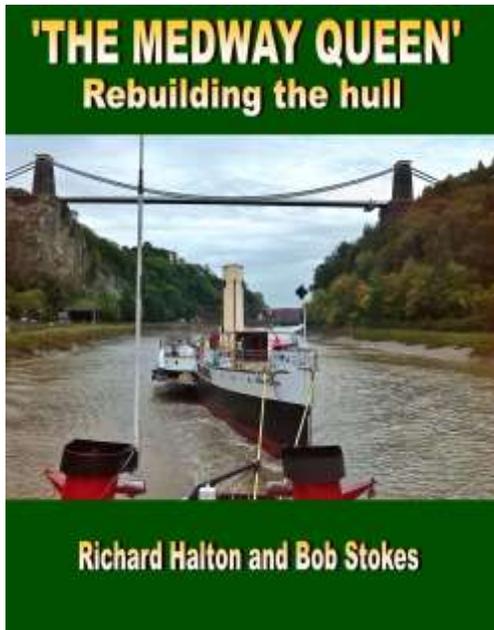


# Why Medway Queen?



This document is reprinted from the chapter of the same name in the Medway Queen Preservation Society's book "Medway Queen – Rebuilding the Hull". It explains the interest of various groups in restoring the paddle steamer, Medway Queen, and the philosophy behind that restoration including its "fit" within the National Historic Ships framework

"Medway Queen – Rebuilding the Hull" was published by the society in 2014 to document the hull rebuild in some detail and to lay the foundations for future work on the ship in the fitting out phases of her rebuild

Richard Halton  
June 2020

Medway Queen has a long and varied history. The various phases of her life gave rise to interest groups who support her preservation for different reasons although nostalgia and the education of future generations are common factors. The Medway Queen Preservation Society draws support from all these various sources.

For many years the ship was an icon of the river Medway and the Thames estuary; in her later years she was the last remaining paddle steamer on those rivers. She is a fondly remembered part of the local culture and history for many local people and those who spent holidays there.

Medway Queen's wartime service reinforces the local support and also interests a wider group of people nationally. The Dunkirk Evacuation still resonates with many people who have only heard the story second or third hand but to whom "Operation Dynamo" represents the best of the British ability to improvise and make the best of any situation. Even now, over 70 years after the event, the society is in contact with veterans (and their descendants) who came home on Medway Queen.

A further interest group is comprised of those interested because she is steam driven or because of their interest in transport or technological history. This is accompanied by a significant overlap in interest with the hugely successful steam railway preservation movement and the high level of coverage of the project given by the heritage press. This interest group is distributed across the UK and internationally.

In the 1960s Medway Queen was a restaurant and nightclub on the Isle of Wight. The club was open from 1966 through to about 1974 and gave rise to another specific group of people interested in the vessel's history and prepared to support preservation projects. Medway Queen is regarded as part of the island's history and culture almost as much as she is part of Medway's past.

The first attempt at preservation began in 1978 when Mr. Jim Ashton purchased the ship and moved her back to her home port. This process actually took some 6 years of hard voluntary work to prepare and move a derelict ship down river to Cowes where she was loaded onto a submersible pontoon and towed to Chatham.

The Medway Queen Preservation Society's roots were partly in the steam railway preservation movement where return to working order and as near original appearance as possible are

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considered paramount. This movement is, in general, very aware that the concept of “original condition” requires a degree of flexibility in definition both in regard to appearance and status of materials. Most large mechanical artefacts have had visual and technical modifications over the years before they became subject to restoration projects. It is important that appearance and function are regained with a minimum replacement of fabric. The aim is, however, as much to preserve the experience of travelling behind a steam locomotive (or sailing on a paddle steamer) as to preserve the objects themselves. It is accepted that financial viability in the long term will always be dependent on volunteer labour and grants or donations for capital expenditure but it is planned that day to day running costs will be covered by income.

Although the formation of the society and commencement of the re-building project in Bristol pre-date publication of the National Historic Ships Committee’s criteria and recommendations the principles are a very close match. The rebuild of Medway Queen constitutes a “reconstruction” in NHSC terms with significant amounts of new material required to attain a sustainable working vessel. The stated aim is to restore the ship to working order and her 1939 appearance retaining as much of the original fabric as possible.

The re-built hull is historically accurate to the 1924 design incorporating modifications such as the bow rudder for her appearance immediately before the Second World War. Years of neglect and the effects of salt water and contaminated mud had left the steel of the hull in a very poor state. The need was for a virtually new hull into which a not insignificant amount of “original” machinery, fittings and other material could be installed. The initial plans centered on an out and out replica hull of welded construction in the belief that riveting was no longer practical and to meet modern safety and operational requirements. In discussions with the Heritage Lottery Fund this was changed to maintain historical accuracy by using riveted construction and the 1924 design although an additional bulkhead would be installed at frame 18 and

some other concessions made to modern requirements. The boiler room was declared a “non-heritage” area which will allow installation of an efficient modern boiler in due course. Medway Queen used to take several days to raise steam from cold. If you operate continuously for 5 months of the year and only have to start from cold once a year this is not a problem. If you consider operating intermittently, perhaps at weekends, this would be a major handicap. Additionally, some vital functions such as life-saving and navigational equipment will need to be augmented by modern equivalents. Inevitably, there will be further compromises as the society attempts to reconcile historical accuracy with modern commercial and licensing requirements.

The HLF and the society’s consultants estimated that the restoration would contain 60-65% original material including the main engine and ancillary machinery. They also warned that the hull was too corroded to be moved, even a short distance to a possible pontoon loading site, so the decision was reluctantly taken to dismantle her as part of the HLF project and to deliver all re-usable material to Bristol by road when required by the build programme..

The contract for rebuilding the hull was awarded to David Abels Boatbuilders of Bristol in 2008 and they began preparing working drawings and building sub-assemblies in their workshops. Through successive re-organisations this business changed into the Albion Dockyard Ltd. during the course of the project but it remained very much the same organisation. In 2009 the keel was laid and construction proper began in the dry dock. In the following pages we will follow the story of that rebuild in some detail.

This is the story of a unique historic vessel restoration project requiring the construction of the first riveted steel hull to be built in a UK yard for over 50 years and taking place at a location with impeccable links to traditional British shipbuilding. The tale concentrates on the technical aspects of the project but we must acknowledge a huge amount of planning and discussion that went into making it possible and reconciling the conflicting requirements and expectations of all the parties involved.