



Everything ship-shape

Jonathan Glancey is thrilled with Cornwall's new maritime museum

There are at least four good reasons for visiting Falmouth: Castle, Swanpool, Maenporth and Gyllynvase, four sandy beaches caressing the world's third largest natural deep-water harbour, washed by the Gulf Stream, blessed by sunny Cornish skies. A fifth good reason is

the National Maritime Museum Cornwall. Nearly complete, this £21.5m Cornish outpost of the recently extended and renovated museum at Greenwich, rises from the southern end of Falmouth's harbourside between the docks and the town centre. The two areas are linked by a new pedestrian walkway.

With its lighthouse-like tower

overlooking the Pendennis marina and its long, oak-clad walls, the new building is unmissable, while appearing to be a natural extension of Falmouth's long association with boats and the sea. Its form, and the materials employed to create it, echo the construction of the boatyards, sail-lofts and dockside warehouses of a town that was once one of the most important ports in the world. In the mid-19th century, the sight of up to 350 ocean-going sailing ships anchored here, after fetching and carrying goods and mail from around the world, would have been nothing unusual. Today this international trade is the stuff of sepia photographs on museum walls, yet Falmouth and boats remain as inseparable as Cornwall and surfing, piskies and pasties.

The new museum, designed by Mary Jane Long and Rolfe Kentish, is the centrepiece of an ambitious redevelopment bringing the town centre and its historic harbour even closer together. A retail, residential, cultural and transport hub gathered around a new square will provide park-and-sail as well as park-and-ride stopovers; from Falmouth it is possible to explore a labyrinth of creeks, rivers and waterside pubs by boat.

The picturesque new building should appeal to both the saltiest old architecture dog as well as the modern-minded: it is a subtle fusion of old materials – oak, slate and granite – and new forms and functions. It reminds me of the Museum of River and Rowing on the Thames at Henley designed by David Chipperfield Architects. It is a decidedly modern building, but one capped with great pitched timber roofs that recall boatyards, boathouses and the traditional construction techniques.

Inside, the collections are displayed under varying conditions of light, both natural and artificial. This ever changing play of light is likely to



Harbour master . . . the National Maritime Museum in Falmouth

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prove to be one of the new building's most endearing features. There are two main galleries inside the lofty building, one dark, one awash with daylight, and both a haven for old boats roped in from around the world.

The introductory gallery is a black box. The boats on display here are connected to interactive audio-visual links that explain what the boats are, how they were built, what they did and the conditions under which they sailed. The museum will explain tides and weather as well the ways of the boats themselves. The black-box gallery can be transformed into a number of dramatic and intelligently themed experiences at the touch of a button: a storm at sea, a regatta or an estuary smothered in deep fog. Done well, such simulated spatial and sensual experiences really help those who have never put out to sea to understand why boats are designed as they are – to deal with the extraordinary range of conditions they encounter away from the sanctuary of Cornish harbours. Done badly they are best confined to the depths of Davey Jones's locker.

The daylit gallery is hung, rather like the way in which aircraft are from the curved concrete vault of Foster and Partners distinguished American Air Force Museum at Duxford: boats dangle from a waved-like wall lit from above with north light. They range from an old oak Fenland punt, used for collecting reeds and catching eels until the late 1940s, through an 1880s Cornish salmon boat and exotic canoes from Sri Lanka, Canada and the Gilbert Islands, to Waterlily, an early steam launch built in 1866 at Chiswick by John Thornycroft, early racing yachts like the Clyde-built "Fricka" of 1896, and most importantly, perhaps, to Mirror Dinghy 1, a plastic sailing boat from 1963.

Mirror Dinghy 1 matters because it is the prototype of the DIY dinghy that opened up the world of sailing to so many people for whom the braying, monied world of Cowes was both unappealing and inaccessible. This pretty little boat was designed by Jack Holt, a well known boat builder, and Barry Bucknell, British television's first DIY pundit. Sponsored by the Daily Mirror and Yachting World, it was the Mini of modern boats; something like 89,000 Mirror dinghies have been sold since. This is populist design at its best, which Long and Kentish's museum is, too.

accessible, in the best sense, easy on the eye, ship-shape and well-crafted.

In recent years, there has been a revival of fine buildings in British seaside towns. At Bexhill-on-Sea, the streamlined De La Warr Pavilion (1935) designed by Erich Mendelsohn and Serge Chermayeff is being given a new lease of life by Troughton McAslan architects. In Barnstaple, there is the extraordinary Landmark pavilion with its twin cooling-tower style auditoria by Tim Ronalds. In Margate, the Turner Centre, a striking sail-like gallery in honour of the town's most famous regular visitor, designed by Snohetta and Spence is under way. There is a long way to go, however, as so many of our seaside towns have been abused over the years, losing a little of their magic with each passing year as they are dumped on by the kind of bland buildings and ruthless commercial exploitation that continues to deface inland towns.

Long and Kentish are well experienced in the design of both monumental and low-key buildings. Their work includes the deft remodelling of the Ivy restaurant in London, the handsome Aldrich Library together with other new buildings at the University of Brighton, the planned extension, with Long's husband Colin St John Wilson and Partners, of the Grade I listed Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, and studios in west London for the artists Peter Blake, Ben Johnson and Paul Huxley.

The Maritime Museum takes advantage of this close association with artists; its lighting effects are painterly, notably so in the waterfront gallery, which is filled with dappled southern light reflected from trays of water on the roof. Daylight sparkles into the building from water rolling into an underwater tidal gallery. The building can be opened up to the harbourfront so that it will smell of the sea and fill with the sound of waves and the cry of gulls. Largely transparent from the waterfront, the museum's interior can be seen by people walking along it to the beaches. Hopefully they will be enticed by the sight of so many special boats, and of visitors ascending the ramps connecting the galleries; enticed, too, perhaps, to set out from Falmouth not by car, but by sail, in the shadow of fine new seaside architecture.