

THE NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM CORNWALL

Britain may be a maritime nation, but most of its population would rather keep their feet firmly on dry land. So museums about boats, like museums about cars or railways, tend to have a specialist appeal. This makes the premise of the £28m National Maritime Museum Cornwall (NMMC) – ‘to promote an understanding of boats and their place in people’s lives, to inspire new boat design and to promote an understanding of the maritime heritage of Cornwall’ – something of a challenge where the ordinary visitor is concerned.

On the plus side, Falmouth is a charming town on the beautiful Fal estuary, and there are plenty other attractions nearby, in particular the Eden Project and the Lost Gardens of Heligan. So although getting to Falmouth is a long journey for most people in the UK, it is already a popular tourist destination.

There are also sensible historic reasons for a maritime museum in Falmouth. It has one of the deepest natural harbours in the world, and has a long naval and boat building tradition. And Cornwall has been associated with fishing for many years.

Some of the objects in the new museum come from the little maritime museum that used to sit on Falmouth’s quayside, while the rest have been loaned by the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. But despite the museum’s name, the

NMMC is not a branch of Greenwich but an independent trust. So it will depend on admission fees for the bulk of its income. Attracting enough paying visitors is going to be crucial.

Things did not start terribly smoothly. The museum was supposed to open in June 2002, but only started taking paying visitors at the end of February this year after a bail out from the Heritage Lottery Fund. But during a three-month trial of free admission 125,000 people came to the museum.

Left: the museum’s inaugural ‘hang’ of the boats

Below: the museum is a new harbourside landmark

This level of interest, created by the museum’s combination of a landmark building and some spectacular displays, suggests it ought to prove sustainable in the long term. It deserves to be, as the designer, Land Design Studio, has created an exhibition that focuses on small boats in a way that many different people should enjoy.

Having said that, my first impressions of the museum’s exterior were mixed. The building sits on the waterfront, ▷

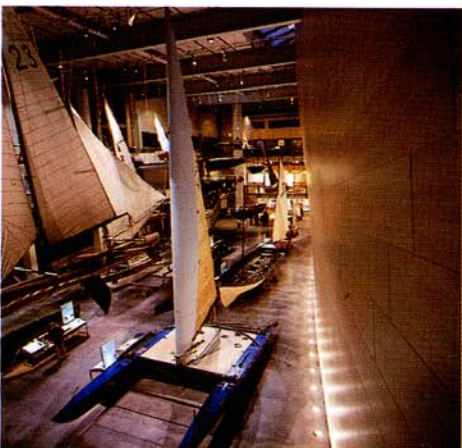
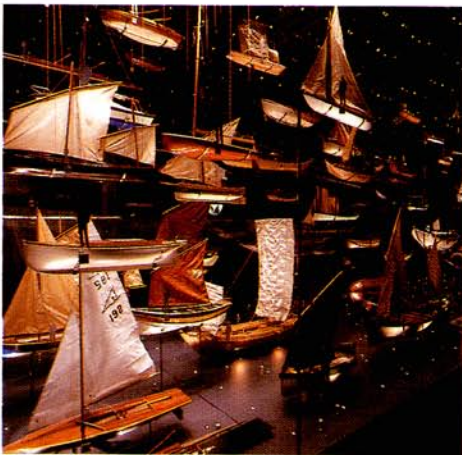


Photographs: National Maritime Museum Cornwall

A different tack

The **National Maritime Museum Cornwall** has made a big splash since opening earlier this year. *Jane Morris* visited Falmouth to see how well it has combined objects, audiovisuals and architecture to capture the spirit of sailing

Sailing by: there are distinct areas within the museum. The Cornish galleries (top), model boats in Set Sail (middle) and the Flotilla (bottom)



and appears almost to float out into the sea. You can approach from a coast road, or from the water using a 'park and float' scheme. From the latter, the building looks intriguing: an oak-clad boathouse with a lighthouse attached. The view from the road is less inviting. The building glowers, dark and truculent, and the small main entrance is almost hidden. This makes an unfortunate first impression for what is an accessible museum. Once inside, the visitors find a light and airy reception area – all blond wood and welcoming staff. The museum's most dramatic display, Flotilla, which features an array

of boats hanging in a central exhibition hall, is largely shielded by wooden screens, but enough is visible to create a sense of excitement.

The displays inside the building make the best use of the spaces the architect, Long and Kentish, has created. The interior organisation of the building is simple, but some clever playing with floor levels and the creation of irregular spaces and angular walls has transformed what could have been a boring warehouse space into one with pace and character. There are visual references to boats and boatyards, throughout – from the rails of the gangways to the portholes on the doors.

There are five distinct areas in the museum. The main display space is a huge central gallery, with boats on the floor and suspended at different heights from the ceiling. There are mezzanine floors at either end of this space – the east end has interactive educational displays, while the west end contains more traditional and

enclosed galleries about Cornish life. The museum's most impressive display, an immersive audiovisual experience, runs along the south of side of the gallery, enclosed behind a curving wooden wall. The tower, with viewing points and displays at its top and bottom, sits on a corner of the building giving views of the estuary and town.

A collection of small boats, on loan from the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, forms the core of the new NMMC. Small boats in this context means 35ft (11m) or less, though an exception is made to include competitive rowing boats. As well as the small boats collection, the NMMC displays a local collection of boat-related objects from the independent Cornish Maritime Museum, Falmouth, which has now merged with the NMMC.

The two museums originally planned to be separate, until the Heritage Lottery Fund encouraged them to join forces. Unfortunately, the join between the two collections is more obvious than it should be. The everyday objects in the Cornish galleries have been displayed in a dull way, at odds with the innovation shown in much of the rest of the museum. As the objects are not as intrinsically exciting, it feels as if a separate, and not very interesting, museum has stowed itself aboard.

Two areas in particular in the museum aim to seduce the visitor with theatrical, experiential displays – the sunlit central hall, featuring the flotilla of boats, and the dark, audiovisual introduction space, called Set Sail (see box on p22). This is a successful tack to take, introducing less knowledgeable visitors to different kinds of boats – from pleasure craft to lifeboats – in an impressive way.

The boats in the Flotilla gallery are suspended at a slight angle, as if they are sailing through an imaginary sea, or beached on the gallery floor. The boats have been chosen to reflect the museum's themes, which include communication, work, leisure, fishing and sport. The themes are alluded to, rather than spelled out, which works

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PROJECT DATA

Client: National Maritime Museum
Cornwall

Cost: £28m

Design: Land Design

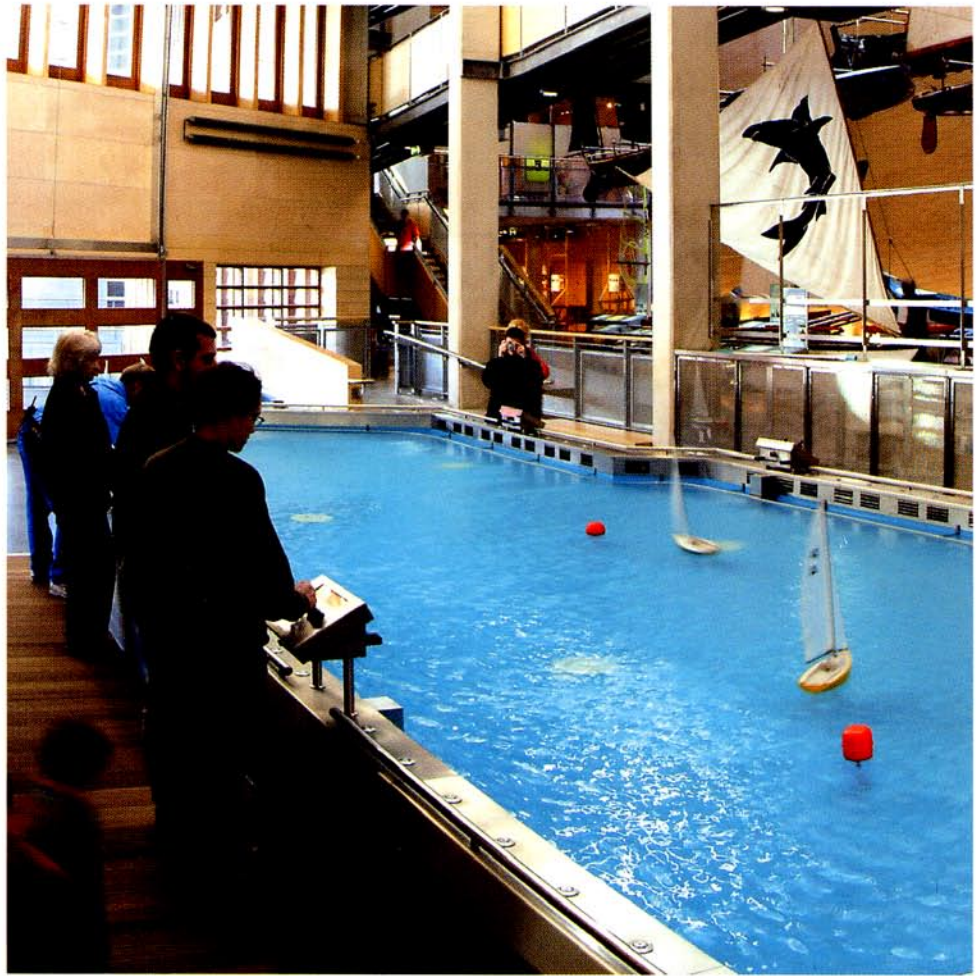
Architect: Long and Kentish

Contact for further information:

Jo Quinton-Tulloch,
the head of exhibitions

Tel: 01326 313388

Email: enquiries@nmmc.co.uk



Testing the water: visitors can sail a model boat around a series of buoys, using remote control

well. In another gallery, Startline, the themes are made much more explicit in a way that seemed to please many of the visitors I saw, but which I found heavy handed and rather dull.

There are 26 boats on display in Flotilla including a tiny 1925 motor launch; the Lady Helmsman catamaran, three time winner of the America's Cup in the late 1960s; and the Jangada, a traditional Brazilian fishing boat. This shows that boats are not simply the playthings of the rich – an impression the museum is anxious to dispel.

Although this display is visually strong, attention has been paid to the interpretation. The floor standing boats are moored to 'pontoons', which include related objects in cases, audiovisuals telling the social history of

the boats, as well as giving technical information about their design and manufacture. For example, a longboat from Tristan da Cunha has a short video showing it being used by the islanders fleeing from a volcanic eruption in 1961. All the boats on the floor can be touched and tugged as visitors wish. The interpretation of the hanging boats is also sophisticated, with interactive points along the viewing ramps. Every boat has a people-centred story, as well as the technical information the enthusiasts will demand.

The tower, which is in itself a significant architectural feature, houses a small gallery at its top and base. The top gallery, Look-Out, is simple and effective: visitors look out over the Fal and can use computer

interactives to find out more about the places they can see. At the base of the tower, sunk into the mud of the estuary, a space called Tidal Zone features a tall window, which is underwater much of the time. Shrimps and other small marine life are visible through the toughened glass and seemed a great draw to visitors. The gallery is used to demonstrate the ebb and flow of the tide – marks on the wall against the window show the position of the highest mean 'spring' and lowest mean 'neap' tides each month.

The museum does not rely solely on theatricality. There are also information-based interactive displays, mixed with objects and more traditional graphic panels – on the ground floor ▷

‘The integration between moving images and objects in Set Sail is arguably the most innovative in the UK’

WHY THE SET SAIL GALLERY IS SO INNOVATIVE

The **National Maritime Museum Cornwall's** (NMMC) most ambitious gallery is the first one visitors see: a long and tall space, containing ten boats in front of a spectacular audiovisual display. Visitors view the display from a rising gangway, which leads from the ground to first floor.

The space is very dark – a great contrast to the brilliance of the entrance hall and the rest of the museum. First, visitors see a case of model boats, lit with twinkling lights and accompanied by a moody soundtrack of waves, weather and fishermen's voices. The models hang attractively within the display case, mirroring the later Flotilla display.

The main ramp has three viewing platforms which overlook a line of nine boats – three per platform. These include a river Thames steamer, a kayak, a lifeboat, and a fishing boat.

The accompanying audiovisuals are shown on three groups of screens behind each set of three boats. The films tell the story of each one. The audiovisuals run for about ten minutes, with sound broadcast into each viewing platform. Between each showing there

is an exciting sequence that uses light and sound to simulate a massive storm in the gallery, which is shown on all the screens. The greatest weakness of the presentation is sound quality, which is affected by the number of visitors in the gallery and where they are standing. Testing has improved this, but further work is needed.

As with many of the displays in the museum, the boats have been selected to show how they are made for many different activities, from summer outings on the Thames, to commercial fishing off Nova Scotia. But the reason why other museums should take note of Set Sail has less to do with content, than with the possibilities of this kind of presentation. The nearest comparable audiovisual in a UK museum is the Imperial War Museum North's (IWMN) Big Picture show (*MP, issue 21 pp24-29*), which is technically nowhere near as interesting as this display, even though the IWMN's images have inherently greater emotional power. The integration between moving images and objects in the NMMC's Set Sail is arguably the most innovative in the UK.

The light fantastic: the audiovisuals in the Set Sail gallery are spectacular



Nick Woods/Land Design Studio

the focus is on boat building, while on the first floor the emphasis is on navigation and the weather.

The display about boat building is definitely the better. There are four interactive stations alongside more traditional displays using objects and graphic panels. The interactive stations focus on different stages in boat building: buoyancy; stability; and how boats are powered. Visitors can also use a computer aided design presentation to create their own boats. These interactives are some of the best I have seen: fun to use and easy to learn from.

The boat building display is supplemented by a library, and a conservation space where two boats were being restored. The work is carried out by skilled volunteers and students from the Falmouth Marine College, chosen for their ability to interact with the public as much as their boat building skills. There is also a big water tank where people can sail a model boat around a series of buoys, using remote control to adjust the boat's rudder and sails. People of all ages clamoured for second goes on the days I visited.

The space called Nav-Station is less successful. This may be a partly a problem of the subject matter: reading sea charts, understanding weather maps, and navigation are not the easiest of subjects. The designers have again mixed interactives with objects and graphic panels – for example a screen showing the local weather, which is monitored constantly by the museum. Nearby, there is a barometer and a copy of diaries from Lieutenant (later Captain) Bligh and emails from Ellen MacArthur, the yachtswoman. The problem is that some of the interactives are difficult to understand without help, while a 'turbulent ball' linked to questions about weather systems and the sea looked very nice, but it is surely wrong as all it can show is turbulence in a spherical body of water.

These small niggles aside, it is impossible to deny the quality of the overall displays. One of the most

impressive aspects of the NMMC is the seamless relationship between its architecture and exhibition design – Long and Kentish, and Land Design Studio were hired simultaneously, worked closely together and the result shows. Spaces have been planned to have a rhythm – dark into light, experiential into educational, spaces which encourage viewers to look closely at objects, and others that allow visitors to look outside to the sea, where the boats really belong.

'The museum should rethink its plan to change the hang of the boats in the central gallery each year to focus on particular kinds of boats'

Because the boats are more robust than most museum objects, whole walls can be opened up when the weather is good, bringing the outside inside. Another imaginative touch is the two skylights, which let in daylight to the central gallery. This is reflected in a rooftop pool, creating rippling reflections which play on the upper surfaces of the space.

The range of approaches to presenting the boats will make it attractive and interesting to people who do not sail, while the level of technical detail and wide range of boats on show should interest enthusiasts. But the museum should rethink its plan to change the hang of the boats in the central gallery each year to focus on particular kinds of boats. One of the strengths of the current display is the number and range of boats being shown, and the way the museum's themes are implicit in the choice of boats.

There are weak areas that need addressing. The Nav-Station needs rethinking in parts, while the Cornish galleries should be better integrated

into the main museum. Nonetheless, the NMMC sets a new standard in the display of sailing history. Matched against the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, or the River and Rowing Museum, Henley, the NMMC would claim the blue riband. **MP**

The museum is designed to relate to its surroundings. The Look-Out tower (top and middle) and the Tidal Zone at the base of the tower (bottom)

