

Caernarfon and the *HMS Conway* Anchor

Introduction

2012 marked the twenty fifth anniversary of the recovery of one of *HMS Conway*'s original anchors. 2013 marks the twenty fifth anniversary of the anchor's installation at Victoria Dock, Caernarfon. Since then it has become one of the recognised landmarks of the town.

Background

The history and constructive total loss of *HMS Conway* in the Menai Strait has been the subject of much interest over the years and is well documented. For the benefit of those not so familiar, *HMS Conway*, originally named *HMS Nile* and built in 1833 as a 96 gun line-of-battle ship, was a naval training ship originally moored at Rock Ferry in the River Mersey. The ship was moved to an anchorage near Bangor Pier in 1941 due to the exigencies of war. In 1949, following careful research and lengthy preparations, the ship was moved to a new home in the centre of the Menai Strait opposite Plas Newydd, the ancestral home of the Marquis of Anglesey, now under the stewardship of the National Trust. In 1953, whilst the ship was being towed to Birkenhead for a refit, she was stranded on rocks known as the *Platters* on the mainland side between the two bridges that span the Strait. It was a tragic loss and due to a combination of factors, including the impact of a strong north westerly breeze on tidal flows. It was always going to be a challenging operation, more difficult than the original movement of the ship south westward four years earlier.

The Ship's Last Home

Between 1949 and 1953 a shore establishment for naval training had been created on Anglesey adjacent to Plas Newydd near to the ship and, following the loss, this became the school's permanent centre of operations until it finally closed in 1974.

When the ship was moved to Plas Newydd, the Ship's two anchors, thought to be originals dating from the 1830s, were moved in advance using the ship's boats. Given that the anchors weighed five tons apiece, this called for seamanship of the highest order. These two anchors were on the Anglesey shoreline whilst two newer and more modern anchors were laid on the mainland side. From these anchors, chains were co-joined and



The hacksaw party! Joe Heber Owen, Ken Jones, Nev Thomas, Owen Williams, Gwyn Pari Huws, Jim Williams.

these, by means of a 63ft riser, were led to a single swivel which was then secured to the ship.

Soon after the loss of the ship, one of the original anchors was recovered and placed in the school's grounds at Plas Newydd where it was not only a visible reminder of the ship and her history but a practical aid for instruction. Following the closure of the school, the anchor was eventually relocated to Liverpool Maritime Museum where it stands at the entrance to this day.

The Second Anchor

The late Frank Rhys Jones, then Chairman of the *Seiont II* Maritime Trust in Caernarfon (a society committed to local marine history matters and the preservation of Caernarfon's retired steam bucket dredger), having discovered that the second anchor still lay on the shore of the Strait, wrote to various bodies with a view to acquiring it for the *Seiont II* Maritime Museum in Victoria Dock. However, this potential project then lay dormant whilst energies and funds were directed to the restoration of the dredger.

In July, 1987, a party of seven members of the Trust, all retired professional or amateur 'ancient mariners', made a trip to assess the viability of the anchor's recovery during which, with the aid of a hacksaw only, they succeeded in removing the chain. This was a labour intensive task but the prospect of taking oxyacetylene gear to the site would not have been for the faint hearted. They also loosened the area around the fluke



*Preparation crew: Dafydd Roberts, Dylan Parry,
Gwyn Pari Huws and Hugh Griffith.*



Seiont II

of the Anchor which was buried to a depth of some three feet. The anchor's stock was almost completely perished, hardly surprising given the almost forty years of punishment from tidal immersion twice a day.

By now, the *Seiont II* was in commission and considered suitable to attempt the task of recovery. My father, Captain Gwyn Pari Huws, took on the task of planning for the manoeuvres that would be necessary to achieve success (see page 85).

- During August
- 1) Check depth of water over bottom adjacent to anchor and also over Seiont's length in line NE from anchor.
 - 2) Secure wire pennant, pick up line, float etc. to the cable which previously connected the anchor - at a point where Seiont could lie afloat (plus) at low water.
(Purpose of above is to allow Seiont to lie off the lifting site, and haul off, without using own anchor which is on the starboard side i.e. the working side for the lifting operation.

September 5th. or 6th.

Shore party to clear bottom fluke and rig slings.

Monday 7th.

0800 Light fires (full steam required for Tuesday morning 0900)

Tuesday 8th.

Leave dock either at 0930 if going to P.P. or 1030 if going to Pier. (Berth chosen must allow Seiont to arrive at anchor site, secure to cable, and secure to lift, by 0800 Wednesday.) P.P. probably best but will mean lying to anchor (own) overnight to ensure being afloat early next morning.

Wednesday 9th.

Secure to 'cable' wire by 0700 and run line(s) to anchor lifting slings.

Haul Seiont to anchor as tide allows until eventually close up to lift when lifting gear fully secured.

By 1030 (maybe) anchor will be lifted clear and Seiont will fall back to 'cable' wire.

At worst, if at all, this will be at 1130.

Then return to Caernarfon, - when/where dependant on circumstances i.e. - if early then possible reach tanker berth noon after slack water. If late, perhaps to Pier.

If Seiont's anchor / windlass restricted due the Anchor lifted perhaps wait to await next day's slack before landing the Anchor and berthing

Thursday 10th.

Send Anchor to Berth Slip when tide slack about Noon - return to berth

Recovery timetable and instructions.



Getting into position.

Recovery

It was perhaps appropriate to use Caernarfon's recently re-commissioned and preserved steam fired bucket dredger built in 1937 to recover an anchor of almost Nelsonian vintage. It was all the more appropriate that the leading hands of the recovery gang should also be of some vintage and, almost exclusively, natives of the area. My father had himself spent two years aboard *HMS Conway* during 1944 and 1945 prior to a seagoing career.

Whilst the recovery exercise was not to be without its complications and risks and in need of careful planning, it was a task that doubtless generated the mixed emotions of fun, excitement, trepidation and danger! Additionally, it needed the skills and experience of both mariners and engineers, the latter led by Mr Bob Griffith.

On 8th September 1987, with full steam raised for 0900, The *Seiont II*, left Caernarfon to make preparations on site, to prepare mooring positions and to connect slings to the anchor before returning to Caernarfon for the night.

At 0700 on 9th September the *Seiont II* once again left Caernarfon with a full crew supplemented by 'younger' support comprising Dr Dafydd Roberts and colleagues from the Welsh Slate Museum in Llanberis. The *Seiont II* arrived on site ahead of schedule but a frustrating period then ensued, difficulty being encountered in positioning the little ship correctly to attempt a lift of the anchor as the tide rose. It should be noted that the Menai Strait is home to one of the strongest tidal seaways in the British



Back at Caernarfon with the anchor suspended from the bow.

Isles. Just as doubt was being expressed about achieving success ahead of the critical point of no return with the tide, the shank of the anchor broke the surface with the remainder of the anchor suspended by slings beneath the bow of the dredger.

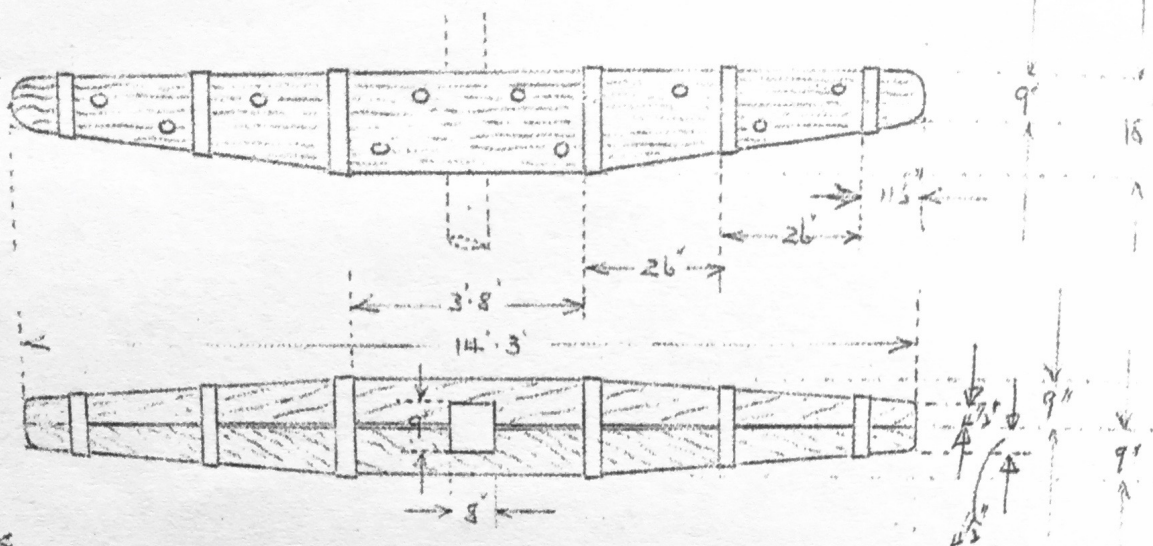
The *Seiont II* and the anchor repaired to Caernarfon where, the following day, the anchor was allowed to rest on the bottom of Victoria Dock. The return passage was eventful as one of the slings broke upsetting the anchor's position and causing a heart stopping moment to those on board!

Ashore

With generous support from Arfon Skips, a local business, and Gwynedd council, the anchor was recovered to the area immediately in front of the then small maritime museum on the edge of the Victoria Dock. The anchor itself was encrusted and in need of significant work to pare back to the original ironwork.

The first task was to design a new stock. This was achieved through research on anchors of that era with the support of the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. My father then prepared a drawing for the proposed replacement (see page 88). The second task was to cost the replacement stock. This would involve a shipwright, blacksmith and the sourcing of timber which was supplied, in due course, by David Roberts & Son (Bootle) Limited. The third task was to raise funds for the cost, some £1200 in total. This was achieved through the generous support of the

REPLACEMENT STOCK FOR H.M.S. CONWAY ANCHOR



NOTE

- ① CROSS & REAR IN WAY OF ANCHOR STOCK SQUARE AND 'NUT' TO BE MEASURED ACCURATELY ON SITE.
- ② GAP BETWEEN SECTIONS TO BE APPROX 1/2" BEFORE DRIVING STRAPS HOME.
- ③ METAL STRAPS 2 5/8" WIDTH AND ABOUT 1/2" THICK.
- ④ HORIZONTAL BOLTS TO BE 1" DIAM & VERTICAL (THROUGH STRAPS) 1/2"

Design of new stock.



Building the new stock.

Philip Holt Charitable Trust of Liverpool. The Holt family (Blue Funnel Line) had been involved in the *Conway's* affairs for very many years and their support was both welcome and fitting. Both blacksmith David Palmer and shipwright John Jones worked quickly and soon the anchor was

repositioned for permanent display in 1988. The final task was to affix an appropriate sign to the stock in both Welsh and English.

The Future

The recent closure of Caernarfon's maritime museum resulted in discussion about the future of the anchor. Happily, this led to Caernarfon Harbour Trust, (one time owner operators of the *Seiont II*, and now owner operators of *Seiont IV*!) volunteering to take responsibility. As a result, there are plans afoot to move the anchor to the Slate Quay at Caernarfon, near one of *Seiont II*'s original berths. Sited here, it will have the advantage of greater visibility to locals and visitors alike. I think the 'ancient mariners' would approve.



The finished article with members of the recovery party and local craftsmen.

Conclusion

HMS Conway's anchors rest, appropriately, in Liverpool and Caernarfon not far from the ship's first and last berths during her service as a training establishment.

In the case of the 'Strait's' anchor, the wording on the plaque explains both origin and history. I hope this short article has not only highlighted the existence of the anchor to readers visiting Caernarfon, but also the effort, dedication, skill, generosity and considerable team work of all those involved in a project undertaken a quarter of a century ago.

Alyn Puri Huws

*Son of
Capn. Gwyn Puri Huws
(44-46)*