

TITLE

'THE SEA GOETH IT ALL ABOUT': MARITIME THEMES IN BRITISH PUBLIC SCULPTURE

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ABSTRACT

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The British Isles have been shaped economically, socially, culturally and not least, physically, by the seas that surround them. An island nation, the sea both unites and separates Britain from the rest of Europe and the world. Moreover, the nature of trade, war and communication of all kinds has been affected by Britain's island situation.

Britain's maritime status has influenced the location, form and iconography of her public sculpture, from early nineteenth-century memorials commemorating Lord Nelson to Siegfried Charoux's *The Islanders* commissioned for the Festival of Britain in 1951.

This essay explores several kinds of sculptural project that together map Britain's changing relationship with the sea throughout the Twentieth Century. It begins with a consideration of sculpture that illustrates Britain's naval supremacy and economic strengths, erected as part of the infrastructure of British imperial power. It moves on to examine the monumental structures that mark the huge losses at sea brought about by maritime disasters and the world wars. In the post-war years Britain was determined to maintain her maritime interests but sea-related industries faced irrevocable decline. Recent sculptural projects address new kinds of relationships between British islanders and their engagement with the sea and its sculptural legacy. This essay considers an aspect of public sculpture that is of particular relevance

to Britain's relationship with Europe. It is a reflection on our contemporary experience of sculpture of the past.

Although Britain was once joined to mainland Europe and the Thames a tributary of the Rhine, it is its form as a separate landmass that makes it distinctive on a map. Geographically near to Europe, yet isolated, its mantle of water has had a profound impact on the history of Britain. The seas around Britain's 7,000 mile coast are among the most difficult in the world to navigate. Indeed, they create the shape of the Isles, and lighthouses and light ships illuminate her outline. To leave Britain, until the early Twentieth Century, required a journey by sea, the term 'overseas' is peculiarly British, it implies anywhere but not at home. Thus the sea separates Britain, yet it also connects it to the rest of Europe and the world.

There are obvious ways in which maritime culture may be evident in public sculpture. Monuments to great men of the sea, navigators and admirals, those that established British Imperial interests through exploration and exploitation; and memorials to those whose were lost at sea, sailors of the royal navy, the merchant navy, fishermen, and life boat crews. European countries with maritime connections all have these monuments to a lesser or greater extent. Yet in Britain, it is the scale and diversity of public sculpture with maritime associations that is remarkable. This essay seeks to

consider works created in the last one hundred years.

Additionally, the legacy of these maritime references is of great interest. Our relationship to the sea has changed dramatically; we no longer rely on the seas for transport or food. Our shipbuilding industry is a thing of the past, and fishing communities have vanished. Much of Britain's coast has become a heritage site, and is experienced as heritage rather than a way of life. The infrastructure of naval bases, shipping and fishing have become industrial archaeology

Public sculpture of the past contributes to this contemporary experience of the sea, and makes visible relationships with it, that are gone forever. Moreover, recent works seek to engage with the spectators' experience of structures that have accumulated over time, indeed of memory in public spaces.

The sea, as a means of importing produce and exporting manufactures played a fundamental role in the development of Britain's major ports during the nineteenth century. Complex port infrastructures developed, sustained by growing trade from the Americas, Africa and Europe. They comprised dock developments themselves, as well as buildings erected to support commerce, finance and commodities. These were embellished with decoration that emphasised their connection to the sea.

Liverpool's inextricable relationship with seafaring and commerce is made visible throughout the city. A series of relief panels on St George's Hall was completed in 1899¹. All feature a central female figure representing Liverpool and illustrate the city's origins as a fishing village, the export of manufactures, the import of cattle and wool. The panel depicting shipbuilding by Thomas Stirling Lee is inscribed LIVERPOOL. BY HER SHIPWRIGHTS. /BUILDS VESSELS OF COMMERCE.

And the Mersey Docks and Harbour Building at

Pier Head, designed by Arnold Thorneley and completed in 1907, incorporates sculpture by Charles John Allen. Situated on the water front by the Cunard Building and the Liver Building, its main entrance is an impressive assemblage of maritime features. Upon its spandrels, from inverted cornucopia, emerge a steam ship, on the left, and a sailing ship from the right, seagulls fly below. The figures on either side of the entrance represent Commerce, with a model sailing ship, and Industry, with a loom². Both these sculptures bare the brunt of their exposed dock-side location, the stone weathered by the impact of the elements. Outside the building are pillars with projecting bronze figures, mermen clutching rolling waves.

As well as embellishing buildings directly associated with maritime commerce, in the capital and in the regions, sculptural reference to the sea appears on monuments with a far wider remit. Thomas Brock's Victoria Memorial outside Buckingham Palace was constructed after the Queen's death in 1901 and unveiled in 1911³.



Marble relief, Victoria memorial, London, 1901-11. Thomas Brock. Photograph, Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, London.

Here, Brock utilised marine themes as an integral part of the meaning of the monument. The surrounding fountain basins circle the statue of Victoria, 'Regina Imperatrix', like the seas connecting her Empire. A marble frieze encircles the inner walls of the basins depicting nereids and tritons, sea horses and hippogryphs. Water spouts from the mouth of Neptune on bronze

panels, and a triton and a mermaid are depicted on either side of the memorial. A large bronze group in the round represents War and Shipbuilding. And below the main groups of statuary, are carved ships prows, parting the waves. In this way, the sea, supports Victoria and the emblems of her Empire, they are decorative or structural devices with deliberately potent associations. Indeed, the motifs extend beyond the memorial to the surrounding landscape. The base of each lamp standard that surrounds the memorial, and lines the Mall all the way to Admiralty Arch, features dolphins with scallop shells between, each lamp surmounted by a model galleon.



Base of bronze lamp standard, The Mall, London, 1911. Sculpted by Thomas Brock as part of the design by Aston Webb for the ceremonial approach to Buckingham Palace. Photograph, Catherine Moriarty.

Yet, as well as wealth and power the sea brought death, and thousands were lost at sea through war and peace, in their contribution to or defence of Britain's empire. The many naval monuments in Westminster Abbey, St Paul's and cathedrals up and down the country, made the perils of the sea apparent.

But with the development of large steam ships, dreadnoughts for battle and liners for travel, the potential for large-scale losses at sea escalated.

The sinking of the Titanic is of course, the most famous foundering in the world. Communities in Belfast, where the ship was built, Liverpool and Southampton, were all affected by the dis-

aster and all built memorials to the crew members who originated from these ports. In Liverpool a memorial sculpted by William Goscombe John commemorates the engineers and firemen lost on the Titanic. The project was delayed by the outbreak of the First World War, after which it was decided that the memorial should commemorate 'all heroes of the marine engine room'. A tall obelisk stands on a pedestal with figures on either side. Those on the west face represent engineers, those on the east face represent stokers. Stylised waves run around the memorial encompassing a carved wreath that encircles a ship's propeller on the main face. The corner figures, above, represent the elements and are further submerged within this watery design. On high, female figures intended to represent the sea, hold a breeches-buoy, indicating salvation perhaps, indeed, the surmounting flame implies imperishable memory, rising above the dangers of the deep⁴.



Titanic Memorial, Liverpool, 1916. William Goscombe John. Photograph, Catherine Moriarty.

The First World War and Second World War led to mass death at sea and the Imperial War Graves Commission oversaw the commemoration of those who have 'no other grave than the sea.' The Commission erected memorials at the Navy's three main manning ports; Chatham, Portsmouth and Plymouth⁵. These are the naval equivalent of the vast Memorials to the Missing erected on the Western Front. The identical structures were intended to be a memorial to the dead and to be of unmistakable naval form, serving a practical purpose as a sea mark or beacon. The memorial at Chatham, that commemorates eight and a half thousand dead, overlooks the port, high up on the Great Lines and can be seen for miles from across the Medway estuary. The architect, Sir Robert Lorimer, incorporated sculpture by Henry Poole. A tall granite obelisk is surmounted by a copper globe and bronze figures, intended to represent the winds and prows of ships and to 'symbolise our far-flung Empire'. The dead, whose names are listed around the pedestal, are guarded by the Imperial lions, watchful as they gaze out to sea or inland. All three memorials were completed by the end of 1924.



4. Detail of Seaman, Naval Memorial, Chatham, 1924. Charles Wheeler. Photograph, Catherine Moriarty

After the Second World War the Chatham memorial was extended to include the names of another ten thousand dead. Sir Edward Maufe, the Commission's principal architect for the United Kingdom, placed a semi-circular wall behind Lorimer's beacon to accommodate them. Carved above, are the names of the seas and the different kinds of vessel in which the

dead served. As the names of the seas merge into one another, this monument seems to locate each death within a framework that creates a sense of the global scale of this conflict and the global dispersal of the dead. Carved statues of sailors by Charles Wheeler and William McMillan, provide a human element, indeed a human scale in this monolithic structure, particularly in their representation of details - the gloves, the muffler, the toggles.

There are no religious symbols, instead decorative features of marine forms; shells, sea horses and waves, connect these industrial deaths to myths and seafaring legends⁶.

Indeed, the concept of giving form to the dispersal of thousands reached an even greater degree of complexity at the extension to the Mercantile Marine memorial at Tower Hill in the city of London. Facing a colonnade designed by Edwin Lutyens that lists the First World War dead, Maufe, again working with Charles Wheeler, designed a sunken lawned area surrounding a paved compass, around it, is a semi-circular screen. Either side of the steps are cenotaphs with a low relief pattern of waves running around the base; on projections are placed statues of sailors. The inclusion of the empty tomb enveloped by the sea, associates the deaths of sailors and fishermen in the service of their country with the Cenotaph in Whitehall, the national war memorial since 1919.

On the semi-circular screen, the dead are listed on wall plaques that are interrupted by tall relief sculptures, each represents one of the seven seas. Here, mermaids, mermen different kinds of fish and sea creature, wave and bubble, create a remarkably light-hearted, yet reassuring sense of the deep and its inhabitants, creatures that may care for the dead before their souls ascend? They are linked to the cenotaph structures and free-standing figures through the repetition of the wave relief and incidental motifs such as holding on to rope⁷.



Relief panel, Merchant Marine Memorial, Tower Hill, London, 1955. Charles Wheeler. Photograph, Catherine Moriarty.

These reliefs are similar in conception to the fountains in Trafalgar Square by Wheeler and McWilliam that commemorate First World War Admirals of the Fleet, Jellicoe and Beatty. Commissioned in the late 30s the sculptures were placed in storage during the war, and finally installed in 1948. Nevertheless, the fountain groups are a clear precedent to the Tower Hill reliefs, although of bronze and free-standing, they too express the creative pleasure in marine forms, with sea-life darting between the tails of mermaids and tritons⁸.

The same sorts of patterns emerge in memorials that commemorate wartime losses at sea by smaller sections of the naval forces. The submarine services, for example, erected their own memorial on the Embankment in London in 1922. Designed by A H Ryan Tension and sculpted by F Brook Hitch, the large bronze

relief includes a central roundel representing the interior of a submarine. Outside the vessel, sea creatures in human form surround the sailors, grasping at their claustrophobic steel capsule with nets and seaweed. This memorial provides a highly disturbing image of twentieth-century death under water.



Submariners Memorial, Thames Embankment, London, 1922. F Brook Hitch. Photograph, Catherine Moriarty.



Detail, Exeter War Memorial, 1923. John Angel. Photograph, Catherine Moriarty.

Losses at sea in wartime were commemorated on local memorials built to remember those from towns and villages throughout the British

Isles⁹. The Exeter war memorial was sculpted by the local artist John Angel and unveiled in 1923, it included figures representing the different services. A bare-chested and bare-footed sailor represents the Navy; he leans over a ship's prow with nets and ropes at either side. This equipment, of long-standing interest to British sculptors as it was to poets, in Tennyson's words 'Hard coils of cordage, swarthy fishing nets, Anchors of rusty fluke, and boats updrawn'¹⁰.

At the Festival of Britain of 1951 the relationship between British Islanders and the sea was given considerable attention. It was recognised as part of a wide cultural experience.

Although, a nation-wide event, the best-known element of the Festival is the exhibition located in London on the South Bank of the Thames. The pavilions and landscaping have become indicative of post-war celebration and the possibilities of reconstruction. Within the displays, Britain's maritime connections were much in evidence. The Dome of Discovery included a section on sea exploration. The Transport Pavilion covered ship operating, and shipbuilding was the subject of the Sea and Ships pavilion. The aim was to look at past achievements in the shipping industry and to celebrate, 'the developments and advances that a changing world has demanded.'¹¹



Sea and Ships Pavilion, Festival of Britain, 1951. Architect: Basil Spence; *The Islanders*, Siegfried Charoux; Hydraulic Fountain, Richard Huws. Photograph, Design Council Archive, University of Brighton.

Among the South Bank pavilions were sited sculptures commissioned by the Arts Council of England. These included pieces by the leading 'moderns' Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth and Reg Butler; regarded by some critics as the most successful works of art, while others were criticised as being simply illustrative and difficult to distinguish from exhibition displays.¹² Siegfried Charoux's *The Islanders*, a huge stone relief located on the Sea and Ships pavilion, represented a family group in warm clothing looking out to sea from their island home. Outside, an hydraulic fountain by Richard Huws, was intended to create the sound of crashing waves, its various receptacles, tipping as they filled with water. On another wall of the pavilion, critics also regarded a relief depicting Neptune by Keith Godwin, as unsuccessful.¹³ In fact, the pavilion itself, designed by Basil Spence was more interesting sculpturally perhaps, than the works that were intended to embellish it. Three large section models of a tanker, a liner and a whaling factory were incorporated within the steel structure, below a suspended hull-shaped canopy.

The maritime display continued in a Seaside section on the riverfront. Here the intention was to show how the British relax. The programme suggested that on the coast, they did not appear 'so sad and frigid after all'.¹⁴ The section co-ordinator sought to feature the variety of coastal towns, local crafts, and the life boat. He also wished to include shells 'Again the story is one of variety' he wrote 'but the forms are particularly beautiful and it has been suggested that many would, if enlarged, make excellent 'sculpture'.¹⁵ The designer Barbara Jones was commissioned to create a shell screen for the pavilion.

It was exactly this interest in the forms sculpted by a marine environment that attracted British artists. For, Barbara Hepworth, the meeting of the Atlantic and the land, the power of the sea and its shaping of the coasts were inspirational



Shell screen, Seaside Pavilion, Festival of Britain, London, 1951. Barbara Jones. Photograph, Design Council Archive, University of Brighton.

both formally and poetically. Pelagos of 1946 was inspired by the curve of the bay at St Ives. Describing its ovoid cavities connected by taught strings, she said, 'the colour in the concavities plunged me into the depth of water, caves or shadows...The strings were the tension I felt between myself and the sea.'¹⁶

Despite the confidence expressed at the Festival of Britain, the post-war years saw Britain's shipbuilding and traditional ports decline. The reduction in British manufacturing and the rise of new shipping methods, combined with the demise in traditional coastal ways of life, and even in the traditional seaside holiday by the 1970s, brought about the need for regeneration schemes in the 1980s. The British were encouraged to engage with the sea as a leisure activity rather than a way of life, yet it retained huge political and psychological significance.

The infrastructures resulting from coastal industries: docks, piers, shipbuilding structures, naval bases, fish markets and the coastline itself, have been repackaged as heritage assets. These structures, as a result of their dereliction, have become unintentional sites of memory. The purposes for which they were built are obsolete and the communities that lived and worked within them are long gone. The wharves along the Thames that once housed tobacco, sisal, or molasses, have been converted into loft apart-

ments. Yet within and alongside these landscapes, public sculpture remains, as distinct monuments or, embedded in facades, as less overt references to a maritime way of life. Joining them are more recent public sculptures, born from regeneration schemes and public art initiatives, funded by lottery cash and government subsidies.

When the Tate Gallery North opened in Liverpool's Albert Dock it invited the native sculptor Tony Cragg to make a sculpture for a site adjacent to the gallery by the river side. Raleigh, of 1983, is a response to the city's tradition of heavy industry and its maritime dependence. Utilising granite and iron bollards salvaged from the dock itself, Cragg added two cast horns that seem to call out to sea, similar in form to the ship's klaxons that were such a familiar Mersey sound of welcome and embarkation.¹⁷

Other cities have chosen new public sculptures that engage with the maritime past and its relevance to generations with no living memory of busy ports, the hubbub of fish markets, or shipbuilding. Brighton, on the south coast, had an important fishing community and was one of the earliest seaside resorts. Two sculptures were commissioned in the late 1990s as part of a Seafront Development Initiative; both addressed the town's changing relationship with the sea. Charles Hadcock created an iron structure situated on the beach; he wanted his work to address the physicality of the sea and the expanse of the horizon. Seeming to emerge from the pebbled beach, it appears as maritime archaeology, its bolted structure relating to maritime engineering, perhaps the bones of a ship or a wreck washed up.¹⁸ Hamish Black's *Afloat*, situated at the end of a jetty, combines the artist's interest in scientific models, maps and other visual forms that attempt to explain the world as we see it, and as scientists explain it to us. The bronze taurus form (how a black hole is imagined), is based on a globe, the poles

pushed together through the sphere in the centre. The concentric radial lines around its surface, longitudinal lines. Major world continents appear as negative shapes cut from the surface, they are not in realistic proportion to one another and seem to float, adrift across the surface of the structure. From the land side, the spectator looks through the sculpture to the horizon. Both works, then, relate to millennial thinking about the sea from the point of view of a coastal spectator and the sea as a measurable space that is nevertheless, incomprehensible in its totality and is still very much an imagined place.



10. *Passacaglia*, Brighton, 1998. Charles Hadcock. Photograph, Catherine Moriarty.

The British no longer seek to rule the waves and they recognise the oceans as a global responsibility. Indeed, the Channel Tunnel, has ended our unconnectedness. It is now possible to travel to and from mainland Europe without so much as a sniff of sea air. Jean-Luc Vilmouth's hanging fish at the Waterloo Eurostar terminal, erected in 1995, gesture to the element under which the tunnel runs and perhaps to sculptural precedents that address the sea and our relationship with it.

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Footnotes

- ¹ Anne MacPhee, 'Philip Henry Rathbone 1828-95: His involvement and influence on the sculptural decorations on St George's Hall' in P. Curtis ed., *Patronage and Practice: Sculpture on Merseyside*, (Liverpool: Tate Gallery Liverpool, 1989), pp.63-66.
- ² Terry Cavanagh, *The Public Sculpture of Liverpool*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997), pp. 128-9.
- ³ Susan Beattie, *The New Sculpture*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 230. Benedict Read, *Victorian Sculpture*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 371-379.
- ⁴ Cavanagh, *op.cit.* pp. 137-9.
- ⁵ Philip Longworth, *The Unending Vigil: a History of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, 1917-1984*, (London: Leo Cooper in association with Secker & Warburg, 1985), pp.93-4.
- ⁶ The papers of Charles Wheeler (1892-1974) are archived at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds. <http://www.henry-moore-fdn.co.uk/hmf/research.htm>
- ⁷ The Tower Hill panels may refer to Agostino di Duccio's reliefs in the Tempio Malatestiano at Rimini (1447-61). Adrian Stokes' *Stones of Rimini*, the work in which he elaborates his obsession with the Tempio reliefs, was first published in 1935 and had a significant impact on British sculptors working in the medium of relief carving.
- ⁸ These fountains have clear connections with inter-war fountains elsewhere, notably the Poseidon Fountain by Carl Milles in Gothenburg.
- ⁹ The UK National Inventory of War Memorials was established in 1989 to record British war memorials. The searchable database and archive is based at the Imperial War Museum, London. <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/niwm/index.htm>
- ¹⁰ In Enoch Arden of 1864, Alfred Tennyson describes the beach where his characters play as children. The maritime impact on the arts of Britain is huge, as well as literature, it has had a profound influence on music and the crafts, from sea shanties to scrimshaw.
- ¹¹ *Festival of Britain: 1951, Catalogue of Exhibits, South Bank Exhibition* (HMSO, 1951), p.65
- ¹² *Architectural Review*, no. 656, vol. cx (August 1951), p. 656.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ *Festival of Britain: 1951, Catalogue of Exhibits, South Bank Exhibition* (HMSO, 1951), p. 173.
- ¹⁵ The seaside section was convened by A D Hippisley Cox. See files *Festival of Britain 1951. Seaside Themes*, 5182 parts I and II, Design Council Archive, University of Brighton. The Archive holds extensive documentation on the Festival and a photographic survey comprising over four hundred images. <http://www.brighton.ac.uk/descoarchive/>
- ¹⁶ Penelope Curtis, ed., *Sculpture on Merseyside*, (Liverpool: Tate Gallery Liverpool and National Museums & Galleries on Merseyside, 1988), p.36.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.43.
- ¹⁸ Sarah Mossop, *Brighton Seafront Sculpture Project: Teachers Pack*, (Brighton: Brighton and Hove Council, 1998).