

THE CHRISTCHURCH HEADLAND FERRY BOATS

The HEADLAND FLEET of five open launch passenger ferries were purpose built for service, in the shallow Christchurch Harbour, between Christchurch Quay and Mudeford Beach. Designed by Marine Architect Eric French, and built at the local boatyard E F Elkins under the supervision of Shipwright Reg Ebsley, the craft were individually ordered by owner operators to replace a fleet of smaller craft that operated as a cooperative under the name of The UNITED MOTOR BOAT SERVICES.

Measuring 36ft long and 8ft 9in in the beam the HEADLANDS incorporated a new design technique now well known as hard chine construction which facilitated a wide beam to length ratio and permitted a high degree of stability combined with minimal draft due to a flat bottom. They were licensed to carry 50 passengers and 2 crew in three compartments separated by oak thwarts.

Built of Oregon Pine on Oak frames and ribs, the HEADLANDS feature an unloaded draft of just 10 inches which increased to just 15 inches when fully loaded. The deadweight was 5½ tonnes. The craft featured Teak for the internal panelling and seats.

Traditional propulsion was chosen with an engine mounted amidships and a shaft coupling the motor to a propeller, most of which was housed in a tunnel built into the craft in the aft section, with its top well above normal external water line. The propeller could be accessed through a porthole deadlight in the top of the tunnel to clear any accumulated debris.

The size of the tunnel meant that only a very small part of the propeller extended below the bottom of the craft. As such a very primitive and early form of water jet evolved which saw water sucked up into the vacuum in the area of the tunnel above the water line, and then expelled out past a long-balanced rudder. It is the shape of the tunnel that gives the HEADLANDS their distinctive wash and unusual attitude in the water typified by a tilt downward to the bow as speed builds and the stern climbs to ride the water as the water is forced out of the tunnel.

First down the slipway was the BELLE, known thereafter as the Prototype, built to an order from Ben Elliott. The QUEEN, built for Edward Stride, which shared the BELLE's more streamlined and lower freeboard in the stern section, followed her. Inevitably she was known as the Flagship.

The PRINCESS, built for Pat Marsh, and PAL, Mrs Keynes, which followed both featured higher freeboard at the stern and a rising shear line aft, which was repeated in the MAID that was to follow in 1935 built to the order of Ralph Elliott. The MAID was also different in so far as she was constructed of Pitch Pine rather than Oregon Pine.

The contract price was £350 per boat, and Robin Stride ruefully recalls that there was an option to have the craft built entirely of Teak planking that would have incurred an extra cost of £100 per craft. The money would have been well spent but was dependant on all agreeing!

As built the HEADLANDS were powered by four-cylinder Kelvin Ricardo petrol/paraffin motors of some 15hp which were very quiet in operation. They did not have the luxury of electric 'self-starters and a Magneto provided the ignition. The use of two fuels was common in the late 1930's and the motors incorporated a vaporiser which effectively pre heated the paraffin to aid combustion. The gearbox was also of an unusual type, the control of which involved winding a wheel, linked by a bicycle chain to a collet that moved the shaft forward into the gearbox or back for reverse. Neutral was somewhere in the middle and not always easy to locate!

These quiet motors lasted into the late 1950's by which time marine diesel motors were beginning to become more popular on economy and safety grounds. The first to be re-engined was the HEADLAND QUEEN, which had a Perkins fitted. The new unit whilst much noisier increased the speed of the 'flagship' to a pace not seen before.

When the time came to refit the fleet sisters Petter diesel motors were chosen which whilst more economical were slow to accelerate, and noisy. BMC diesel motors, of the type fitted to London Taxis, marinised by the locally based Mermaid Engineering were next fitted in the 1970's and these lasted until 2007 when similar sized Ford diesel motor, again marinised by Mermaid Engineering, were fitted. Currently the fleet are powered by BETA low emission units.

WAR TIME USE

It was the HEADLANDS unusual propulsion that undoubtedly contributed to their long life. The need to maintain a vacuum in the tunnel to enable the vessel to move meant that they were simply unsuitable for use at sea, for should the vessel roll in a seaway and air enter the tunnel, propulsion would be lost.

The HEADLANDS whilst superb for their designed role ferrying passengers up and down shallow Christchurch Harbour are simply inefficient at operating at sea. As such their use to the Royal Navy in the Second World War was limited to inland waters.

Whilst precise detail of their full Wartime service has proved impossible to obtain it seems that HEADLAND PAL and QUEEN were sent to operate harbour patrols in Chichester Harbour. It is known that the BELLE, manned by Wrens, served as a tender to the "Stone Frigate" HMS Mastodon, (the Naval name for Exbury house) and sailed as far as Lepe Beach where the invasion fleet was being assembled. The BELLE features in Neville Shute's novel "Requiem for a Wren" The MAID was sent to the river Clyde.

No role was found for HEADLAND PRINCESS as she was found in need of substantial work to the undersides of her hull, similar to that earlier carried out on her fleet sisters. These were deemed low priority and she remained laid up ashore at her builder's yard for the duration of hostilities.

POST WAR ACTIVITY

At the end of the Second World War the craft were offered for sale back to their original owners. The BELLE had a large hole in her upper works but she was repaired and returned to service in 1947. The QUEEN and the PAL were found to be in a much better state and were back in service in 1946.

The MAID proved hard to reclaim from the Admiralty but ultimately, she returned South and was refitted in time to return to service in 1948 albeit with a different Kelvin engine.

An unfortunate consequence of their Naval service was that the varnished hulls could not be restored as the copious amounts of Admiralty grey paint had leached into the pine topsides applied over the pre-War varnish. The BELLE and PAL were painted French blue but the QUEEN sailed for two seasons with white topsides. Ultimately the French Blue livery was adopted for all the fleet. Only the MAID had her varnished hull restored as the grey paint had not affected the pitch pine.

The PRINCESS did not return to operations at Christchurch and was instead sold for use on the upper Thames, renamed IVY, where she was to remain until the mid 1960's when she returned to UNITED operations, following acquisition by Ron Loveless who had earlier operated a small twelve-seater launch on the service. When she first returned to Christchurch, she operated with the wooden slatted coach type seating and a canvas awning cover.

In the mid 1960's the advent of cheap jet aircraft travel to the Spanish Costa's had yet to become a reality and the Pontins Holiday Camp at Wick Ferry attracted many thousands of happy campers that regularly enjoyed cruises down to the Beach. Additionally, at Tuckton there was a major tourist attraction known as TUCKTONIA which was a 'Britain in Miniature' which attracted many families who probably had their first glimpse of the River from the top deck of the open top buses and trolley buses then operating circular tours of the Town. They would return to Tuckton Tea Gardens and enjoy a cruise down the river or in one of the self-drive motorboats available for hire.

Slowly, however the trade dwindled as more tourists were tempted abroad with the promise of sunshine, and the business was affected by the closure of TUCKTONIA when the land was sold for redevelopment as housing. Also, as private car ownership increased more visitors travelled to Mudeford Beach by the newly introduced motorised ferry from Mudeford Quay, where a large car park had been created, or by the Noddy Train that had started operations from Hengistbury Head

THE LAST FORTY YEARS

Reflecting the reduced demand, and the retirement of Reg Keynes the HEADLAND PAL was first sold for service at Keyhaven operating the ferry to Hurst Castle.

By the late 1970's the fleet had reduced to six craft; AVON VANITY, CHUNKY, HEADLAND BELLE, MAID, PRINCESS and QUEEN, when the opportunity was taken to re-acquire the PAL and bring her back to Christchurch to enable CHUNKY, a shorter version of the HEADLANDS to be retired

The PRINCESS was the next to be sold after the death of owner Ron Loveless, and she initially went to Durham, and later to Nottingham, before yet again finding work on the river Thames. No word has been heard of her since 1990 and she has not been listed as in service since then.

By this time the business had become the ownership of brothers John and Richard Elliott and long-term colleague Robin Stride, all other owner operators having retired. By the 1990's the trio had retirement in mind and the business was quietly put on the market, and was ultimately sold to Allan and Alison Vincent in 1995. Alison was a native of Southbourne and Allan had a long career of working with boats in England and Spain.

Since acquiring the business Allan, helped by son Adam and son-in-law Jason, sought ways to revitalise the operations, which had been materially affected by the closure of Pontins Holiday Camp in 1998. An early example of this was to acquire, and rebuild the Cafeteria at Tuckton Tea Gardens, managed by Alison, as an integral part of the boating activities. It was also decided to add some covered accommodation to one of the craft to attract more trade in the shoulder seasons, and Allan then took the bold step of converting the HEADLAND QUEEN by the addition of a fixed stern cabin in 2006.

Inevitably the greater air draft has made the QUEEN more of a challenge to handle in high winds particularly when berthing and leaving Christchurch Quay. However, she proved to be popular with and is regularly out on charter, and a similar conversion was carried out on the PAL in 2010. Additionally, the fixed masts were altered so they can be lowered, permitting the craft to sail upstream under Tuckton Bridge.

Celebrating their 90th Anniversary in 2024 the craft sail from Tuckton daily from Easter until the end of October. Normally two craft are in service operating a 45-minute departure frequency calling at Wick Ferry, for the Captains Club Hotel Complex and Christchurch Quay before sailing down the Harbour to Mudeford Beach. They are also frequently out on private charter and Evening Bar-b-Cue cruises in conjunction with the Tuckton Tea Gardens

C J WOOD 7th November 2023