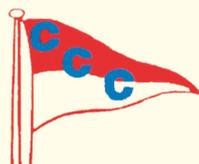


The John Sebastian Light Vessel 55

A History



**Home to the
Cabot Cruising Club**

Collated by Jackie Corcoran (Second Edition)

John Cabot is a well known and well documented figure in Maritime History. A number of businesses and organisations are named after him throughout Bristol, where his epic voyage of discovery began.

His place of birth is not really known, but it is a given that he came finally to Bristol to prepare to discover new lands. His ship, the Mattea – named it is thought, after his wife, left home in 1497 and found America. The ship is now known as the Matthew and a replica sits alongside the other instantly recognisable icon for Bristol – Brunel's SS Great Britain. However, this is not their story.

Another historic ship resides about half a mile away, tucked into a corner of the floating harbour. She was built in 1885 and was responsible for saving hundreds of seamen in her hard working life.

Built in the same dock as the SS Great Britain, she was never meant to be grand or glamorous and was certainly not unique. Without an engine, she was towed to the areas of greatest need and her crew lived there only to keep her light in good working order and make sure no ships floundered on the hazards she marked. A welcome sight for sailors on their way back into port.

At the end of her useful life, she was sold for scrap. Her lantern and other valuable parts were removed and with no residual value was set alight. She burned for days but did not succumb. She floundered, wounded and abandoned where she lay.

A new club had formed and were using local hostelries for meetings and were looking for a new home. Like-minded pleasure cruisers wanted to get together to set off on discoveries and adventures as part of a small flotilla. Moorings in the Bathurst Basin were basic, but the erstwhile sailors formed a merry band looking for the best way to socialise and use their boats and have fun.

They had all passed the wreck that bobbed with the tide and made enquiries about purchasing her. Some of them knew her as a working girl and had delivered papers and groceries to the crew. Just a deck and hull remained, but they had the vision of a cosy clubhouse if they could just obtain the hull.

For £275.00 (this was 1954 so this was quite a sum for an old wreck) it was theirs. Working throughout the seasons, begging and borrowing tools and materials, they gradually turned her from an empty, blackened shell to a usable space. Working by torches and doubtful electrical supplies, a bar was born.

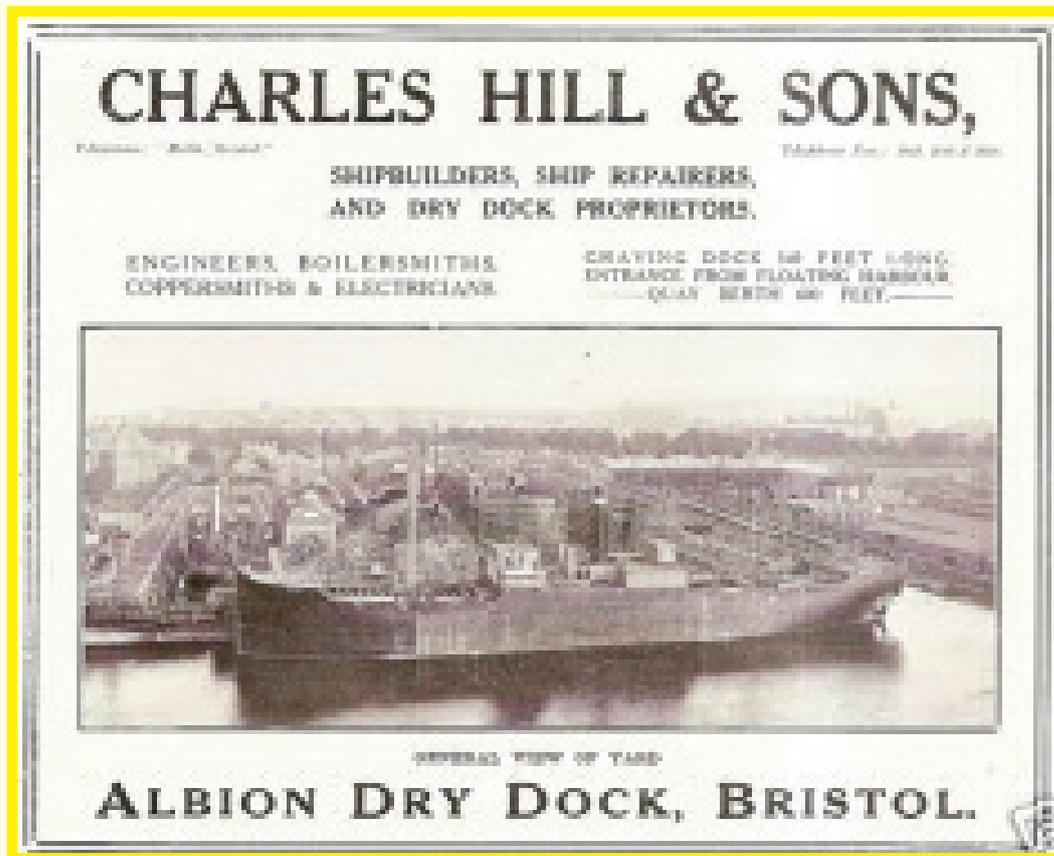
She finally opened her doors in 1959.

She has evolved. She has been maintained and improved by members throughout the years and work continues.

They called her John Sebastian after the father & son who left these shores some 462 years earlier and who the Cabot Cruising Club were proud to be named for.

She is now the last remaining wooden lightship still afloat in the world. Yes. She's a bit shabby and overshadowed by more glamorous vessels, but without her the Bristol Channel would have been a far more treacherous place to navigate.

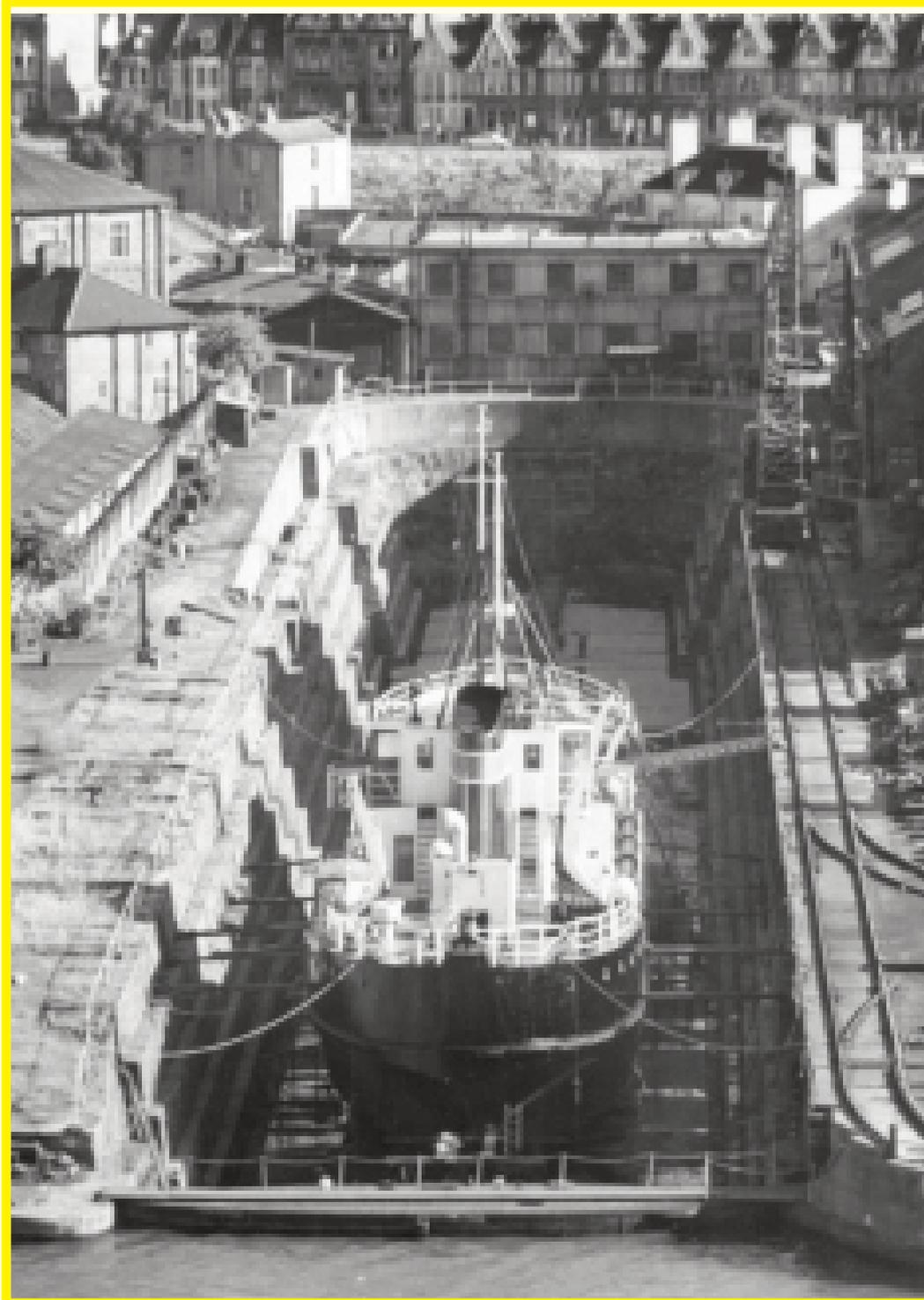
The Ship Builder



JOHN SEBASTIAN was built in 1885 as a Light Vessel (LV 55) as a batch order of three (LV54, LV55 and LV59) by Charles Hill & Sons, Albion Yard, Bristol, for Trinity House. The hull type was wood with iron beams.

She was sold out of service in 1954 to Portishead for scrap where her lantern and metal work was removed. She is now owned by Cabot Cruising Club, Bathurst Basin, Bristol.

She is 102.92 feet long (31.39 metres) and weighs 274 tons. She is 24.16 feet (7.37 metres) wide and has a depth of 12 feet (3.66 metres). The hull is double skinned; this is basically one hull inside another.



This is likely to be the actual dry dock where John Sebastian was built.

Another of the fleet is now in Thurrock, it was also used as a clubhouse but has fallen into disrepair since the club has found a landlocked alternative, her lantern has been removed by the local authority now and is being restored as a centrepiece for their museum.



What can happen without constant maintenance.

Living on a lightship

Lightships were created as a portable alternative to the lighthouse. Wherever there was a hazard, sand banks or a wreck, a lightship could be located to warn off the ships. This meant an isolated life for the men employed to man them. The crews were changed, with one crew being taken out on a small craft and the other coming home.



By the beginning of the 20th Century it was usual for a Trinity House light vessel to have a crew of 11.

This consisted of a Master and six Ratings on board and a Master and three Ratings ashore. The Masters were changed every month, while the rest of the crew served a month afloat followed by two weeks of shore leave. The crews were qualified seamen who had normally served at least two years on deck. When a man started on a lightvessel he would serve as a general seaman before being promoted to a Fog Signal Driver and Lamplighter.



The seamen lived in the part of the ship that now houses the bar. Their berths would have been around the walls and there would have been small lockers in which to keep their belongings. As today, there is no natural light below decks, so it must have been cosy in the bad weather and easy to sleep in the daytime.

The Master's quarters were in the part of the ship that is now the stage.

None of the rooms that you see today reflect the conditions that the crew would recognise in their day. The area in front of the stage was the work shop where spares were kept and maintained. The mast that held the lantern came through the deck and if you

look at the flooring halfway along the dance floor you will see the floorboards that were installed over the place where it went down to the bottom of the keel.

Along the walls in the lower part of the ship were cast iron pillars, these were removed to create more space in this area.

The grand staircase is not original. The original entrance was behind the red velvet curtain next to the bar.

It was a tough life. The ship was towed out about 12 miles from Avonmouth and anchored over hazards. In the Channel this is most likely to have been sandbanks.

In the early days (late 1880's) there would have been no television or radio. The sailors would most likely have amused themselves between chores, by making rope pictures, ships in bottles, or playing games.



The lantern was the main priority and the wicks were trimmed regularly to ensure the light stayed bright. The lamp on LV55 was powered by oil.

There was also a Fog Signal powered by two 14 horse power Hornsby oil engines.

Decks were kept clean and tidy. Brasses were polished and the glasses in the lamp kept clean. The lantern was at the top of a high mast, so to light the lamp, the whole thing was lowered by ropes and pulleys so that the oil could be topped up and the wick lit and trimmed. This must have been a very dangerous job in rain and wind and not very pleasant. The men would have taken it in turns to be on watch throughout the day and the night.

They had to bring their own food and supplies and prepare their own meals. Washing clothes was also their own responsibility. Supply boats would visit once a week and the company would have been a welcome diversion. Members of the Cabot Cruising Club, remember trips out to take newspapers and little treats to the men. One Boxing Day was memorable to one of our club member's when he accompanied his father and some friends to take a few Christmas goodies to the lightship; he was quite young and was particularly worried about the journey home with his inebriated elders.

In later years, modern equipment was installed and life was a little easier. Lightships in general were used by the Royal Navy when telegraph and wireless radios were in their infancy, to test the equipment and later to train sailors in their use.





Modern technology in action.

Most lightships have now been replaced by unmanned vessels or beacons.

NB: Some of the pictures used in this booklet are for illustration only and are not necessarily of LV55.

History of the Cabot Cruising Club

by Herbert Gerrish.

Present CCC members might be interested in the story of how Cabot acquired the John Sebastian and how it became the HQ ship it now is, so I have jotted down a few reminiscences with the assistance of Ted Pike and Cliff Howlett – the only other present members personally involved in those early years.

Unfortunately, a good many of the records of that time have been lost, but by delving into the bilges we have unearthed a few old and mouldering files and papers, from which I have been able to augment my memory, in particular regarding actual dates.

On advice, I have purposely omitted the names of those I remember as having been involved from time to time, in case, in so doing, I should inadvertently omit some, and so give offence. This does not purport to give the full story up to the present day, but mainly covers the purchase of the Ship, up to the formal opening as a fully commissioned Club HQ. Much work has been done since by successive generations of members, and of course still continues.

Before purchase of the Lightvessel, Cabot CC – which incidentally was founded in 1937 – had its HQ at the Nova Scotia public house at Cumberland Basin, at which were held regular monthly meetings – the formal Club meeting being held in an upstairs room while, true to Cabot form, an irregular meeting was held concurrently in the bar below – by the ‘opposition’! There had long been an ongoing requirement for the Committee of the time to be on the lookout for, and acquire – suitable premises for the Club’s own HQ. One or two attempts in earlier years had failed, including the acquisition of a barge at Sea Mills for conversion, but which for reasons now lost sight of, was sold out of the Club, to be turned into a ‘Viking Ship’ for a Weston Carnival, and was burned out in a firework display there.

However, in 1954, the present Lightship was 'discovered' lying 'for sale' in Portishead Dock, and it was suggested to the Club Committee that it might make a good HQ. At this time the ship was in an incredible state of dereliction. It had, by this time – a year or more after being sold out of the service of Trinity House, been through the hands of two lots of breakers, who had each torn off it/burned off it, anything they thought of value, leaving the subsequent rubbish lying all over the place – on deck and below. The then owner – a scrap merchant who lived at Canvey Island, Essex – had then beached her at New Passage – one of the few places where the road reaches the shore line – preparatory to burning the remainder, so as to collect the considerable amounts of brass/copper and other metal still remaining. However, the landlady of the adjoining hotel, claiming the foreshore rights, took legal action to have the hulk removed – and so it had been docked pro tem in Portishead, and put up for sale again.

So after a lot of negotiation with the owner, (and with no thought whatever by most members present of what they were letting themselves in for) at what seemed to me, as a comparatively new member, a very irregular meeting, it was agreed to buy the ship for £275.00. I well remember the Hon. Sec. going out from the meeting to clinch the deal by phone. I don't think any record was made of the meeting or the decision to buy – I never came across it in my years as Hon. Sec although I have recently come across the old account book, which records the payments made on September 9th and 25th 1955. (Incidentally there was in the December 1975 edition of 'Power and Sail' an article on Cabot CC which quite incorrectly stated that we had bought it from Trinity House of £1000.00). Sufficient to say that it was bought with the whole of the money Cabot had, at that time, and we then had a derelict hulk on our hands and no money with which to do anything.

However, in those days, Cabot had many good friends –including some members too – in the shipping community of Bristol, among them Alderman Duggan of the Ald Shipping Company (President) and Alderman (later Sir) Kenneth Brown (Vice President) and his brothers, of the Holmes Sand and Gravel Co., and the latter firm arranged in October 1955 for the hulk to be towed up to Bristol – free of cost – and berthed initially at Welsh Back. (Dock dues were then £1 per 10ft length -£12 p.a. for our ship!). Here it lay for approximately a year, whilst a scheme for conversion was prepared, and eventually work started. No proposals whatever, as to what could or should be done with it had been considered when purchase was agree, and as the magnitude of the task ahead – and lack of funds – became evident, many of the initiators of the purchase – including many of the most vociferous of them –faded into the background – especially when it was realized that a bar could not be provided overnight!

So here we were, with the hulk, of which the hull and main decks only were sound, in a terrible state internally and externally, filthy everywhere, and littered with junk inside and out – on deck, steel coamings to main deck house, and the remaining bit of the roof to same, all left very rough after cutting away of the parts removed by oxyacetylene. Below, a mass of old woodwork, smashed out and left, and the main hold deck, soaked black and smelly with colza oil. Below was black as night and the only access was by a vertical steel cat ladder through a hatch in the main deck – now the small deck light over the foot of the main companion way. There was no artificial light whatever – no electrical wiring – since the ship had been lit by oil lamps –and no form of heating. There had of course, been no engines for propulsion, the main hold having been used partly for servicing of the lantern, but mostly for the engines which powered the fog horn and pumps.

We were fortunate again in having amongst our membership, an architect who got out the drawings for the conversion, and more important, a number of skilled tradesmen, e.g. a master plumber, a BR electrician, an experienced joiner and an apprentice carpenter, and a goodly umber of members willing to help and do anything – highly practical people, all of whom too, (with other members) seemed to be expert at obtaining secondhand materials virtually free.

Such members – who in fact, in the main were initially lukewarm or even opposed to the purchase –ultimately formed the nucleus of a more or less regular gang of about 10, who turned up in all weathers, every Tuesday and Thursday evening, and often came and went, and ‘regulars’ who weren’t so regular, but generally there were 6 or 7 there on each normal ‘working shift’.

The club having no money, a number of members provided modest free loans for materials to start things off, but in the main at the outset, we adapted what we found aboard, and the work gangs scrounged other materials, and I think about all we actually bought in the early period was timber, nails, screws, some paint (at specific cheap rates of course) and such like, and some electric wiring and fittings (although many fittings and all the conduit were scrounged). The loans were paid off comparatively quickly.

We started by trying to sort out the junk – getting rid of the really useless stuff – and dismantling remaining lockers and partitions etc. which didn’t fit our new scheme. Our Commodore at the time loaned us a small circular saw – powered by a small JAP engine, with which we cut up all spare timber (by the light of the hurricane lamps) for future use as firewood. The exhaust to the engine was merely a length of old pipe pushed through the main deck –without silencer – and awful noise it made outside, and an awful struggle it was below, trying to cut up, say, a locker top, to find, after ruining the saw blade and drive belts – that there was a sheet of 1/16” steel plate on the underside – unnoticed in the dim light. That no one was injured seriously, was a miracle.

After some months, our Commodore produced an ex wartime Coventry Climax generating set, which was installed on deck – in the open –and very dangerous temporary lighting was rigged up below. This improved working conditions – so long as we could start the generator. This got harder and harder as the valves really began to deteriorate, frosts became frequent, and we had to sweep snow off it on many a winter’s evening. (Indeed on many occasions we worked all evening below with the fire buckets frozen solid).

Sometime in the late summer of 1956 our friends the Browns once again came to our assistance by towing the ship to its present berth in Bathurst Basin. Here as before, we were constantly plagued by thieves getting aboard, and even one gent caught rowing round the ship, stripping the copper sheathing off above and partly below the water line. Odd loose items such as ventilators and suchlike were frequently dropped overboard by vandals. I think one of the first constructional jobs we did (as opposed to destructional jobs) was to cover the main hold with patent glazing (still in place until very recently!), scrounged from Stroud Post Office, which was being reconstructed. Then we cut out the small deck house over it (since demolished) with doors, and which also covered the tops of the hawse pipes. The companion way was made by our joiner member – who shall be nameless but who you all know as a regular attender even now – mostly from recovered timber, and fixed in position. The rubber tread coverings were scrounged from reconstruction works at the Old Clifton Down Hotel (prewar name – now Bridge House) – as were many sanitary fittings, doors and other items, still in use! In fact, one never knew what secondhand materials one would find deposited on the ship on arrival on work nights.

It was decided that the two hawse pipes should be removed. They are 1 ½ “cast iron, so, after using up two cylinders each of gas and oxygen to make a cut of about 4 inches long (and setting alight to a lot of rubbish and one of the members too, in the process) we gave up and decided to leave them – which was wise - because one can't imagine – or can one? – what would have happened had we managed to cut through them, and they'd collapsed in two halves!

Incidentally, before covering in the hold we hoisted out the tow tanks (used now for water storage) and placed them on the deck – another hair-raising event with makeshift gear and very inexperienced operatives.

Cutting holes in the hull sides for the WC and basin discharge pipes was another problem job. During much of the early period we had merely two chemical closets aboard, which it was someone's job weekly to empty, generally by staggering along the quay wall, under the road bridge, and emptying into the river – although one snowy winter's night someone emptied them directly overside – straight into the Commodore's open boat, unfortunately moored alongside the ship. Also the steel bulkhead forming the chain locker up forward was cut into, to form the doorways to the toilets.

The Grossmith Cabin was, during this early period, completely fitted out with oak benching, panelling and door – as it still remains – by a member after whom it was named who was at the time the Managing Director of one of the biggest engineering firms in Bristol – working entirely on his own, mostly by the light of a bicycle lamp.

Individual works are too numerous to detail – and would entail mentioning individuals by name – but, as can be seen, many partitions were erected (and some later taken down again), ventilators made and fixed, and the bar – largely as it now exists – made from the counter removed from Unity Street Post Office which was being closed at the time. But probably one of the most laborious jobs – with little to show for it – was the cutting of the groove in the penant stone of the harbour for the mains electrical cable - all by hammer and cold chisel. This took literally hundreds of hours, and I should think the ship must be resting on a bed of such chisels judging by the number we lost into the dock.

Looking back, it seems to me incredible the amount of purely voluntary effort that went into the initial conversion, and the results achieved, especially as we had no sophisticated gear or tools, conditions were appalling – and most workers had their own boats to maintain also. The amount of second hand (and some new) material which members produced was equally surprising (even the ship's bell was scrounged from an ex wartime naval camp).

Much time and effort was, of course, expended in trying to get the main deck weatherproof. One long spell was spent properly caulking the seams and running with hot bitumen – not very successfully. Then the whole deck was covered with fiberglass membrane, bedded and coated with Synthapruf and this did quite well for a while. The area inside the main deck house coaming was laid with tarmac by a well known local driveway surfacers, and this did well for some years, but the problem in all such methods was the number of fittings on the deck.

And of course, painting inside and out went on almost continually – paint scrounged, and even on one occasion the outside of the main hull ‘done’ professionally by a painting firm at cost –but, again, we were foiled by the extremely bad and dirty condition of the surfaces.

This may all sound now, very amateur and shortsighted, but it must be recalled that the club had spent all its capital, and relied entirely on subscriptions – from an average of about 75 members at £1 p.a. (it went up to £1.5.0d in 1956 and stayed there at least until 1960!).

Nevertheless some three years after the purchase , the club was offered £2000 by a local entrepreneurial consortium for the ship – but this was of course rejected by the Committee.

And so the voluntary and frequently hard and unpleasant work continued week by week – year by year – through all seasons – until the “first” opening of the bar in February 1958. This was when we got our first licence, and here we had another bonus in the person of a member who was a senior member of Simmond’s (later Courage’s brewery) – who set up the bar – and saw us through our early days as a licensed club, serving as Bar Chairman for some while. The club as such was then more or less confined to the bar and toilet areas – the furnishings were sparse , and heating arrangements various and all dicey and not very effective.

Work of course continued – naturally at a somewhat reduced rate since the attractions of the bar outweighed the enthusiasm for painting/scraping/sawing and hammering etc.

The more formal opening of the ship as a partly furnished and habitable Club House took place on May 15th 1958, and finally –after even more work inside and out, the whole ship was fully and formally opened on Mary 3rd 1959 by Capt. McCraith – one of the Trinity House Elder Brethren – who was aboard Patricia on her annual visit to Bristol. This was a quite magnificent event, the whole place painted and polished and furnished – the bar fully stocked and gleaming, electric light throughout, and a large gathering of members and friends and a fitting tribute to all who had done so much with so little (money!) over a period of 3 _ years. Following this opening, for two or three years, the Club's Annual Dinner was held aboard, using outside caterers, but this practice was ended due to the cramped conditions prevailing caused by so many people wishing to attend.

There have of course been many improvements and alterations made in subsequent years – the laying of the strip wood floor, alterations to the bar and the after end of the ship, the removal of the mast, and more recently major alterations on deck and now installation of proper heating.

This however, is intended to be only a history of activities up to the formal opening of the ship as a finished clubhouse in May 1959. We started up with £275.00 cash and finished up owing nothing to anyone.

As a matter of interest, two other clubs have a Trinity House Lightvessel as HQs, the Royal Northumberland Yacht Club, Blythe, and Thurrock Yacht Club, Little Thurrock, Essex.

The following details of the John Sebastian's history before we had her (incomplete, as it seems Trinity House no longer have complete records) have been supplied by Trinity House, and two masters of the ship whilst she was in service, and are in the Club's records:

Was:

- Trinity House L.V. No 55
- Built in 1885 Builder's Tonnage, 274 tons
- Length 103ft Beam 24ft
- Sold out of Trinity House Service 1953
- On Newarp Stations October 14th –December 15th 1914
- On Swarte Bank Station 1922 temporarily, during November of which she withstood terrible gales, and, in the Master's own words "shipped a terrific green 'un, filled herself to the rail, flooded the engine room, carried away skylights, ladders and everything else on deck, and strained her back, so that when moved to Cross Sand Station off the Norfolk Coast soon after (where she was for a very long time) had to be pumped out night and morning"
- Moved to Owers Station (off Selsey Bill) on 15th March 1937 until 17th May 1939.

Put on E & W Grounds Station in Bristol Channel on 14th July 1939 where she was until 18th January 1942.

- Then taken to Milford Haven for overhaul and lay in Holyhead Harbour as a spare until 18th March 1947 – and then put back on E & W Grounds until 1st September 1953 when she was sold out of the service to breakers

Article by H V Gerrish passed to us by Gordon Faulkner of Bathurst Basin who has put a date of May 1987 at the top of the article. Unfortunately, it is not clear when the article was written or where it was published.

NB: This article is produced from the original document and has been left with the charm of occasional typing and spelling errors.

In 1979, members decided to overhaul the club boat. At this time the grand staircase was built and the old mast removed.

The entrance was moved to the spacious new top deck and the new lavatories were added at this time. The room at the end of the corridor is now at the chart room and is currently used for storage.

The galley was created and the bar relocated to its present position.

The top deck was refurbished and the old wood was replaced. The mast you see today was added at this time to remind everyone of its past glory. The flag pole at the top of the mast was replaced when the vessel was turned around in 2009.

There is no contemporary narrative from the members who worked so hard at this time currently available. There are very few records either but a few documents are available showing the costs involved.

Very little has changed since, apart from on going maintenance. Members have weekly work-parties to keep her afloat. There are plans to replace the seating near the bar and fund raising events happen regularly to fund the works needed. The bar is manned by volunteers, even for very busy private functions.

In 2011 the vessel was accepted by the National Historic Ships Register. With permission from the Secretary of State, the Red Defaced Ensign can now be flown.



Bathurst Basin

The location of the John Sebastian dates from 1804-09 and was a part of the Floating Harbour Scheme.

The aim was to cure the problems caused by the tides and create a stable waterway in the heart of Bristol.

It was built on the site of an old millpond (Trin Mills) as a link between the Floating Harbour and the New Cut. The Lock built to help to regulate the tide can still be seen at the wider end of the Basin near the Louisiana. It was sealed in World War 2.

The swinging footbridge alongside the Ostrich replaced a railway bridge, but the tunnel (now blocked) can still be seen.

The Bathurst Basin was named after an MP, Charles Bragge. He changed his name in 1804 to that of his mother's family, and was then known as Bathurst. It was designed by William Jessop, a well known engineer in the 18th & 19th century.

The Louisiana was built to cater for sailors and anticipated visitors on the completion of the new Floating Harbour. It was originally called Bathurst Hotel.

The imposing grey stone building along the side of the basin is Bristol General Hospital. It was built in 1858 with warehousing underneath. It was built on the site of the Bathurst Ironworks.

Holms Sand & Gravel company used the basin to take delivery of building materials, mostly sand and gravel as their name implies.

The Ostrich public house is much older than the surrounding buildings and is built against Redcliffe rocks. Caves riddle the rocks and some have been exposed inside the pub. It has been used for the refreshment of sailors & dockside workers since 1745.

The beautiful building opposite the John Sebastian in yellow and red brick was formerly Robinsons (or Warriner's Warehouse) who were oil seed manufacturers. It was built in 1874 in the Byzantine style. It was designed by William Bruce Ginell.

Until recently the John Sebastian did not have an address, but since 7th April 2011, it now resides against the John Sebastian Quay.

New members, with or without boats are always welcome. If you would like to be involved, you can visit the club on Thursday or Saturday evening. You can apply to become a Friend of John Sebastian by completing a form and dropping it in to us. For more information please visit our website, www.cabotcrusingclub.co.uk.

