

6 - Cultural Significance

6.1 - Basis of Assessment

The identification of cultural significance in this section is an assessment based on the recommendations in James Semple Kerr's *The Conservation Plan* (1996) and the general guidelines in the Heritage Lottery Fund's *Conservation Plans for Historic Places* (March 1988). It permits judgements of significance to be tailored to a place, individual structure, feature or large complex object, by applying the most appropriate criteria. These have developed out of a thorough understanding, rather than by employing a formulaic check-list. It is a logical progression from the previous sections on understanding the ship and the site.

The system employed here is the result of extensive collaboration and debate between Matthew Tanner, the Curator of the *Great Britain*, and Jo Cox. It assesses the elements of the ship and site on the basis of their ability to demonstrate philosophies; customs; designs; functions; techniques; processes; styles; their formal and aesthetic qualities and associational links for which there may be no surviving evidence in the fabric.

The assessment is a different approach to that of statutory protection. Listing, for example, gives blanket protection at a particular grade to a whole building or structure and its curtilage. Judgements about the relative merits of individual elements only come into play for listed buildings or scheduled ancient monuments when physical changes are proposed. They are then decided on a case-by-case basis at the point of prior advice or in the act of giving or refusing consent. Neither listing nor scheduling provides an owner or manager (or anybody else with a *locus* in the process) with much detailed information on what kind of merit different parts of a building or structure might be considered to have. This is both their strength (the assessment of merit changes with time and allows consent for change to be given or refused on the basis of knowledge/opinion when the change is proposed) and a weakness, since managers can be left in the dark about how to retain significance and where limited resources should be spent on conservation.

The evaluation has been rendered here first as bullet point general statements. These summarise, in a form intended to be brief and relevant, the cultural significance of the ship and site, as an *aide memoire* to decision-makers and managers.

The general statements are followed by a more detailed table of graded elements. This has the intrinsic imperfection of any inventory. It does not cover every item of fabric. This does not mean that fabric that is not mentioned is not significant. It tends towards losing sight of the wood for the trees by plucking out elements that make up the whole. This is mitigated by a separate grading for grouped elements and recognising that the whole, in some cases, is more than the sum total of its parts.

The system is designed to assist positive priorities - retardation of fabric decay, the focus of limited budgets, presentation issues - on this site. It is not a manifesto for change, or intended to put at risk elements assessed as having 'some' or 'little' cultural significance. It has no legal weight and is not intended to supersede or challenge statutory or other existing systems for evaluation. Well-established systems already operate for the buildings on the site. When completed, the National Historic Ships Committee Research Project at the University of St Andrews, which is looking at models for ship and ship project evaluation, will give a broader and more comparative context for the *ss Great Britain* and the *ss Great Britain* Project (see Appendix 2). This Conservation Plan is very different and intended to be useful in a site-specific context.

The limitations of the system were felt to be substantially outweighed by the usefulness of an exercise which applied a demanding and relatively sophisticated set of criteria to the structures in order to identify significance as closely as possible. This should mean that the policies and strategies that ensue can be justified, generate good quality debate and make the best possible use of energy and funds.

6.2 - General Statements of Significance

The *Great Britain* is of exceptional significance because of

- the combination of technical innovations in the original design of the ship: principally the iron hull; her size; the screw propeller; watertight bulkheads.
- the seminal influence of the design on modern ship-building.
- the unique physical connection between a preserved ship and a place built for her design and construction.
- the strong association with I K Brunel who engendered and collaborated on her design and construction.
- her status as a monument to the boldness of early 19th century problem-solving
- the beauty and fineness of her original lines as a fast ship.
- the way in which she and the other first phase elements of the site - the dock, dock office and steamship factory remains, are part of Bristol's maritime history.
- the richness and complexity of information of different periods in her fabric.
- the variety and breadth of commercial and national histories associated with her.
- the variety and breadth of personal human histories associated with her.
- the way in which her fabric expresses risk and danger.

It is difficult to categorise or analyse the emotional impact of the ship on visitors, many of whom may have only a fleeting interest in her engineering story. As a piece of sculpture, her impact is breath-taking and, combined with her battered appearance gives her an intrinsic quality that is not amenable to tabulation. The heroic project to resurrect her from the Falklands (illustrated in photographs displayed on board) is also a great emotional pull on site.

The site of the *Great Western Dockyard* as a whole is of exceptional significance because

- it includes the remains of the first purpose-built integrated steamship works in the world
- it is the birthplace and present setting of the *Great Britain*
- it is a demonstration of Bristol's maritime and industrial history
- of its industrial textures and materials and the pleasing simplicity and fitness for purpose of the designs of the buildings
- it gives historic meaning to the Floating Harbour and *vice versa*

The *Great Western Dock* is of exceptional significance because

- it is the birthplace of the *Great Britain*.
- the fabric of the ship and the fabric of the dock were designed for and influenced by one another.
- it is one of the major surviving elements of the first purpose-built integrated iron steam-ship works in the world.
- it is associated with I K Brunel, who advised on its construction
- it is associated with William Patterson, as the ship-builder of the *Great Western* and the *Great Britain*.