

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*.

- of the pleasing contrast between its vernacular character and the high-tech character and ironwork of the ship.
- it is a surviving example of a 19th century vernacular dock.
- it is a surviving example of one of Bristol's City Docks.
- For its association with particular Bristol-built ships.
- For its association with the neighbouring Albion Dock.

The factory is of exceptional significance because

- it is the birthplace of the *Great Britain* and her engines.
- of the influence of the research and construction within its walls have had on modern shipping.
- it is one of the major surviving elements of the first purpose-built steam-ship works in the world.
- it has archaeological potential.
- for its association with I K Brunel.
- for its association with a series of Bristol industries, tanning, tobacco, and grain warehousing.

The dock office is culturally significant because

- it is a rare survival of a what must have been a commonplace building type.
- of the way in which it demonstrates paperwork as well as manufacture as an essential part of the dockyard operation.
- its front to the Floating Harbour demonstrates the relationship between the dockyard and harbour.
- the pleasing way in which the oriel window expresses the function of the drawing office.
- its interesting interior contrasts between functional and fancy detail.

The Jefferies range is culturally significant because

- it is representative of the buildings required by a small-scale ship-repair outfit of its date
- it is a visual demonstration of the altered status of the dockyard in the early 20th century
- of its pleasing industrial character and textures
- it reveals the adaptability of simple buildings to different functions

The range of buildings north of the dock is culturally significant because

- it is representative of the buildings required by a small-scale ship-repair outfit of its date
- it is a visual demonstration of the altered status of the ship-yard in the 20th century
- of its pleasing industrial character and textures
- it defines an historic boundary between the dockyard and the towpath and Floating Harbour
- it reveals the adaptability of simple buildings to different functions

Timber yard buildings, excluding the factory and dock office. The timber yard buildings have cultural significance because

- their use, at the time of writing, is a reminder of the importance of the timber industry to the Floating Harbour.
- They contribute to the industrial character of the site.

Fences, walls etc, delineating existing boundaries

The south boundary wall of the timber yard is culturally significant because

- its east portion is probably part of the first purpose-built iron steamship works in the world
- the use of Pennant stone links it to the dock and factory
- for its archaeological potential
- as signifying the value of what lay inside during the active dockyard era of the site by providing security

6.3 - Tabulated levels of Significance

The grading system employed here is as follows. An upper case letter indicates an overall grade for a major element or area. These are sub-divided into smaller elements which are given lower case grades. There is not a mathematical relationship between the grading of smaller elements and larger elements or areas of which they may form a part. Post-1970 re-created elements are not usually included in the system, since they are judged to have no cultural significance relative to that of fabric from the pre-heritage life of the site and ship. This does not necessarily mean that they are intrusive. Where they are listed, it is where it is suspected that genuine confusion might arise regarding what is post 1970 and what is not, and they are not graded. Where they are intrusive and it would be desirable to remove or amend them, they are noted as 'int'.

- A* Elements of international significance
- Aa Elements of exceptional significance
- Bb Elements of considerable significance
- Cc Elements of some significance
- Dd Elements of little significance
- int Elements that are intrusive
- det Elements that have a level of cultural significance but detract from elements of greater significance.
- () Brackets are used for explanations where considered necessary.

Although tabulated and based on as full an understanding of the site as could be gleaned in the available time, it should be underlined that the degrees of significance are open to review and it is expected that they will be reviewed. Elements that are recognised as relatively poorly understood at the time of writing and await more information turning up, better interpretation and/or archaeological recording have generally been assumed to have a high degree of significance until it can be proved otherwise. This is a safety net.

The site as a whole with the ship	A*				
The ship as a whole	A*				

The Great Britain

Associational Links

The Great Britain has extensive associations, some demonstrated in physical evidence, some not.

She is associated with:

I K Brunel and via him with the Floating Harbour, Clifton Suspension Bridge and Temple Meads Station in Bristol;

the *Great Western* and *Great Eastern*, as I K Brunel's other two ships;

Thomas Guppy; William Patterson; Marc Brunel; Robert Stevenson; James Nasmyth;

personal and clique networks in engineering and business;

Coalbrookdale

transatlantic passenger liners and communications;

emigration to and the development of Australia, including the impact of the gold rush;

the Crimean War;

the Indian Mutiny;

Liverpool as a maritime city;

Falkland Islands culture;

Prince Albert & Queen Victoria.

The Hull

The hull is of international significance, demonstrating size and the use of metal that made the ship a watershed in design. The wrought iron plating is wasted and repaired in places since 1970 with fibreglass and steel and the frames are also wasted and patched. A proper measured survey will enable a more refined discrimination between individual plates and frames to be made than is contained in this schedule.

The hull	A*			
plating (excepting fibreglass and steel repair)	a			
frames (excepting post 1970 repair)	a			
double bottom (although a replacement of the Phase 1 fabric, this preserves the design of longitudinal strength critical to the development of ship size)	a			
keel (added 1852)			c	
docking keels	a			
stern post	a			
stem post	a			

The transverse bulkheads

These are mostly compromised by the extent to which they have been re-created since 1970

foocle bulkhead		b		
forward boiler room bulkhead		b		
after engine room bulkhead		b		
bulkhead aft of the lifting propeller space	a			

Forward

Forward of the focsle bulkhead

The area forward of the focsle bulkhead is of especial interest for the survival of Phase 1 & Phase 3 fabric that is rare elsewhere on the ship, along with rare and significant domestic fittings. There is visual public access to the focsle, but the lower tiers are accessible only via ladders and hatches.

Forward of the focsle bulkhead	A			
The Focsle	A			
wrought iron stanchions to deck-head	a			
angle iron beams to deck-head	a			
king beam (post 1970 replacement)				
diagonal struts to deck head	a			
timber stringers to port and starboard	a			
iron plate brackets to the renewed shelf stringers	a			
bulkhead to upper deck			c	
bulkhead to WC ('heads) area		b		
hawsepipes (first phase)	a			
hawsepipes (1882)			c	
breasthook brackets and plate over		b		