



The bare bones of the once imposing triple-mast schooner, the King. Made of both wood and iron, today she is one of a very few survivors of boats made of a composite construction method, used for only 40 years.

had receded, the hulls were smashed to prevent the boats from floating and to encourage sedimentation.

Initially, all went well, but as the boats started to rot, the bank became exposed once more. Reinforcements were necessary, so between 1909 and the mid 1970s, 86 boats were hulked. These included ocean-going schooners, graceful Severn trows built to withstand the vagaries of the river, and flat-bottomed barges, known as lighters, that transferred goods from moored ships. As they filled with sand and silt, they became encased by vegetation. Today, the ships' graveyard is the biggest collection of maritime artefacts on any foreshore in Britain. The remnants of 30 boats are visible in the grass and mud along the river bank.

Journey of rediscovery

Although photographs and documents of the site in the 1930s survive, over the years interest in the Purton ships waned. "For a long time they were Gloucestershire's best-kept secret," says Paul. "I used to play among them as a child in the 1970s, but back then everyone took them for granted. We didn't really think about their history, or what they represented. Many were more or less intact, although they had been abandoned for more than 40 years."

In 1999, after many years at sea, Paul returned to Purton. "It was only then it struck me what a special place it was," he says. "But although the layout of the site had been appraised by Bristol University a couple of years previously, no one seemed to know what the actual ships were, or anything about them. I thought there might be official records of what was beached, but I checked all the archives in the area and there were none. I couldn't find a thing about them."

Then, on holiday in Brixham, Paul came across a book called *Lost Ships of the West Country*, by Martin Langley and Edwina Small. Featured in it were photos and names of three of the ships. "The book really whetted my appetite," he says. "I decided to carry on from there and try to identify all the Purton ships." >

"Then I shall question Peter,
Upon the heavenly floor
What makes the tides in rivers –
How comes the Severn Bore."

Ivor Gurney, 'The Fisherman of Newnham'



The Sarah MacDonald, a schooner renamed the Voltiac, was built by the Perth New Ship Building Company in 1867, and beached in August 1953.