

The first ship he investigated was the biggest one in the graveyard, the King. “Although she stands high on the bank and is only reached by the highest tides, just her skeleton remains now. Beached in 1951 during a snowstorm, she was a big ship, almost 120ft (36½m) long. It was tough going to identify her, but when I finally did, it was a euphoric moment.” It took him three months, using a combination of primary and secondary sources. These sources included the archive held at the SS Great Britain and personal communications.

Like many of the boats, the King was difficult to trace because she had been remodelled and renamed during her lifetime. Originally a three-masted schooner called Sally, she was built in London in 1870. In 1940, she was bought and renamed by Foster Brothers of Gloucester, who produced animal feed. Her masts were removed and new deck hatches put in to open up her vast hold. She transported linseed and cotton seed to the company’s crushing mill on Baker’s Quay, and the finished cattle cake along the canal network. But only 10 years later, it was more economic to use road transport, and she was obsolete.

## FAMILY CONNECTIONS

Stories of the boats, and crews who sailed them, are gathered from many sources. These include port records, paperwork for the tugs used to beach the boats and the personal reminiscences of people who worked on the river. Whole families were often involved in shipping, and many of their descendants still live in the area. One such was the Nurse family. Jim Nurse is one of the Friends of Purton and was able to provide first-hand information. “The Nurses had shipping connections for generations, and were typical boat owners,” says Paul. “Usually, an owner’s son would be given a seven-year apprenticeship on a vessel, then, if he came through, his father would buy him his own boat. The family’s house would be extended to accommodate a married son’s new family, and you can still see many of these houses today. The son would carry the business, with wives often taking over if their husband died.”

Sadly, this was not unusual. “George Nurse was captain of the brigantine the Guide, but was lost off the coast of Anglesey in 1883. He was swept overboard in bad weather when he was trying to calculate their position against South Stack lighthouse. There are many such tales of tragedy and hardship.”

The Guide, later the Shamrock, and another Nurse family ship, the schooner Island Maid, later the Orby, lie in the ships’ graveyard. Built in 1854 and 1863 respectively, in their early days they mostly operated to and from the Mediterranean. Their role then changed to transport either fruit or cattle between Corunna in Spain and the south coast of England. In both cases, speed was of the essence, and the Guide and Island Maid lost out with the arrival of the new steam ships. They were brought to the South West, ending their days as barges on the Gloucester and Sharpness Canal. The Guide was beached in 1950 and the Island Maid circa 1945.

## Detective work

In 2008, Paul founded the Friends of Purton, a group of fellow enthusiasts. Dedicated to researching the stories behind the ships, they also wanted to obtain protection for the site as a scheduled ancient monument.

As well as looking at what was above ground, it was important to establish just what lay below the surface. This way, they knew just how big the site was. “At the start, we were making the best of what we had,” says Paul. “We used magnetometers to identify ferrous metal below ground, but were less high-tech too, even using cameras on fishing rods. Now, thankfully, we have the support of the universities of Bristol, Birmingham and Cardiff, and the Nautical Archaeology Society. After recognising the importance of the site and the vessels, they have carried out sophisticated geophysical surveys and laser scanning.” This has revealed many of the boats lying under the surface to be largely intact.

With names rarely surviving on the boats, the Friends scour the site for clues. The smallest of details can be vital. “With the Dursley, we had no leads,” explains Paul. “However, the remains of a black band on a grey background were visible on the rudder post. These turned out to be the colours of the Bristol lighterage company Fred Ashmead & Son. With this, and a number on the beam, we managed an identification.”

## Historical importance

At the time they were beached, the Purton ships were considered worthless. Often unseaworthy and in breach of safety legislation, they were uneconomic to repair. Their owners were usually glad to be rid of them. But with the passage of time, their historical significance has been underlined. Most were built to designs used only around the Severn, while others were of national maritime importance. Many were built without plans and drawings, relying on shipwrights’ long experience and time-honoured traditions. The construction methods used are not fully understood today.

The Ada was built using local techniques by the Bristol yard Thomas Gardner in 1869. She is a rare example of a wooden Bristol dandy, a specialised two-masted sailing ship. She started her days transporting pit props and bark to Ireland, returning home with a hold of Irish hams. With the decline of coastal trade in the 1930s, she was cut down and used as a towed barge, until being beached in 1956.

The Severn Collier is a unique survivor. Built circa 1937, this was a wooden screw barge, a timber constructed vessel with an on-board motorised propeller. She ferried coal from Lydney to the Cadbury Brothers’ chocolate factory at Keynsham. Built to replace towed barges, she originally had an engine, but this turned out to be too small for the job. It took her almost eight hours to travel a mile and a half when fully laden. The mistake was never repeated. Her engine was removed and she, too, was >