



A once-sturdy cross-braced schooner, the Dispatch was hewn from Scottish pine with an elm keel. Today, a sea of grass has flooded her amidships. The rusting iron knees remain on her moss-covered timber.



A memorial plaque gives a brief history of the Dispatch, sponsored by shipbuilding family, the Geddies.

### Protection for the ships

Paul's vision for Purton was finally realised in 2010, when English Heritage agreed to list the Harriett as a scheduled ancient monument. Although she is the only one of the wrecks to be so protected, her presence confers legal protection on all the other vessels on the site. Constructed in Bristol circa 1905, the Harriett is an oak Kennet and Avon barge, the last of her kind anywhere in the world. Measuring 72ft (22m) long, she spent most of her life carrying wood pulp and coal from Bristol docks to mills along the Bristol Avon Navigation. She was pulled out of economic service in 1960 and beached in 1964. At least 60 per cent of her upper timbers survive today.

### Resting place

Exposed to the elements and vulnerable to souvenir hunters, the Purton ships are slowly deteriorating. Paul does not want them to be preserved, however, either at the graveyard or in a museum.

"Removing any boats from the site would mean dismantling fragile remains, and jeopardise other vessels nearby," he says. "Throughout their many histories, these vessels have served the Severn, and should remain there as testimony to a life since past, resting in peace, not pieces. Even on-site measures would be too expensive for too little return. I believe the money would be better spent protecting other, more viable and active parts of our maritime heritage."

The Friends group hopes interest and a sense of pride in the wrecks will become widespread as more people realise

what they represent. Memorial plaques with short histories of some of the boats, often sponsored by the descendants of those who knew them, have been erected on the site. The Friends also run guided tours.

"We're always on the lookout for information from anyone who might know of the ships at Purton, or who would like to help with our research," says Paul. "The aim is preservation through documentation. The real longevity will come by exploring and recording the lives of these ships, and those who built and sailed on them." ■

• Words: Diane Wardle • Photographs: Nick Dawe

### CONTACT

[www.friendsofpurton.org.uk](http://www.friendsofpurton.org.uk)