

Port Towns & Urban Cultures

Conference Report 25th to 27th July 2013

The Port Towns & Urban Cultures Project recently hosted its first Port Towns & Urban Cultures conference, which it is hoped will become a regular event in the future. Spread over three days the conference drew together delegates from around the globe to share their mutual interest in all things PTUC related. So far we have had some excellent feedback and hope that everyone enjoyed it as much as we did.

Firstly, we would like to thank our partners at the National Museum of the Royal Navy, (NMRN), for allowing us the use of their facilities on Day One of the conference; in particular, a special mention must be made of the superb reception and dinner aboard *HMS Victory*. This was an incredible experience, especially for those who had not had the chance to visit Portsmouth before. Eating between cannons on possibly the most famous British warship was a great way to make friends and discuss the day's panels.

We also extend our thanks to the Royal Naval Club and Royal Albert Yacht Club for all their help on Days Two and Three of the conference. The venue was superb and the conference dinner they gave us on Saturday night was particularly splendid.

Day One



After a light networking lunch, while people registered and dusted themselves down, the conference began in the Princess Royal Gallery of the NMRN with its fantastic views over the Historic Dockyard. Dominic Tweddle, Director General of the NMRN, got us underway with a brief talk on their projects including the on-going work on *HMS Victory* and its transfer to the custodianship of the NMRN. Brad Beaven of the University of Portsmouth and Project Leader of PTUC then took to the floor to give an introduction to the PTUC project and extend a warm welcome to all.

With that, we began the first panel of the day which focused on the Royal Navy in Port Towns and introduced interesting papers by Ann Coats and Nick Hewitt. Ann explored the 'quality' of a dockyard town and highlighted how expendable workers really were during peace-time. Following on neatly, Nick examined Portsmouth Dockyard at war from 1914 to 1945 taking us through the verisimilitudes of dockyard fortunes brought by war and peace.

After a quick refuel for all the caffeine addicts, Eleanor O'Keeffe began the second panel with a paper on the celebration of Jutland Day in Newcastle during the 1920s and 1930s. We then welcomed a joint paper given by Lorna M. Campbell and Heather Noel-Smith which considered the post-war political and social activism of Napoleonic era naval officers, specifically Pellew, Hart, Cadogan and Groube.



As the afternoon drew to a close the conference greeted the keynote speaker, Isaac Land of Indiana State University. Isaac gave an illuminating talk that raised the question of whether port towns are transnational. He discussed the rise of Global, World, Atlantic and Oceanic history and the challenges associated with them, and the use of Coastal history as a middle ground. Isaac drew our attention to the work of John Gillis, *The Human Shore* and humankind's changing interaction with the coast. Isaac then considered the ideas of boundaries and questioned who transcends them and who crosses them, arguing that the port is a place where the nation looks at itself; it is a place of double identities and multiple allegiances and one of inclusion and exclusion. Places and spaces of isomorphism with the complexities that make a real place interesting. His enthusiasm for the topic and range of ideas raised in the keynote definitely set our minds thinking!

We rounded off the day with a drinks reception on the foredeck of *HMS Victory* in glorious sunshine followed by a wonderful buffet dinner on the lower gun deck which was an incredible finish to our first day.



Day Two



An early start found us comfortably ensconced in the Royal Naval Club and Royal Albert Yacht Club whose grand Victorian façade looks out over the ruined Garrison Church in Old Portsmouth; a suitably picturesque place to continue where we left off.

Panel 1 started the day on the theme of Crime and Disorder in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. We began with Florian Grafl's paper on Barcelona's port area during the Restoration monarchy with a key focus on perceptions and the level of crime on the streets. This was followed by Bill Taylor's interesting paper on port towns, as settings of material culture, considering the topography of moral deprivation using the example of London. Haim Sperber finished off with a paper on Jewish communities & criminality in Odessa during the late c19th; exploring the image versus the reality of crime.

Meanwhile, Panel 2 focused on Sailor Lives and Families with papers by Hanna Hagmark-Cooper, Melanie Holihead and Mirelle Luecke. Hanna introduced the concept of the strong, independent sailor's wife keeping an eye on the home whilst the sailor was away, summing it up with the *Nantucket Girls' Song*; Melanie discussed the families of sailors in Portsea and in

particular the use of Allotments of Pay and how these could be reduced or even stopped for sailors' transgressions, a sharp reminder of the impact on their dependants; Mirelle then gave a refreshing paper focusing on the Mariner's Church and the New York waterfront and the efforts to control the unruly spaces, particularly the work of Henry Chase in cleansing the waterfront and caring for the morality of sailors.

After a short break, we continued with our third panel on Identities in Port Towns. Vivian Bickford-Smith set us off with a paper on the use of 'local colour' and popular images arguing that ports can be many things to many people. Nigel Worden followed this up by considering the identity of sailors and social conflict in mid-eighteenth century Cape Town presenting the view of the sailor as a rough outsider and the power dynamics that existed. Melanie Bassett concluded the panel with a paper on the Edwardian Portsmouth press, the Royal dockyard worker, leisure and empire; an interesting paper that examined the influence of the press and how sections of the working class negotiated imperialism.

Our fourth panel considered Port Town Life and Work starting with a paper by Caroline Withall on Pauper Apprentices of port towns during the Industrial Revolution. This paper demonstrated the numerous apprenticeship schemes and the level of involvement in trying to place paupers in employment. In similar vein to the wider aspects of port towns, Daniel Swan gave an excellent paper on women workers in Portsmouth dockyards. The only oral history research presented at this conference, Daniel revealed that while many women wanted to work and do their bit during the Second World War but they were limited in roles available to them by men and as a consequence not all found it as liberating as others. Tytti Steel presented a different dimension of women in port towns with her paper on encounters on the waterfront. Tytti left us with one of the most memorable statements of the conference: "men may have had a girl in every port but women had a man on every boat."



After a quick lunch, we held our last two panels of the day. Panel 5 introduced a slightly different dimension to the conference by considering Port Towns: Heritage and Urban Regeneration. Opening this topic we welcomed Alex Scott who gave a paper on the history of Liverpool museums and their part in the imperial setting of the city and how they reflected the city's narrative. We then moved into the realm of regeneration with Gunter Warsewa's paper on local culture and reinvention of the port city looking at tradition, local culture and European port cities today. Gabriel Gee continued the focus on port towns by looking at the metamorphosis of harbour cities and their changing identities during the twentieth century. A joint paper by artists Shreepad Joglekar and Nathan Heuer on community and memory in port town revivals concluded the panel by looking at historic preservation and meaning for

the community in Texas and Kentucky and the creation of a manufactured cultural identity. They had produced artworks inspired by their research and had brought some along for display in the refreshments room.

Meanwhile, Panel 6 introduced the Representations of Port Towns and Imagined Communities starting with an illuminating paper by Elizabeth Libero on British representations of Rio de la Plata. Elizabeth considered the failed British attempt at incorporating South America into the empire, the selling their invasion plans back home with images of the riches of South America and the desirable qualities of the inhabitants who would make good subjects. Rosa Maria Delli Quadri then gave a paper on rambles around Portsmouth, the port, the city and travellers between 1700 and 1800. This was followed by Paul Gilchrist's paper looking at song culture, sailing and sailors in North-East England. Paul drew on his own family history in considering the songs and poems of Robert Gilchrist, a sailmaker from Newcastle. Songs dealt with a variety of themes including the separation of the family, representations of sailors and politics. Viki Carolan finished with a study of shipyard communities on film, 1930-1960. Salient points raised were the creation of a generic shipyard community, which meant leaving out localism and regionalism to give a homogenous approach to the image of these communities.

The day's panels having finished there were a few hours for delegates to enjoy the warm July sunshine and venture out to explore Old Portsmouth and the environs of Southsea whilst digesting the day's papers before reconvening for the Conference dinner which we are pleased to say was a grand success.



Day Three



And with another early start we were back at the Royal Naval Club and Royal Albert Yacht Club for the final day of the conference. One of our first panels of the morning was Panel 7 looking at Crime and Disorder, which was chaired by Isaac Land. Tomas Nilson investigated the stereotype of sailors in Gothenburg c.1880 to 1930. Using criminal records to reconstruct the level of sailor criminality and disorder, in particular drunkenness and violence, and how this evidence situates alongside the Jack Tar figure. Jonathan Hyslop approached crime from the preventionist dimension in his paper on Policing the global maritime labour force, 1890 to c.1940s. Jonathan studied the port of Durban and the power of its governor in restricting and obstructing

port town mobility and raised a poignant question about the sailor and male honour along with a reminder that local factors are key when thinking about port towns.

The second panel of the morning, Panel 8, focused on Sailor Life with interesting papers by Jo Byrne, Molly Perry and Sari Maenpaa. Jo considered Hull, fishing and the death of trawltown; fishermen, their culture and the needs of shore-side workers. Jo also talked of the oral history project of the 1960s and the journey to heritage that has since taken place. Meanwhile, Molly gave a stimulating paper on sailors in action and print during the Stamp Act crisis. Considering the protest and unpopularity of the Stamp Act, Molly examined colonial protest and the role of port towns and sailors. Port towns became epicentres of dissent and sailors were used as political icons and social actors to display protest. Finally, Sari gave a refreshing talk on men and their companion animals on early twentieth century Finnish sailing ships. At this time ships remained essentially male communities and there was an established masculinity amongst sailors. However, Sari argued that by having pets on board and showing emotion towards them actually caused masculinity to become more fragile.

Moving into the final two panels of the conference, Panel 9 considered Port Towns and Urban Elites and we welcomed Christos Bakalis with a paper on the role of urban elites on the formation of urban spaces in the Aegean port towns in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. Christos stressed some of the differences between the Aegean Islands due to the different networks of trade and cultural exchange. His paper highlighted how the civic elite on the islands sought to distinguish themselves through the architecture of their houses. Raffaella Salvemini and Paola Avallone followed this with a paper on sea borders in the port cities of Southern Italy looking specifically at sanitary and customs controls in Naples. This was largely determined by economic imperatives such as taxation of goods and concerns about sanitation needs, especially during the time of the plague. Maria Sirago concluded the panel, also with a paper on Naples, which looked at the Naval Schools for the royal fleet and cargo ships, 1734-1861. She considered the development of the schools and the effect of Italian unification which effectively marked an end to the institution.



Finally, our last panel on Port Town Agencies featured some interesting papers by Deirdre Heavens, Tilman Plath and Oliver Le Gouic. Deirdre presented on the subject of endangering the state in a port town, detailing the unrest in Ipswich caused by the policies of Charles I and the Duke of Buckingham and in particular resentment of interference in the 'Godly life of the town'. Oliver then gave a detailed account of foreigners in a port town, particularly French involvement in Cadiz during the eighteenth century. Oliver argued that Cadiz was a hub for Europeans on the Atlantic and consequently a number of rights and customs were established for foreign nationals. Tilman closed the panel with the bold statement that Riga should have

become the capital of the new Russian Empire. His paper on an old port town and a new maritime power examined the expansion of trade in Riga and its effect on the Balkans. Tilman argued Riga was ultimately hindered by the Russian tariff system as this limited growth and development. With the conference reaching its end, we had one last lunch at the Royal Naval and Royal Albert Yacht Club and made use of a last hour or so to discuss topics raised during the conference before saying our goodbyes and departing.

The papers presented drew on a great array of maritime topics relating to port towns and displayed tremendous diversity. Subjects ranged from encounters on the waterfront, crime and disorder, pauper apprentices, the seafarer's wife as a national character, dockyard workers and leisure, sailors and their pets, naval officers and social responsibilities, and song culture of sailors. Consequently, a number of key themes evolved over the three days, in particular considering the boundaries of port towns and dockyards as spaces within the towns. Another reoccurring theme was that of strong, independent women, whether workers during the war, wives or women of the ports in general. Again, the interaction between sailors, their families, the town and the docks all came together revealing the interconnections between people, institutions and spaces. Once again, we would like to thank everyone for coming and being a part of the first Port Towns and Urban Cultures conference. It really was a great experience and we look forward to further collaborations in the future.