

300 years of Turk's boatyard

The famous Thames yard is celebrating its tricentenary – but the Turk family's links with the River go back much further

Martin Smith reports



Left: Royal Waterman Mike Turk with the Queen

Below: Rowing skiffs outside the yard



Growing up on the Thames above London in the late 1970s, I couldn't help but notice the Turk's hire boats come the height of summer. For me and my friends the school holidays meant an abundance of longed-for fishing time but, predictably I suppose, the break also coincided with the peak in river holiday traffic. And my childhood, in turn, happened to coincide with an historic peak in Thames pleasure boat usage. The hire boats were the bane of our lives.

Not all the hire company names stick in my memory, I suppose there must have been Hobb's, and Salters among others, but perhaps because of its exotic ring, or more likely because their fleet were bright orange, I still remember Turk's; they were part of summer on the Thames.

Those glory days of mass public pleasure boating on the Thames were soon curtailed by Freddie Laker and the advent of cheap foreign flights, but a few of the stalwart companies from that era remain: those that are adept at adapting, and the Turks family is awash with this trait.

Eight centuries

This survival instinct is strong in the Turk line; it's a name that goes back in relation to the Thames over eight centuries to at least 1195 – when a Turk was building ships for the defence of the realm on land near the Tower of London – and another Turk was made London's Lord Mayor in 1230. The direct line from the current business goes back to a Richard Turk who set up RJ Turk at Kingston in 1710, but it turns out that the ruination of my summer



Above: Two Sopwith Schneiders at Turk's Kingston yard, 1915



Left: An Edwardian river launch in the Chatham submarine shed

Right: Boats built by Turk's for the Rangoon Boat Club



fishing can be laid right at the feet of Mike Turk, the great-great-grandson of RJ. Now, in turn, the business is passing from him into the hands of his son, Richard.

Though he may have officially retired in 2007, Mike still has a firm grasp on the company. But when we met, he soon slipped into story-telling mode.

He began by recounting tales of life at the company's various sites in the Kingston area, notably at the Albany Boathouse, where Sopwith seaplanes were taken for float-testing and rigging work during the First World War.

It was this link with the famous British aviator and sailor that led to Turk's being asked to build the mast for Sir Tom Sopwith's J-Class *Endeavour* in the 1930s; at the time the largest hollow spar ever built. The premises were not entirely suitable for the process, though; during shaping the mast stuck out across the tow-path. Though the finished mast could not help Sopwith in his repeated endeavours to

wrest the America's Cup from the United States, a lasting relationship was forged between the two families.

Mike's own involvement in the family business began at the completion of his National Service in the mid-1950s at the age of 21. Mike began working alongside his father, Richard Henry, who seems to have let the firm fall into some disrepair, while maintaining a tight grip. Mike, finding that the business didn't even own a shovel, had to approach the old man for the funds to purchase one. Turk the elder, who was one of the river's great characters and could still hold his own sculling into his 80s, refused the purchase on the grounds of thrift.

Cut-throat competition

As the post-war austerity eased, Mike finally took over full control and the firm moved heavily into the hire business. Though this aspect provided a great deal of activity, making money at it proved more difficult as price cutting was cut-throat: "We were

all competing with Jimmy Hoseason" (the leading budget-holiday provider of the time), explained Mike, "so whatever prices he set, we had to follow. It was really hard. He was based in Norfolk where he could employ cheap labour out of the fields. We had London overheads, but we couldn't charge any more money."

So, it was woe betide a business that couldn't turn boats around in timely fashion, no matter what state the craft were returned in: "I got an irate phone call from one chap, who said that he was at Penton Hook and the boat was taking on water," stated Mike. "I calmed him down and got in the car, wondering what could have happened. By the time I got there he'd disappeared and, as it turned out, he'd holed the boat and it was barely afloat. I managed to lift it to repair the hole and we got her back to Kingston, but inside was covered with silt and everything was soaking. "The next lot of punters turned up while we were still hosing her out, and all

TURKS BOATYARD

my staff went into hiding, as they didn't want to have to face them – it was down to me to come up with a story. I kept them away from the boat and said that the it had been returned in a terrible state and I wasn't prepared to let it out until it was the standard we expected – I didn't tell them that the boat had been on the bottom a day ago. I suggested that they spend the day in London and I'd have it ready for the evening, but they just wanted to hang around. When I thought it was dry enough, I took them on board and went through how everything worked.

"I went back to the office and ten minutes later one of the men came up and knocked on the door – everyone thought I'd been found out. He wanted to know how his girlfriend was supposed to store her week's wardrobe in a drawer full of water. As I emptied it out, I told him that it was just a result of the over-zealous cleaning and they all went off for a happy week."

Riverboat cruises

With time, though, the Turk's fleet was sold off along with the Albany boatshed, and the firm moved into the passenger boat business with the purchase of the wooden Jacobs-built *Windsor Castle*. She was purchased by Mike over the phone following a drink in The Donkey House, a waterman's pub at Windsor.

"She was a fantastic boat for us, she had this huge saloon that could hold really big parties, but after the *Marchioness* accident (where 51 people died when a gravel dredger collided with a passenger boat in the centre of London in 1989), we had to get rid of her because of the new MCA laws. I would have refurbished her, but they wanted us to put in a bulkhead right across the dance floor, and it's difficult to get any wooden boat to meet the freeboard



Above: One of Turks' current fleet of steel river launches



Left: The replica frigate Grand Turk

regulations. That's why we had to get rid of the *Empress of India* too – they were both Dunkirk Little Ships."

By the time the new laws came in, though, Turk's was fully aware of the demand for entertainment on the river, and today still runs a fleet of five steel-built passenger launches, as well as a handful of classic river craft in the Kingston, Richmond and Hampton Court areas.

Film locations

It was this West London location that made Turk's the first port of call for any nautical requirements at the Pinewood, Shepperton and Teddington studios. The list of films for which the firm has either built historic replica or stunt boats or supplied props and

advice reads like an award ceremony nominations list. These include recent films such as the Brad Pitt epic *Troy* and the brand new Sherlock Holmes film, as well as the Harry Potter series, the 1974 *Swallows and Amazons*, virtually the entire list of Bond films, historical epics such as *The Lion in Winter*, *A Man for All Seasons* and *The Private Life of Henry VIII*.

In 1997 Turk's built – appropriately enough in Turkey – its own replica frigate, the *Grand Turk*, for film and TV work. She appeared in the Hornblower series and the 1999 film of *Longitude*, as well as visiting festivals and sailing around the UK coast with paying crew. However, the increasing difficulty of operating within the UK's maritime regulations led to her sale earlier



Left: The two monoremes built for the film Troy

Below left: Richard and Mike Turk



Above: Richard, bow, and Mike, stern, lend a hand lifting the film-prop Swallow down prior to the recent auction

Left: A general view of the collection of boats in the submarine shed at Chatham



this year – to France, where they apparently cope with these things more sensibly. She has now gone to Bob Escoffier's Etoile Marine at St Malo.

Even with his wealth of experiences of the tribulations of the film business, Mike felt compelled to mention the difficulties involved in overseeing the recent building in Malta of two 140ft (42.7m) monoremes for *Troy*. The problem was having to coach, on-set, 140 or so buffed-up actor-oarsmen in the art of rowing in some kind of seaman-like fashion: "It's always like that with film, they don't just want you to build the boat, they want advice on how to move them or sail them as well. They don't know about things like tides and wind."

Guard to the Crown

With his family background and so much of his own life spent on the Thames, it comes as no surprise that Mike is deeply involved in the politics and history of the great river. He is one of just 22 Royal Watermen, the 'guards to the Crown' whenever it is carried on water, and nominated to row the royal barge on state occasions as well as attending the opening of parliament.

He became a member of the Company of Watermen and Lightermen in 1956, and was elected Vintners barge master and swan marker at the age of just 21, which led to the honour of accompanying Churchill's coffin when it was ceremonially taken, aboard the launch *Havengore*, up the Thames in 1965. To this day, the traditional swan-umping ceremony – the annual census of Thames

swans, dating from the 12th century – begins from Turk's yard at Sunbury.

With such historic links to the Thames, it must have been a wrench for the company to take on an additional base out on the Medway, at the Historic Dockyard at Chatham, in 2004. But with the cavernous submarine building sheds next to the working museum there, Turk's had the space to expand once again. The relationship between yard and Chatham's working museum has been such a success that the initial five-year lease has now been extended to 25 years, enabling Turks to invest in adapting the shed to better suit its needs.

With 44,000sqft of floor space, and an enormous roof height, Turk's has branched into the maintenance of the Thames Clipper river sightseeing fleet. There was also space aplenty for the storage of the film replicas and props and the firm's remarkable collection of skiffs, punts, canoes and all kinds of river craft including

the odd steam launch, but earlier this year Turk's decided to have a clear-out, and put the whole collection – nearly 200 lots – up for online auction.

At the time it appeared to be connected with a planned move out of the submarine shed, but with new contracts in place, Turk's is staying, and is using the space to build boats – a couple of houseboats are already booked in.

Now, as Turk's celebrates its tricentenary this year, it looks set for another new era, with the Thames (upper and lower) passenger and entertainment businesses at its core and film work and replica building as demand dictates. The Chatham shed will give the business the space to breathe, while the River will continue to form the lifeblood for one of Britain's great heritage boatyard families.

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The Company of Watermen and Lightermen

Though it was the Romans who built the first bridge over the Thames in around AD80, it was not until 1750, with the building of Westminster Bridge, that London obtained its second permanent crossing. And it was through control of the river's access points, via stairs and jetties – a factor that still restricts leisure usage in the capital today – that the city's watermen and lightermen were able to maintain a grip on London's main artery and therefore its people and politics.

At the height of their power the watermen and lightermen gained a reputation for all kinds of sharp practice, and many was the passenger left with no choice but to swallow a newly announced fare-hike midstream on a foggy London night.



Thames Watermen's cutters in 2009

In order to regulate these vital trades – watermen dealing with people and lightermen with cargoes – an act of parliament was passed in 1555, bringing into being the Company of Watermen, while in 1585, Queen Elizabeth I granted the Company its coat of arms. Lightermen were accepted into the Company in 1700; it remains the only ancient city guild to be formed and run by act of parliament.

The licences of all watermen and lightermen working on the Thames still come from the Company, which runs the mandatory seven-year apprenticeship. Freeman of the Company may take part in the Doggett's Coat race – a rowing race between London Bridge and Chelsea, held every year since 1715 – for the prized coat, breeches and silver badge, first presented by the Irish comedic actor Thomas Doggett.