

SEABORNE

A very different and rather special second-hand chandlery to some of the fittings rescued from



Left: The front entrance to Seaborne Interiors' London showrooms in St. Katharine's Dock. Above: Alongside the large furniture pieces, smaller items, every bit as interesting, jostle for position.

With photographs

There is something particularly appealing about nautical shops. Be it a well stocked chandlery, a marine bookshop or an *Aladdin's Cave* full of secondhand goodies, I just cannot resist the temptation to browse amongst the fascinating items on display. It was, therefore, with particular pleasure that I accepted an invitation to visit a nautical shop with a difference: the London showrooms of Seaborne Interiors Ltd, a company which specialises in salvaging the furniture, fittings and artefacts of commercial ships destined for the breakers' yard.

Situated in Ivory House at St Katharine's Dock, near the Tower of London, the setting is superb. The company's premises overlook the tranquil yacht basin and enjoy a prominent position within this historic building – a converted warehouse whose name derives from the cargoes of ivory which were stored there during the 19th century. The St Katharine's Dock maritime complex has become a major tourist attraction in recent years and, with several beautifully restored *Thames* barges berthed nearby, the shop complements its nautical surroundings nicely.

Seaborne Interiors Ltd was originally founded in Sweden almost thirty years ago by Mannfred Braun, a Swiss national who, having served in the merchant navy, became aware of the vast quantities of

magnificent vessels were being unceremoniously scrapped. With the breakers' yards interested only in the value of the scrap metal involved, most of the furniture and fittings were usually destroyed. This often included many beautiful items of furniture such as tables, chairs, beds and bunks, writing desks and sideboards (generally in solid teak or mahogany), together with clocks, barometers, compasses, ships' wheels, solid brass lamps and fittings all made by skilled craftsmen and very often works of art in their own right.

Determined to preserve as many of these items as possible, Mr Braun began purchasing complete ships' interiors, restoring such things as navigational instruments, interior fittings and selected pieces of ships' furniture and offering them for sale through his shop in Stockholm. Such has been the demand for these fine objects – from people of all walks of life – that the company now has two showrooms in Stockholm and another in Basle, Switzerland, as well as the London branch. Nevertheless, it remains a small private company and the stock for all the outlets is still purchased by Mr Braun himself.

Passenger ships, freighters, ferries, tugs and warships can all yield interesting and valuable pieces although, since only the finest quality items find their way into the shops, a great deal of painstaking restoration work is often needed before

they can be offered for sale. Ships are usually in a run-down state by the time they are scrapped, so fixtures and fittings invariably need some degree of renovation to restore them to pristine condition. Furthermore, furniture, for example, is usually built-in aboard ship and such things as bunks, dressing tables and desks must be transformed into free-standing units if they are to be used in a landbased environment. To ensure that the restoration work blends in harmoniously with the original piece of furniture, wood from adjacent cabin fittings is used wherever possible.

Much of the furniture currently on display in the London Showrooms originated from three Italian cruise liners, the *Giuseppe Verdi*, *Donizetti* and *Rossini*. These luxuriously appointed 13,226 ton vessels, all sister ships, each carried 552 passengers and were built at Trieste between 1949 and 1954 for extended cruising between the Mediterranean, the Caribbean and the coast of South Africa. All their furniture is beautifully made and would grace any home but among the items I particularly admired were a writing bureau in solid mahogany, some statuesque brass and mahogany bar stools and a magnificent queen-sized bed complete with built-in drawers and brass handles, identical in detail to a single bunk which converts into an elegant settee, sumptuously upholstered in dark red velvet. Other items which caught my eye

INTERIORS

Peter Phelan visited St Katharine's Dock to discover what happens to ships destined for the scrap heap.



Above and right: The larger furniture items are arranged to give customers an idea of each piece's potential. Compatible items are displayed together and the lighting is chosen to reflect the era.

by the author.

Mauretania and a couple of desks, one from the *Campana*, the other from the cargo ship *Orlando*. Connoisseurs of hardware will undoubtedly find much of interest amongst the fine collection of nautical artefacts. They include navigation lights, anchors, binnacles, wheels and divers' helmets – the latter being very much collectors' items. And amongst the array of fittings in the smaller showroom, I discovered a brass searchlight from the Suez Canal, a beautiful ship's bell from the *Evenlode*, built in 1955 as the last steam collier to work on the river Thames. I also noticed a number of brass port holes and a gang plank nameplate from the *Forth*, a 9060 ton submarine supply ship launched in 1938 and which later played an important role in the Suez crisis of 1956.

There are also many interesting clocks, barometers, sextants, logs, plotting instruments and compasses to be found, some of which are quite old. One superbly made telescope, mounted on a wooden tripod, dated from the 18th century. Model ships both old and new are always in demand and, at the time of my visit, examples ranged from a 10'(3m) builder's model of a British cargo vessel, the *Vinemoor* & *Westmoor*, to an incredible example of a fully rigged sailing frigate, made entirely of bone by a French prisoner-of-war during Napoleonic times – it measured just 6"(152mm) overall! Nautical books, period prints and marine paintings



in oil and watercolour are also on display, as are original commercial shipping posters. These have proved so popular that Seaborne Interiors Ltd now works to commission and will produce a "personalised" poster for any individual or establishment. Incidentally, this customised service also extends to making silk cushions with suitably nautical motifs.

Finally, although most of the items in the shop are comparatively old and the showrooms have the air of an antique shop, Seaborne Interiors Ltd also carries a comprehensive range of new lighting and nautical fittings, many of which are produced exclusively for the company. These are still generally of a "period" design, however, and are made of solid brass and, where possible, cast in an original mould. The range includes such things as bulkhead and ceiling lights, spotlights, inspection and bunk lights, handles, mirrors and bollards. Equally attractive, are gimbaled kerosene lamps and wall and table lamps, many of which have opaque or coloured glass shades.

Although some of the many fascinating items sold by the company eventually find their way back aboard ships or private yachts, for the most part customers purchase them for the home or with a commercial environment in mind. Handsome desks, cabinets, tables and swivel chairs can help create an exclusive air in the office or board-room and that fine

convertible single bunk I mentioned earlier, would not look out of place in a modern hotel reception area. As with anything which has an intrinsic beauty of its own, such unique items have a timeless quality and, if placed in an appropriate setting, will always complement their surroundings. Such things will, I am sure, also become antiques and in time acquire great value. What more could a discerning purchaser want!



A 6'113mm LGA model frigate made in bone by a Napoleonic prisoner of war.

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