

Sail without fail

Built in Aberdeen and launched in 1877, three-masted sailing barque the *Elissa* is still taking to the seas today, discovers **Bruce Stanley**

October marked the 140th anniversary of the launch of the Aberdeen-built, three-masted sailing barque *Elissa*. She was named after Phoenician Princess Elissa in the epic Roman poem *The Aeneid*, and built for trade with Australia.

She wasn't the first and she wasn't the biggest (far from it – Hall's *Schomberg* was five-and-a-half times bigger at 2,600 tons). She was nothing special, however she has a remarkable tale to tell, for she is a survivor.

The only 19th-century Aberdeen-built sailing ship still sailing, *Elissa's* hull was made from riveted iron in 1877 at the Footdee yard of Alexander Hall & Co. (yard no. 294) for Henry Fowler Watt from Liverpool, at a cost of £8,000.

She, like many other clipper ships built by Hall's, donned the world-renowned

'Aberdeen Bow'. William Hall and James Hall, sons of Alexander Hall, first fitted this style of bow to the 142-ton schooner-rigged coaster, the *Scottish Maid*, in 1839.

Elissa sailed her maiden voyage on 19 December 1877, when she carried a cargo of Welsh coal to Pernambuco (now Recife) in Brazil, arriving on 28 January 1878.

She is currently owned by the Galveston Historical Foundation in Galveston, Texas, which in 1975 helped American photojournalist Peter Throckmorton to save her from a salvage yard in Piraeus, Greece for \$40,000.

It was 1979 before she was towed across the Atlantic to Galveston, then in 1985 she made her first voyage as a fully-restored ship, travelling to Cirpus Christi in Texas.

Today she can be visited in the Texas Seaport Museum in Galveston, where she was

refurbished to her original design.

Elissa is one of the oldest ships in the world that can still be sailed thanks to her foundation and a dedicated team of volunteers. She first visited Galveston as a merchant cargo ship in 1883 and then in 1886, hence the connection with the port.

Most clippers were three-masted square-rigged ships, however it had been discovered by 1862 that the rig of a barque made the vessel faster. This was because the mizzenmast, which had the smallest sail area, blanketed the main mast spread in a following wind.

If it hadn't been for Peter Throckmorton, *Elissa* would have probably been broken up by now. We are very fortunate that she has been lovingly restored to her former glory, and is in the safe keeping of good hands.

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Far left: *Elissa* at Galveston, where she was refurbished.

Top right: *Elissa* is the only 19th-century Aberdeen-built ship still sailing.

Below left: Bust of William Hall from the Aberdeen Maritime Museum.



VITAL STATISTICS

- Length stern to tip of jib boom – 205 ft.
- Beam – 28 ft.
- Figurehead – full size female.
- Displacement – 620 tons.
- Gross Registered Tonnage – 430 tons.
- Draft – 10 ft 6 in (3.2m).
- Height – 99 ft 9 in (30.4m) from keel to top of the main mast.
- Miles of rope – 4.5 mi.
- Sails – 19 in total, giving a surface area of 11,500 sq ft (1,068m²) (a quarter of an acre in surface area when fully-rigged).

Sailing ships are classified by the configuration of their rig. *Elissa* is a barque, which means she carries square and triangular fore-and-aft sails on her foremast and mainmast, but only triangular fore-and-aft sails on her mizzenmast (aft mast). During her long life, she has been sold and renamed several times.

Elissa remains a testament to the greatness of Aberdeen shipbuilder Alexander Hall. For more information on *Elissa* and the Texas Seaport Museum, visit www.galvestonhistory.org

ELISSA

DATES

AND

EVENTS

TIMELINE

1877

Built as a merchant vessel, *Elissa* was launched on 27 October.

1918

Converted to a two-masted brigantine and had an engine installed. She sailed under Norway and Sweden's flags.

1930

Sold to Finland, she was converted into a schooner once again.

1959

Sold to a Greek owner and sailed under different names.

1970

Rescued from destruction in the Greek port of Piraeus.

1975

Bought for \$40,000 by the Galveston Historical Foundation.

1979

After a year of repairs in Greece, *Elissa* was towed to Gibraltar.

1979

Towed across the Atlantic to the USA, starting on 7 June.

1985

Made her first distance as a restored sailing ship, travelling to Corpus Christi in Texas.

1986

Elissa sailed to New York City to take part in the Statue of Liberty's centennial celebrations.

2011

Declared 'not seaworthy' by the US Coast Guard.

2013

Texas Seaport Museum raised \$3million for restoration.

2014

Returns to sailing in March from Galveston, Texas.

2017

Elissa is used as part of a programme to take people back to the Age of Sail as they learn traditional sailing skills, as well as helping to maintain her with varnishing, tarring, sweeping and scrubbing.