THE SOCIETY FOR NAUTICAL RESEARCH EST 1910

Extracted article: from *Topmasts*, No.56 November 2025

The Illustrated Journals of Kelsick Wood, Georgian shipbuilder

By Simon Francis Brown, SNR Member

Georgian Britain's merchant fleet and the small shipyards which supplied it tend to lie in the historical shadows. A brig laden with coal or sugar lacks the grandeur of a mighty man-of-war or the romance of the tea clippers which would follow. Furthermore, small merchant yards typically left little behind them. Their shipwrights relied less on the formal plans and designs common to naval yards, and more on experience and collective muscle memory.

Without the Admiralty's love of record-keeping and the resources to insist upon it, many merchant yards' ledgers, plans and correspondence have been lost or destroyed in the intervening two centuries. There are exceptions though, whether by accident or design. Among the most colourful are the series of journals kept by the Cumbrian shipbuilder, Kelsick Wood (1771-1840).

Towns along the Cumbrian coast have long turned to the sea for their livelihoods. While the Lakeland Fells hindered travel inland, the Irish Sea provided convenient sailing routes to towns and cities around its edge, from the west coast of England to Wales, Scotland, Ireland and the Isle of Man. The ports

of Whitehaven and Workington flourished during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when Cumberland's coastline was home to a large and thriving maritime industry.

Much of the wealth generated in the county came from the many collieries which supplied the nation's growing demand for coal. The increased volume of shipping brought associated industries with it. Shipyards, sailcloth manufacturers, rope walks and foundries sprang up along the coast, all meeting the need to build and maintain the many merchant vessels on which Britain's remarkable economic expansion relied.

Kelsick Wood was one of the many shipbuilders who operated along this coastline during the late Georgian era. He is best remembered for his two decades running the family's shipyard in Maryport, six miles north of Workington and 27 miles south-west of Carlisle. The town was a small and recent addition to the county's commercial fabric. It was a project conceived by the local landowner, Humphrey Senhouse, in the mid-eighteenth century, to expand and monetise the natural harbour where the River Ellen met the Irish Sea.

Kelsick purchased the family business from his cousin Adam in about 1818. The Wood family yard had been in operation since 1765 and was fairly typical of the area and time. It produced between two and three vessels each year, mostly brigs, along with a smaller number of ships, barques and sloops. There were some recent innovations, such as the little iron railway which allowed workers to haul vessels out of the water for repair, but more generally, shipbuilding remained in its pre-industrial state. The yard's shipwrights used hand tools to turn timber, sailcloth and hemp rope into ocean-going vessels.

Many of the vessels built at the county's shipyards were the sturdy, flat-bottomed brigs used to export Cumbrian coal across the Irish Sea. Kelsick's focus was elsewhere and his shipwrights specialised in building vessels for foreign trade. Some sailed Mediterranean routes, but others plied their trade with the Americas, Africa, the East Indies and Oceania. The yard's brigs were typically in the region of 200-300 tons burthen, tiddlers alongside the ships of the East India Company, but they braved the same seas.

Kelsick kept a journal with him during his years in Maryport, in which he noted details of contracts, stocklists, the cost of supplies and the particulars of

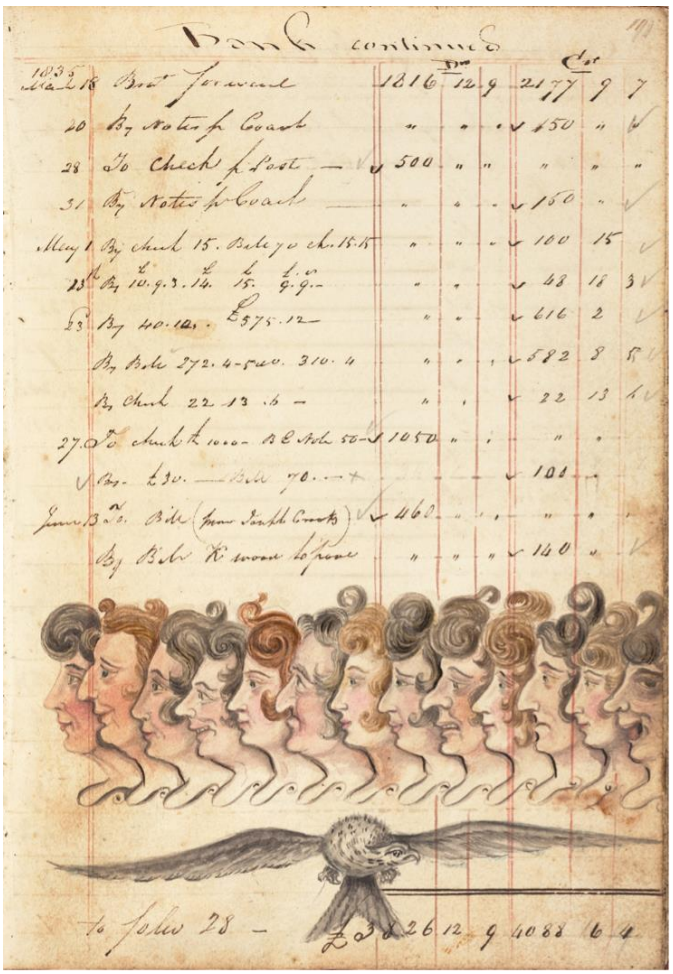
each vessel. Most shipbuilders and business owners presumably did something similar.

These are Kelsick's personal records, rather than formal documents of the yard. He gives just a single page to some vessels, but documents others in more detail. One volume devotes several pages to the *Coeur de Lion* (launched 1834), including cordage requirements, timber selected, owners and suppliers, even the design of her figurehead and a description of her launch day. Another volume goes into the minutiae of the *Mary* (1838). At 694 tons burthen, she was the largest ship built by the yard during Kelsick's lifetime, intended for the China and India markets upon the East India Company's loss of its final monopoly. The *Paragon* (1835) and the *Eliza Heywood* (1834) are among others which receive greater attention.

Kelsick also liked to draw and paint, but where other men might have partitioned their personal and professional lives, Kelsick found space for both within his journals. The results are remarkable, often chaotic but utterly charming. Some of his pictures related to shipyard business, designs for figureheads and billetheads or sketches of the yard's ships at sea. Many others were of whatever took his fancy: animals, birds, even insects, objects on his desk, family members, imaginary demons and mythical creatures.

There is a clear evolution in Kelsick's journaling habits during the 1830s. In the earlier years, his shipyard business shares the page with his quirky private pencil drawings and watercolours, often blending into one another. Because the pictures and text were prepared independently, the results can be both interesting and confusing. The figurehead of one ship can sit amid the timber of

another, and an elegant lady can smile coyly among rope prices or coal for the smithy. The men and women in his journals laugh, drink, argue, flirt and play as they go about their daily business. He liked his beautiful ladies, dressed in colourful Georgian finery, but he also drew grotesque, gurning, snarling faces. Later volumes have a cleaner, more ordered appearance, with alternate pages devoted first to shipyard notes and then artwork.



Away from the journals, the wider historical record of Kelsick's business is pleasingly rich. Newspapers, archives and family letters reveal stories of ambition, fortunes made and lost, the building of empire, emancipation, brutality and bravery, even love and ruin.

Builders of wooden sailing vessels faced a multitude of challenges at this time, which only worsened as the nineteenth century grew older. Kelsick was active during the last decades before steam power replaced sail, iron replaced wood and free trade replaced the relative protection of the Navigation Acts. The family took measures to protect its business, but the pressures of technical innovation and economic policy ultimately proved too great to bear. Just as the Industrial Revolution had once driven the demand for the yard's vessels, the same relentless progress and innovation ultimately sealed its demise.

The shipyard in Maryport operated for just shy of a hundred years, under the management of four generations of the family. It went the same way as many of its rivals and closed in the 1860s after a painful and protracted decline.

Today the site is grassland. While the yard and others like it have faded into history, Kelsick's journals remain as a unique record of Cumbria's once-proud

shipbuilding industry and of Georgian Britain more generally. They reveal stories of ingenuity, endeavour, change and innovation.

Many business notebooks could expect to be consigned first to a box and then a damp attic, or worse, but I like to think that Kelsick's drawings and watercolours have protected his journals through the centuries. At least five of these little books are known to have survived. His final, unfinished volume, (numbered 8 on its cover), is in Greenwich at the National Maritime Museum, along with a separate sketchbook. At least three others are in private hands. One more is with the Maryport Maritime Museum, ahead of its exciting re-opening at the renovated Christ Church, the old 'Sailor's Church' painted by L.S. Lowry, next to the town's harbour.

Further reading:

The Vanishing Age of Sail. The Illustrated Journals of Kelsick Wood, Shipbuilder by Simon Francis Brown is published by Amberley Press, July 2025 (ISBN: 9781398124912).