Historic Scotland podcast: Episode 2 transcript

Chapter 1

Sarah:

Hello, and welcome to the Historic Scotland podcast. My name is Sarah MacGillivray. I'm an actor and a writer with a passion for people, place and story.

Each episode, we will be travelling across Scotland to a different site and unearthing their surprising tales. Today, we're at Trinity House in Leith.

Packed to the rafters of stuff from the sea, Trinity House is a treasure chest of tales. We're talking everything from profit and piracy to journeys of personal discovery that both seamen and women have embarked on for centuries.

This episode, I'm talking to a captain. Captain Lee, the master of Trinity House.

Chapter 2

00:51

Captain Lee:

We're all of an age group where we've got a common experience. It's good.

Sarah:

And Nicola and Emilia, two storytellers who, in their own ways, are bringing the records of the past into the present.

Nicola:

And you've got so many stories and it's bringing out that human element. It's bringing out that empathy. It's bringing out the women. It's bringing out the people who don't get recorded in history.

Emilia:

We're still making so many discoveries about the house to this day.

Chapter 3

01:26

Sarah:

Now, there's a few things you need to know about one Captain Stewart Lee. Born and raised in Campbeltown on the west coast of Scotland, he developed an early fascination with the sea.

His interest in maritime life began during summers spent working on herring boats, an experience that placed within him a deep respect for the ocean.

He left home at 18 to pursue a life in the Merchant Navy. He's navigated vessels across the North Atlantic, the Southern Ocean and the Pacific. He's sailed Greenock to New York, Norfolk, Baltimore, Charleston and Wilmington. It's an experience, he says, that's both shrunk and expanded his world.

Trinity House in Leith stands as one of Scotland's most historically significant maritime institutions, with its origins dating back to 1380. It provided a vital network for shipowners and seafarers, ensuring that knowledge, trade and expertise were passed down through generations.

Over the centuries, it evolved into a powerful force in maritime governance, overseeing navigational standards and the welfare of sailors. Its walls are steeped in history. Portraits of past masters, intricate nautical instruments and pieces of Scotland's maritime past fill its rooms.

But beyond the artefacts, Trinity House remains a living institution, deeply connected to both the traditions of seafaring and the changing nature of the maritime world.

Captain Lee is its master.

Chapter 4

03:17

Captain Lee:

So as master, I basically chaired the meetings, organised the guys. I'm very, very fortunate that the people I have are all willing volunteers.

Sarah:

And do you meet every few months?

Captain Lee:

If needs be, we meet every month. Given how the workload has gone, we have a quarterly meeting.

Sarah:

OK.

Captain Lee:

So we have an agenda and we get through things. It's mainly financial, housekeeping, attending. A role now is mainly ceremonial. The castle, city chambers, three services at St Giles as one of the senior corporations in the town.

Sarah:

And do you have to wear your special uniforms?

Captain Lee:

We wear a uniform for those. In fact, the one, the photograph, the not very fetching photograph.

Sarah:

Oh, it's lovely. We saw it.

Captain Lee:

That was the seafarer service that day.

Sarah:

And how many of you?

Captain Lee:

There's 20 of us now. The oldest member, David Flemmie Miller, is 94 and still attends meetings.

Sarah:

Fantastic.

Captain Lee:

And the youngest, I would say, is probably in his late 40s, but he's younger by quite a bit than the others.

Sarah:

Can I ask you, what's the best thing about being part of the, what would you call it, Trinity House establishment?

Captain Lee:

I think the fact that you, even in the pilotage now, they never see each other. Everything's done online on our iPhones. There's not that, you don't go down the pilot station like we used to and the camaraderie that was there and picking other people's brains. It's become functional.

Whereas here, I mean, if you step out of line here and say something wrong, they'll soon tell you. You know, it's good. And we're all of an age group where we've got a common experience and we're all equally dismissive of the way it's gone, where it's driving to the lowest common denominator now.

It's how cheap can you run a ship? You know, the sheer size, the… I mean, the new container ships, there's 22,000 TEUs on them. So that's like 11,000 40-foot containers.

Sarah:

Okay.

Captain Lee:

That's a lot of boxes if it goes wrong.

Sarah:

Okay.

Captain Lee:

And we feel that there's a lack of respect for the sea now. It's just seen as a medium to float ships on. There's a social element, but most of the members here actually just want to perpetuate… We're the last generation that knows how to use all that stuff upstairs.

Guys nowadays, guys with master's tickets now wouldn't know what half of that stuff is. Which is really quite sad.

Sarah:

Yeah, absolutely. But you all know how to use those instruments.

Captain Lee:

And the powers that be are quite happy with that because as long as we get from A to B for the minimum amount of money, that's fine.

Chapter 5

06:21

Sarah:

You can really tell that the captain has such a deep respect for the sea, can't you? And a belief in the fact that things should be done the right way.

When you come to Trinity House and step through its grand entranceway, you walk across a tiled floor. There's an emblem on it with the start date of the institution, 1380.

It initially acted as a workers' guild for the Master Mariners of Leith. The highest level of merchant ship workers and business owners made up the membership within these walls. Their stories, and the stories of Scotland's success, are woven into the stonework here. It's a privilege to stand in, but it's also a place of privilege.

The emblem on the floor features a motto in Latin which translates to 'the earth, the sea and the stars are conquerable by men of courage'. But when we pause on those words, 'conquerable by men of courage', we have to ask, what kind of conquests are we talking about? Because while Trinity House is tied to noble ideals of navigation, trade and maritime mastery, we can't ignore that maritime history is also a story of control, exploitation and power.

The very trade routes that built Scottish fortunes were the same ones that carried enslaved people across the Atlantic. Ships weren't just vessels of commerce, they were instruments of

empire.

By 1815, 65% of all goods exported from Scotland were destined for the West Indies, the country's biggest overseas market at that time.

Many of the members here would have been trading to and from the Caribbean, making money from so-called slave goods, such as rum, sugar and tobacco. And as an organisation, this place directly profited from the importing of these goods, taking a commission of one shilling per tonne that came into the port of Leith.

And even within Trinity House itself, power wasn't just about the sea and the goods floated on it. It was about who got to have a say.

One of the objects here tells us a lot about that. A wooden voting box. It's made of mahogany, wood from forests cleared to make way for plantations, and inside, the voting tokens are tamarind seeds, a product of the same system.

Decisions made in rooms like this weren't just about running a guild – they were shaping the very structures of privilege, wealth and exclusion.

History isn't just a list of dates or people or a collection of artefacts; it's the way those things force us to confront the past.

We're going to come back to the captain in just a moment, but before we do, I wanted to introduce you to another friend of mine.

Chapter 6

09:31

Sarah:

Emilia is Historic Scotland's Interpretation Assistant. That basically means she focuses on engaging visitors by bringing historical sites to life. And there's no better place for that than the

Convening Room.

Emilia:

So welcome to the Convening Room.

Sarah:

Oh wow! Oh, this is massive.

Emilia:

It is. It's kind of completely different to what you see downstairs. It's a completely different type of space. The height of the room, the like light coming in – it's really quite spectacular in a way.

Sarah:

It really is. I don't think I've ever seen ceilings… well you know you don't expect to see the ceilings as high as this. It's beautiful. And there's a gorgeous arched window there as well. The walls, what would you say? The walls are sort of a red colour and all these beautiful ornate gold frames with obviously lots of portraits. And what about this ceiling?

Emilia:

Yeah, the ceiling is kind of a part, the show-stopper part of the room, but it actually wasn't original to the house. So, John Hay, who was master of the house at the time, he didn't think this room showed off the wealth and the splendour of the organisation enough, so he actually had the plaster ceiling added in a few years later. It contains a wealth of nautical imagery –

you've got globes, Poseidon, also flying fish and ships…

Sarah:

Flying fish…

Emilia:

Yeah, like around the border you see it's motif and it's quite spectacular. It's great.

Sarah:

It really is. It's like a cake you want to just like reach out and touch it. It's amazing. And this is one big, massive, long table. Is this an original table?

Emilia:

Yes, original to Trinity House. When this building was built there were over 100 members of Trinity House so they needed somewhere where they could all come together, do their meetings and also socialise. It kind of had an atmosphere similar to that of a gentlemen's club. I can imagine a number of the members sitting around this table, conducting business but also probably having meals and drinking and having a good time basically.

Sarah:

Yeah, and it's full of objects now, there's so many different objects. These all from the collection here to do with the maritime…?

Emilia:

They're all from the collection and the reason all these objects are laid out on this table like this is that when Trinity House first became a museum back in the 1960s, this is how they decided to lay it out and it hasn't really changed since then in over 60 years. So it's not how we might in the modern day think of exhibiting these objects, but I really like that we still have it like this. I think it adds a lot of charm to the room and it's not something you see every day.

Sarah:

Yeah. It's quite fun to look at as well because I feel like you could… your eye could be drawn to lots of different objects…

Emilia:

Exactly.

Sarah:

Like… what's that? What's that big thing there?

Emilia:

So, this is… so this is a harpoon. So these are a selection of objects related to the whaling industry because that was a big part of Trinity House. Whaling, whaling ships, whaling expeditions, but also whale production factories. So, Peter Wood, who is in this portrait here, which was painted by Raeburn, he owned a blubber smelting plant and he also financed ships to go to the Arctic and hunt whales, and so the long objects you see here on the table are

actually narwhals' tusks. Now the tusk was…

Sarah:

What? No way. Narwhal tusks?

Emilia:

Yeah, this one especially is absolutely huge.

Sarah:

That's really big.

Emilia:

And it was something that they brought back. I think sometimes they got called unicorns' horns and they were kind of… this exciting object that looked very unique and people hadn't seen them before. But the one closest to us, if you see, there's like a metal cap on the end

Sarah:

Yeah.

Emilia:

So this was actually Peter Wood's personal walking stick that he had fashioned for himself and

you can see it in the painting of him as well.

Sarah:

Yeah, that's his actual stick.

Emilia:

Yeah, it's kind of one of his prized possessions.

Sarah:

Again, it's incredible to see those close up because I don't think I've ever seen a narwhal tusk.

Emilia:

I know.

Sarah:

I've never seen a narwhal let alone its tusk so it's incredible, but it's also so sad.

Emilia:

Yeah.

Sarah:

Do you get that? Does everyone else feel that too?

Emilia:

I do yeah.

Sarah:

Yeah, but it's like, it's like anything, it's like wow it's incredible to see it, but also I wish I wasn't here.

Emilia:

I know. There's actually quite a few kind of environmental objects in the collection here at Trinity House so we have, yeah, the narwhal tusk. This is the jaw of a sawfish. I don't know the context behind why these are here but a lot of the objects that we have in the collections were donated by members of Trinity House, so things that were collected by them on voyages, just like the narwhals' tusks.

Sarah:

Wow.

Emilia:

Over here we have, if you see the basket on the side of the mantelpiece, that is carved out of

the largest seed in the world, which is a Coco de Mer seed.

Sarah:

What?

Emilia:

And they take 12 years to get to that size.

Sarah:

They take 12 years to get to the size of almost like a big melon.

Emilia:

Yes, yes. It's huge. So it takes 12 years to get to that size.

Sarah:

And that's just the seed?

Emilia:

Yeah. The Coco de Mer plant is now incredibly endangered and there's sort of embargoes on making crafts out of the seed. And so it's incredibly rare that we have one in Trinity House. And I think it's kind of problematic in an environmental sort of way that we have it. And like, what's

the impact and what's been the impact that someone brought this back to Trinity House when it could have been like a plant?

Sarah:

A tree. And then be thriving.

Emilia:

Exactly.

Sarah:

I suppose, is there a way of that… I suppose it's the education around that…

Emilia:

Yeah, definitely.

Sarah:

Like, is what makes it and it's part of the…

Emilia:

Yeah, I don't know when it was brought back. It's not like a recent addition to the collection but,

yeah, it’s an interesting object. Very unique. I’ve never seen one before or in any other kind of museum.

Sarah:

It’s incredible to see it, to see a seed that’s that big and then it’s been made into a sort of basket. It’s quite beautiful.

Emilia:

Yeah. It is stunning.

Sarah:

Emilia is not the only one doing incredible work at Trinity House.

Chapter 7

16:30

Nicola:

My name is Nicola Wright. I work for a company called Illuminate UK and we’re responsible for outreach and education here at Trinity House. I’m also a professional storyteller and a tour guide and trainer.

Sarah:

Nicola is a tour de force of storytelling. She captivated me from the moment I met her, and I needed her help to understand some of the stuff in front of me too.

So we were just getting to know Trinity House and it seems like there's so many objects and so many interesting things. I think everywhere you look, you bump into something incredible. It looks like it's got so much history behind it.

How do you and your work take these objects and bring them to life?

Nicola:

Well, Trinity House really is a treasure trove. And there are so many stories here. And I use the objects as conduits to tell different stories. Like we're standing here in front of a sextant.

Sarah:

Right.

Nicola:

And we've got a tour about Ernest Shackleton.

Sarah:

OK.

Nicola:

Because we can use a sextant and tell the story of Frank Worsley and Ernest Shackleton on the *James Caird*, leaving Elephant Island and going to South Georgia. And it just brings that story to life. And that's just one among hundreds of stories here that you can use.

Sarah:

Do you have any like favourite stories or favourite objects that you've discovered?

Nicola:

A particular favourite object of mine is this war instructions book. And that was given to every Merchant Navy ship in 1917.

Sarah:

Right.

Nicola:

And that's at the height of unrestricted submarine warfare in World War I.

Sarah:

Wow.

Nicola:

It’s lined in lead. And the reason it’s lined in lead is so that if your ship is attacked, you can throw it overboard and so it won’t get into enemy hands. And it’s just a wonderful, wonderful object to tell so many stories about World War I. We’ve got a great story about a cursed U-boat. Kids absolutely love that one.

Sarah:

What’s that? Can you tell us that a little bit?

Nicola:

Well, we do Halloween tours here because it’s such a perfect space to do that.

Sarah:

Yes, it must be.

Nicola:

So we’ve got a story of a German U-boat that was cursed and everything that was going to go wrong went wrong on this U-boat from the very beginning, from its construction. And then it was launched and one of the crew was killed in a blast and that member of the crew haunted the rest of them and they actually performed an exorcism on this U-boat. So I can use this object to tell that story and it’s just fantastic.

Sarah:

And what really grabs you about a story when you're looking at these objects and you're looking for something that you want to tell? What is the thing that gets you where you think that's going to be a great story?

Nicola:

It's the human… It's bringing out, because this museum, if you look around it, it's full of stuff and it's full of dead white men.

Sarah:

Yes.

Nicola:

But you scratch the surface and you've got so many stories and it's bringing out that human element. It's bringing out that empathy. It's bringing out the women. It's bringing out the people who don't get recorded in history and I think you can do that with this wonderful space and really flip it on its head. And it's great when you're bringing a group around and they come in and it's very dry and then you draw them in with these fascinating stories and these fascinating objects that we have, so I love that.

So again, using an object as a conduit to tell a story – this is the *Royal Fusilier* and this was built in the Caledon shipyards in Dundee. And through that, we can actually tell the story of Victoria Drummond, who was named after her godmother, Queen Victoria.

So immediately we've got a woman of wealth. So we know more about her because she's upper class. Victoria Drummond grew up in Perthshire, and she was fascinated by how things worked. She was fascinated by mechanics and by engineering. And luckily for Victoria, because she was

educated at home as was normal with women of that class, she had a father who really believed in her. And he encouraged her to study. So she studied at the Technical College in Dundee, which is now the University of Abertay.

She did an apprenticeship at the Caledon shipyards, and she studied to be a marine engineer. So she was the first marine engineer in Britain.

Sarah:

Was she?

Nicola:

Yeah, she's an amazing woman because she's unstoppable. Because although she'd qualified to be third engineer, because she was a woman, she could only get work as a fifth engineer. So lower status, even though she was far qualified for the job. So she did that job and then she was applying to become a first engineer. She had to pass exams. She was failed over 30 times. And the reason she was failed was because she was a woman. They kept failing her and failing her and failing her. So Victoria, she thought, I've had enough of this. So she went to the Merchant Navy of another country and she served on a ship, the *SS Bonita* for Panama, for the Panamanian Merchant Navy. And during World War II, that ship was torpedoed and Victoria Drummond managed to save the ship. And because of that, she was awarded an MBE. So she became quite well known. And then it was only after the war that she finally got to be the first engineer. She was still met with sexism throughout her career. She actually lied about her age. And the reason she lied about her age, nothing to do with vanity – she wanted to work longer because she'd finally got the job that she wanted. So she's fascinating. There is a book. She's written a book about her experiences, but it is very much, she is a woman of class, so she can push, she has opportunities to do other things.

I'd like to find out more about Nellie McPherson on the *SS Fingal* because she's from a different class and doesn't have that opportunity, but we do know something about this extraordinary woman and I love that – it's great to find out about the women.

Sarah:

I love what you say about unstoppable.

Nicola:

Oh yeah, yeah, and she just would not give up and I think that's, you know, the power of the suffragette if you like or you just got to keep… if somebody says 'no', you just keep going.

Sarah:

Yeah, yeah. And it ties into the motto of Leith.

Nicola:

Yes, 'persevere'. Absolutely, absolutely, and you've got the wonderful window, and if you look at the window, you'll see an image of a woman with a white and yellow skirt on. The fishwives, the Newhaven fishwives, and they are extraordinary women that carried men to their boats, that carried a creel of herring on their back, that walked from Newhaven to Edinburgh to sell that creel of herring and it would weigh nine and a half stone. So these are formidable women.

Sarah:

Yeah.

Nicola:

And I love the fact that we can start drawing a little bit of them out in this very male environment. There's very much women's stories here as well.

Chapter 8

23:33

Sarah:

Formidable women. I love that. Sort of really paints a picture. And persevere – Leith definitely has a great motto there and mottos seem to be cropping up all over the place, right?

Do you remember the one that was written on the floor of the entranceway of this very building? The earth, the sea and the stars are conquerable by men of courage. Well, I had a wee question for Captain Lee, which was that apparently only men are allowed to join the house.

So it's men only, isn't it?

Captain Lee:

Well, that is a function of the fact that only men could get master's tickets. And the original proviso was you had to spend five years before the mast on sail ships.

Sarah:

So you're a master because of the mast?

Captain Lee:

No, no, no. In the days when it was sailing ships, you got your Mates and then you got your Masters. So that qualified you to be the captain of a ship and obviously in the day, there was no women at sea until probably in the 70s. Sheila Edmondson, one or two others, the wee Penny Sutton was a wee girl I had as a third mate and these girls had to try so hard, really hard and in a lot of respects their careers were cut short because they met our handsome second mate or whatever, married him out of shore. There was very few of them progressed up the ladder.

So that was a proviso that you entered to be in the house you needed a master's ticket, you had to be a British national and you had to be over a certain age, and you contributed to the annuity things, which precluded 99 point whatever percent of the population.

Of the incorporations that were in Leith, they were divided up into four main trades. We were just the Masters of Mariners because we were big enough and powerful enough to be on our own. And then there was the maltsters who had other people in it and then you went down to the merchants who had the traffickers and all the rest of them.

We had, I wouldn't say a monopoly, but we valued education above everything because of the kind of work that we did. And obviously it's in the interests of a ship's master or owner to pass on to his son the skills that are needed. Because although you had agents in places like Campo Viera and Bruges and places, and they would find cargoes for you, you, as master, once you left here, you were your own man. You controlled how you got there, what happened, what sales you used, what route you took.

You had to understand languages. A lot of the guys here spoke Flemish, Dutch, because they traded a lot. Some of them spoke Polish. But I remember reading somewhere, there was actually somebody who taught Flemish in the 18th century, to aid them because a lot of our trading was to the low countries.

Sometimes when the goods, when somebody died, when the goods were looked at, what he'd left behind, you would have money in five or six different currencies, like Napoleons, ducats. So your son had to understand what was going on. He had to understand money and how to exchange it. He had to have a smattering of the local. He had to be literate so he could read the legal documents. And they had to converse. They did a bit of trading on their own part because

there was a thing called portage where the cargo, even though you weren't the owner of the ship, the owner would fix the cargo and a lot of it was in barrels or, if it was timber from Scandinavia, it was in deals, so that's rectangular and square.

There's spaces and the crew and the captain were allowed to carry cargo to their own benefit. Like sailors would bring back, through connections with people, they would bring back like a sack of raisins or cloth or something to pass over to family here.

There was all this stuff that came in with the Dutch East India Company into the low countries and filtered its way out. Now, raisins in Scotland, that was luxury stuff. So there was trading that went on. Edinburgh tried to stop it, but they weren't actually merchants, so there was court cases. Everybody had their own advocate. There was court cases going left, right and centre all the time. It was just everybody…

So as another side to that, your wife had to be equally literate because if you went off, say you went off to Bordeaux to pick up a cargo of wine, you don't know how long you're going to be away.

Sarah:

Right.

Captain Lee:

You could be caught by… piracy was a terrible problem and privateers were a terrible problem. If you were going further afield, we've got records of ships that were captured by Barbary pirates out of Algeria, off the Western approaches, and money had to be raised to ransom these guys and bring them home.

Even the whalers. Personally, I think the case of Leith as a whaling port has been overstated. Peterhead and Newcastle were far more important. But there's a model upstairs of one of the… I think it's called the Wraith. They were captured by the French before they got to Orkney and

taken back off to France, and they had to be ransomed.

But to get back to them, the wives had to be capable of running the affairs of their husbands while they were away.

Sarah:

Right.

Captain Lee:

As well as raising the family.

Sarah:

Yeah.

Captain Lee:

And looking after their other interests. So they needed to be literate. Your daughter needed to be literate because then she wasn’t married. If she wasn’t, she wasn’t marriageable.

Sarah:

Right.

Captain Lee:

Because it was a closed community. I mean, all the mariners lived in the one place. All the maltsters lived in the one place because they had mutual support.

Sarah:

Okay.

Captain Lee:

Communities.

Sarah:

So education, literacy…

Captain Lee:

Education and literacy was everything.

Sarah:

Very important…

Captain Lee:

And women, in particular, and women, when women got married… there was a very famous case in the 17th century, a woman called Susanna Ludgip, and she married twice. Now, she had everything going for her. Her brother was a burgess at Queensferry, which meant he could trade. He was a merchant. He owned a ship. He did various things. She married twice. Her own husband died, and she married a guy called Henry Bell, and she looked after all his affairs. Ships are divided into 64ths.

Sarah:

Oh, I didn't know that. Okay.

Captain Lee:

That was before the Merchant Shipping Act said that they had to be. But it has to be a number that's equally divisible. You can't have bits and pieces. So there's 64ths. So if you had 32 64ths, you owned half the ship.

Sarah:

Okay.

Captain Lee:

Okay, so it was done like that. So, to actually be the full owner of a ship, ships were lost all the time. Frequently. Foundered, bad weather, running aground, ships disappeared off the face of the earth with monotonous regularity so the cautious guy had, instead of having a whole ship to himself, I'll have a quarter in that one, a quarter in that one… So basically the ship traded, cargo

sold, profits made. Out of the profit comes the running costs, whatever it costs for this, dues for that, customs and things and then what the money, the residue that's left is divided into the number of shares that that ship's divided up into. So if you've got five 64ths or six 64ths, you get five 64ths of the profit.

Sarah:

Right.

Captain Lee:

So it's all divided up. So it was a sort of a banker thing. You know you could lose everything at once and ships got lost for various reasons – they were captured, they sank, they were impounded, they got diseased.

Sarah:

Dangerous, yeah.

Captain Lee:

And another side that the wives had to look at was that a large part of the cost of a ship, it wasn't the hull of the ship, but it's the kit that goes with it. The masts, the rigging, the anchors, they all had Carron's carronades. The famous Carron ironworks in Falkirk made the carronade.

Sarah:

Oh, right. No, I didn't know that.

Captain Lee:

That's where the name came from.

Sarah:

Oh, okay.

Captain Lee:

So these were fast nimble boats that had to be able to defend themselves against privateers. Some battles were quite famous. So women played… Susanna Ludgip fought, I mean a lot of the money she lost was through one of her son-in-laws who was a no good job and she ended up as one of the widows here and she shouldn't have, but that was a function of the fact that other agencies outside wouldn't pay back what was owed when her husband died.

It was a very sad case, but she was a very determined woman. And at the time, her handwriting was described as very strong and forceful.

Sarah:

Oh, excellent. That sounds like good things.

Captain Lee:

So it was a complex thing. And more so than any other people, these women and young men were very, very literate. In fact, there was a petition sent to Parliament to try and stymie some of the stuff that Edinburgh was doing to us. And there were members here, 70 signatories, all of

whom signed their own name. There was nobody made their mark. Because they were all literate. And that was a really important thing.

But for the women, it was the fact that they could deal with advocacy. They needed a basic knowledge of what way was up.

Sarah:

Yeah, what was going on in the case…

Captain Lee:

Far more so than any other section of the community. The fishwives in Fisherrow, that was a different sort of community. They were more, they dealt with the money. So they baited the hooks on their lines early doors in the morning. The guys only fished during daylight because navigation was very basic and weather-wise. They tucked their skirts up and carried the men out to the boat so they didn't get wet.

Sarah:

God, they were so strong.

Captain Lee:

They were.

Sarah:

The physical strength of that, yeah.

Captain Lee:

And then they looked after the household affairs. And then when they came back with the catch, they sorted the catch and they took it up to Edinburgh and sold it.

Sarah:

Again, so physical.

Captain Lee:

They were quite something. But a different set-up than here.

Sarah:

Yeah, different community. And so at the moment it still operates as men only. Do you ever see that sort of changing, Stewart?

Captain Lee:

If somebody, I mean, there's no point in changing the bylaws and the rules because it doesn't say male.

Sarah:

Yeah, yeah, right.

Captain Lee:

So basically, if a woman with a foreign-going master's ticket and she's got British citizenship and she shows up, why not?

Sarah:

Absolutely.

Captain Lee:

Why not? I mean, there's no impediment.

Sarah:

Yeah, I understand.

Captain Lee:

And as seamen, in my own case, my wife bought the house. I was loading liquid gas in Newington in Maine, having sent power of attorney home to my wife, and she bought our house and I came home and we'd moved in.

Sarah:

Amazing.

Captain Lee:

Yeah. I mean, you have to trust your wife.

Sarah:

It's such a partnership. It should always be, but I imagine it's important to that.

Captain Lee:

It's got to be. My wife has, I think of myself as, well, my daughter might disagree. I think of myself as quite modern. My son certainly would disagree. My wife has looked after the financial affairs since I was third mate.

Sarah:

Yeah.

Captain Lee:

She's had power of attorney. She checks her … I take nothing to do with the financial running of her house. She does all the bills.

Sarah:

That's fantastic. And do you think that's sort of echoed then? So you've obviously got a modern version of that, but there's echoes in time of that.

Captain Lee:

Yeah, I mean, if you can't trust the woman you're married to, who looks after everything while you're away at sea… okay, at the time, I mean, I'm not away for six or seven months towards the end, but I was away at sea. If you can't do that, what's the point?

Sarah:

Yeah.

Chapter 9

35:48

Sarah:

Love can be such a wonderful thing, can't it?

Emilia was going to show us her favourite object. I think it might be one of my favourites also. And for me, it really cements Trinity House as a place about people. People, as Nicola kept saying, are at the heart of every headline here. And there's a whole set of tales to be told. Some of them are really stark reminders that the story of Scotland and the stories of Scottish people are painted by patterns of light and dark. But also that a place like this can sometimes feel like home for people who have no home.

Sarah:

And your favourite object, you said, is over here.

Emilia:

Yeah, so it's maybe, it's perhaps more inconspicuous. It's not what your eye gets drawn to immediately when you walk into the room.

Sarah:

Yeah, because it's in a frame, isn't it, under the massive painting?

Emilia:

Yeah, so it's like a collection of four handwritten kind of sheets in one larger frame. And, as it says at the top here, it's a selection of entertainment programmes done for polar expeditions dated between 1824 and 1825. And they were all from Arctic voyages led by Sir William Edward Parry, who was a pioneer of British polar expedition.

At this point in time, whaling was still really important, but the population of whales was retreating further and further into the Arctic. So that meant that the whalers were having to go further and further also into the Arctic.

And these would be incredibly long expeditions and some of them would take several years. And during this time, ships could be frozen into the ice for up to 10 months at a time.

Sarah:

Ten months just frozen in the same place?

Emilia:

Yeah, exactly. So they would begin sailing in the summer and get as far as they can. And then in the winter, when the ice would begin to freeze up, they would just hunker down and stay where they were. And then by the time the summer came again, the ice was a bit easier to get through. So they would go even further in. So it was completely gruelling, and I can't even imagine how cold and how miserable they would have been most of the time, basically.

Sarah:

And how many people would have been on a ship, roughly, for one of these?

Emilia:

I'm not sure. I think probably less than 100. So it'd be quite like an intimate group. So you definitely get to know everyone on your ship really well.

Sarah:

You'd have to be so brave to go off on an adventure like that.

Emilia:

I know. It's hard to imagine what it would have been like. And they're also incredibly dangerous. You know stepping on these ships not knowing when you're going to be able to get back, if you're even going to get back at all.

Sarah:

That might be it. You might be off and you'll never return and you don't know what you're going to see. You've probably got no idea of actually what it's…

Emilia:

Amazing…

Sarah:

So is this almost like theatrical programmes then, entertainment?

Emilia:

Yeah.

Sarah:

So this is like you're on your ship and this is your entertainment for the 10 months.

Emilia:

Basically, exactly, yeah, so when the men were in the ice on these voyages… it was because there was a lack of sunlight sometimes and also a lack of fresh fruit and vegetables, it was quite common to get scurvy, which is caused by a vitamin deficiency.

Parry and other captains thought that scurvy was actually caused by laziness and kind of by not

having, kind of lazing around and not being active enough.

Sarah:

Okay.

Emilia:

So because of this, he was determined to make sure his crew didn't become basically lazy.

Sarah:

Sedentary and lazy.

Emilia:

Yeah, exactly. So he wanted to make sure they were being active at all times. So he would create a programme of lots of different activities on board. So there was a library. They would do Bible study classes. They'd learn English, learn to read and write. And then there was also… he created the tradition of the Grand Arctic Theatre, which is where the men would create.

Sarah:

I love this.

Emilia:

I know, it’s fantastic.

Sarah:

The Grand Arctic Theatre.

Emilia:

My favourite object. Yeah, so they would put on plays, they would write their own plays, but they’d also do Shakespeare productions. And then also what they would do is have these grand masquerades and fancy balls, which are basically just times where they would all get together, put on fancy dress costume and dress up and dance the evening away. So about every two weeks they’d have like a big event they would look forward to.

Sarah:

They did not…

Emilia:

I know, it’s fantastic.

Sarah:

And did they make the costumes themselves?

Emilia:

It was a mixture… so if you see on all four of these programmes that at the bottom there's a sign that says 'NB, no person can be admitted without domino or fancy dress', so that means they had to – they couldn't just come in their regular clothes. They had to dress up.

Sarah:

You get turned away…

Emilia:

Exactly. Also it was very common for them to wear ladies' clothes, women's dresses, and Parry was from Bath down in England and on some of his expeditions, he was donated by the ladies of Bath some of their old clothes. So there was sort of like a women's clothing closet on board where you could just come and dress up.

Sarah:

That's amazing, like different ball gowns or different dresses, different things?

Emilia:

Yeah, it's very like theatrical – attires basically from like the higher classes of the women of Bath.

Sarah:

Oh, that's amazing.

Emilia:

I know, it's fantastic and it's kind of like we see this tradition… this is when we see the tradition of drag on ships coming in and this was a tradition that lasts to this day. And it still goes on. It's like a thing that on ships in the 1950s and 60s, there was a kind of surge in gay British men working on cruise ships and ocean liners, sort of the inconspicuous nature of the jobs. And a lot of them were short stint – it allowed them to kind of live more how they wanted to and also allowed them to be more true to themselves at a time when in Britain homophobia was rife and it was still illegal to be gay. So it gave them a chance to escape this homophobic kind of culture and make their own environments. So it's really interesting.

Sarah:

I suppose with all the history that you're looking after here, there's so much… there's a constant push-pull between the lightness of it and also the horrendous parts of the history and it must be so difficult to sort of, again, navigate that all the time. I don't know, do you have any thoughts?

Emilia:

Yeah, I think as Trinity House is full of dichotomies between positive stories and really exciting parts of history but then there's also a lot of links to not so nice parts of history so, yeah, like the whaling industry – we could be critical of it, but it was incredibly important and it was an important source of livelihoods for lots of people in Scotland and, yeah, I think it's definitely important to be critical of the collections and of Trinity House as an organisation in history. I don't think that it should be immune to criticism, especially when we're still making so many discoveries about the house to this day. We don't know everything about the organisation. There's still a lot to learn. Yeah, I think it's important to keep that in mind and to not worship the

house, basically, and to be open to being critical about it is definitely my point of view on it.

Chapter 10

43:58

Sarah:

Dichotomy is such a great word. All of the narratives in all of these items link together and overlap.

People like Nicola and Emilia and Captain Stewart Lee, all safeguarding and stewarding these stories, but also holding space for the sometimes uncomfortable and vulnerable conversations they can unearth about you and I, people all over the world.

Nicola:

This is Leith. Leith is multicultural. Leith has all life. And what I think is wonderful about this museum, open the doors. This is for the people of Leith. This is their museum. And we've got these incredible objects here.

So look beyond that 'Oh, it's very dry, very old.' No, look at it. That's why it needs interpreted.

Sarah:

Yes.

Nicola:

Because you could wander around here in five minutes. Or you can stay here for an hour and I

tell you this story, tell you that story. And people want to find out more. And that's what's so beautiful and magical about this place. And why it is a storyteller's paradise, because every day I come here and I find something else.

And I'm still researching, constantly adding to the tour and still researching and coming up with different tours, theme tours, like the Shackleton tour, like the Halloween tour, looking at different themes that we can use to tell our stories.

Sarah:

That's amazing. And can I just ask how that process starts for you? So would you come in, notice something, and then go to the team and say, what's the historical context?

Nicola:

Yeah, I do. I mean, because there is so much here, I kind of, I think, well, you know, what about this? Can we find out more about this object? Can we use this object to tell the story?

It's not as simple as there's a direct link with an object here to the transatlantic slave trade. So we have to think about goods coming into Leith, goods going out of Leith, and how we can use objects to tell stories.

Sarah:

So that's really interesting to hear you talk about that community and also that expertise and that knowledge that you all have, that you obviously with the work you're doing with the community and the children that you want to sort of pass on.

How do you sort of see… what would you love for the future of Trinity House? How do you see it?

Chapter 11

46:17

Captain Lee:

I think the way forward, we have to keep trying to help people like Nicola. Nicola does a wonderful job with the children. And if we can be part of that and, if you like, pad out the messages that she puts across, that's satisfying.

We've also got the historical tie to South Leith Church. We've been joined at the hip since 14... whatever.

Sarah:

Yeah, literally. Right there across the road.

Captain Lee:

Right across the road. And it's amazing, you know, when they raised Leith to the ground, they left that and this.

Sarah:

Really?

Captain Lee:

Yeah, when Hartford and them come up and, well, after Hough and Cromwell. Cromwell used the vaults to store stuff for his... In fact, General Monck, we've got a receipt for the bill that General Monck got for storing stuff in our vaults.

Sarah:

In the vaults. So there's so much history in this building.

Captain Lee:

There is, there's a lot of history.

Sarah:

It's a long-standing establishment.

Captain Lee:

And Historic Scotland have taken it on board and they spend the kind of money that we could never... We had got, as I said earlier, we had got to the point where we were selling off artefacts to pay bills.

Chapter 12

47:21

Sarah:

Trinity House is a vessel of its own. It isn't just a museum. It's a living, breathing archive of Scotland's maritime past. Every painting, every instrument, every fragment of history stored here carries the echoes of the people who built, sailed and shaped this nation, for better or for worse.

But history isn't static. It's not something locked away behind glass. History is the stories told by Nicola and Emilia, the conversations sparked by Captain Lee, and the moments when an object, an old ledger or a sailor's worn sextant, suddenly connects past and present.

This place is a paradox. A symbol of tradition, yet one that asks for interpretation. A site of privilege, but one that has also been a sanctuary.

A house filled with tales of ambition, trade and adventure, but also of struggle, loss and survival. And like the sea itself, the story of Trinity House is still shifting, still moving, still carrying with it the weight of centuries. And the promise of all that's yet to come.

This has been the Historic Scotland podcast.

It was produced and edited by Adam Stoner.

I'm Sarah MacGillivray.

Next time, we're off to Stirling Castle. It's a fortress filled with stories, from royal intrigue to military might. But hidden within its grand halls is something truly extraordinary. A ceiling unlike any other. Why do I get the feeling someone's looking at me? Alright, see you then.