



The Åland Maritime Museum and s/v *Pommern* in Mariehamn's Western Harbour. Photo: ÅMM.

A MUSEUM FOR A PEOPLE OF THE SEA

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In the beginning, the Åland Maritime Museum was a museum by mariners for mariners. It was owned and run by Ålands Nautical Club as a privately funded initiative with the aim to keep the memory of the sailing ship era alive. In 1986, the museum was restructured into a non-profit charitable trust, with Åland's Nautical Club and the Government of the Åland Islands as trustees, a status that is still current.

Over the years, the collection and exhibition grew and eventually the day came when the museum had out-grown itself. In November 2009, the museum closed to the public and the task of reconstructing the Åland Maritime Museum began in earnest, not only renovating and extending the building, but also re-developing the exhibition, making the museum relevant to a much wider audience. The extension was designed by architects Johanna Vuorinen and Esa Kangas from Helsinki, who were also in charge of renovating the existing building,

which is listed for being of particular architectural significance. In the process, the museum's total area grew from 800 m² to 2,400 m². The exhibition, which grew in size from 700 m² to 1,200 m², was completely re-developed, with the museum's new vision as a guiding light; i.e. to be a world-class museum with a strong local presence. The exhibition layout, including fittings and graphics, was designed by the Helsinki-based studio Amerikka, while the museum's staff was responsible for the content; from writing the concept script and choosing artefacts to conceiving interactivities and authoring exhibition texts. The result was an innovative core exhibition that appeals to a wide audience.

The core exhibition centres on four main themes: *The Age of Sail*, *Engine-Powered Shipping*, *Shipbuilding*, and *Safety at Sea*. Artefacts and images have been selected with care, closely linking them with the stories told. The Age of Sail exhibition takes up most of the old building and includes the captain's saloon of the four-masted steel barque *Herzogin Cecilie* as well as a climbing rig for visitors. The gems of the exhibition on Engine-powered Shipping are the triple expansion steam engine and the captain's saloon of the steamship *Dagmar*. In the Shipbuilding exhibition we focus mainly on traditional wooden boatbuilding but there

is also material from modern dockyards. There are four different aspects to the Safety at Sea exhibition; accidents, wartime seafaring, pilotage and lighthouses. Of these four, the last is the biggest, showing several large lighthouse pieces, with the prism from Märket lighthouse being the most impressive.

All texts, despite being based on solid research, are presented in a casual style, either in short factual prose or as personal stories. The latter uses specific events in real people's lives to illustrate various periods and general trends in history. At the same time, it adds a human dimension to the exhibition, which is greatly appreciated by our visitors. In order not to alienate our traditional core visitors in the process of widening our audience, we put much effort into making the exhibition multi-layered and on finding the precise tone of voice for the texts. That effort landed us with an engaging, accessible and aesthetically pleasing exhibition that can be appreciated on many different levels and that allows for new discoveries with each subsequent visit.

At the heart of our work with audience development are three key words; people, discoveries, and accessibility. People are

at the heart of the stories we tell; human activities and experiences make and shape our heritage. A visit to the museum should be a journey of discovery; finding exciting artefacts, encountering captivating stories and trying new skills. Accessibility is about being inclusive of all visitors, regardless of background knowledge or physical and intellectual abilities. The key to being accessible is being open to the public, which we are: the museum is open daily all year round, including most holidays. The second step is to allow for wheelchair access throughout the museum. This also benefits visitors who are otherwise mobility-impaired and visitors with prams and buggies. Thirdly, we have made the museum tri-lingual, offering all museum information and all exhibition texts in Swedish, Finnish and English. In the future, we plan to produce audio guides, too, partly in order to offer visibility-impaired visitors access to the exhibition texts, and partly to extend our foreign language services. To enable our visitors to really get up close and personal with the artefacts, we have only placed the most sensitive artefacts behind glass, while the rest have been placed out in the open. This was an appreciated feature of the old exhibition





The museum's voluntary engineering corps took on and completed the gargantuan task of renovating the old triple steamer. Photo: AMM.

and it allows our visibility-impaired visitors to 'see' the artefacts with their hands. For visitors with hearing aids, we offer audio induction loops. We have further invested in mobile sound receivers and transmitters that can be used by visitors with or without hearing aids. For the benefit of all visitors, there are plenty of seating opportunities in the museum.

Families and children are visitor groups that we want to attract to the museum. Somewhere along the planning process, Ruby the ship's rat emerged as the museum's mascot. Since opening, she has been given an increasingly prominent role both in our marketing strategy and in our outreach and educational programmes. As with so many other features of the museum, we have found that Ruby serves many different purposes. The rat holes with mini-dioramas that are located throughout the museum were originally intended as a fun feature for children. Now we use them in our nursery tours as focal points for discovery and discussion, and they are also a part of the treasure hunt all children are invited to join when visiting the museum. Ruby also features on the interactivity signs, encouraging visitors to "give it a go". With the extension, we got several new facilities, one being a room for educational activities. The

educational room, which we have named Ruby's room, is a new facility, which gives us hitherto unimagined resources to develop our educational programmes. The room also doubles as a playroom that can be used freely by families visiting the museum. We also use the room for weekend activities aimed at children, focusing on arts and crafts. Ruby's room is not only the domain of children; on several occasions it has been used by business executives for teamwork exercises.

Partly because we are a small museum with limited staff resources and partly because so much is virtual and computerised today, the interactivities in the museum are mainly "hands-on". The square-rigged climbing mast, complete with sails and ropes, is perhaps the most striking interactive feature. Children love it, but so do adults. Even the Prime Minister of Finland accepted the challenge and climbed to the top when he visited the museum. There is also a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle in the shape of a ship. The task is to load it correctly with the aid of a loading chart. This interactive exercise has proven to be an excellent opportunity for parents and children to co-operate, as the task is more difficult than it first seems. Of course, the museum is not without more hi-tech content. There

is a bridge simulator, two animations depicting various ships transporting their cargoes across the world and, last but not least, a karaoke machine. The karaoke features in the section dedicated to cruises and passenger shipping.

The vision of the Åland Maritime Museum is to be a world-class museum with a strong local presence. We want to be an integral part of the community we serve, which is why we work actively to find external partners to work with. Apart from offering educational programmes to schools and nurseries, we are involved in co-operations that involve marketing, cultural programming and lifelong learning. However, one of our most important links to the local community is our volunteers. They are a loosely formed group of around 100 individuals, most of them retired mariners but also others, to whom the museum and Åland's maritime heritage is important. Due to its form, the museum's voluntary activities are very informally organised but the work the volunteers do and the support they give us is invaluable. There is a long-standing tradition of voluntary work in the museum, but the re-development took it to a new level. Without the volunteers, the project would have taken much longer and cost much more. They helped us demount the old exhibition and move the collection to storage, they were involved in preparing artefacts for display, moving them back to the museum when the building work was completed and mounting them in the new exhibition. They were solely responsible for renovating the steam engine, which is now on display and which they demonstrate to the public on a regular basis. So important is their role in the museum that they were given the honour of cutting the ribbons when the museum re-opened. That said, it is not only the museum that benefits from the volunteers; the museum has also become a very important part of the volun-

teers' social life, and that is an added bonus that is positive for the local community as a whole.

In 2012, the Åland Maritime Museum took over the public and museological management of s/v *Pommern*, while the ownership of the proud four-masted steel barque still resides with the town of Mariehamn. No major and certainly no irreversible changes have been made to the *Pommern*, which makes her unique in the world. The town is committed to the preservation of the ship and there are plans to build a dry dock for her, to be completed in 2017. In conjunction with the building of the dry dock, the visitor experience will be reconsidered, both in terms of physical and of intellectual accessibility. The aim is to present the visitor with a sense that the ship could cast off and set sails at any time, taking off on a voyage around the world. *Pommern* must be made to feel alive, as if her crew was still there. At the same time, the visitor must be given the ship's history; the voyages she made, the cargoes she carried, and the adventures she endured.

At the outset of the reconstruction of the Åland Maritime Museum, the top priority was to make it accessible to all. Based on the overwhelmingly positive response we continue to receive from our visitors – be it children from local schools or an old sea dog from the other side of the world, museum professionals curious about the new exhibition or executive directors interested in storytelling, a bus-load of merry nurses or a group of serious boat-spotters – we have managed very well and of that we are happy and proud. Being nominated for European Museum of the Year Award 2014 is another indication that we have got something right.

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