



'VALHALLA' THE TRESCO SHIPS' FIGUREHEAD COLLECTION

The National Maritime Museum at Greenwich is the national museum of the Royal Navy and the merchant shipping industry and celebrates most other aspects of man's encounter with the sea.

Apart from its galleries at Greenwich the Museum maintains several small outstations in the West Country, in conjunction with other organisations who own and run the premises in which these 'detached displays' are situated; the Museum's 'Valhalla' Figurehead Collection is one such.

This account of 'Valhalla' is intended both for visitors to Tresco and for others interested in figureheads but who may not be able to visit the Collection. It is the first of a number of such booklets which the Museum hopes to publish on its outstations and succeeds that issued by the Tresco Estate in 1972.

Various members of the Museum, and others, have contributed to the new text which has been prepared by John Stengelhofen, the Museum's Curator in the West Country. He has also designed and in part illustrated the work, which has been produced in Cornwall under his supervision.

The figureheads in the Valhalla Collection represent the final century in a tradition dating back over three thousand years. From earliest times ships' bows have carried carvings of human or animal forms as part of the overall decoration of the vessels, although the motives and meanings behind these often elaborate figures have altered over the centuries. Their pattern, size and shape have also adapted to fit new types of ships' hull, while the artistic style of figureheads and other decoration has changed to reflect contemporary fashions.

At 'Valhalla' most of the 28 figureheads date from the middle and end of the 19th century and come from merchant sailing vessels or early steamships that were wrecked on the Isles of Scilly. As such the collection is a random cross-section from generally modest vessels, whose small and simple figureheads contrast with larger naval examples which survive elsewhere, such as the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich. At 'Valhalla' one sees more of the popular skills of the Victorian carver of fairground figures, shop and inn signs, rather than of the formal heraldic sculpture which adorned ships-of-the-line.

In 1992 when museum conservator at the New Bedford Whaling Museum the Kress Foundation sponsored my study of wrecked carved ship's figureheads at the Valhalla Museum. The museum and collection of figure heads are located on the island of Tresco, at the Isles of Scilly, near Cornwall, England. The original text and photograph of the Valhalla Museum are from the 1984 publication by: Stengelhofen, John: Valhalla, by The National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, England.



Photograph of Robert Hauser with unidentified Valhalla museum figurehead.