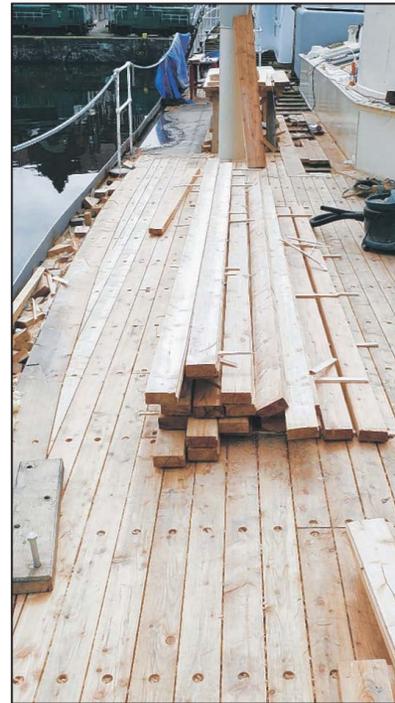


What happened to yacht



■ Labour of love – the restoration of the ship in Poland has seen the deck replaced and hull repaired



By KATY ISLIP
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THIS piece of British history was a prominent feature on the Leigh foreshore for 28 years as home to Essex Yacht Club.

The Bembridge was a familiar landmark on the edge of the Thames Estuary until it was sold by the club in 2004.

Now, the pilot cutter is undergoing a renaissance in Poland as an ambitious restoration process nears completion.

When the Bembridge was sold in 2004, it was moored off the Kent coast as its new owners worked on plans to turn it into a floating restaurant.

But after the restaurant plans failed, the 1938-built Bembridge was left rotting on a mooring in the Medway, before Polish shipping company Magemar stepped in and bought it last year.

Now the team is nearing the end of a painstaking restoration process which has seen the ship faithfully restored to its former glory, and ready to begin its new life as the company's floating offices in Szczecin, in north-west Poland.

Rafal Zahorski, general manager at Magemar, said: "I came up with the idea to buy an old vessel, one so attractive the harbour authority would accept it

Voyage of the vessel launched in 1938 continues

as an attraction of the port and give us permission to keep her inside the harbour, near our stock.

"Additionally, for a shipping company like us to have an office on the vessel is perfect, and we are the first company in Poland to have its offices on a vessel, and additionally on a historic vessel."

However, the Bembridge came within a hair's breadth of never making it to her new home, after she was hit and holed by an iceberg while being towed up the river to Szczecin.

After her dramatic arrival in Poland, work on the Bembridge got under way, becoming a labour of love for all involved, despite the huge amount of work required.

Mr Zahorski said: "We were forced to replace the whole deck. The stern deck simply

club's HQ, the Bembridge?

did not exist, because it was removed in 1972, and we rebuilt it as it was in 1938.

"The hardest part were the repairs to her hull. We were forced to replace 80 square metres of steel plates. Now she looks almost like new."

The restoration team is working hard to put the finishing touches to the Bembridge, including sourcing original fixtures and fittings, and a hunt for the original ship's bell.

The craft will eventually house its own museum, showcasing memorabilia from the Smith's Dock shipyard, where the Bembridge was built in the Thirties, plus the history of the pilot class of ships and the Bembridge herself.

Mr Zahorski said: "In the future, I see the Bembridge being an active vessel, fully restored, attracting many visitors and students, as well as being an attraction for our city, supporting the maritime culture of the port, city and area.

"All of us are in love with our old lady Bembridge. She deserves now to be a girl who can be admired again."

For more information about the transformation of the Bembridge, visit the website www.bembridge.pl

To share any information about the craft or its original owner, Trinity House, e-mail rafal.zahorski@bembridge.pl



■ Former use – the Bembridge left its mooring at Leigh in 2004

HISTORY OF SHIP

BUILT in Middlesbrough, at Smith's Dock shipyard, the Bembridge was launched in July 1938 and worked in the Isle of Wight district as a pilot cutter, carrying pilot mariners with knowledge of the local area out to craft in order to guide them through dangerous or congested waters, such as harbours or rivermouths.

The ship served in the Second World War, taking part in the British evacuation of Dunkirk in May 1940, and used in the Normandy landings in June 1944.

She even survived being hit by a bomb during a German air raid, which luckily did not explode as it passed through the ship.

After the war, Bembridge continued to serve as a cutter, before becoming a training vessel offering sailing trips for underprivileged children.

She then became a survey ship working in the North Sea, and eventually became the HQ of the Essex Yacht Club in 1976, undergoing a refit carried out mainly by club members.



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