

Wales Maritime Heritage Society, as LINDA ASHMAN reports

New museum of maritime heritage

WE NOW have a new museum in Pembroke Dock. The West Wales Maritime Heritage Society (WWMHS) opened the doors of its Maritime Heritage Centre to the public on Thursday August 6 following an official opening by Mayor of Pembroke Dock, Peter Kraus on the previous Tuesday.

WWMHS, a society dedicated to preserving and promoting our maritime heritage, is based in the former Hancock's shipyard on Pembroke Dock's waterfront.

Although the Society has occupied the premises for some years, until recently it has been restricted to repairing and sailing the vintage boats in its care.

David James, Secretary of the Society, explained: "The Society has long wanted to open the boatyard to the general public, but only recently were we given permission to do so from Pembrokeshire County Council who own the property.

"Because the yard is within the 'footprint' of the projected marina we have not been able to negotiate a secure lease but, fortunately, the marina developer, Conygar, has been supportive."

Once permission was given, Society members worked long and hard to turn one rather sad and scruffy building into something more respectable and have filled it with maritime exhibits and displays.

"Children are also catered for – we have a children's corner and special exhibits, including a boat in which they can go on an indoor fishing trip," said David.

"Local organisations, including the Milford Haven Port



Children enjoy an indoor fishing trip with Brian King and David James.

Authority, Pembroke Dock Town Council, Pembrokeshire County Council, Pembroke and Monkton Local History Society and the Pembroke Dock Chamber of Trade have all given support to this project for which the Society is extremely grateful."

The Museum aims to give an insight into shipbuilding, not only in Hancock's yard but all along the Cleddau, with its associated trades and occupations.

The setting is ideal – where better than a historic shipyard on Pembroke Dock's waterfront with its own slipway and dry dock?

The yard has a long history of shipbuilding. Peter Hancock & Sons took over the yard in 1921 from former owners J & W Francis. Many ships have been constructed here – the Francis family built two and three-masted ships such as the *Verbena*.

Hancocks began by building fishing smacks, Brixham trawler type but larger, and more recently the Hobb's Point ferries – the *Cleddau Queen* in 1956 and the *Cleddau King* in 1962. The last ship to be built there was the *Fastnet Rock*, a coal carrier, in 1979.

The yard is still popularly known as Hancock's yard and many Pembroke Dock people served apprenticeships there.

"It is a start," David emphasised. "It is hoped that the project will attract suitable donations to swell the content of the Museum as well as photographs and memorabilia.

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very difficult. The WWMHS will expand and develop our facility to show another aspect of Pembroke Dock's marvellous history."

The Museum will be open to the public on Thursdays through to Sundays between 11am and 4pm until September 27th. Admission is free but donations would be welcome.

IN ALL it was a very busy week for the WWMHS, for following close on the heels of the opening of the Maritime Museum was the annual Pembroke River Rally on August 8th.

Boats sailing into Pembroke are now a rare sight but, thanks to the WWMHS, we have the River Rally to remind us of Pembroke's maritime past, and also to afford an opportunity to sail up its once great river.

It is hard to imagine now, but Pembroke was once a prosperous port dating back to medieval times when royal charters granted it a monopoly of sea trade in Milford Haven.

Although its importance declined in the 19th century, the sea remained a main highway until well into the 20th century when the last of the coastal traders, the *Kathleen & May*, made that final trip up the Pembroke River to the North Quay in 1960. Now a barrage effectively bars the way to shipping and can only be lowered on special request.

I was fortunate to be able to take part, embarking at Hobb's Point, where the Mayor of Pembroke, Cllr Pauline Waters and guests were boarding *Dashing* a vintage motor cruiser owned by Mr John Allen-Mirehouse.

Aboard one of the Society's boats *General Picton*, we made our way to Crow Pool, at the mouth of the Pembroke River, to join the flotilla of boats which had assembled there, waiting for the tide to rise high enough for the voyage up river. Leading the way and issuing orders was David James in the pilot boat *Supporter* closely followed by *Dashing* at the front of the convoy.

Next came *Cresswell Star* carrying a colourful Henry VII (alias Malcolm Powell in a costume borrowed from



Pictured at the opening of the Maritime Heritage Centre are, left to right, Society members David Reid, Tony Ward, David James and Brian King with Pembroke Dock Mayor Peter Kraus.

Pembroke Museum) while the rest of the flotilla, 27 vessels in all, fell in line astern carefully following buoys which mark out the twisting narrow channel with its myriad of hidden shoals and mud banks.

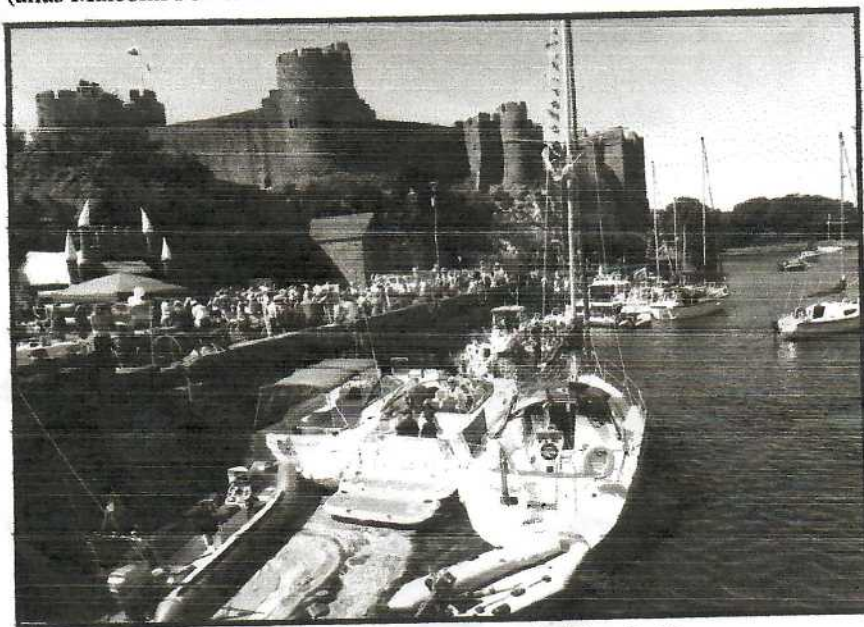
It was a beautiful trip in glorious sunshine, accompanied even by music from a small boat whose crew played guitars along the way. The Maritime Volunteer Service followed in the rear in case anyone got into difficulties.

At last we reached the barrage and sailed through the lowered gate to the applause of well-wishers to behold a marvellous view of the castle rising magnificently above the water.

A large crowd had assembled on the South Quay to greet us as we disembarked. First ashore was the Mayor of Pembroke who made her speech to proclaim that she had exercised her right to navigate the river into this ancient seaport.

There was a wonderful, festive atmosphere on the quayside as large crowds enjoyed the sunshine and the spectacle, the songs of the Vagrant's Crew and other entertainment.

• If you would like to volunteer to help in the work of the WWMHS – whether as a boat builder, sailor or steward at the Museum (no previous experience needed) or if you would like to join in next year's rally contact David James on 01646 683764, website address www.wwmhs.org.uk or email wwmhs@hotmail.co.uk.



Crowds line the quayside for the River Rally.

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