

# The new age of sail

*Moves to build a lug-rigged sail training ship for Scotland are under way, reports Tim Loftus*



**P**ortessie, 1903: a sleek black fishing boat slid into the waters of the Moray Firth, her towering masts and vast efficient lugsails complement the powerful hull to create an icon from the age of sail.

*Muirneag* (meaning ‘darling girl’ in Gaelic) was built as a Zulu, a craft named by Scottish fishermen in their respect for the bravery of the African warriors then engaged in a bloody colonial war. At the time of *Muirneag*’s launch the British herring fishery was the largest in the world and the Scottish Zulu represented the cutting edge of working sail.

Steam and then internal combustion were soon to supplant sail in the fishing industry, but the *Muirneag* under her hard-driving skipper, Sandy Macleod, sailed on into the 1940s, regularly beating the steamers and achieving legendary status.

Around 1945, at the age of 80, Macleod took the *Muirneag* to sea for the last time. She was broken up for fence posts, but not before Stornoway dentist George Macleod measured and recorded her dimensions, producing an exquisite set of plans. It is this set of plans that became the

seed of a plan to build a new *Muirneag* for the modern era.

Muirneag na Mara (SCIO) was formed to revive traditional boatbuilding skills, facilitate youth training and apprenticeships, provide sail training and tall ship racing, be a base for citizen-led marine science and bring people closer to Scotland’s maritime story on board a living piece of nautical history.

As a traditional boatbuilder I am acutely aware of the tenuous position of Britain’s maritime heritage. Traditional boatbuilding has been designated ‘Red endangered’ on UNESCO’s skills list, which in turn places all our historic vessels at risk. Ageing ships with a lack of skilled shipwrights is a bad combination.

Muirneag na Mara will address this decline with apprenticeship schemes due to run for the entire build. Trainees will be working under the tutelage of skilled shipwrights and learning the entire range of skills required to recreate *Muirneag*.

This will begin in the forest with careful selection of trees. Native oak (for framing and centreline), larch for

hull planking and Douglas fir for decks and masts. These were the mainstay timbers for Scottish boatbuilding and are still appropriate today, although the larch in particular needs to be very carefully chosen.

There have been a number of disastrous restorations involving substandard domestic larch. The causes of this decline in quality are unclear, but high growth rates associated with hybridised strains seem to produce less durable timber than those harvested 100 years ago. Currently we are selecting larch on appearance (dark colour, narrow, well-defined sap band, few knots), density (heavy and hard), smell (strong and resinous) and provenance (who planted it, where and when).

We are looking for sustainability; well-managed forests, windblown trees, low transport mileage etc. are prime considerations. A good example was a stand of ancient larch on Woodland Trust land at Migdale. These were trees being felled as part of a management plan, with very low impact extraction and only 50 miles from the boatyard. We have our own sawmill which allows us total control over the final processing of selected logs.

Apprentices will be involved in the timber processing before being introduced to the technical side of lofting (full-size drawing), framing, planking, decking, caulking, spar and block making, fit-out and systems engineering.

Once built, *Muirneag* will enter an operational phase and begin taking people to sea. It is hoped some of our apprentices will stay either with the ship or with local businesses able to offer their services to Scotland’s maritime heritage projects.

Muirneag na Mara is currently fundraising. The total project budget is £1.8 million and the charity is working hard to achieve this in a challenging economic climate. We remain confident that funding will be forthcoming and that the physical build can begin in the next two years.

[www.muirneag.org](http://www.muirneag.org)

*Tim Loftus is a traditional boatbuilder and lead shipwright for the Muirneag.*