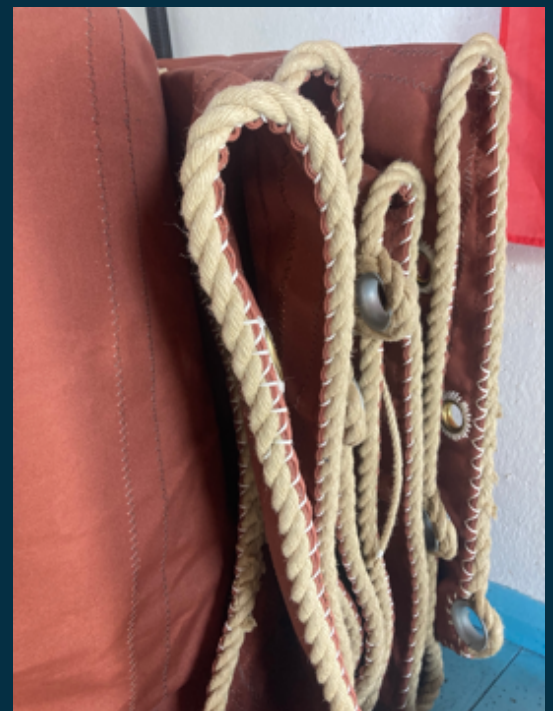


Bringing Your Dreams to Life: the story of a traditional sailmaker

The design, creation and functionality of a sail may be regarded as the most important component of a sailing ship. It may sound obvious but can often be overlooked. The sails enable the speed and the movement of a vessel in a sustainable and environmentally sound way. The sheer power of a sail catching wind is absolutely extraordinary and is mastered through choosing the appropriate materials and shape. Not only is sailing a fantastic way to travel at speed and not damage the environment, but sails on a tall ship are also visually stunning and give a serious nod to the preservation of our island heritage. If you think about it, without the sail the Pelican would simply just be a fishing trawler.

The Oxford Dictionary defines a sailmaker as ‘a person who makes, repairs, or alters sails as a profession’ and although that is the case, over the years the manufacturing of sails has changed due to technological advances and the changing world in general. Our tall ships the Pelican of London and Fridtjof Nansen still have sails made by a traditional sailmaker, supporting and maintaining real craftsmanship, which some of today’s and future generations may not consider a viable career choice.





Steve the sailmaker, makes the sails for TS Pelican and Fridtjof Nansen. He was made aware of the craft by his father, who worked in the old shipyard in the area. This allowed him to see and familiarise himself with how the industry worked. Recently we visited his HQ, an unforgettable experience because Steve wants to protect and preserve the trade.

Situated in the South East of England at what feels like the end of the world you will find a cabin with a green door and green windows where the sailmaker is located. Steve singlehandedly runs his sail-making business designing and creating sails for tall ships and other vessels with a beautiful view of the sea in a calm secluded area of England. He has been in the profession since 1988.

Sail-making is without a doubt an art. All sails are handmade, hand-stitched, and made to bespoke order! It takes a huge amount of hard work and manual labour to make them, and every sail is unique, slightly different, and tailored to perfectly match the vessels. Steve draws out how he imagines the sails to look - which is incredibly skilful and truly a work of art. When asked where he starts he replied: “you have to dream up how to do it”!



Since Steve has been in the industry he has watched it change: “it used to be a single-handed person, like me, making sails in a traditional sailing loft, like this one, but it has become more computerised and corporate as the years have progressed – especially in the past 20 years”. Steve added: “This is a traditional sail loft, this is how they were years ago – this is the real thing”! Steve continues to maintain the traditions of his profession by using a drawing pad, and a tape measure and going aboard the ships to measure up. Although Steve does believe that technological advances have helped the trade become easier, he believes it may have lost something but can’t quite pinpoint what that something is.

Steve struggled at first to decide on his favourite part of the job, saying that he enjoys the whole lot. But after further thought he added: “Pinning it out to shape it, although this can be slightly nerve-racking, seeing it out all in one is really enjoyable” and he really enjoys the hand and rope work.



The visit to Steve's sail loft was truly magical and we are honoured that he makes the sails for our tall ships. His passion for maintaining the traditions of the industry is transparent and remarkable: heritage has not been lost. Sail-making may be a career you have not really considered but it should definitely be if you are interested in ships, sewing, planning, creating, handwork, sailing, textiles, detail, physics (the list goes on), and seeing your dreams come to life.



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FUTURE