

## VERNACULAR HARBOURS

Some among us have asked for clarification of the term "vernacular harbour". A sharp, concise definition is not possible, as is so often the case in our subject(s), but a brief historical review shows where we have come from and will help us to understand the usefulness of the term, however imprecise it may seem.

The term "vernacular" has occurred as a noun and adjective in both the UK and USA since the 18th century; its etymology arises from Latin "vernaculus" - of the common people. In academia, the term has been used mostly by architectural historians, to refer to domestic, small-scale, functional (and usually anonymous) buildings rather than public or monumental buildings (which are often the work of named architects). Thus, the term applies to a collection of characters, often extended to include "built with local materials" or "low technology". From its initial usage by historic buildings people it has been extended to, e.g. "vernacular boats" and "vernacular harbours".

The problem with such loose, imprecise definitions is that often a single new observation, or the discovery of a previously unknown document, can cause uncertainty as to the classification of a building or boat. This has led some to avoid the term "vernacular", using instead such phrases as "primitive/peasant houses" or "working boats". These alternatives are in many respects more unsatisfactory than the phrase they replace; can leisure craft not be included among "vernacular boats"?

And so to VERNACULAR HARBOURS: we are concerned with harbours that have served fisher folk, commercial trade on a small scale and sometimes as ferry terminals. We are not interested in harbours of refuge capable of sheltering large fleets of naval vessels; major commercial ports of the industrial revolution; or prestige, ceremonial ports. For our purposes VERNACULAR HARBOURS are:-

- local rather than state initiatives,
- small-scale,
- low-technology,
- often built with local materials or local construction techniques,
- not usually the work of named civil engineers,
- often show evidence of piece-meal development, as funds accumulate.

The above list does not exclude harbours with occasional industrial products such as bollards or cranes bearing the name of a foundry; harbour lights; or simple "steamer piers" which may be little more than improved natural rock skerries.

Difficult judgements may be required on occasion but, however "soft-edged" the definitions may seem, they will mostly serve our purposes. The very fact of their local characteristics provides us with a wide range of typological material with which to assess functional characteristics.