

Incarnations of Butley Priory Refectory: Boats in the Barn

by Valerie Fenwick

In 2017 Sir Edward Greenwell most generously loaned me the enormous Abbey Barn in Butley to house a group of ethnographic boats. They were the remnants of the Exeter Maritime Museum collection, suddenly dispersed in an online auction after the owner was declared bankrupt.¹ It was planned as a temporary measure to provide time for an appropriate permanent home to be found. However, in the interim a ‘pop-up’ museum was created. In the Barn craft, ranging from primitive reed boats to an Irish currah, a Kenyan ambach raft, a Pacific proa and a seagoing basket boat from Vietnam, could be seen by invited local groups and maritime archaeologists from the University of Southampton. For the next two years there was an opportunity for visitors to have hands-on contact with rare survivors, and for students to experiment with the latest recording techniques as well as using traditional tape and plumb bob.



Clockwise: Tuvalu canoe arriving; Portuguese valboeiro; Kiribati proa; Chinese sampan.

At the same time preparation of the display provided an opportunity to reveal details of the structure normally hidden under curtains of cobwebs and layers of dirt. It is 70 feet long and 22 feet wide, with battered walls a patchwork of materials, repairs and alterations. Sixteen assorted columns had been inserted to support a later upper floor, and made manoeuvring the boats tricky.