**Edward Carter Preston's Figurehead of Admiral Nelson**

Edward Carter Preston (1886-1965) worked prolifically as a sculptor in the Merseyside region during the first half of the twentieth century. He was associated in particular with the production of sculpture for the new Anglican Liverpool Cathedral and was also a highly successful medallist, receiving commissions for plaques and medals from the British government during the First World War.[[1]](#footnote-1) However Carter Preston’s output ranged far wider than those works that made him famous; despite being a fine art sculptor he also accepted commissions which led to him creating maritime sculpture and even wooden toys.

Despite the diversity of projects undertaken by Carter Preston, characteristics in evidence across his *oeuvre* are technical virtuosity, innovative application of techniques and experimentation with unusual media. For example, he embraced materials such as plywood which, at the period, was associated more with industrial practices. It might even be posited that Carter Preston’s acceptance of unusual commissions may have spurred his experimentation with materials and new technologies. It seems that the demands of a new job sometimes forced ingenuity. Indeed, it will be argued here that the commission of the carved ship figurehead depicting Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson for HMS Conway (Fig. 1) encouraged Carter Preston to experiment with materials and practices not normally employed by a fine art sculptor.

HMS Conway was established in 1859 by the Mercantile Marine Training Association as a training ship or ‘school’ for the Merchant Navy. Three ships were used over the life of the school: the ‘Jackass Frigate’, HMS Conway (1857-1861; launched 1832); the ‘Southampton-class’ sailing frigate, HMS Winchester (1861-1875; launched 1822) and HMS Nile, a ‘second-rate’ naval warship (1875-1953; launched 1839). All three ships were named ‘Conway’ once in the role of the HMS Conway training ship. From the beginning of the endeavour it was intended that the school should be moored off Rock Ferry in the River Mersey, Birkenhead, in order to train naval officers. Before the 1850s, the British Merchant fleet was often staffed by untrained and ill-disciplined individuals. The Merchant Shipping Acts of 1851 and 1854 were initiated to ensure that crews of ships were thereafter comprised of trained staff who had sat examinations in academic and nautical subjects. Many merchant fleet owners feared further changes in legislation and so certain ship owners in several main ports of the UK formed the Mercantile Marine Service Associations (MMSA). The Liverpool branch of the MMSA was one of the earliest to be formed and decided in 1857 to provide a school ship specifically to train boys for a career in the British Merchant fleet. This endeavour gave rise to HMS Conway.[[2]](#footnote-2)

From the arrival of the first vessel whose role it was to be the school HMS Conway, the two consecutive ships were based in the River Mersey. The final ship (originally HMS Nile) was active as HMS Conway for the longest period. This ship remained in operation at Rock Ferry from 1875 until she received extensive renovations in 1937, after which she recommenced her role as the floating school. The renovations were undertaken at Cammell Laird shipyard in Liverpool by a Mr. Dickie for the company of L. Holt and Alfred Holt & Co. with the total cost amounting to £20,000.[[3]](#footnote-3)

As an important part of the renovation process, Edward Carter Preston was commissioned by the Conway Club of former cadets to design and make a replacement figurehead for the vessel.[[4]](#footnote-4) The original figurehead, a bust of Lord Nelson which had adorned the ship since her launch as HMS Nile in 1839, had been destroyed in a collision between HMS Conway and SS Bhamo in 1918. Carter Preston was requested to supply again the image of Nelson. However, he designed the figurehead as a full figure rather than a bust, and his plans were approved by the Conway Club in 1937. The figurehead was unveiled by former HMS Conway Cadet, the Poet Laureate, John Masefield O.M., on 11 September 1938 at a special ceremony at the Pierhead landing stage in Liverpool.[[5]](#footnote-5)

As a carved ship’s figurehead, Carter Preston’s Nelson is highly traditional in appearance; it is figurative, made out of the expected material of wood and, finally, painted. However the figurehead was constructed in an era when Admiralty ships were made increasingly of steel and with fewer examples of craftsmanship in areas such as woodwork. Even though the tradition of incorporating figureheads on ships was retained in the twentieth century by special vessels such as training ships like HMS Conway,[[6]](#footnote-6) the fact that HMS Conway received such a figurehead in 1938 by a sculptor with a national reputation makes it an interesting anomaly. In addition, there are comprehensive photographic records of the creation of the figurehead held at the Carter Preston Archive at Liverpool Hope University and, perhaps uniquely, there are extant film recordings of its making and unveiling that are available publicly on websites such as Youtube.com. These records of the processes of making the sculpture, and of its unveiling ceremony, are extremely valuable, as most other ship figureheads are older and many were made by anonymous artisans. Ship figurehead historian, Michael Stammers, comments that makers of figureheads were often transients who were sometimes ‘apprenticed as cabinetmakers and joiners and circulated in the woodworking trades making furniture, working at house carpentry, etc.’[[7]](#footnote-7) Therefore, even though Carter Preston’s figurehead is atypical because it was made by a fine artist, its notoriety contributed to the valuable accumulation of information about the making of figureheads as it encouraged the documentation of processes surrounding them.

The archival and film records also illustrate the unusual and creative solutions adopted by Carter Preston to solve the technical problems encountered in the making of the figurehead. As mentioned previously, throughout his career Carter Preston displayed a propensity for finding new uses for materials, and was alert to the potentialities of unusual woods, papers or stones. For instance, when wood was in short supply during both world wars, Carter Preston looked to surprising sources for supplies and it is this resourcefulness and redoubtable creativity that makes him a fascinating subject of study.

During World War One Carter Preston used the material of plywood in order to be able to continue creating sculptures when other wood was scarce. Although this material had already been embraced by industries such as automotive manufacturing, it was an unusual choice of wood for a fine artist. Not only was the choice of wood unexpected but, as will be discussed, the sculptures that he made during this First World War period were constructed in a technically-experimental manner using plywood layers. This essay argues that his experiments with plywood during the First World War were possibly instructive for his later practice when making the figurehead of Nelson. During the Second World War, when materials were again scarce, his ingenuity became apparent once more. For the sculpture *Eve*, c.1940, [Fig. 2] Carter Preston obtained a wooden barrel from a domestic mangle as a way of having access to a block of wood for carving. The resulting figure of a woman is remarkably assured and sensitive, and displays Carter Preston’s skill at carving directly into the material and responding to the natural grain of the wood. As is typical of other early-to-mid twentieth-century direct carvers such as Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth or Eric Gill he allowed the material to dictate the form and did not attempt to dominate the form himself. As Kenneth Towndrow in *The Studio* magazine stated of Carter Preston’s *Figure in Yew* (n.d.), it is ‘a most interesting piece of direct carving with a subtle use of the grain in the wood’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Clearly, this comment applies equally to *Eve*, as does Towndrow’s observation that the sculptor’s imaginative uses of media throughout all periods of his career ‘has taught some of us that the spirit of adventure is the virtue lacking in the applied arts today. He is rarely to be visited without the discovery of metals, woods, glass, stone or plaster revealing an answer to some question put with a vigour and freshness of imagination that in itself has the rare urgency of genius’.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In 1918 Carter Preston won the competition to create the Next-of-Kin plaque to be given to relatives of those who died in the First World War, his design selected from among 800 entries. Carter Preston had previously shown interest in this area by entering a 1916 competition to design the Battle of Jutland Bank medal, in which he came second.[[10]](#footnote-10) Following his 1918 success he was commissioned on many other occasions to create plaques, medals and much relief work in sculpture, for example, the Distinguished Flying Cross in 1918.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The largest body of work made by Carter Preston was at Liverpool Anglican Cathedral (1904-78), for which he was the lead sculptor from 1930 until 1961, working with architect Giles Gilbert Scott. This resulted through his friendship with Dean Dwelly, the driving force behind the cathedral building plans.[[12]](#footnote-12) For this engrossing project, Carter Preston made around sixty sculptures as well as reliefs and memorials. Indeed, one suggests that the fact that this immense endeavour kept Carter Preston occupied for most of his career might is partly the reason why he is not well known outside of Merseyside.

For his work at the cathedral Carter Preston was given authority largely to design whatever he thought was appropriate, and his work on the project often showed a Modernist tendency towards linear and elongated forms. These tendencies were probably honed by working alongside his brother-in-law, sculptor George Herbert Tyson Smith (1883-1972), whose work was ‘marked by an enthusiasm for Egyptian and early Greek archaic sculpture’, and whose ‘flat, linear hard-edged style’ also bore the influence of the work of Gill and Ivan Meštrović.[[13]](#footnote-13) The linearity of Carter Preston’s style might further have been refined as a result of his relief work on First World War medals which exhibited ‘a clarity of form not blurred by overhandling’.[[14]](#footnote-14) It is certainly evident that Carter Preston had a propensity for working in a linear manner even when carving three-dimensional forms in the round.

Whilst the First World War gave Carter Preston the opportunity to design the medals commissioned by the British government, the same period also saw him conceive a novel form of art work which he termed ‘plychrome’ figures. An example of this is his *Joffre and the Gallic Cock,* c. 1915, held at the Special Collections and Archives within Liverpool Hope University [fig. 3]. Carter Preston’s new process for making plychrome sculptures came about due to a war-time shortage of materials, as occurred again later in his career with the sculpture *Eve,* discussed above [fig. 2]. These representational figures were made by cutting out flat shapes in plywood with a jigsaw, sandwiching them together and turning them upright so that they formed a rounded three-dimensional sculpture. The resulting form was then painted and presented on a flat plinth. The sculptures often depicted caricatures of military or political figures, such as Prime Minister David Lloyd George, imaginary animals such as *Gryphon,* or literary characters such as ‘Una and the Lion’ from Edmund Spenser’s poem *The Faerie Queene* (1590 and 1596).

The technique of laminating together planks or layers of wood was not new. Indeed, furniture construction before the twentieth century often exhibited lamination.[[15]](#footnote-15) However, such furniture usually comprised horizontal layers of wood rather than vertical layers as were used by Carter Preston. The vertical orientation of the layers in Carter Preston’s designs for the sculptures and toys is unusual and therefore necessitates discussion. One suggests that Carter Preston employed vertical layers because most of the sculptures or toys were relatively small in size: often around twelve inches high and five inches wide. If he had constructed a sculpture of this size out of horizontal layers he would have been required to create many small, complex and irregular shapes that needed to be layered on top of one another. Instead, because he chose to orientate the layers vertically, these pieces of wood were much larger, less intricate and fewer in number, and therefore much easier to construct.

A detailed examination of the construction of *Joffre and the Gallic Cock* [fig. 3] illustrates the technique more clearly. The vertically-orientated layers of wood appear as faint lines on the face and hat of Joffre. Such sculptures were ‘toy-like in form but sophisticated in subject-matter’, easily made and affordable to buy: ‘The materials were inexpensive and the sculptures [were] priced at between two shillings and five pounds’.[[16]](#footnote-16) In June 1915 an exhibition of these sculptures was held at the Fine Art Society in Bond Street, London and its catalogue contained a foreword by J.G. Legge, Liverpool Corporation’s Director of Education.[[17]](#footnote-17) He had been influential in Liverpool’s Sandon Society, which was the organisation that arranged for Roger Fry’s Post-Impressionist exhibition to travel from London to Liverpool: the first time that Post-Impressionism had been seen outside the capital. It is apparent from his introduction that Legge was familiar with avant-garde art and open to innovation. He stated that Carter Preston was ‘one of several Liverpool artists working out their own ideas of art and craftsmanship in complete freedom from academic, bureaucratic or communal control, the A.B.C. of disappointing Art’.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Legge also described the process behind Carter Preston’s conceptualisation of the new form of sculpture during winter 1914:

Mr. Preston began, as did many others, by cutting out figures in silhouette in readiness for the Christmas market… Then, as the artist worked on, he became dissatisfied with the simple silhouette, and conceived the idea of applying silhouette to silhouette until he should build up a solid figure. Shortly before Christmas he produced the group of *Una and the Lion*… and by April he had so elaborated his technique as to be capable of executing such groups as that of *Heligoland*… Then the irresistible call for portrait studies and caricatures of a topical interest led him within the last two months to vary his technique again… Rarely is the opportunity afforded of witnessing so full a development in so short a time.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Amongst several others, the exhibition was reviewed by Frank Rutter in *The Sunday Times*, who praised repeatedly the use of colour and the innovative technical concept behind the sculptures on display. He referred to ‘the rare beauty of colour, the vivacity of characterisation, the monumental sense of design, and the fundamental brainwork of conception and invention’. ‘In each of these figures, whether caricature or allegory, there is a wealth of happy imagery and symbolism’, Rutter continued.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Joseph Sharples has argued that, possibly as a result of his 1915 exhibition, Carter Preston was asked later to design furniture and toys for wounded soldiers for the Lord Roberts Memorial Workshops in Liverpool.[[21]](#footnote-21) However, there is some debate about the timescale of when Carter Preston began working at the Lord Roberts Workshops, for Bampton writes that it was while Carter Preston was working at the Workshops that he developed his plychrome figures.[[22]](#footnote-22) This debate is important as it is not clear whether Carter Preston conceived of the statuettes as a result of his work with the rehabilitated servicemen, or if he had previously developed the technique and later used it to advantage in the workshops. The origination of the workshops was in 1915, as was Carter Preston’s exhibition of plychrome statuettes at the Fine Art Society, and so it is unclear which occurred first. The workshops began first in Fulham, London, and spread later to other towns and cities in the U.K. In total, eleven of these workshops existed around the United Kingdom providing sheltered employment for around 3,500 wounded veterans.[[23]](#footnote-23) If the veterans had suffered disabling injuries they were offered opportunities to create objects that could both aid in their rehabilitation and be offered for sale. When working under the guidance of Carter Preston, for instance, the servicemen found it easier to conduct the process of sandwiching together plywood shapes to make the plychrome sculptures and toys, rather than carving or modelling the forms. The resulting objects were then sold as inexpensive toys; the process became self-financing and was an excellent motivational or therapeutic system. As Reznick has written, this organisation ‘promoted the idea that semi-skilled work was valuable in social terms as a means to reconstitute disabled persons’ sense of individual and communal worth. Moreover… the workshops were economically productive environments that attracted customers and extended the market for items made by retrained disabled men’.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Carter Preston’s 1915 exhibition and his experiences of working at the Lord Roberts Memorial Workshops are important events that relate to his later work on the 1938 figurehead of Nelson for HMS Conway. It seems that the technique of applying silhouette to silhouette, or lamination, was revived and used in order to solve technical problems in the making of the figurehead over twenty years later. At first he had developed this method out of necessity, either due to lack of resources or in consideration of wounded soldiers’ abilities but, at any event, it once again became an important point of reference when the large size of his figurehead commission presented difficulties.

By the time that Carter Preston was commissioned to make the figurehead of Admiral Nelson in 1937, HMS Conway (formerly HMS Nile) was almost 100 years old and was very much in need of a general re-fit. Although the original plans of the ship in the Surveyor of the Navy records in the National Archives do not illustrate the intention to include a figurehead, an image of Admiral Nelson had in fact been sited on the prow from the beginning of the vessel’s career until its loss in the aforementioned collision in 1918. This first figurehead was in honour of Nelson’s victory in the Battle of the Nile of 1798 and, as with more conventional with figureheads of Nelson, it was carved as a bust.[[25]](#footnote-25) David Pulvertaft states that figureheads of Nelson more often took the form of a bust rather than a full figure because ‘the bust was preferred as the absence of arms reduced the cost - a factor always at the forefront of the Navy Board’s thinking!’[[26]](#footnote-26) The carver of the original bust is unknown and was probably an artisan from the Plymouth shipyard in which she was built.[[27]](#footnote-27) Apart from the loss of this first figurehead of Nelson in the collision in 1918, it was fortunate that HMS Conway was otherwise undamaged and the ship remained in naval service; however she lacked a figurehead for the next twenty years.

As part of the 1937 re-fit of the ship, the process of deciding on the sculptor is unknown as almost all the records relating to HMS Conway have now been lost. However, as the vessel was based in Merseyside, Carter Preston was a logical choice as a carver for he was widely known to be the lead sculptor for the developing and prestigious Liverpool Cathedral. His reputation as a designer of wartime medals was also something of which the people of Liverpool were proud.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Once Carter Preston was given the task of creating a new representation of Admiral Nelson to replace the lost original on HMS Conway, he produced a sketch and a small model for the committee to examine, and his design was also described in *The Cadet* magazine in April 1938.[[29]](#footnote-29) Carter Preston chose to depict Nelson ‘in the uniform of a rear admiral: his rank at the Battle of the Nile. He is wearing the star of the Order of the Bath and the gold medal presented after the Battle of Cape St. Vincent. While the upper half of the carving is fairly traditional, the lower half is of modern appearance with the naval crown and Nelson’s famous signal at Trafalgar’.[[30]](#footnote-30) The signal was ‘England expects every man to do his duty’, a text which usually accompanied figurehead depictions of Nelson. Sometimes it appeared as a ribbon on the trailboard that linked the figurehead to the prow, as occurred with the figurehead on HMS Nelson which was built in Woolwich in 1814.[[31]](#footnote-31) However, Carter Preston chose to wind the signal around the lower portion of Nelson’s body as if it were a strap lashing Nelson’s legs to the prow. Nelson is also shown carrying a telescope in his right hand, with his left sleeve empty as a result of the partial amputation of this arm in 1797 during the Battle of Santa Cruz de Tenerife in the Canary Islands. The incorporation of a telescope and the empty sleeve are seen regularly on other figureheads of Nelson, for example, on HMS Horatio, built at Bursledon c.1807, and HMS Nelson, built at Woolwich in 1814. Interestingly, Carter Preston accurately shows Nelson as retaining both his eyes. Nelson famously lost the sight in one eye in 1794 whilst battling the French at Corsica but did not lose the eye itself. HMS Horatio’s figurehead of Nelson from c.1807 depicts Nelson with one eye closed[[32]](#footnote-32) as indeed many images in general popular culture were wont to do.

To finalise the design, Carter Preston undertook a great deal of detailed research, which resulted in a more realistic representation of Nelson’s face and costume than may be seen with some of the earlier figureheads of the Admiral. He was given access to Nelson’s uniform from the Battle of Trafalgar which was, and is still on display in the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, London.[[33]](#footnote-33) He studied the uniform in order to replicate its details and colours. He was also given access to Nelson’s life mask[[34]](#footnote-34) at the National Maritime Museum and from this he made a replica now owned by the sculptor’s descendants. This replica in turn enabled him to create a twice life-size carved model of Nelson’s full head in plaster, c. 1937, which is now on permanent display in the Conway Chapel, Birkenhead Priory, Birkenhead [fig. 4].

The Conway Chapel is a memorial museum to HMS Conway, whilst still being a functional religious chapel. It inhabits the scriptorium at Birkenhead Priory, which is the oldest building on Merseyside. The museum contains artefacts and memorabilia from the ship and is maintained by the Friends of HMS Conway. This carved plaster model of Nelson’s head depicts the man as bearing strong, commanding features which are especially visible when viewing the sculpture from the side. As a reporter commented on the occasion of the unveiling of the figurehead, Carter Preston’s research into Nelson’s appearance ‘confirmed his own mental picture of a man with a powerful chin, heavy eyebrows, and a full though rather sensual mouth’.[[35]](#footnote-35) From creating the twice life-size plaster model of Nelson’s head, Carter Preston later made the head of the final sculpture twice the size again.

Having completed the necessary research for his figurehead of Nelson, and his design having been approved, Carter Preston began to construct the sculpture. He decided to make it out of teak so that it would ‘outlive both the ship and its inhabitants’.[[36]](#footnote-36) Indeed his aim has been fulfilled as the figurehead is still in existence today at the Royal Navy’s Courts Martial Centre, HMS Nelson, in Portsmouth whereas the ship itself has been lost since it was grounded accidentally in the Menai Strait, North Wales, in 1953 [fig. 1].[[37]](#footnote-37) It was however unusual to construct a ship figurehead out of teak as most figureheads were made out of yellow pine from the beginning of the nineteenth century.[[38]](#footnote-38) Carter Preston’s choice resulted in a sculpture that weighed two and a half tons once carved, and reaches nearly fourteen feet high.

A major problem facing Carter Preston at the beginning of the process was that a block of teak of the size required was impossible to acquire. Large blocks of wood had become scarcer since around 1875 and like other sculptors, carvers of figureheads, and even builders,[[39]](#footnote-39) Carter Preston had to work with several pieces of wood instead of one large block. Rather than compromise his design, Carter Preston revived his earlier technique of lamination which had been perfected with the plychrome figures during World War One. On this occasion he glued together multiple three-inch planes of teak rather than plywood so that, together, they formed the necessary large size [fig. 5]. The final block, comprised of the amalgamated planes, weighed four tons before real carving began.[[40]](#footnote-40)

There is some precedent for using more than one block of wood for a figurehead. For example, Stammers relates that ‘large or complicated figureheads would be made up from several timbers and some had detachable arms which could be removed before setting sail’.[[41]](#footnote-41) Richard Hunter, a historian of ship figureheads and archivist, also states that lamination for ship figureheads by the 1880s had ‘become a relatively standard thing and there were quite a few traditional ship figurehead carvers in Liverpool at the time who would have worked in that way who could have acted as examples.’[[42]](#footnote-42) However, not being a shipyard carver, it is uncertain as to whether Carter Preston made contact with them or was aware of their methods. However it is interesting to speculate whether Carter Preston could perhaps even have taken inspiration from the traditional local carvers when working on his 1915 plychrome sculptures. Certainly, he returned with the figurehead of Nelson to the lamination practice used with the First World War plychrome figures made at the Lord Roberts Workshops. Therefore it is likely that his technique with the figurehead was employed as a result of his awareness of the possibilities offered by his previous experiences with the method.

It is ironic that, on an occasion when someone criticised his earlier war medals for being “too medallic”, his response was “the effect was obtained with planes not lines,”[[43]](#footnote-43) as were his plychrome figures of circa 1915 and indeed the figurehead of Nelson. Thinking in and utilising planes and, in some cases, sandwiching them together, seems to be a key characteristic of Carter Preston’s *oeuvre*. As early as 1927 this was understood, as George Whitfield commented in the *Liverpool Diocesan Review*: ‘In his modelling, Preston works his clay… in order that the planes may be retained as precisely as possible.’[[44]](#footnote-44)

The figurehead was carved in Carter Preston’s studio at 88 Bedford Street, Liverpool; now part of the University of Liverpool.[[45]](#footnote-45) Throughout the process, Carter Preston ensured that many photographs were taken, and these records reveal the procedure of carving a ship figurehead (See fig. no. 5- Process Illustrating the Lamination). While many extant figureheads were made before the advent of photography or film, for some of those created after the invention of photography in the 1840s, photographic documentation does exist.[[46]](#footnote-46) However the archive of photographs illustrating Carter Preston’s carving of the figurehead provides an exceptionally full and clear insight into the basic construction, carving and finishing processes he employed.[[47]](#footnote-47) For example, the technical equipment that aided the carving is visible, such as a pantograph and, in some photographs, maquettes of the form in wood or clay may be seen. However, there is no visual evidence in the photographs of manuals or texts on carving figureheads that might have informed his practice and no documents of this type exist in the Carter Preston Archive at Liverpool Hope University.[[48]](#footnote-48)

The photographs illustrate the range of tools employed by the artist and these include a large wooden mallet and several different sizes of chisel to enable him to create various details such as the locks of Nelson’s hair or the braiding on his uniform. Many of the photographs expose the close relationship between the emergent wooden carving and the carved plaster model now sited in the Conway Chapel, Birkenhead [fig. 4]. Indeed, photographs that illustrate the recumbent figurehead [fig. 5] also show that the plaster model of the head is nearby in the studio for reference. The many extant photographs of the stages of carving the figurehead show the pronounced, expressionistic chisel marks in the wood which are clear to see on the unpainted form of the sculpture. The multiple images of the various stages of carving also reveal that the sculptor did not work on and complete one area of the form at a time, but that he created the form as a whole and then added more elaborate detail when he felt that he had achieved a desirable basic shape. Photographs of each stage of the process indicate that the figurehead exhibited an even level of detail all over its form at any one point in time. For example, at the stage when clear details of the uniform, such as buttons, were beginning to be described, then facial features such as eyebrows were also carved to a similar degree of verisimilitude. Indeed, Michael Stammers, an authority on the subject, indicates that this was usual for carvers of figureheads and explains the specific language that developed around the processes of carving maritime sculpture. Although carvers of more traditional, or fine art, sculptures also often worked on all parts of their form at once, Stammers indicates that the stages of carving were named and taught to maritime carvers. The first stage of the process is ‘“blocking in”, a roughing out of the outline of the figure [...]. This was followed by “bosting in”, which was the real shaping process. It involved a high level of skill because it was difficult to see the shape [...]. The last stage…was the carving-in of the small details…”chip-carving”’.[[49]](#footnote-49)

Carter Preston’s research at the National Maritime Museum into the decoration on Nelson’s uniform, and the associated heraldry and symbolism suitable for a figurehead, resulted in a high level of detail on the sculpture that was elaborated during the ‘chip-carving’ stage. The appearance of the finished polychrome sculpture was very probably the result of four coats of paint and a final varnish in order to withstand the intended maritime climate.[[50]](#footnote-50) It is typical for figureheads of Nelson that they are polychrome with naturalistic colouring of flesh, hair and garments.[[51]](#footnote-51) However, in 2015, the hands, face and hair of Carter Preston’s figurehead are painted harshly in white, and the eyebrows are a strident black, even though the coat is painted more sensitively in navy with gold detailing. Nevertheless, photographs in the Edward Carter Preston Archive at Liverpool Hope University of the figurehead that were taken soon after it was set in position on HMS Conway, indicate that the paint colour scheme was at that point in time far more subtle. Even though the photographs are in black and white, it is apparent still that the eyebrows on the figurehead, whilst dark, were not a crude black, and the face and hands were a more realistic flesh colour rather than white.

An earlier colour scheme may also be perceived from an examination of the aforementioned film footage: in particular, the film that was made when HMS Conway ran aground.[[52]](#footnote-52) In this short film, which seems to have been made by a private individual with a Super-8 camera, the face of the figurehead appears to be flesh-coloured and the hair is brown, not black. Indeed, it is typical for ship figureheads that they are repainted frequently, and often by general maintenance workers rather than by artists or conservators, depending on the esteem with which the particular work was held. Figureheads have been treated differently if used as shop advertisements, sited on ships, held in private collections, or displayed within museums. Indeed, conservator, Valerie Reich Hunt writes, ‘tobacconist figures, trade signs, weather vanes, ship figureheads, and other similar objects were often repainted as part of their ‘maintenance’… repainting was frequently done with any type of paint available.’[[53]](#footnote-53)

Although popular understanding is that figureheads were painted in colour, as indeed was usual with figureheads of Nelson, this was not always the case. As Thomas has written, ‘Usually the figureheads of deep-sea ships were painted white, thereby avoiding any accusation of idolatry or superstition [...but] small merchant ships and naval vessels usually had their figureheads painted in lifelike colours’. Warships were variously painted in white or colour but, if coloured, were ‘refreshed’ on every occasion that the ship was repainted.[[54]](#footnote-54) For Carter Preston, the opportunity to indulge in heraldry, symbolism and high colour in his work on the figurehead unites characteristics that had been evident in his work for many years. Before the First World War, as a member of the progressive Sandon Studios Society in Liverpool, he was ‘painting strongly coloured, decorative Post-Impressionist watercolours, of which some were exhibited at the Society in 1911 alongside a selection of works from Roger Fry’s Post-Impressionist exhibition in London’.[[55]](#footnote-55) After the war he moved ‘gradually from an archaic to a more classical style and often employing a rich symbolism and many literary allusions’.[[56]](#footnote-56)

Despite being the designer and maker of the figurehead, Carter Preston did not have the technical background to realise its final placement. When the time came to site the figurehead on the prow of HMS Conway it is thought that a shipwright named Mr. Taylor assisted in the placing of the figurehead.[[57]](#footnote-57) The division of labour between figurehead carvers and the shipwrights who installed them had in any case been standard practice for centuries in the yards of contractors who were charged with creating figureheads.[[58]](#footnote-58)

Once the ship’s re-fit was completed with the figurehead in place, the ‘masting ceremony’ was held in April 1938.[[59]](#footnote-59) The events were filmed for the British Pathé News broadcasts and these film clips also depict Carter Preston preparing the figurehead in his studio, and the masting ceremony itself.[[60]](#footnote-60) The film of Carter Preston carving the figurehead in his studio is a rare document indeed, as the practice of carving figureheads during the era of the moving image was dying out. Viewers are able to see Carter Preston in the act of carving with two assistants. They are all using chisels of various sizes or are shown sanding the wood. Also depicted is the sculptor measuring the figurehead using a set square and other equipment to ensure that he is adhering to the correct proportions and angles. The scenes depict two maquettes nearby in the studio that were used for guiding the process. One is a horizontal model of the figurehead, approximately twelve inches long, and the other is smaller, depicting the sited figurehead attached to a model of the ship. Both maquettes are painted in detail so that features such as Nelson’s epaulettes or medals can be observed and copied.

It is probable that the footage of the masting ceremony is even more important than the film of Carter Preston working on the figurehead. Such surviving footage of a masting ceremony during this period is extremely rare, as ship figureheads became more uncommon during the twentieth century. The film of the masting ceremony shows a parade of dignitaries processing towards HMS Conway prior to the unveiling. These include the Earl of Derby who resided near Liverpool, and the guest of honour on the occasion, Dr. John Masefield, who also led the ceremony. The film goes on to show Masefield reading from a manuscript and speaking in front of the shrouded figurehead, and then the unveiling itself as the figurehead is revealed when two curtains are drawn back. A large, respectful crowd of onlookers is visible who focus their attention on the figurehead. Finally, the ship is shown from afar, at sail with the new figurehead in place at the prow. The large crowd and the ceremonial attire of those in the procession indicate the level of importance that this event was given at the time. From the crowds in attendance it is clear that the city of Liverpool was made of aware in advance of the completion of the carving and the occasion of its unveiling. As the film was made by the Pathé news company it must also be assumed that the footage was intended for wide broadcast in cinemas during news features. The film was probably accompanied by sound originally, as Pathé films were silent until 1928 but, at the time of this footage in 1938, contained sound.

John Masefield had been a cadet on HMS Conway between 1891-94, later becoming Poet Laureate, famous for the *Salt-Water Ballads* (1902) and his children’s novel, *The Midnight Folk* (1927).[[61]](#footnote-61) Especially for the occasion, Masefield wrote a poem that was read out at the ceremony entitled ‘The New Figurehead’ which went as follows:

## Ninety nine years ago, the long-dead hands

Fitted your figurehead to lean and yearn

Vant-courier to you as you thrust your way,

Your herald in your going and return,

Seeming to search the seas for foreign lands

Seeming to brood above the burst of spray.

Long perished are those builders, and that form.

We, who are linked to you by subtle ties,

To-day re-dower you, again complete

The Life you had (for us) with head and eyes

To front the running water and the storm

And bear alike, unblinking, sun and sleet.

We give you this as dower, with our thanks,

Old Ship who cradled us and gave us friends

And sealed us to the service of the Sea.

All honour to you till that service ends,

New fo'c's'lemen to fill the dwindling ranks,

And CONWAY boys wherever ships may be.

2nd May 1939.[[62]](#footnote-62)

The poem emphasises that the act of placing the figurehead upon the ship is to ‘re-dower’. It describes what becomes a touching gesture to decorate and restore the ship as thanks to her for her role as protector and community-maker. It is as if new life is being added to the old ship as a result of the figure with its ‘unblinking’ new ‘head and eyes’. Masefield makes clear that the figurehead is knowingly anthropomorphised by the ship’s inhabitants and that they take strength from the knowledge that the figurehead confronts harsh sun and sleet at the prow before the sailors feel the effects further back in the ship. The figurehead is therefore a stoic example that instils confidence and motivation and acts as a symbol to the ship’s crew of their bond and common purpose.

Immediately following the ceremony at Pierhead, Liverpool, a service was held at Liverpool Anglican Cathedral in the company of Lord Derby of Liverpool and, of course, the many other examples of Carter Preston’s work that already adorned the walls as a result of his years of being lead sculptor there.

After the day of celebrations for the re-fit and masting ceremony, HMS Conway remained at the River Mersey fulfilling its function as a training ship for cadets. However in 1941 the ship was moved under tow to Glyn Garth mooring in the Menai Straits in Anglesey, North Wales. This was to allow more outdoor activities to take place for the cadets but it also protected the ship from bombing during World War Two when Liverpool’s waterfront came under regular attack. In 1953 there were plans to bring the ship back under tow to the Mersey but, during this process, she ran aground and was fatally damaged. As mentioned previously, rare colour film footage of this incident exists, and this allows a clear view of the exterior of the ship and, particularly, of the figurehead *in situ*.[[63]](#footnote-63)

The ship remained, decaying, at the site where she ran aground for three years, after which she caught fire in unexplained circumstances. Although the ship was lost, prescient workers thought to remove and therefore save the figurehead, and in 1974 this was sited in Portsmouth at the HMS Nelson Centre where it now exists as a public sculpture [Fig. 1]. It therefore serves as a valuable and rare example of the carving of figureheads in the twentieth century.[[64]](#footnote-64) More importantly, it is an exceptional example of a figurehead being made by an established sculptor of fine art works.

In conclusion, it is compelling that one of the last traditional carved ship figureheads, created for service within the Merchant Navy, was informed by technical solutions used for plychrome sculptures that were exhibited at the Fine Art Society in Bond Street, London, more than twenty years earlier. The concept of laminating together planes of material was adopted originally as a result of shortages of materials during the First World War. When Carter Preston again found himself to be confronted by a scarcity of material– on this occasion, teak– he gained inspiration from his former technical solution. The figurehead and the earlier plychrome figures were intended for different applications but they were deemed equally valuable to Carter Preston and the processes involved in their creation illustrate his inventiveness and irrepressible creativity.[[65]](#footnote-65) [[66]](#footnote-66)

1. It is surprising therefore that Carter Preston’s work as a sculptor is little known outside Merseyside. Very little is written on the artist. The main published source is Ann Compton (ed.) *Edward Carter Preston, 1885-1965, Sculptor, Painter, Medallist,* Exh., Cat., (Liverpool, University of Liverpool Art Gallery and Liverpool University Press, 1999). This is the scholarly catalogue to an important exhibition of Carter Preston’s work in 1999 which took place at the University of Liverpool Art Gallery. The catalogue is the best source of information on Carter Preston currently available. It mentions Carter Preston’s figurehead of Admiral Nelson from HMS Conway but no focussed research has until now been completed on this particular sculpture. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. HMS Conway website: http://www.hmsconway.org/history\_founding.html accessed 15th November 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. HMS Conway Website: <http://www.hmsconway.org/history_mersey.html>, accessed 18th January 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Conversation with Haydn Lockwood, Honorary Vice-President of the Conway Club and Trustee of the Conway Chapel, Birkenhead Priory, 23d March 2013. Contemporaneous writers also stated that the reinstatement of a figurehead and renovation of the ship was important. For example, the ‘Liverpool Correspondent’ in *The Times* newspaper in 1938 wrote, ‘Mr. Lawrence Holt told me that the Conway, and her sister ship, the Worcester, were the repositories of British sea traditions. These vessels stood for something vital in connexion with our sea life… “This, to my mind”, said Mr. Holt, “is a magnificent act of devotion by the personnel of the British Merchant Navy, and the significance of it will be far-reaching.”’ ‘Our Liverpool Correspondent’, (1938) ’New Figurehead for the Conway’ in: *The Times*, September 10 1938, p.13 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. HMS Conway website, <http://www.hmsconway.org/history_mersey.html> Accessed 27th June 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Michael Stammers, *Figureheads and Ship Carving*, (London: Chatham Publishing, 2005). Stammers writes, ‘the tradition was perpetuated into the twentieth century by… training ships.’ p.11 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cited in Arthur C. Credland, ‘Review of *Figureheads and Ship Carving* by Michael Stammers’, *The Mariner’s Mirror*, Vol. 92, No. 4, 2006, p. 533 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Towndrow, Kenneth Romney, (1947) ‘Small Sculpture in the Home’ in: *The Studio*, vol. 84, No. 654, September, p. 62 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Philip Dutton, ‘The Dead Man’s Penny: A History of the Next of Kin Memorial Plaque’, in *Imperial War Museum Review* No. 3, 1988, pp. 60-68 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For example, a Next-of-Kin medal may be viewed in the Victoria and Albert Museum’s Sculpture Collection in Room 111, Case No. DR14, and the Distinguished Flying Cross in the Imperial War Museum, London, http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30007545. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Michael Pugh Thomas, ‘A Family Perspective’, p. 15 in: Op. Cit. No. 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Edward Morris and Emma Roberts, *Public Sculpture of Cheshire and Merseyside*, (Liverpool: Public Monuments and Sculpture Association and Liverpool University Press, 2012). pp. 279-80 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Keith Sugden and Phyllis, ‘The Artist as Medallist’ in Op. Cit., No. 1, p. 43 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. S. B. Sherrill, ‘Bentwood and Lamination: Their Origins in Europe and America; Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence,’ in: *Magazine Antiques,* Vol.125, No.1, January 1984, p.80 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. S Joseph Sharples, ‘From Signwriter to Cathedral Sculptor’ in: Ann Compton (ed.) *Edward Carter Preston, 1885-1965, Sculptor, Painter, Medallist,* Exh., Cat., (Liverpool, University of Liverpool Art Gallery and Liverpool University Press, 1999), p.23 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The Fine Art Society, *Exhibition of Plychrome Models and Statuettes by E. Carter Preston,* Exhibition Catalogue, June 1915, (London, The Fine Art Society, 1915) pp. 3-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., pp. 4-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Frank Rutter, ‘The Galleries’, *The Sunday Times,* June 20, 1915, Issue 4811, p. 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Sharples, Op. Cit., No. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Maureen Bampton, *Craftsman and Client: The Official Commissions of Edward Carter* Preston, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Liverpool, University of Liverpool, 2007, p. 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. J.H. Drummond, (1952) ‘The Forces Umbrella’ in: *Royal United Services Institute For Defence Studies,* Vol. 97, Issue, 587, p.428 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Jeffrey S. Reznick, *Healing the Nation: Soldiers and the Culture of Caregiving During the Great War*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2004). p. 119 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See the early photograph of the early figurehead *in situ*: HMS Conway website, <http://www.hmsconway.org/figurehead.html>, accessed 21st September 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. David Pulvertaft, ‘Horatio Nelson. National Hero Naval Figureheads’ in: *Maritime Life & Traditions*, Issue 26, 2005, p. 64 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., p. 67 Pulvertaft writes: ‘The Admiralty files include no details of the approval of *Nile’s* original figurehead.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. When Carter Preston won the competition for the Next-of-Kin medal, he received many letters and notes of congratulation from both official organisations, such as Liverpool Town Hall, and private individuals. (Bampton, Op. Cit. 22, p.76) [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Panagiotis Konikkos, *The Carter Prestons and Tyson Smiths. An Unpublished Family Tree,* Unpublished M.Arch Thesis, (Liverpool: Liverpool John Moores University, 2014) p. 30 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Pulvertaft, Op. Cit. No. 26, p. 67 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid. p. 66 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid. p. 65 Pulvertaft writes that the carver of the figurehead from HMS Horatio ‘clearly knew that Nelson was blind in one eye, but was unaware that he had not lost the actual eye but simply the sight in it- or was this a characteristic of the nation’s hero to which the carver simply had to allude in his carving?’ The figurehead from HMS Horatio is now housed at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, London and is dated there to 1837 (UKMCS Figureheads website: <http://figureheads.ukmcs.org.uk/?p=161>), accessed April 20 2015) However Pulvertaft dates it to 1807 when the ship was launched and writes that the figurehead had been removed at some point before 1850. He also states that further work was done to the bust by famous figurehead carver, Edward Hellyer, in 1849, citing Hellyer’s estimate as evidence. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Royal Museums Greenwich Website: <http://www.rmg.co.uk/whats-on/exhibitions/nelson-navy-nation/about>, accessed 21st September 2014. Currently it is part of the ‘Nelson, Navy, Nation’ exhibition at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. National Maritime Museum Accession Number SCU0106.4 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Anonymous, ‘A Figurehead for HMS Conway’, *The Manchester Guardian,* September 10th 1938, p. 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Lockwood, Op. Cit, No. 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See the film clip of the ship ran aground at YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDoWrHT4HJM>, accessed 21st September 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. ‘For a long time elm was used but it had the disadvantage that with constant wetting it became soft and rotted… Around 1700 oak was used… The letters in the Admiralty collection which start in 1830 confirm that by that time the yellow pine was the timber which they issued… (However, unusually) the new owner of *Derwent*… wanted the figurehead to last and had it carved in teak.’ P. N. Thomas, *British Figurehead and Ship Carvers,* (Wolverhampton, Waine Research Publications, 1995), p. 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Interview with Richard Hunter, an authority on ship figureheads, 26 March 2015. Richard Hunter manages the website [www.figureheads.co.uk](http://www.figureheads.co.uk) and states that large blocks of seasoned wood became a rare commodity after 1875. This meant that even large wooden beams within houses began increasingly to be comprised of several smaller sections, whereas in previous centuries they would be constructed from one vast tree trunk. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Bampton, Op. Cit. No. 22, p. 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Stammers, Op. Cit. No. 6, p. 89 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Hunter, Op. Cit. No. 39 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Sugden and Stoddart, Op. Cit., No. 14, p. 43 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. George Whitfield, ‘Liverpool Artists’, *Liverpool Diocesan Review*, Vol. 2, 1927, p. 424 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Taryn Evans, *Edward Carter Preston. Renaissance Man*. Unpublished MA dissertation, Manchester: Manchester Polytechnic, 1989). Edward Carter Preston Archive, Special Collections and Archives, Liverpool Hope University. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Stammers, Op. Cit. No. 6, p. 77. Stammers mentions one particular carver, David Hughes of Liverpool (1847-1923), who kept a photographic record of his work (p. 92). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. These photographs are now held at Liverpool Hope University in the Edward Carter Preston Archive, Special Collections and Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Email to the author from Susan Beck, Archivist, Special Collections and Archives, Liverpool Hope University, 18 March 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Stammers, Op. Cit. No. 6, pp. 93-94 [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid., p.94 [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. The images in David Pulvertaft’s journal article, ‘Horatio Nelson. National Hero Naval Figureheads’ illustrates that polychromy was usual in depictions of Admiral Nelson. Pulvertaft, Op. cit. No. 26 [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Youtube, Op. Cit. No. 37 [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Valerie Reich Hunt, ‘Conservation of Folk Art: Shelburne Museum’s Collection and Approach’ in: Valerie Dorge and F. Carey Howlett, (eds.) *Painted Wood: History and Conservation,* (The Getty Conservation Institute, Los Angeles, 1998), p. 428 [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Thomas, Op. Cit., No. 38, p. 12 and p. 73 [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Morris and Roberts, Op. Cit., No. 13, p. 276 [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Lockwood, Op. Cit., No. 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Stammers, Op. Cit., No. 6, p. 94 [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. The erection of the figurehead authorised formal celebrations of the re-fit to occur but, indeed, celebratory ceremonies of one sort or another have been typical for centuries when figureheads were sited on ships. However, the sculptor’s friend and employer, Dean Dwelly of Liverpool Cathedral, believed that the phrase ‘masting ceremony’ was invented on the occasion of the unveiling of Carter Preston’s figurehead of Nelson. In *The Manchester Guardian* he stated that ‘There is no precedent for the use of the word but [...] the Dean [...] feels that it is suitable, it sounds well, and there is no reason why a phrase should not be coined for a special occasion’. Anonymous, Op. Cit. No. 35 British Pathé Websites, <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/new-figurehead-for-ts-conway/query/Conway>

    and [www.britishpathe.com/video/hms-conways-new-figurehead-unveiled-aka-liverpool/query/Conway](http://www.britishpathe.com/video/hms-conways-new-figurehead-unveiled-aka-liverpool/query/Conway), both accessed 21st September 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. John Masefield, *Salt-Water Poems and Ballads,* (Lenox, USA, HardPress Publishing, 2013) and John Masefield, *The Midnight Folk,* (London, Egmont Books, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. ## Cited in HMS Conway Website, [www.hmsconway.org/docs/poems.rtf](http://www.hmsconway.org/docs/poems.rtf) accessed 21st September 2014.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Youtube, Op. Cit. No. 37. The appearance of the ship is also recalled in a stained glass window in the Conway Chapel at Birkenhead Priory. The chapel functions also as a museum to HMS Conway and is run by The Friends of HMS Conway who commissioned the window. It was created by Merseyside artist, David Hillhouse. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Credland, Op. Cit. No. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. All too often maritime sculpture has been identified as ‘folk art’. However the figurehead of Admiral Nelson created for HMS Conway was designed and carved by an established fine art sculptor. Moreover, the extant archival records comprising detailed photographs of the construction of the figurehead, along with rare film footage, offer unique insights into the process of production of such sculptures. These facts, combined with the adroit use of materials shown by the sculptor, ensure that Edward Carter Preston’s figurehead of Admiral Nelson makes for a fascinating subject of study. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Thanks are due to the Friends of HMS Conway, often retired Conway cadets who conduct their own research and archiving, to Richard Hunter, an expert on ship figureheads, and to Susan Beck, Archivist of the Carter Preston Archive at Liverpool Hope University. All of these individuals aided the writing of this paper with their generous communications and assistance. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)