

Maritime's cutting edge in Cornwall

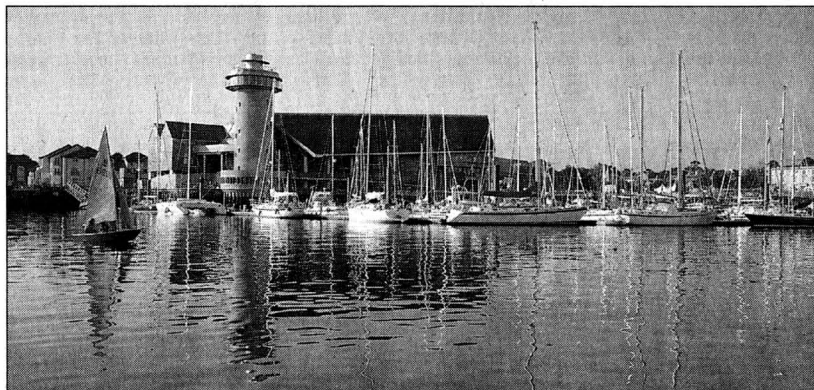
By Guy Liardet

WEST COUNTRY civic enthusiasm and the small-boat collection owned by the National Maritime Museum Greenwich have combined to create something truly remarkable on the Falmouth waterfront in the National Maritime Museum Cornwall. Supplementing the Eden Project and Tate St Ives, this ambitious £28 million development has transformed three derelict acres into a regional attraction of great significance.

Funded by the National Lottery, the South West Regional Development Agency and much local generosity, the central building is a design by the award-winning architects Long & Kentish and is wrapped around a waterside piazza that can hold up to 4,000 people.

It also has a challenging appearance — a long, slanted roof and an imposing tower. Much use has been made of oak cladding. There is a faint echo of Bilbao's Guggenheim — two of the major galleries are separated by a vast wooden wall bulging like the tumblehome of a 17th-century battleship. All is light, space, modern materials, modern technique. Notably original in design and execution, the word "museum" seems inappropriate.

Peter Cowling, the director, a former naval officer and previously director of the Royal Society of Arts, firmly states that "this is not just for boating people". Great care has been taken by Tim Gardom Associates to make the words and pictures accessible to the lay. The theme — that small boats are shaped by the lives and times of those who use them — is consistently projected, and the nature of the sea, tides, wind and weather is conveyed with imagination and humour.



The museum's Flotilla gallery, top, and the view of the museum across Falmouth harbour

But there is no doubt that it is the collection itself that holds centre stage. Greenwich was looking for an appropriate home for this world-class assembly of some 160 significant small boats and has certainly found it. Only a proportion can be shown at once and the stock will need rotation. In the gallery called "Flotilla" there are boats at floor level with their associated artefacts and others suspended in the air — these can be examined from an upper gallery equipped with audiovisual devices enabling each to be selected and explained through videotapes and voice-

overs. Particularly charming are the songs of the Brazilian fishermen in their *jangada*.

At floor level, for example, one can approach with veneration — nay, reverence — *Thunder and Lightning*, the international 14-footer owned by Peter Scott — son of the fated Antarctic explorer, war hero, naturalist, glider pilot, artist — and John Winter, inventor of the trapeze — that won the 1938 Prince of Wales Cup. Bred from two previous winners, *Thunder and Lightning*, this is an exquisitely carpentered planing dinghy, designed by the great Uffa Fox.

Next door, in another large

gallery called "Set Sail", one can see today's cutting-edge winning International 14, all hard chine glass-reinforced plastic, Kevlar sails, twin trapeze, asymmetric jib, infinitely complicated. Also on display is the actual Prince of Wales Cup.

The multimedia company New Angle has excelled itself here with a huge, noisily dramatic multi-part screen illustrating the boats on display; film of a Grand Banks fishing dory, small in a vast ocean; white water canoeing; Rodney Pattison winning his 1968 Olympic gold medal in the Flying Dutchman Superdo-

icious; calm on a river, *Water Lily*, an early 1866 steamboat; the first Mirror dinghy — sail number one — of some 300,000, and elsewhere there is an early Optimist, costing £39 — both expressive of the recent huge expansion of opportunity for the young sailor.

Though many would disagree, the world is not all about dinghy racing. There is the 13ft Wayfarer in which Frank and Margaret Dye sailed to Iceland, can you believe it? And the last whaleboat to leave Tristan da Cunha in 1961 after the volcano erupted. Te-iti-n-Ueua, a native of Tarawa in Kiribati (Gilbert Islands), has his 1975 outrigger canoe on display. There are catamarans, hydroplanes, an enormous variety.

A keynote is hands-on participation, including radio-controlled model sailing. An observable boat restoration workshop "has plenty to do", says Graham Lewis, assistant keeper of the collection. Though the world's merchantmen no longer "touch at Falmouth for orders", the view of this fine harbour from the top of the tower remains magnificent.

Cowling is full of praise for his team of young workers who have all kinds of disciplines and a "vibrant enthusiasm". He has more than 200 volunteers from all over Cornwall. There is a large car park and plans for extra "park and float" capacity.

Will it succeed? The Royal Yachting Association points to seven million Britons involved in recreational boating. We are still an island nation. Succeed? It will win prizes.

□ National Maritime Museum Cornwall in Falmouth is open Wednesday-Sunday, 10am to 5pm, for "Shake Down and Sea Trials". Entry is free. From February 19, open every day from 10am to 5pm (charging).