

More Shipbuilding Strategy

Dr Paul Stott, Strategic Maritime (UK), 17th June 2026



In 1980 when I arrived in Newcastle as a student, a trip down the River Tyne was a trip through a grimy industrial landscape. In 2026 the same trip is almost rural. Every shipbuilding yard has closed.

If you take the riverside footpath West to Scottswood, there is very little to tell you that you are treading the ground of the mighty Elswick Works, where William Armstrong built the world's navies. The Elswick Works was based around a shipyard, but it was not per se the shipbuilding that made Armstrong one of the wealthiest of UK's Victorian industrialists – it was the arms and the armour plate that generated the real wealth. The carved panel in the photograph is one of the last remaining signs that he was there at all.

What happened? The most commonly heard response to this question wheels out the spectre of Margaret Thatcher and accusations of competition based on low wages and illegal subsidies. This is at best far too simplistic. The real answer lies in the fact that shipbuilding is in a constant state of flux, but the major changes can be glacially slow – so much so that it can be hard to see the big picture.

I have loaded a paper to www.strategicmaritime.co.uk today, "Shipbuilding Strategy in the UK", which is my take on a context for UK shipbuilding strategy. I have been hesitant to load this up because I am very concerned that it is not seen in any way as a criticism of the Royal Navy – which maintains a magnificent service for the defence of our nation in very difficult budgetary circumstances. Nor should it be seen as being critical of the UK National Shipbuilding Office. It is a purely rational and objective context. If any criticism is implied it is of our national dysfunctional relationship with the sector: having once been a global dominator is something of an albatross around our neck – it makes objectivity difficult to achieve.