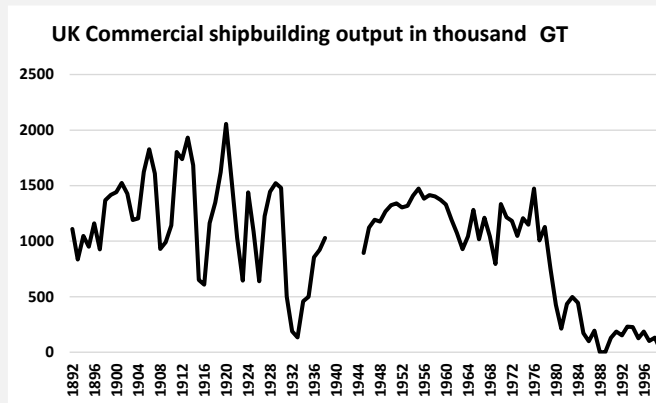


How low can you go?

Dr Paul Stott, Strategic Maritime (UK), 21st July 2026



Hello and thanks to those following.

The chart (taken from research published on www.strategicmaritime.co.uk) shows the output of commercial shipbuilding from UK shipyards between 1892 and 1998. The apocalyptic downturn in demand that accompanied the 'Great Depression' of the 1930s can be clearly seen in this data. Shipbuilding is always volatile but the collapse to virtually zero demand was something else. This, coupled to the end of the great battleship-building era after WWI, led to mass unemployment of UK's shipyard workers and the closure, in 1934, of the mighty Palmers Shipyard at Jarrow on the South Bank of the River Tyne - after more than 80 years of operation and over 1,000 ships built.

Unemployment in those times meant hunger and hardship. The skilled workers, who had undertaken apprenticeships of between 4 and 7 years, had few other employment options and two years following the closure 200 men marched the 282 miles from Jarrow to the House of Commons with a petition asking for the Government to consider directing work to re-open the yard to alleviate the hardship in shipbuilding communities. The march was supported with food, shelter, goodwill and sympathy and was one of a number of 'hunger' marches seen in UK in the 1930s. The petition was delivered and debated by MPs but without conclusion. Within a short time the situation had reversed:

rather than shipyard workers seeking assistance from the country, the country was critically dependent on the work of those men to supply the ships needed to support a war effort.

Things have changed so much since 1936 in so many ways that it is hard to draw direct lessons from these events – although I have a theory that we are still paying for the business practices of the time in the UK in terms of persistent labour relations difficulties (see the presentation “Whatever Happened to our Shipbuilding Industry” on www.strategicmaritime.co.uk)

It does raise a very important question, though. What would have happened if the slump had persisted for another five years or if those shipyard workers had had other options and left the industry for other work? Impossible to say, of course, but undoubtedly this would have shifted the balance, at least to some extent, in WWII. This begs the general question: how low can a maritime nation afford to let its shipbuilding ability decline before it becomes strategically vulnerable?