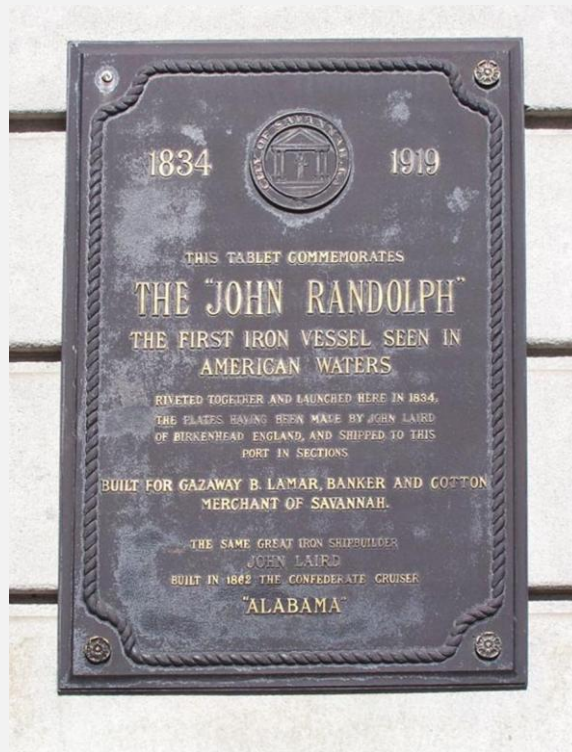


What is a shipbuilding yard?

Dr Paul Stott, Strategic Maritime (UK), 27th October 2026



Hello and thanks to those following.

In the second half of the 19th Century the larger shipyards of the River Tyne were pretty much self-sufficient. This included engine building for many but additionally, for the mightiest of them all, such as Palmers of Jarrow, it extended as far as smelting their own steel.

Specialisation started with main engines and shipyards progressed to concentrate on their core business: design, fabrication, assembly, outfitting, launching, testing and delivering ships. For the engine builder, this enabled one manufacturer to supply many shipyards, expanding opportunities whilst reducing the capital risk for the builders who no longer had to maintain their own workforce and capacity to build engines.

Why is this relevant in the context of disruption in 2026? Disrupting shipbuilding will require significant investment and my point here is to wonder whether the risk associated with that investment can be shared?

A shipyard cannot get away from the fact that it needs a launching facility: large cranes and space to lay out blocks prior to assembly. Without these it cannot be a shipbuilder. But, it does not essentially need to encompass fabrication of blocks. These could be delivered to the shipyard for assembly. The scope of a shipyard could therefore be reduced to a minimum: assemble, commission, launch, test and deliver the ship. We progressed some way in this concept in UK in the dispersed building of the Queen Elizabeth class carriers.

If the fabricator were to be automated, with facilities running 24/7, there is no reason why it could not supply fabrications to multiple shipyards. The investment in automation could thereby be shared by a cluster of shipbuilders, sharing the business risk – in the same way that engine building started to be shared over a century ago.

This business model would not only help to share the risk. It would eliminate the need for every shipbuilder to duplicate the investment needed to disrupt the industry. Supplying of steelwork to an assembler is not new. The first iron ship built in the United States, the river boat John Randolph, was put together at Savannah GA in 1834 from parts prepared and shipped by John Laird (subsequently Cammell Laird and now Balaena) in Birkenhead, UK.

This is not a key to automation as my previous two blogs were. It is entirely feasible for a single shipyard to make the investment – the aim of this blog is to wonder whether that would be the best way?