# **Transcript:** Enthusiasms of Scale - model boat clubs of Cornwall

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**\*\*\*Sound Effects taken from the model of the Duchess of Cornwall\*\*\***

This paper presents an audio narrative on leisure ‘making’ and ‘sailing’, as model boat enthusiasts research, plan, build, modify and launch model boats, as part of a wider network of model boating clubs, on coastal lakes in Cornwall.

Following the object, in this case ‘the model boat’, from its inception, to its life on the open water, reveals emotional, socio-cultural, temporal and geographical rhythms, embedding understandings of affective and emotional relationships within co-constitutive practices of leisure and placemaking.

In taking their boats on a sojourn around a boating lake the model boat owner inscribes a particular, personalised history within wider narratives of place. Journeying forth in space is also journeying backwards in time, where personal biography and understandings of nature come together and entwine. In the wake of the boats, naive pasts, situated in childhood, or lost communities, or make believe worlds, appear, surfacing between experience and imagination.

The research borrows from Hilary Geoghegan’s geographical theories of enthusiasms conceptualised by Geoghegan as, “an emotional affiliation that influences passions performances and actions in space”. This research speculates upon the shared enthusiasms of model boat builders from inside the object-oriented portholes of the model boat, in an attempt to offer an original, boat and lake-led analytical framework from which to evaluate the contemporary but declining practice of model boating within Cornwall.

Within the context of childhood studies and out-door play, Horton and Kraftl open-up a space in which they seek to, as they say “articulate both bodily, micro-geographical encounters with social-material processes and the structural, political, exclusionary social geographies which are co-constituted through them within communities.” And this is relevant for us, because model boat enthusiasts’ micro-geographies of play and social interaction necessarily involve the materiality of the places in which boating happens.

Just to briefly provide some historical-geographic relevance for those not familiar with the geography of Cornish boating lakes, the Cornish towns of Newquay, Looe, Redruth, Helston, Falmouth and Penzance all possess a boating lake that is part of their freely available, civic, leisure infrastructure. Most of these lakes directly originate from human intentions, however, the lakes at Falmouth and Newquay were (at least partially) naturally formed, when tides from the ocean deposited a natural ‘bar’ of sand between the tidal waters on one side and freshwater rivers on the other. This place, where freshwater rivers pooled up behind a naturally occurring sandy bar created an environmentally precarious inland body of water and a precious habitat for specific coastal wildlife. Civic planners at the time recognised the potential leisure benefits of these inland bodies of water and formalised their existence through building roads across the natural bars in both locations and in this way, the naturally occurring physical geography of specific coastal locations led to the creation of lakes that were subsequently adopted by the communities of Falmouth and Newquay as a location for leisure activities.

All of the boating lakes within this study, with the exception of Redruth, can variously and to differing degrees be described as currently experiencing a period of physical decline in regard to their original purposes as a ‘boating lake’ and in some instances the decline can be described as chronic. For example, the Penzance boating lake is an entirely human-made, rectangular shaped lake that is fed from a naturally occurring watercourse that runs parallel to the boating lake. The Penzance Lake has no associated boating club and it is in an advanced state of disrepair through lack of use and is currently under immediate threat of civic redevelopment into an additional parking location for the area.

Other Cornish boating lakes were formed as a direct consequence of the industrial legacies associated with the milling industries in the towns of Looe and Helston. The sites of both Coronation Lake in Helston and Millpond in Looe were originally chosen as a reservoir to store water that would control the flow of the water wheels that powered the mills in both towns. The industrial histories associated with both lakes are visibly memorialised within the surrounding historical infrastructures and place names. Millpond lake in Looe has been reduced to less than a quarter of its original size to enable the area to accommodate the increased parking associated with the shift in the Cornish tourism industry that have occurred within the town. The Millpond club contains a number of very active, vocal members however, the lake itself has ceased to be dredged on a regular basis and it is slowly filling up with silt making it increasingly unsuitable site for the sailing of model boats.

Helston boating lake, known as Coronation Lake, is a 400-meter-wide oval in shape and is still very much in use today by the local community for various recreational and commercial purposes including a café, bike hire and a skate park. Coronation Lake has an interesting, vibrant and colourful leisure-based legacy within the town as a popular location for sporting regattas including swimming festivals, full sized boating activities as well as model boating. The lake is also considered a year-round haven for multiple species of waterfowl.

Redruth boating lake is the newest boating lake in Cornwall. It was developed in 2012 as part of a Lottery funded regeneration project called ‘Heartlands’. Multiple members of a boating club called the Camborne Podhoppers enthusiastically referred researchers to their regular and very enjoyable meetings at the Redruth/Heartlands lake as sign of an exciting new development within the world of model boating in Cornwall. However, upon closer questioning they also conceded that the lake itself was also somewhat problematic when used for this purpose as it is bifurcated by a very low pedestrian bridge that does not allow for the passage of boats beneath it.

Meetings take place on Sunday mornings at all of the clubs, and each has its own ‘place’ in which this happens. Variously, wind, weed, waves, water, moorhens and nesting swans alongside socio-cultural dynamics are co-present and can’t be separated in thinking about the way in which model boaters and boating lakes are co-constructed and entwined in the particular ways which place and people emerge within dynamic socio-material relationships. The character of these on-going relationships, formed in the process of spending ‘leisure time’, are significant in developing and understanding on-going processes of place-making along the Cornish coast.

It is in the interactions between the boats on the water, the swimming waterfowl and the rules of the club where relationships of belonging and an intimate understanding of place are formed. These emotionally, historically significant, place-based, enthusiasms are revealed within activity-based, performative crafting and these behaviours are evident within the interviews undertaken in the co-presence of both the boats and the wildlife on the banks of the boating lake.

**\*\*\*Interview\*\*\***

Interviewer: “What makes you most happy when you're building a boat?”

Interviewee: “It's seeing it come together you know you start off with maybe a photograph a plan and a lot of bits and over time you put it together and you see it come into fruition and the best thing is actually getting on the water and actually seeing it working you know I mean actually running and working on the water it's one of the best things about it you know and obviously today's like today being able to come down and display them you know and letting people see what you actually do you know model boat building is an opportunity for participants to commune with current and historical Cornish boat building traditions.”

Model boat building is an opportunity for participants to commune with current and historical Cornish boat building traditions, lost legacies and personal histories in both public locations and in private places of construction. Almost all the model boats that researchers witnessed being sailed in public spaces by their builders were either representations of historical vessels or followed in a traditional style of boat building. As such, most model boats are aesthetically representative of an actual historical vessel.

Only two of the boats that researchers witnessed in action followed a non-derivative style of construction, and in both instances the reasons for the creation of these vessels were dictated by innovative practical necessity rather than aesthetic or emotional interest. In one instance, the cumulative degradation of the conditions at the Millpond Lake had caused a club member to create an original design for a concept-driven rescue boat that bore no resemblance to any model or full-sized boats currently in existence. This original vessel was designed to return other model boats to shore that had become stranded in the middle of the lake due to the increasing shallowness of the Millpond. Interestingly the boat-builder here was apologetic for its practicality and lack of historical or personal narrative, as if perhaps it wasn’t ‘enough’ or didn’t quite belong. He was however proud of its technical competence and its abilities to ‘rescue’ stranded vessels less-well adapted to the conditions on the lake.

Other than this practical exception to the rule, the overwhelming majority of model boats in Cornwall appear to be constructed in the style of traditional sea going vessels and they are often directly mimetic of a full-sized vessel that is either is in existence today or has existed in the past. For a significant number of the modellers interviewed for this research, the process of planning, building and sailing their boats was often imbued with a direct, lived, culturally significant, historical, familiar and sometimes personal connection to a maritime legacy.

**\*\*\*Interview\*\*\***

Interviewee: “it's just bringing back a lot of memories really because I mean when we were a kids we used to go work fishing on the luggers and they were always

looking for a crew and you go out and if you earned yourself a couple of shillings

you were you were laughing like you know what uh we we like the old luggers I

mean I've tried to do two or three new luggers a couple of propelled luggers and they're all sailing boats I think one there's only one that's got a motor in it but um yeah I love I love the old luggers.”

Through the process of modelling and sailing model boats in public, these (mostly male) modellers are inscribing their boats with their own life-stories and in turn, when sailed in public, the boats offer up a personal, at times nostalgic, precise, to scale, full-sail, physical embodiment of the coastal narratives which they are referencing. In this way, modellers are finding ways to practically present and publicly share their emotional and historical enthusiasms of scale within the specific coastal geographies of Cornish towns.

Given the age of many members, illness, disability and the legacy of members who have died haunt the stories that members tell and build into their craft. Following the object navigates a path where we can seek to understand the intricacies of the processes and relate to the resultant systems of human behaviour and relationships, these shared stories frame past and future in a time scale and sense of rhythm through which model boaters create situated narratives through the materialities of the lake. Daniels and Lorimer state that ‘weaving personal biographies which are place-based brings period and place into closer conceptual conjunction’. It is here that a sense of place can be understood to emerge enfolding the non-human into on-going relationships where participants give meaning to the materialities of the lake and its vitalities, to themselves, and to the ‘event’ of sailing.

Situating these objects, the meanings they affect and the co-construction of place and identity as they are built and sailed, as ‘extra-sectional relationships’ involves paying close attention to the processes and the materialities that model boat enthusiasts engage with, and asks what exactly are the registers of their telling? Using model boats to identify with historical place-based narratives occurs here, but also puts them into action on the surface of the water in the present.

Narrating the progress of swan’s nesting successes and their proximity to a busy road at the edge of the boating lake encompasses value judgements about road users. Within the group at Helston this forms a topic of regular discussion, and through this shared experience interactions are shaped and a sense of belonging emerges.

Through the interaction of the model boats via the sailing rules designed to protect wildlife and the narratives of the model boaters, a shifting and shared sense of ownership of the lake emerges and is given meaning. Building model boats, and sailing them in particular places, as a group, and individually, creates bonds within the group, and place-specific cultures emerge.

Tensions arise when behaviours choreographed by the meanings embedded in such places and accepted socio-cultural norms are challenged by individuals. During sailing sessions some individuals challenge the ‘rules’ of the club, specifically in relation to bio-social encounters. Self-definition emerges in small relationships of self to other over the surface of the water and become entangled within the conceptual and material co-construction of nature, encounters with non-human materialities, and appropriate codes of behaviour. In their choice of boat, the narratives associated with it, and a playful sense of disregard for the rules, different social and material dynamics play out revealing subtleties with the groups. These model boaters are both at-once part of the group and set themselves apart. Interestingly these ‘rebel boaters’ are members of the ‘Cambourne Pond Hoppers’ based in Helston, but do not live in Helston as many of the others do. Breaking speed-limits for example, challenges not only the rules but also a sense of place.

Idealised narratives, located in specific times and places, connect boats to local histories, memories and biographical details which have a ‘retroactive’ force, where the agency of the boat, mutually constituted in the act of building and sailing as a recognisable and storeyed ‘object’ leaves out as much as it includes on its journey.

Nearly all the model boating members are men, and of retirement age. ‘Retirement age’ spans early sixties up to members in their nineties and is therefore both a ‘category’ externally defined, yet encompasses a wide range of ages, diverse socio-geographical backgrounds and bodily capacities.

They talk about the prestige associated with being a long-standing member, the limits their current bodily status put upon their ability to sail compared to their ‘younger selves’, they admire ‘youthfulness’ in younger members of the group and share stories, often emotionally charged, of their own illness and the health of others. Conversations about health and social issues combine with practical advice about building and sailing whilst members tinker on the banks of the lake. In this way, the practice of modelling is a conduit for important conversations and the lake becomes a repository where modellers deposit emotional responses to aging and death.

**\*\*\*Interview\*\*\***

Interviewer: “what's the what's the motivation for you, if you don't mind me asking?”

Interviewee: “What are you gonna do? You know you're retired we've all got problems like I've got lung cancer we have all sorts of problems but what are you gonna do is sit and watch the grass grow knock it you know count the days away no you want to try and do things”

Interviewer: “ But why this thing in particular I mean there's, you could have played darts, you could have done all sorts of things what is it about this particular thing?”

Interviewee: “Well with this you're the captain aren't you you're in charge you know? Yes I I used to be in the investment business and you had targets, to hell with targets! All the guys here we're a bunch of old farts and we enjoy ourselves we do we're all about the same age and let's say we've all got the same problems well similar problems.”

We can hear emotional geographies of aging and masculinity emerging where members’ connections to nostalgic family histories, and the bonds with one and other, are mobilised through more stereotypically ‘masculine’ activities. Deeper personal connections are formed through the shared understanding of the boating lake and the embedded codes of behaviour that are co-produced through the encounters and actions of model boat club meetings. In this way, the more socially acceptable, practically based, everyday activities of model boat club members resonate, within richer emotional landscapes in the on-going process of placemaking.

Bachelard describes this process of coming to know as ‘technical-knowhow’. Specifically, the technical skills needed for sailing on the water might be thought of as an encounter where interactions with objects and non-human materialities, experienced through moving and doing, enter ‘muscular consciousness’. Boating provides a sense of being ‘enmeshed’ within a world where imaginative and material terrains are indistinct and inseparable. It involves incorporation and movements where imaginary worlds set sail and shimmer with enchantment and emotional resonance.

Through the private activity of building a model boat, the social activity of sailing it and the spaces of ‘the lakes’ boating lakes emerge as a place where the emotional lives of men are articulated, reinforced through sharing and repetition, and embedded in temporally different registers of ‘telling’.

John Law argues that stories perform the ‘cultural task’ of deciding what exists and what goes with, or does not go with, what else. In this research, we suggest that the boats themselves tell a complex and interwoven story of people, place, culture, ship building traditions and maritime history that are all bound up with personal biographies. There is both a physical, temporal, intellectual and emotional investment in the making and sailing of particular boats. Boat builders obtain an intimate, technical understanding of the provenance of their boats primarily through researching and building their models but also through sailing them with communities of other boat builders. Members of boating groups freely demonstrate affective, emotional and embodied relationships with their own and other modellers’ boats, as well as with one and other, that are spatialised and inter-subjective.

More often than not, modellers are explicitly involved in the process of intentionally appropriating the exact likeness of an identifiable, existent, maritime object as central to their enthusiasms, which even goes as far as creating and recording realistic sounds that they can play as they sail their vessels around a lake to add an additional aural authenticity to their practices of modelling.

It is the specific actions associated with the modellers desire to produce a scaled replication of a culturally specific maritime object that draws parallels with other leisure activities which concern themselves with the appropriation, ownership and (re)production of culturally significant products such as through the actions of media fandoms. Similarly, to media fandoms, it is the careful, precise, physical processes of production that inscribes the model boats with an individual significance which extends from the narrative of the original vessel and takes them both into a fantastical speculative realm that is sometimes negatively described as a pathology. It is the accurate, to scale, replication of a physical likeness of a boat and the subsequent alignment with a relevant historical nautical narrative that in some small way places the modeller within their own sphere of ownership and control, whereby they form intimate parasocial relationships with and through these objects to both imagined and real, contemporary and historical communities. Perhaps it is the tension between the seemingly diminishing physical attributes of the bodies of many of the men involved in model boat clubs and the overtly wistful and nostalgic associations that the act of ‘modelling’ and ‘play’ have with activities that are considered typical of childhood which imbues adult modelling activities with pejorative connotations of flippancy and timewasting. But we would suggest that these accusations fail to accurately understand the scale of personal investment, meaning and the subsequent personal and social benefits that modelling has for its participants. It is the haptic, embodied, emotional and sensory experiences of making and the textures and likenesses of the boats and as they sail, which exceeds representation. It is the way the boats as ‘objects’ are created, built, and ‘played with’ on the lake and subsequently socialised into model boat club dynamics, which creates an on-going narrative of place-based myth-making as small stories ripple outwards, enveloping people into places from disparate eras and allowing the lost narratives of another time to emerge once again in plank and sail.

Through model boat building many modellers are able to express aspect of their personality and in demonstrating their interests, technical, historical or localised, they connect with other similarly minded people. A focus on verisimilitude is important to many and thus their boats serve as precise, scaled down, working models of many ships no longer in existence. A seriousness is accorded to these models as they relate to industrial processes of boat-building when developing proto-types, and in association with the companies or boat builders who are keen to see their craft preserved. In this way model boats are a ‘living archive’ for ships no longer functioning or in existence, retaining a sense of time and place, and reiterating it across the water of the lake. Many modellers move beyond accessing the blue-prints of a boat to taking photos of details, spending time talking to crew, or noticing a ship’s ambience. In this way the original character of the boat is captured and recreated. The materiality of the original is archived and enlivened through the processes of researching and building, but also through the liveliness of the encounters and the affective relationships created in processes through which the model emerges as an object.