Aberdeen has a proud history of shipbuilding, lasting over 200 years. The importance of the industry to the city is reflected in the many objects that make up the maritime history collection. There is a significant number of ships plans related to Aberdeen built vessels, but also models, paintings, tools, documents and photographs which tell us a lot about the business that went on and also the stories of individuals who worked in the shipyards.
Shipbuilding

Ships built in Aberdeen have traded, sailed and sometimes fought around the world. Nearly 3000 ships were built in Aberdeen between 1790 and 1989, with RMS St Helena being the last Aberdeen-built ship launched. The city’s last shipyard closed in 1992.

This is a wooden half-hull model, the hull being the main body of a ship. It was made for the colliers (coal transport ships) Ballyrush and Ballyrory at the Hall, Russell shipyard in the early 1960s.

Half-hull models were an important part of the design process of shipbuilding, functioning to establish the shape of the vessel and often used to illustrate the plan for the metal plating, when iron, and later steel, replaced wooden-hulled vessels. This is the case here and you can see the lines indicating the shapes of the metal plates.
This fantastic photograph shows the clipper ship *Prince Alfred* being built at the shipyard of William Duthie Jr. and Co. in the early 1860s. William Duthie’s shipyard was located on a stretch of land in the harbour known as *the Inches* across from his family’s other shipyard at Footdee, run by his father, John Duthie. The Duthies were an important shipbuilding family in Aberdeen, beginning in 1817 and lasting until 1925.
Innovation and Design: Freezing

This is a General Arrangement plan of the *Fairtry* trawler built in 1954 by the Aberdeen shipbuilding firm John Lewis & Sons.

A General Arrangement plan shows a plan of the decks and the principal area of a ship. Here you can see a cross section above and below deck in profile, and from above.

The *Fairtry* was the world’s first purpose-built freezer-stern trawler, showing that Aberdeen shipbuilders were at the forefront of new fishing technology in the mid-1900s.
Innovation and Design: Speed

This wooden prototype model was built by the Aberdeen shipbuilding firm Walter Hood and Co. This was to ensure approval of the design prior to the building of the clipper ship *Thermopylae* in 1868. The *Thermopylae* was ordered by the Aberdeen White Star Line company owned by George Thompson and was one of the most famous ships to be made in Aberdeen.

The ship still holds the record for the fastest trip made under sail.
Changing Names

One of the many confusing aspects of looking at ships built in Aberdeen (or indeed anywhere) is the fact that often the same name may have been used multiple times for different ships.

This half hull ‘presentation’ model (so called because it would have been presented to the owners of the ship) is not the more famous clipper ship of the same name built in 1868, but was built by Hall, Russell and Co. in 1891 for the same owners of the original *Thermopylae*.

It is a significant for us as one of the first objects that started Aberdeen’s maritime history collection in the 1890s.
International Links

Aberdeen had close links to Japan in the 1860s thanks to a local man who became known as the ‘Scottish Samurai’, Thomas Blake Glover.

The *Jho Sho Maru* became the second warship built for Japan in Aberdeen and was brokered by Thomas Blake Glover and his two brothers. It was built by Alexander Hall and Co. in 1869 but faced destruction before it set sail.

Whilst it was being fitted out at the shipyard, a nearby fire at a sawmill broke out and threatened to engulf the ship. James Hall of the shipbuilding firm ordered the ship to be pulled out away from the quayside averting disaster, however Hall tragically died of a heart attack brought on by the stress of the incident.
There are plenty of photographs of this view in the collection, usually of guests lined in front of vessels at their launch ceremonies.

This unusual oil painting depicts the scene of two vessels close to completion being fitted out at their berths at Hall, Russell shipyard.

The plan below shows a birds-eye view of the yard around 1950. You can see the three berths where ships were constructed and launched from. The rectangles in between each berth represent tracks for a travelling crane, which is also depicted in the painting.
Craft and Skills

This forge, possibly dating to the early to mid-1900s, was used by rivet squads at Aberdeen’s shipyards.

A squad would often consist of three men, one who would use tongs to pass the red hot rivet from the forge to the riveter, who would hammer and spread the shaft of the rivet through a hole to form a seal. A third man would hold the rivet head in place on the other side of the metal plate with a heavy hammer or tool known as a dolly bar, or “Huddin-On” hammer locally.

A riveting forge in use in the shipyard during the 1930s
The maritime collection boasts several joiner’s sketchbooks dating from the late 1800s to the 1930s. These showcase the craftsmanship of the joiners in Aberdeen’s shipyards.

This design from 1878 was used in the construction of Ben Ledi, a paddle steamer tug built by Hall, Russell & Co. It shows the sponson, or hood, which would have covered the top of the paddle, and has an intricate thistle design at its centre.
Personal Stories

The collection also holds an intriguing record of the people behind the ships.

Here a shipyard worker dusts the figurehead of the St Sunniva passenger ferry built in 1931 by Hall, Russell & Co.

The ferry travelled between Leith, Aberdeen and the Northern Isles of Orkney and Shetland for the North of Scotland & Orkney & Shetland Steam Navigation Company.

Many young Aberdonian men served an apprenticeship in the shipyards based at the harbour. Hall, Russell & Co. was the main shipbuilding company in Aberdeen after the Second World War.

This certificate shows the positive appraisal of a young engineer, George Wood, in 1961 following his five-year apprenticeship.
This ‘team’ photo of shipyard workers at Hall, Russell & Co. dates to around the 1940s. It shows us the faces of some of the men whose hard work created many vessels at the yard.

What is striking are the smiles on most of their faces and the range of ages from young apprentices to older experienced workers. It shows us that for most it was a great place to work where camaraderie and pride were important assets in the success of a build.

The experiences of apprentices and workers at Hall, Russell sometimes recorded in oral testimony and even poetry, proves that work at the yard was rarely dull.