

HMS Trincomalee – Ships Figurehead  
National Museum of the Royal Navy

## Treatment Proposals

**Dimensions:** Height 124cm, Width 75cm, Depth 100cm

**Description:** Carved and painted ships figurehead depicting a man in a turban. Probably oak but possibly elm, paint likely to contain lead.

**Condition:** Becoming poor: most significantly long term decay of the timber substrate has led to many significant losses to both decorative detail and main structure, drastically affecting stability and integrity. There are various large splits and voids in the main carcass plus evidence of previous repairs (of varying quality and suitability) which have begun to alter the original presentation of the figure. Along with old repairs and additions the figure appears to have been over-painted several times and the thickness of the paint contributes to the general poor appearance, as does the heavy surface dirt and many accretions and abrasions. The crown of the turban appears to be copper sheet, at least in part, and the originality of this element will need to be ascertained as it may have been an element added to protect end grain.



**Treatment:** The over-paint is disguising the true condition of the figurehead and the quality of previous repairs, which may well be contributing to deterioration – for example a common repair in the past has been the addition of fibreglass which actually prevents the timber from taking up or releasing moisture with seasonal humidity changes. In addition the over-paint will, at best, hinder or, more likely, prevent essential access for the chemicals needed to halt decay and consolidate the main timber structure. There is, therefore, a strong argument for removal of the paint layers to allow full assessment and treatment of the timber. Such removal is, of course, an ethical challenge to the full story of the figurehead but, to satisfy the historic record that is the successive paint layers, a small archival patch of each paint layer can be revealed and left in-situ as a permanent record. The original colours and scheme will be revealed in this way. It may be that the paint removal needs to be done mechanically but it is more likely to be a solvent based process. The precise solvent will need to be established with tests but I would anticipate that a dichloromethane solution is the likeliest candidate – whichever method proves most suitable, each paint layer can be discovered and recorded through the process. Lead based paint needs suitably safe conditions for its removal and disposal.

Once the original timber surface is revealed the full extent of the decay will become much clearer and can be addressed with a liquid fungicide for rot, a liquid based consolidant to give strength to the rot weakened areas and timber inserts to replace the losses. Where possible a timber chosen to match the original will be used – I have a stock of reclaimed timber for the purpose – but there may be protective or practical reasons to use an alternative, permission/discussion would always be sought first. New inserts will be carved to continue the shaping of the figurehead and complete its main structure.

The restored figurehead can finally be painted to match the established original scheme. I would suggest an acrylic based paint medium as it is inert and readily reversed but this would need the figurehead to remain indoors for display purposes. The paint can also be waxed for long term protection. I also understand a new mount will be needed to facilitate future display.