

A Madeiran Mosquito

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By Tom Macan

Madeira may seem like an odd place to find a steam launch dating from 1900. But the nicely-restored hull of SL Mosquito is on display in a large glass case just back from the seafront in Funchal, close to the cable-car terminus. How did she get there, and how did she survive?



SL Mosquito, taken from inside the glass display box.

Madeira at the end of the 19th Century must have been a busy place. Funchal Roads was a stopping point for most ships bound for ports across Africa and South America, plus plenty of transatlantic traffic. Telegraph messages could be picked up, fresh produce purchased and mail collected and delivered. But coal bunkering was perhaps (from the shipping companies' point of view) the principal reason for a Madeira call.

The firm of Blandy Bros was not only a producer of the Madeira wine that bears their name, but was also the dominant company in the bunkering business. Coal was stored in two floating hulks and on shore; coaling barges lumbered back and forth to replenish the bunkers of ships at anchor.

In the 1890s, Raleigh Blandy was in charge of the engineering and fleet-management side of the business. He was well-qualified for this task, having spent five years with Lairds Shipbuilding on the Clyde and had subsequently obtained a Chief Engineer's Certificate on the Hull-based Wilson (subsequently Ellerman Wilson) Line. He must have been the man behind Blandys' decision in 1899 to acquire a smart harbour launch.

In the late 19th Century, Simpson Strickland at Dartmouth was one of the United Kingdom's premier builders of small commercial launches (and also of very smart steam yachts). Raleigh clearly wanted the best, and it was to Simpsons that he went to get it. On 27 March, 1900, Simpsons quoted him £739 for a varnished teak launch (plus spares). A Kingdon vertical fire-tube boiler was to supply a reciprocating, compound steam engine.

Mosquito's primary purpose was the collection and delivery of passengers and mail to and from ships at anchor (Funchal only acquired a proper harbour in the 1920s). So she boasted a smart brass wheel, full-length canvas awning, and a folding hood, with horsehair cushions for'ard for the passengers' benefit.

Raleigh clearly also knew about the punishment that she might receive when lying alongside ships at anchor, so her specification included “a large rubber”, bound with a half-round brass strip. Bilge keels of American elm and a straight keel were provided so that she could be run up the beach. At times, it seems, she might be required to undertake more mundane barge-related duties, so therefore a galvanised iron towing hook and bridge were positioned on the aft deck.

Mosquito remained in steam for over 40 years, but it was as a diesel-powered launch that she would bring Winston and Clementine Churchill ashore when they wintered in Madeira in 1950. At the age of 77, she was retired, to be subsequently rebuilt for Lisbon’s 1998 World Exhibition and restored for display in 2005. Sadly, her restorers seem to have little idea of what Mosquito’s original machinery might have looked like. Her original Kingdon boiler would have been a handsome 3’ diameter cylinder, lagged with varnished teak strips and topped off with a brass dome supporting a brass funnel. Her two-cylinder engine, in gleaming steel and brass, would have stood fully 2’ high in a teak-and-glass housing. Now a copper funnel rises directly out of a casing which might just be adequate for a small petrol engine.

Blandys’ files have the full details of her specification, and the correspondence about shipping her from Dartmouth to Funchal. The Steamboat Association holds extensive Simpson Strickland archives; these reveal that Blandy Bros placed their order on 27 March 1900, and that completion was on 4 August 1900. Her hull (yard number 535) measured 30’ overall, with an 8’ beam and 3’9” draft. The boiler (number 962) was a BD-sized Kingdon, with a working pressure of 150psi (reduced from the standard 175 psi). The engine (number 912) was a condensing compound with two cylinders – the high pressure one 4” in diameter and the low-pressure one 8” in diameter with a 5” stroke.

Raleigh Blandy, a certificated ocean-going engineer, would surely have insisted that her brasswork was highly polished and that the brass and steel of her engine sparkled; she must have been a pretty sight going about her daily business in Funchal.



**The Canadian Pacific Line's 'SS Montrose', circa 1932,
when 'Mosquito' was in her prime as a busy harbour launch.**

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Tom Macan was Counsellor in the British Embassy in Lisbon from 1990 to 94, and a member of the British Historical Society Council, during which time he kept a vintage sailing dinghy on the Tagus. He owns a very small steam launch called "Carranca".