

Tide Lines Exhibition

at Dover Museum ~ 6 April- 5 July

MERRIL LILLEY

This exhibition featured the work of John Robb-Webb, who builds sculptures from driftwood and other flotsam found on the beach. When the exhibition was launched on 6th April, it had already been shown at venues in Barrow, Hull and the Isle of Man. Christine Waterman, the Curator at Dover Museum had seen the exhibition and invited Mr. Robb-Webb to bring it to Dover.

At the launch Mr. Robb-Webb made a short speech introducing the exhibition. He said it was a "collection of debris from the beach in Cumberland" which was "an heroic and dramatic place to grow up". He explained his feeling that it was "about childhood, a bit of romancing" and that it gave the viewer "a sense of fantasy as well as an ability to cope with knowledge". Later, when I asked him how long it had taken him to assemble all the exhibits on view, he said that he had retired four years ago from a post as principal of a college in Leeds and had spent the time since then in building up his collection of sculptures.

The inventive use of all kinds of driftwood is fascinating. He has used fish boxes, pallets, odd pieces of trees and beach fire remains for his sculptures. To these he has added anything which may enhance a particular sculpture; matchboxes, shells, rope, coins, postcards, beads, nails, pipes, old lead soldiers and ships, portholes and navigational instruments. Sometimes he has used an item of ironwork as the basis for a sculpture. One of his favourites is a model of H.M.S. Indefatigable made out of a piece of an Edwardian fireplace. Other favourites are three Dazzle paintings of warships.

All the themes are associated with war and ships, from the Russian Outrage of 1904 and the sinking of the Titanic to the evacuation of Dunkirk in the Second World War. One exhibit associated with the latter is called Alphabet II and consists of a set of child's alphabet blocks, set into the ribbing of a wrecked section of a clinker-built boat. The blocks show names of some of the fishing trawlers and drifters that participated in the evacuation. A burnt block records the loss of the boat.

The exhibition attracted a large number of visitors for the two months of its run and must have been a great source of inspiration to the children who viewed it and went back to school to construct their own collages and sculptures from beach combing and other collectable items.

HMS Indefatigable
Driftwood construction by John Robb Webb

