

COASTAL NOTES
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Who doesn't have a favourite moment from the BBC's Para Handy series, whether it was the original Duncan McCrae version, the definitive Roddy McMillan or the later Gregor Fisher. All told the tales of the crew of the puffer 'Vital Spark', and her captain, Para Handy, as they chugged their way around the Clyde and the West Coast islands, carrying cargoes ranging from coffins to coal, margarine to mousetraps.

Puffers were a real lifeline to remote communities; everything they needed came in the puffer. The very first puffer, the 'Glasgow', was built at Swan's boatyard at Kelvin Dock, Maryhill in 1857, intended for service between Glasgow and Leith. She was called 'Thomas' and was just under 20m in length so that she could fit into the locks of the Forth and Clyde Canal, by then the major trade route between East and West Scotland. The name puffer came from the puff of steam emitted at every stroke of the simple non-condensing steam engine; although condensing steam engines were soon developed, the nickname stuck.

Within a few years three types of puffer were working. The canal boat like the 'Glasgow', and the 'shorehead', which sailed into the estuaries and up Loch Fyne both remained under 20m to fit the canal locks, while the larger 'outside' boats sailed the West coast, but kept under 27m, so that they could pass through the Crinan Canal. The beauty of these boats was that they could be beached at low water, off-loaded, then float off at high tide, meaning that they could service the many islands and communities without a harbor or even a pier.

The last Scottish puffer was built in 1921 at Kelvin Docks; however, the Admiralty commissioned a number in 1939 under the class name VIC (Victualling Inshore Craft), which were mostly built in England. They were used to service warships during the hostilities; many of them entered the coasting trade after the war. The last surviving coal fired steam powered puffer is the VIC 32, which now takes tourists on week long cruises, starting from her base at the Crinan Canal. Tourists start their cruise by wheeling barrowloads of coal - maybe not quite the same as the QE2.

VIC 72, as 'Eilean Eisdeal', was the last working Clyde puffer. Re-named 'Vital Spark' in honour of Neil Munro's stories, she is now a working exhibit on permanent loan as part of the Maritime Museum at Inveraray Pier.

There never was a puffer called the 'Vital Spark'. Instead, number of puffers were used in the filming of the Para Handy stories. These practical, hard working little boats were a crucial life line for the many isolated communities of the west, before piers were built and the faster ferries took over. They may not have been things of beauty – to quote Para Handy, the *Vital Spark* is "aal hold, with the boiler behind, four men and a derrick, and a watter-butt and a pan loaf in the foc'sle", - but there is a great fondness for those tough little boats. There are two at Inveraray Maritime Museum and one in the Crinan Canal, all in the hands of loving enthusiasts who will ensure that these pieces of history and heritage aren't forgotten.

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