

BRITISH TUGOWNERS ASSOCIATION



Annual Conference Report 2025



The British Tugowners Association (BTA) held its AGM and Annual Conference at the historic Belfast Harbour Commissioners, drawing over 80 delegates from the UK, European's towage and wider maritime community. This year's conference brought into focus key themes including maritime decarbonisation, emergency response, future fuels, and industry resilience. The AGM preceded the Conference, seeing the handover of Chair of the Association from Nick Jeffery to Mike Paterson following the two-year tenure. The Association sincerely thanks Nick for his leadership, expertise and diligence since 2023 in steering the organisation.



DAMEN

UZMAR®

The British Tugowners Association Annual Conference 2025 was kindly sponsored by Sanmar Shipyards, Damen Shipyards and Uzmar Shipyards

The BTA was delighted to be hosted in Belfast and **Joe O'Neill, CEO of Belfast Harbour Commissioners**, provided a keynote reflecting on the port's development since 1847, its vital economic role across 716 businesses, and investment ambitions in shipbuilding and offshore wind. A major highlight was the announcement of a £90 million deep-water quay development due to complete by 2030, and a pledge for carbon neutrality on Scope 1 and 2 emissions.

The newly appointed Chairman of the BTA, **Mike Paterson, of Svitzer UK MD**, welcomed delegates and praised the strong collaboration across the maritime community such as pilots, stevedores, and shipyards and celebrated towage's growing role in decarbonisation. Mike also highlighted the towage sector's importance in emergency resilience and encouraged the industry to ask difficult questions and develop robust preparedness strategies with ports and harbourmasters.

The Conference welcomed, **Virginia McVea, CEO of the MCA**, and paid tribute to towage crews for their response to the recent North Sea collision between the Stena Immaculate and MV Solong, emphasising the heroic firefighting efforts of the towage industry. She called for sector input on the Maritime Decarbonisation Strategy, especially a call for evidence for vessels under 400 GT, a category comprising much of the UK flag and where industry input would be key to achieving realistic and meaningful reductions.

Virginia also discussed the MCA's expanding role in development of autonomous vessels, and introduced a new innovation hub dedicated to advancing future fuels, vessel autonomy, and modern seafarer training, and highlighted the implementation of mandatory insurance requirements for vessels operating in UK waters.

Ajit Jacob, MCA's Chief Examiner, gave an update on seafarer training reforms. He presented on the Restricted Certificate of Competency for various vessel types, including tugs, workboats, yachts, lauded the collaboration with industry in the modernisation process. Ajit highlighted the value and integration of simulator training as part of training with operators able to use approved simulator time in lieu of sea service, up to a maximum of 30 days at sea.

The BTA was delighted to award **Alex Jones from Svitzer, the Tug Trainee of the Year Award** for 2025. Presented by Virginia McVea and Ajit Jacob, Alex an OOW apprentice, was accompanied by his proud father, also a Tug Master with Svitzer. Alex was recognised his achievement and dedication to the profession and acknowledged the efforts he's made in pursuing a career change to join his father in towage.





Mike Kane MP, UK Maritime Minister, provided a prerecorded video to the Association, congratulating the BTA on reaching the milestone of 90 years and stressing the vital role of towage in the UK economy. Mike stressed the importance of decarbonisation for the small vessel sector, and reaffirmed government commitment to seafarer training and careers to build a safer, fairer and more inclusive maritime sector.

Mike said “Maritime is the heartbeat of the UK economy; it is the activity that keeps everything else moving. This is a 24/7 operation in all weathers and conditions, making sure ships can move, ports stay open, and goods keep flowing. None of that would happen without the towage sector – your work is fundamental to the safety and reliability of our maritime system.”

Led by **Nick Dorman (Targe Towing)**, a panel of **Rob Shearer** and **Alex McCooke** (both of Shipowners' P&I), provided an in-depth look at the revision of the UK Standard Conditions of Towage, originally drafted in the 1920s and last updated in 1986. The BTA as custodians of the Conditions undertook the review with experts to modernise and futureproof. The panel highlighted that the existing language had become outdated and no longer reflected the operational realities of modern towage.

The revised framework aims to encourage widespread adoption by improving clarity and avoiding disputes, ultimately strengthening the commercial and legal basis of UK towage operations and providing clarity on the liability regime. Operators were encouraged to familiarise themselves with the revised Conditions and comprehensive explanatory notes both freely available on the [BTA website](#).

Erik van Schaik of **Damen Shipyards** delivered a compelling session on the company’s innovations in fuel-flexible tugs, highlighting models such as the ASD Tug 1810, 2111, and 2312, which can all be delivered below 200 GT.

The British Tugowners Association Annual Conference 2025 was kindly sponsored by Sanmar Shipyards, Damen Shipyards and Uzmar Shipyards



Erik outlined the technology drivers behind Damen's approach, including:

- The reduction of NO_x, SO_x, and CO₂ emissions
- Global carbon pricing mechanisms
- The importance of maintaining future-proof flexibility in design to accommodate fuels such as diesel, methanol, hydrogen, and electric.

He addressed significant engineering challenges, particularly around energy density. For example, storing methanol requires more than three times the volume of diesel (1 m³ diesel = 3.3 m³ methanol). The team also tackled safety issues, including flash points, toxicity, and ventilation requirements for enclosed fuel spaces.

Erik noted that the Damen design process combines prescriptive rules with risk-based assessments, ensuring compliance with emerging regulatory frameworks for smaller vessels.

The prestigious **BTA Lifetime Achievement Award** was presented by **Tom Woolley, the BTA Honorary President** to naval architect **Robert G. Allan of Robert Allan Ltd**, in recognition of over 40 years of exceptional service to the global towage industry. Renowned for his contributions to habitability, crew safety, and operational performance, Robert has set enduring standards in tug design.

In his remarks, Robert, who joined via videolink, expressed gratitude to his team at Robert Allan Ltd., emphasising that success in naval architecture is a team effort. He pledged to continue supporting innovation and championing safe, effective tug designs for the betterment of crews and the industry as a whole.

A major highlight of the conference was the launch of A BTA Guide **Use of Tugs in Firefighting Guide** developed by the Technical Committee in consultation with industry experts. **Alasdair Smith** of Targe Towing, launched the guide and compered a panel discussion surrounding firefighting and was supported by **SOSREP Stephan Henning, Ruud Plomp of Artemas Academy** and **Geert Vandecappelle, CEO of Boluda Towage Europe**.

The British Tugowners Association Annual Conference 2025 was kindly sponsored by Sanmar Shipyards, Damen Shipyards and Uzmar Shipyards

The guide, [available to download for free here](#), is designed for both tug crews and shore personnel, and covers topics including:

- Command & control structures
- Risk assessment
- Multi-agency response
- Communication protocols
- Boundary cooling techniques
- Training & drills



Alasdair concluded the lively session by stating the Guide was a starting point for continued engagement and dialogue welcoming feedback from across industry.

BTA Chair **Mike Paterson** closed the conference by highlighting themes that emerged throughout the day such as the strength and cohesion of the UK maritime community; the vital role of towage in supporting national logistics and keeping goods moving; the growing urgency of decarbonisation; and the increasing importance of building resilience and preparedness for emergency response across the sector.

The conclusion of the Conference was followed by the Annual Dinner at the impressive Titanic Belfast Museum, kindly sponsored by Uzmar Shipyards, offering delegates a valuable



opportunity to contemplate and engage in meaningful discussions on the day's presentations and key takeaways.

A noteworthy highlight of the evening was the recognition given to Ajit Jacob, Chief Examiner at the MCA as he received the **BTA Tug Personality of the Year** award, presented by outgoing Chairman Nick Jeffery, for services and efforts to maritime training and education in particular the small vessel sector and modernisation

The BTA extends its thanks to the sponsors Sanmar, Damen, and Uzmar, and to all speakers, delegates, and organisers for another successful and impactful conference.

The Annual Golf Competition

The Royal Belfast Golf Club played host to the Sir William Crosthwaite Cup, drawing towage professionals, industry experts, and passionate golfers for a day of competition on the fairways and greens in the Belfast hills.

Attendees enjoyed favourable weather conditions, filled with friendly competition, networking opportunities, as well as displays of both excellent and questionable golfing skills. The occasion not only fostered professional and personal connections but also served as a platform for the exchange of knowledge and the cultivation of collaboration within the towage community.

Matthew Flaxington from Targe Towing emerged triumphant, claiming the Sir William Crosthwaite Cup, a distinction he'll proudly hold until 2026. The BTA would like to extend our gratitude to Sanmar for their generous sponsorship of the Annual Golf Competition.

