

BRITISH TUGOWNERS ASSOCIATION



2026 Annual Conference Report

The British Tugowners Association (BTA) held its AGM and Annual Conference at Hope Street Hotel in Liverpool, drawing over 80 delegates from across the UK and wider European towage community. This year's Conference theme, Insight, Leadership and Collaboration Across the Towage Industry, brought together speakers from across the sector to explore casualty response, salvage operations, floating offshore wind, emerging technologies, decarbonisation and the future challenges facing harbour towage.

The BTA's 91st AGM preceded the Conference, seeing the election of Geert Vandecappelle as Chairman of the Association, succeeding Mike Paterson following his tenure. The Association sincerely thanks Mike for his leadership during his tenure as Chairman.

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Opening Remarks

The Conference was opened by Robert Merrylees and Scott Baker, who welcomed delegates to Liverpool and reflected on the continued importance of collaboration, innovation and professional development across the towage sector.

The newly-appointed BTA Chairman, Geert Vandecappelle of Boluda Towage Europe, welcomed delegates and highlighted emphasising the importance of industry collaboration and promotion of a culture of safety.



Modern Maritime Apprenticeships - Captain Neil Atkinson, Fleetwood Nautical Campus

The Conference welcomed Captain Neil Atkinson of Fleetwood Nautical Campus, who presented on recent developments in the English apprenticeship routes, outlining the apprenticeships offered at the college including:

- Level 2 Maritime Mechanical and Electrical Mechanic
- Level 2 Seafarer
- Level 3 Officer of the Watch (Near Coastal)
- Level 4 Small Vessel Chief Engineer
- Level 4 Master 500 GT



The College continued providing hybrid routes that combine paid employment with structured training, encouraging learners to gain practical experience while achieving recognised maritime qualifications. Captain Atkinson also highlighted apprenticeship and maritime training funding opportunities available to employers and encouraged greater use of these schemes to support workforce development within the towage sector.

Tug Trainee of the Year Award - Awarded by Karrie Trauth, UK Chamber of Shipping President & Neil Atkinson of Fleetwood Nautical Campus



The President of the UK Chamber of Shipping, Karrie Trauth, and Neil Atkinson of Fleetwood Nautical Campus were pleased to present the 2026 BTA Tug Trainee of the Year Award to Mara Kruse of Svitzer. In her speech, Karrie Trauth applauded Ms Kruse's achievements, noting that her resilience, determination and excellence exemplified the talent developing within the towage sector. An Officer of the Watch (<500 GT Near Coastal) apprentice at Svitzer, Mara was applauded, not only for her academic and professional achievements, but also for her leadership, support of fellow

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trainees and advocacy for the towage industry. The BTA was pleased to recognise her as the 2026 Tug Trainee of the Year.

Update from the BTA Technical Committee

Technical Chair Alasdair Smith (Targe Towing) and Vice-Technical Chair James Evans (Boluda Europe) provided an update on the important work undertaken by the BTA Technical Committee including a number of freely available industry guides developed in partnership with Polestar Publishing. A key highlight of the update was the publication of the second edition of the BTA Rope Selection, Procurement & Usage Guide, [available to download free of charge from the BTA website](#).



The guidance expanded on rope lifecycle management, taking account of tug characteristics, operational considerations, and environmental conditions as well as the importance of the Towline Operational Assessment.

Fifty Years in the Business: Lessons Learned and Challenges Ahead - Gary Dockerty, Sanmar Shipyards

Gary Dockerty, Regional Sales Director at Sanmar Shipyards, reflected on the company's 50-year history and evolution into one of the world's leading tug builders, having delivered more than 300 Robert Allan-designed tugboats since its founding in 1976. Highlighting the changing demands of the shipbuilding market, Gary outlined how increasing expectations around sustainability, efficiency and technological innovation are shaping modern tug design and construction. He emphasised the importance of integrating design with manufacturing from the earliest stages to improve build efficiency, reliability and long-term



maintainability, while also underlining the value of strong supply chain partnerships in delivering successful projects.

The presentation also explored Sanmar's investment in emerging technologies, including advanced 3D modelling techniques that enable operators to visualise, customise and refine vessel designs throughout the development process. Gary further highlighted Sanmar's role in advancing alternative fuel and low-emission technologies, alongside the company's work on the world's first remotely operated commercial vessel. Reflecting on the industry's transition towards decarbonisation, he noted that whilst new technologies are proving successful in operation, their implementation must be matched by appropriate infrastructure and

careful planning to ensure long-term commercial and operational success.

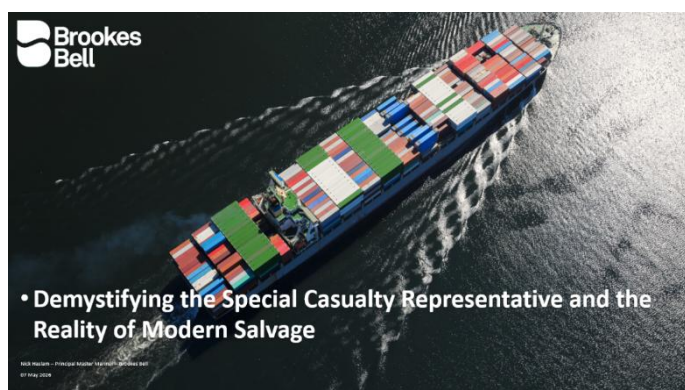
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Demystifying the Special Casualty Representative and the Reality of Modern Salvage - Nick Haslam, Lloyd's SCR, Brookes Bell

Nick Haslam of Brookes Bell delivered a thought-provoking presentation examining the changing nature of maritime casualties, vessel fires and emergency response. Drawing on lessons from recent incidents, Nick highlighted the increasing complexity of firefighting operations aboard container vessels where fires may develop long before smoke detection systems activate and can burn for days

or weeks. Delegates heard how modern cargoes, the carriage of dangerous goods, and the emergence of alternative fuels are creating new operational challenges for crews, salvors and emergency responders, reinforcing the importance of understanding cargo characteristics, fire behaviour and associated risks from the earliest stages of an incident.

The presentation explored the practical realities of casualty response, including the limitations of fixed firefighting systems, the reliance on manual intervention by specialist teams, and the significant resources required to manage major fires safely. Nick emphasised the importance of preparedness, risk management and effective coordination between responders, while also considering the implications that future vessel technologies and alternative fuels may have for emergency response operations. Nick encouraged delegates to consider whether existing emergency towing and casualty response arrangements remain sufficient for future risks.



Mock LOF Salvage Arbitration - Penningtons Manches Coopers

Michael Howard KC of Quadrant Chambers, supported by James Severn, Joe Riley and Robbie Skinner of Penningtons Manches Cooper, delivered an interactive mock salvage arbitration examining how salvage awards are assessed. Using a scenario involving a grounded container vessel in the South China Sea, delegates were guided through a complex casualty response involving flooding, bunker removal, refloating operations and towage to a place of safety.

The session explored the factors considered when determining a salvage award, including the value of the property salvaged, the degree of danger, environmental considerations, the skill and efforts of the salvors, and the promptness of the response. Delegates were invited to assess the case from both the salvor's and the owner's perspectives and submit their



James Severn
Partner - PMC



Joe Riley
Managing Associate - PMC



Robbie Skinner
Associate - PMC



Michael Howard KC
Quadrant Chambers



salvage estimations before hearing of Michael Howard KC's award.

The mock arbitration provided valuable insight into the operation of Lloyd's Open Form (LOF) and the Salvage Convention, highlighting the role these established frameworks continue to play in resolving complex maritime casualties and supporting the provision of professional salvage services.

Tug Personality of the Year Award 2026

The BTA's Honorary President, Tom Woolley, was delighted to recognise Captain William (Bill) Evans, former MAIB Inspector, as the recipient of the Tug Personality of the Year Award for 2026. The award acknowledged Bill's significant contribution to improving safety within the harbour towage sector through his investigative work and dedication to identifying lessons that continue to benefit the industry. Although unable to attend the Conference, his achievements and lasting impact were warmly recognised by members. *Bill pictured receiving the award from Tom Woolley at BMT, Fareham.*



Challenges of Floating Offshore Wind: Potential Opportunities for Towage - Lisa Tuckwell, SOSREP

Lisa Tuckwell, Deputy to the Secretary of State's Representative (SOSREP), examined the challenges and opportunities presented by the rapid growth of floating offshore wind. With floating wind developments expected to play a significant role in achieving the UK's net-zero ambitions, Lisa highlighted the unique operational and emergency response considerations associated with these structures, particularly as projects move further offshore and into deeper waters.

The presentation explored the practical difficulties of responding to drifting or disabled floating wind turbines, including questions surrounding emergency towage arrangements, attachment points, and the suitability of existing response frameworks.

Lisa encouraged delegates to engage with ongoing work between government, regulators and industry to ensure that emergency response planning develops alongside the sector. The session highlighted a potential future role for towage operators in supporting floating offshore wind developments and underscored the importance of addressing these challenges before large-scale deployment accelerates.



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BTA 2026 Gala Dinner

Following the Conference, attendees joined the BTA Gala Dinner sponsored by Damen Shipyards, offering delegates an opportunity to reflect on the day's presentations and continue discussions with colleagues from across the industry.

The event opened with a presentation by Wijtze van der Leij of Damen Shipyards, the sponsor for the evening's events. The evening also featured a speech from the President of the UK Chamber of Shipping, Karrie Trauth, who welcomed delegates to the Gala Dinner and highlighted the critical role of harbour towage in supporting safe port operations, UK trade and national resilience. She commended the BTA's leadership on safety, skills and industry collaboration, recognising initiatives such as the Association's guidance work and Safety Seminars. The President also congratulated Mara Kruze, recipient of the 2026 BTA Tug Trainee of the Year Award, highlighting the importance of developing the next generation of maritime professionals.



The Inaugural BTA Clay Day

As part of the networking activities the day preceding day to the AGM and Conference, the BTA hosted its inaugural BTA Clay Day and welcome dinner, sponsored by Uzmar Shipyards.

19 budding marksmen were expertly hosted by Shotwick Clay Shoot and their diligent coaches providing attendees tuition, a practice session and friendly competition for the BTA Clay Day Cup.





BTA Clay Day Trophy

This year, Alex McCooke of Shipowners' P&I won the trophy with a near-perfect score of 19 of 20. The Cup was presented to Alex by Deniz Dereli and Burak Bölükbaşı of Uzmar Shipyards.



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Competence



Safety



Quality



The BTA is part of the UK Chamber of Shipping

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Tugowners
Association

Founded 1934

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