

Creating and maintaining a National Historic Fleet in the UK

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England has a long history of preserving historic ships, even if the efforts have not always been successful. Our earliest known example is of the *Golden Hind*, the ship of Sir Francis Drake. When she returned to London in 1580 after circumnavigating the world - and laden with treasure looted from Spain - Queen Elizabeth I decreed that the ship was to be kept 'for all time'. Unfortunately Her Majesty did not think to introduce legislation protect her and within five years the *Golden Hind* is said to have been reduced to a wreck by souvenir hunters.

A better attempt at preservation was made two hundred years later with HMS *Victory*, a First Rate Ship of the Line and flagship of Vice Admiral Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. She has been successfully preserved in Portsmouth for over 200 years, although she has been extensively reconstructed. She owes her survival to two bodies: first, the Royal Navy, which has funded the restoration, maintenance and manning of her, and secondly the Society for Nautical Research (SNR) which launched the "Save the Victory Fund" in 1910.

The SNR was perhaps the first body to recognise how rapidly maritime heritage was disappearing – and not just ships like *Victory* but also local vernacular craft. Its members undertook pioneering recording work in the 1920s and 1930s. However, it was not until after World War II that concerted efforts were made to save large vessels from destruction. Leading the way was the Cutty Sark Preservation Society. Having secured a new home for *Cutty Sark* in Greenwich, it looked around for other ships to save. Rebranding itself as the Maritime Trust, it actively set about saving other important vessels at risk, largely funded by the receipts from visitors to the *Cutty Sark*.

The vessels the Maritime Trust chose to save were not just those associated with famous people or events, but vessels that reflected a much broader spectrum of maritime life: fishing boats, merchant ships, lifeboats and passenger craft.

This was of course not a uniquely British phenomenon. Similar organisations were set up all across Europe and North America. It is interesting to note that when the first edition of *The International Register of Historic Ships* was first published in 1985, it gave data on 700 vessels in 43 countries: when the third edition was published 14 years later, there was information on 1,800 vessels in 72 countries.¹

Yet, even as the *International Register* was being printed there was a realisation that that to save a ship from immediate destruction was one thing; to secure its long-term future was quite another. The resources of the Maritime Trust became more and more stretched and it was forced to break up its collection, handing over vessels to local organisations.

It was also around this time that several international conferences were held specifically to discuss the conservation of historic ships. One such conference was held at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich in 1987 and from this arose the National Historic Ships Committee (NHSC), launched in 1992, as an expert and independent body providing guidance on preservation, restoration, conservation and maintenance for owners, and tasked with developing a national policy on historic ships, although without official recognition.

It was well known that there were a large number of historical vessels in the UK. Many were listed on specialist registers (of, for example, paddle steamers and yachts) but there was no simple means of establishing which parts of maritime history were well represented and which parts lost or under imminent threat.

Consequently, the NHSC's highest priority was to establish an inventory – the National Register of Historic Vessels. The original criteria for inclusion were:

¹ Brouwer (1999: 11)

- berthed in the United Kingdom
- British built or owned
- built no later than 1945
- minimum length of 40 ft (12.19 metres)
- minimum displacement of 40 tons
- substantially intact

This Register is still going strong, yet almost all these criteria have been modified. The age criteria is now 50 years or older and the displacement criteria was abandoned as not particularly helpful. It is no longer essential for a vessel to have been British-built or owned, so long as she has demonstrable links with Britain. The length criteria has now been reduced to 10 metres – largely to harmonise with a new register, the Small Boat Register, run by the National Maritime Museum Cornwall. The only unaltered criteria are that the vessel must be UK based and substantially intact... although the Committee did allow itself to include vessels which did not fulfil all criteria if they were ‘of extraordinary maritime importance’. This explains why the 16th century carrack, the *Mary Rose*, is included even though she is very far from intact.

Even though entry on the Registry was voluntary and offered no obvious benefit, it proved remarkably popular and there are now around 1,200 vessels on the Register. Undoubtedly there are more vessels not on the Register which fulfil the criteria, but there is a confidence that the Register captured the vast majority of significant vessels.

The Register had a more important function than simply a listing: it was also a means to establish which were the most significant vessels in the country. The University of St Andrews, which had been commissioned to develop the Register, were also tasked with developing an assessment system.

They examined a wide range of other assessment systems for historical artefacts, but none seemed quite appropriate and in the end a bespoke system was therefore developed.

This was based on giving a numeric score to fourteen criteria. The first eleven assess the vessel itself:

1. Technological innovation
2. Exemplary status – type and construction
3. Exemplary status – function
4. Aesthetic impact
5. Historical associations with people and events
6. Socio-economic association
7. Percentage of original fabric (by reference to the end of her normal working life)
8. Condition
9. Age
10. Scarcity of type
11. Scarcity of function

Three final criteria – the ‘project variables’ – assess the capability of the owner(s) to preserve and manage the vessel:

12. Preservation strategy
13. Project technology
14. Project management

Up to five points could be awarded for each criterion. Vessels with a total score above 40 were considered the most important. It was decided that these were the ‘Core Collection’ – vessels of pre-eminent national importance, which:

- span the spectrum of achievement of UK maritime history
- illustrate changes in construction and technology
- merit a higher priority for long-term preservation
- merit a greater degree of support

Almost 60 vessels formed this Core Collection.

Vessels with scores below 40 but higher than 20 in the assessment were seen as a ‘reserve collection’ and given the title ‘Designated Vessels’. These were vessels that:

- are of substantial heritage merit
- may be of more vernacular significance
- may be of greater regional or local significance
- merit support ahead of other non-Core Collection vessels
- might replace a Core Collection vessel which had become a casualty

There were more than twice as many designated vessels as Core Collection vessels.

The remainder of the Register – nearly a thousand vessels – still make a contribution to the UK’s maritime heritage but are simply referred to as ‘Registered Vessels’.

At the very same time, a major new source of funding had emerged for historic vessels in the UK – the National Lottery. It gave very substantial sums to historic ship projects: over €60 million in total and up to 75 per cent of the funding for any single project. Without this funding, the conservation of the *Great Britain*, the conservation of the *Cutty Sark* and the new museum for the *Mary Rose* would have been much more modest projects.

The Committee was of course uniquely situated to help the National Lottery in assessing applications, and in 2006 it changed from essentially a volunteer organisation effectively subsidised by the National Maritime Museum into a non-departmental public body, reporting to and funded by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. Its name was also changed to the Advisory Committee on National Historic Ships, or National Historic Ships for short.

It has however continued the principal work of the Committee. It maintains the National Register of Historic Vessels and it continues to provide advice to government. However, it undertaken two particularly important new initiatives.

First, it has abolished the distinction between Core Collection and Designated Vessels, to create a single National Historic Fleet of around 200 vessels. The criteria for this are:

- “ being of pre-eminent national or regional significance

- “ spanning the spectrum of UK maritime history
- “ illustrating changes in construction and technology
- “ meriting a higher priority for long term preservation

This may seem a backward step in the sense that the most important vessels are not so readily identified, but in practice, there proved to be little practical value in the distinction. An application for a grant from a Core Collection vessel would not necessarily be prioritised over an application from a Designated Vessel, and – understandably – a large number of owners of Designated Vessels thought they had been judged unfairly and they should be Core Collection Vessels. And finally, it was recognised that national importance does not always take precedence over local importance.

Secondly, and more importantly, was the change of emphasis, from essentially a lobbying organisation to one attempting to improve the environment for historic vessels. It does this in a number of ways:

First by advisory papers. The first publication was on how to record historic vessels, which is seen as fundamental to developing a conservation strategy. The second was on deconstruction – a set of guidelines for preserving as much information as possible about a vessel which has no sustainable future before she is lost forever. A third publication – dealing with the various conservation strategies open to historic vessel owners – is due out later this year.

All these publications are written, not for the museum or conservation professional, but for the enthusiastic vessel owner. And it is developing a supportive environment for these people that is seen as the way forward.

The decline of the British shipbuilding industry has meant that facilities for ship repair are becoming fewer and fewer, as are skilled craftsmen. One initiative that National Historic Ships has undertaken is to develop a free on-line directory of skills, services and facilities. This has been on the website for a year, and has over 500 companies listed.

From this has developed a more ambitious scheme which is currently being launched. This is to create a UK-wide ship preservation network, which will bring together vessel owners, businesses, training providers, heritage bodies and all those with an interest in maintaining historic and other high value vessels. The ship preservation network will be based in four pilot areas around the country – chosen because they offer either a natural concentration of existing resources or they have disused facilities which can become the basis for a new ship preservation site.

Finally, National Historic Ships has a small grants scheme. It gives away relatively small sums – up to €2,500 – but this is the only grant scheme available in the UK for vessels which are not owned by trusts or other publically accountable organisations. Since 2006 around €200,000 has been distributed.

Sadly, National Historic Ships' concentration on improving the environment of historic ships is partly the result of the lack of resources to intervene to save vessels directly.

Although it has had some success with direct intervention – for example it played a key role in transferring two World War II craft from private ownership into the care of Portsmouth Historic Dockyard, yet there are still a huge number of challenges. To give a single example, the *City of Adelaide* is a composite clipper, smaller but similar to the *Cutty Sark*. But whereas *Cutty Sark* has a sustainable business plan, the *City of Adelaide's* owners, the Scottish Maritime Museum, have been unable to develop a similar plan and have now reached the point of applying for her demolition. Although National Historic Ships has opposed this and done its best to encourage other parties to take over the ship, either in its entirety or in sections, time is running out.

Time also ran out for MV *Wincham* last year. This Merseyside coaster - which was a member of the National Historic Fleet - was owned by a small volunteer organisation and when faced with potential repair bills far in excess of what her owners thought could be raised she was demolished very quickly, before National Historic Ships could intervene.

Yet somehow our key ships do carry on and many are thriving. The SS *Great Britain* in Bristol has completed its pioneering conservation programme and is attracting much greater audiences than it ever anticipated. The *Cutty Sark*, after a very difficult period following the fire in 2007, now seems to be on track for a re-opening towards the end of 2011. Very shortly afterwards, a new museum for the *Mary Rose* should be open. The future may be uncertain but it is not necessarily gloomy. There are now closer bonds between historic vessel owners than ever before – largely thanks to National Historic Ships forming a focus. Whatever happens next, these bonds are likely to remain.

In the UK we have a very peculiar situation where buildings, even if privately owned, are protected by law. Ship wrecks are protected by law. But intact surviving ships have no protection whatsoever. And this is unlikely to change: the latest Heritage Protection Bill, which has yet to be put into law, makes no mention of historic vessels.

There is also no protection for the Advisory Committee on National Historic Ships. A new government has just come to power in the UK on a platform of cuts to the public sector rather than tax increases, so the organisation may find its funding cut - it may even be abolished as an official body.

With the number of ship conservation projects being undertaken all over the world we have, collectively a huge technical knowledge, a vast amount of expertise to share. Yet this is not enough to secure the future of Britain's historic ships. They are no better protected in law that they were five hundred years ago under the first Queen Elizabeth. Changing this situation is the principal challenge ahead for the Advisory Committee on National Historic Ships.