

# The Classification & Recording of the Floating Maritime Heritage in the United Kingdom

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Despite being asked to talk about the Classification and Recording of the Floating Maritime Heritage in the UK, and for the sake of variety after a good lunch, I thought I would begin by talking about historic country houses.

It is perhaps worth recalling that in the UK in the 1970's, there was a national outcry about the loss of a growing number of our historic houses -including a controversial and highly influential exhibition entitled *The Destruction of the English Country House 1875-1975*, which contributed to a vigorous campaign to protect our historic buildings and a greater public awareness of the threat to our architectural heritage. To date, there has been no comparable outcry about the threat to our historic ships and no legislation or government policy to help safeguard them for the future. Arguably, the UK's maritime heritage is in critical danger -ships, unlike buildings, are less substantial structures, built to serve a purpose with a life expectancy of maybe 25 years, but not expected to last indefinitely without extensive, and often expensive, preservation.

In this brief presentation, I hope to describe some of the issues facing us in the UK concerning the preservation of our maritime heritage, and primarily with the preservation of our fleet of historic vessels. The UK historic fleet can reasonably claim to be unrivalled in its depth and range, and in some cases, we are a *net exporter* of historic vessels to other countries around the world.

Before we can seriously begin to plan -and, if necessary, to campaign- for the preservation of particular crafts, we need to know what we have, why particular vessels are important and, given inevitable limitations on resources, which vessels we would choose to preserve if we had to make a choice.

## ■ THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC VESSELS (NRHV)

I will describe the recent creation in the UK of the National Register of Historic Vessels (NRHV), which is a tentative start to creating a record of our historic fleet, which

The computer database of the National Register of Historic Vessels.

will help us to make future decisions on preservation and funding priorities. The National Historic Ships Project was begun in 1995, with the aim of providing high quality management information to assist in developing a national policy on the preservation of historic ships. Over the next five years, the project team from the Scottish Institute of Maritime Studies, at the University of St Andrews, developed the computer database that is now the National Register of Historic Vessels. The team also designed a system for assessing and evaluating the heritage merits of historic vessels, which I will describe in more detail a little later.

The most recent and last phase, from 1997 up to the end of last year (2000), took the database and the evaluation system as the basis for the creation of a list of vessels so important that every effort should be exerted nationally to ensure their survival in a good state.

Let's spend a moment looking at the criteria that were used in creating the National Register of Historic Ships database.

#### □ CRITERIA FOR THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC VESSELS

These were:

- Built before the end of 1945.
- Over 40 tons or over 40 feet (12.19 metres).
- Built in the UK.
- Based or operating in the UK.
- Substantially intact.

To qualify for inclusion on the database, a vessel must satisfy all the criteria.

It is acknowledged that these criteria are to some degree arbitrary -much discussion and debate- in some cases creating more heat than light -surrounded the se-



lection of these criteria- a debate too time-consuming to rehearse again now. However, changing any element of the criteria would have substantially increased the number of vessels identified and recorded in the Register. Unfortunately, the project did not have the resources to undertake the extra work. I will return to this issue later in my presentation.

The extensive consultation process among owners of historic vessels -both public bodies and private individuals- took a variety of forms:

- Press releases to the maritime media-yachting magazines, Classic Boat.
- Creation of special web-sites describing the project.
- Letters seeking the views of specialist class and owners groups.
- A conference for interested individuals and groups.
- «Roadshows» open to anyone: held in 7 venues around the UK.

Surprisingly, research revealed that the vast majority (perhaps 95%) of the UK's historic vessels are in private ownership: many are still working commercially, being used in static roles as trading premises or houseboats or still being enjoyed by their owners as pleasure craft's.

Original estimates suggested the criteria might identify an estimated 500 vessels for the Register: this proved a serious underestimate of the size of the UK's historic fleet -some 1,500 vessels were identified: today, the combined total of Registered Vessels has exceeded 1,800.

The Project went on to recognise that there were vessels within the Register which were of outstanding significance. Therefore sub-groups were created for the Core Collection and Designated Vessels.

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## □ THE CORE COLLECTION

These are historic vessels which:

- Are of pre-eminent national importance.
- 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.

To date, there are just over 50 vessels in the Core Collection -the debate goes on among enthusiastic owners- which vessels they think should be included: the National Historic Ships Committee has had to make, and stand by its selection, in the knowledge that «it will be damned if it does and damned if it doesn't». Among the vessels on the Core Collection are, for example, and not surprisingly:

- *HMS Victory*, 1765, Nelson's flagship at Trafalgar - now preserved at Portsmouth.
- *Excelsior of 1921*, a sailing trawler of the type once common in the UK fishing fleet.
- *Branksome*, of 1896, an elegant Victorian lake steamer in largely original condition.
- *Peacock* a traditional canal narrow boat of 1915.

### The Designated Vessels

- Are of substantial in 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.

There are currently over 160 vessels in this category. Examples are:

- *Barcadale*, 1938-39, a 60 ft Motor Fishing Vessel.
- *Flamborian*, 1938, a coastal passenger vessel still taking excursion passengers.
- *FCB 56*, an 80 ft ferro-concrete barge, built for war service.
- *Dolly*, c1850, a Windermere steam launch, recovered as a total wreck and restored to working condition.

The Registration procedure required the creation of a functional classification of craft -a Functional Thesaurus- identifying the range of functions which a boat or vessel

might be asked to perform, and then groups them into broad categories under a generic heading. There isn't time to describe these in detail, but I can give you a sample.

### Fighting Ship

- Aircraft Carrier.
- Amphibious Vessel.
- Armed Boarding Vessel.
- Capital Warship.
- Decoy.
- Dummy Warship.
- Fireship.
- Minesweeper.
- Minor Warship:
  - Amphibious Operations Support Vessel.
  - Escort.
  - Submarine Hunter.
  - Minelayer.
  - Patrol boat.
- Pirate.
- Privateer.
- Submarine.

There are 18 categories within the Functional Classification with another 105 sub-groups: there may be others, but this is our best shot to date. For anyone interested, I can provide copies of the full list after the presentation.

Alongside the Functional Thesaurus, a complex process in its own right, is another evaluation and assessment system, designed to assess the merit of historic vessels. This comprises eleven elements, dealing with the heritage attributes of the vessel, and a further three, covering the method and conduct of its preservation. I only have time to show you these briefly but can provide details later, if necessary:

### Vessel Attributes

1. Technological innovation.
2. Exemplary status: type and construction.
3. Exemplary status: function.
4. Aesthetic impact.
5. Historical associations (with people and/or events).
6. Socio-economic associations.

7. Percentage (%) originality of fabric.
8. Condition.
9. Age.
10. Scarcity of vessel: type.
11. Scarcity of vessel: function.

#### **Project Variables**

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

These are used with a scoring system, running from 0-5 for most elements, with the highest level of significance scoring 5. From this, a vessel application can be assessed for inclusion within the Register, and for subsequent and more detailed consideration, for inclusion in the Core Collection or Designated Vessels Lists.

#### **Promoting the Register**

In return for helping to compile the Register, successful owners receive a certificate to confirm the vessel's status and inclusion on a mailing list to receive «Scantlings» - the Register's annual newsletter. There are no charges or costs for owners to place their craft on the Register: indeed, having a Certificate of Registration for a registered vessel is much sought after by owners.

However, Registration is no guarantee of public or private funding - there are no preservation funds attached to the Register. However it does help to make the case for a vessel making application to fund-giving organisations.

#### **Register on the Web**

More recently, the Core Collection and Designated Vessels Lists have been made available via the National Maritime Museum's Web-site. Quite shortly, the Register itself -over 1.800 entries- will be available for use by the

general public and funding organisations. It can be used as a detailed data-base -answering questions about the vessels listed, and providing a useful source for the researcher or enthusiast owner. On a practical level, the Museum takes serious steps to safeguard the security of confidential information supplied by owners.

#### **Maintaining the Register**

There are significant funding issues attached to the continuing maintenance of the Register. Currently the National Maritime Museum continues to fund the on-going updating: additional Registrations continue to come in at 3-4 month. Incidentally, the total cost of the project has been estimated at £400,000, including £150,000 directly from our Heritage Lottery Fund.

#### **Extending the Register**

There are voices suggesting the criteria are too narrow and should be opened: this is sound in principle, but potentially expensive in practice. Changing the built before 1945 to 1956 would include a period when the UK was very active in shipbuilding: reduction of the length criteria from 40ft to below 35ft would be undesirable -these are not ships, and would potentially attract entries from vast, possibly, unmanageable numbers.

### **■ WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM THE PROJECT?**

#### *Size and complexity*

- The numbers of vessels were much larger than forecast.

#### *A concept proved*

- Sceptics were confounded: a Register can be constructed, albeit with flaws.

#### *A base line for decision-making*

- For the first time, the basic data is available.



*A base line for the future*

- Work done to date can be built on.

*Importance of vernacular vessels*

- The project identified the need for an extra list of Designated Vessels.
- The consultation exercise demonstrated the strength of grass-root feelings among owners-particularly of fishing boats.

*Maintaining accurate data*

- We are looking at a 'moving target' - ships move around and can suddenly disappear.
- Constant updating is vital to maintain credibility of the Register and its value.
- Reviews on a cyclical basis - 1-3 every year.

*The Historic Fleet lacks a 'champion' - any one organisation to promote its case*

- A major failing - The National Historic Ships Committee, and the Register can provide the facts, but are not a lobbying organisation.

■ **EMERGING CONCLUSIONS**

- The project represented outstanding value for money, given the funding invested: it delivered on time and within the budget.

- A long overdue, and much needed, research project.

But, there is still no national policy for preserving our maritime heritage - the campaign continues: let's hope it does not go the way of our country houses.

