

# Conservation of Historic Ships National strategies

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## A Partnership Project now supports the national database of historic vessels.

**W**e have a large historic fleet in the UK: at least 1,200 vessels over 12m in length and possibly as many as 500 smaller vessels. Many local and national trusts and societies support these vessels, including the widely known Heritage Afloat. There is some government aid for vessels in the care of museums, and some Heritage Lottery Fund grants for other vessels, but overall it remains an uncoordinated area of our heritage.

The National Historic Ships Committee was formed by the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich in 1992. A project to set up a national database, begun in 1995, has recently been supported by a Partnership Project with English Heritage. The original project was seen as the foundation of a properly funded and organised national policy. Completed in 2000, the database was officially set up at the Maritime Museum as the National Register of Historic Ships, maintained by two members of the museum staff. The NHSC is made up of members chosen for their knowledge, experience and standing in historic ship preservation, and they serve *ad hominem* and in an honorary capacity. I act as Secretary, and have led the Partnership Project. A small group of committee members helps run the Register and provides specialist skills and knowledge.

### The historic vessels

The vessels are under a diverse ownership, some in the care of museums but many not. Individual trusts own many, some still remain in private hands, and just two – the light cruiser *Caroline* and the 1st Rate *Victory* – are owned by the Ministry of Defence. The vessels represent the broadest spectrum of maritime activity, from large ships such as *HMS Belfast* and *Victory* to much smaller sailing craft.

### The Register

The Register, a relational database with over ten fields, can store information on function, builder, dimensions, construction, propulsion, history and location. It is built round a basic functional/type thesaurus, and it can also store images (see [www.nhsc.org.uk](http://www.nhsc.org.uk)). There are strict entry criteria for vessels: built before 1955; British built; length greater than 12m; and substantially intact.

Vessels appear on the Register in one of three levels of importance: A Core Collection of 58 historically pre-eminent vessels; a Designated Vessels List that currently holds 162 vessels of considerable merit; and a third list of vessels, which are least significant but nonetheless historically important. To determine the level, we score the vessels on innovation, exemplary status, aesthetic quality, historical association, originality, age, condition and rarity.

When we score historical significance, we also monitor the vessel's project itself – its feasibility, conservation practice, business approach and educational outreach – so that we can maintain an overall view of its sustainability. As the Committee is composed both of museum and sailing ship specialists, the Register covers the whole of our maritime heritage. It helps to guide funding priorities and establish specific needs for vessels at risk. However, the Register offers no legal protection, has no enforcing conditions and does not hold any purse strings.

### English Heritage's support

English Heritage has helped keep the Register alive. Working in partnership with the National Maritime Museum, we have been able to update entries over the last two years. We have visited every vessel on the Core Collection

Above: *Corrie*, an Edwardian racing yacht built in 1908, based at Gosport, Hampshire. Below: *Challenge*, the last steam tug to operate in the Port of London. At the time of Dunkirk, she towed other ships across the channel and also rescued troops. She now operates from Shoreham-by-Sea, West Sussex, and works between Southampton and Bristol.



list, and have also carried out research on all the vessels on the Designated List. We now know a great deal more about how the vessels are sustained and how much outreach they generate – and, more importantly, how much more could be achieved.

### Why register?

The Register provides useful data about the whole fleet of historic ships – for politicians, enthusiasts, visitors and owners. In recording maintenance and repair priorities, it can be used to put people with the same problem in touch with each other and to disseminate details of funding opportunities. It allows us to encourage better standards – teaching the sailor about conservation and the museum curator about sailing. As many readers will appreciate, taking the ship to sea, and later saving it, draws upon practical as well as academic expertise.

### Challenging times

The condition of our historic fleet is deteriorating, and the numbers diminishing. Resources are scarce. Maintaining the Register is not cheap; unless entries are kept up to date, it soon becomes a useless tool. The Register cannot work without the support of the ship owners themselves, and they need incentives. Perhaps cheaper taxes, mooring fees and other small incentives given to ships on the Register can eventually be achieved – particularly if we can encourage ship owners to be good conservationists, to increase outreach programmes for the public, and to help attract investment into areas in need of development.

We have recently gained government recognition for what we do. In February 2005, the Heritage Minister, Andrew McIntosh, announced the creation of a National Historic Ships Unit, which will advise the Government on policy and funding priorities, coordinate work within the sector and maintain the Register. This positive step forward will, we hope, encourage a better understanding of the costs of restoring and maintaining historic vessels and will help promote historic ships to a wider audience. We also hope it will help us save our historic ships, carry out more research, improve our guidance and develop new partnerships. We see new partnerships as the golden key: museums and sailing ships, shipwrights, sailors and curators working together to increase the general public's interest in and enjoyment of the wonderful heritage of historic ships. It is a rich combination for the 21st century and deserves a bright future.

