

## RECENT INITIATIVES IN SHIP PRESERVATION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

### Najnovije inicijative za očuvanje brodova u Ujedinjenom Kraljevstvu

**John Robinson**, BA (Econ.), FMA  
Historic Ships, London, United Kingdom  
rob.crusoe@btopenworld.com

#### *Summary*

*The United Kingdom has a long and consistent history of public concern for preserving ships important in its national history. The year 2010 marks the centenary of the Society for Nautical Research, which mobilised public opinion to preserve Admiral Nelson's flagship VICTORY when she was due to be scuttled at sea at the end of her service afloat. More recently, the fast tea clipper CUTTY SARK was brought to London and installed in a dry-dock at Greenwich in 1951. Twenty years later, the abandoned hulk of the pioneer transatlantic steamship GREAT BRITAIN was recovered from the Falkland Islands and returned to Bristol for restoration and public display.*

*The technical success of these and other preservation projects has led to a succession of new schemes for ship preservation, both in museums and by volunteer groups. By 1979 there was a realisation that the UK needed to agree priorities and policies for ship preservation in order to prevent the available resources being overwhelmed by too many projects. The National Maritime Museum convened a National Historic Ships Committee to offer leadership in this sector. More recently, an Advisory Committee was created to advise Government Ministers on all aspects of ship preservation.*

*The National Historic Ships Unit is a small secretariat that services the Advisory Committee and maintains the National Register. It also provides information on where specialist materials and services for ship restoration can be obtained. It encourages closer networking between traditional maritime craftsmen, and campaigns for the retention of a few historic dry-docks where traditional vessels can be maintained and restored (see [www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk](http://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk)).*

**Key words:** Society for Nautical Research, the National Maritime Museum

## ORIGINS OF SHIP PRESERVATION IN UK

Throughout history, the British Isles have depended on the sea both for defence and for importing our daily needs. Our geography is such that no citizen lives more than 150km from the sea. Until recently, nearly every family had a relative who was a seafarer. Now that link is gradually disappearing as more people work in city offices, and crew numbers on ships are reduced by the introduction of electronic aids.

Yet the British passion for maritime history shows no sign of diminishing. As early as 1580, attempts were made to preserve the *GOLDEN HINDE* on her return to London after the first English circumnavigation of the world. But at that time little was understood of conservation, and after a few years the ship fell apart in her open-air berth. After the British victory over the combined French and Spanish fleets at Trafalgar in 1805, the body of Admiral Nelson, who had been killed at the height of the battle, was carried back to England aboard his flagship *VICTORY*. The reverence among both sailors and landmen for Nelson's memory ensured that throughout the next century, the Royal Navy continued to find new uses for this notable sailing warship. She was still afloat in Portsmouth Harbour when the centenary of the Battle of Trafalgar was marked in 1905, but the Royal Navy no longer had enough craftsmen to maintain her hull, built in 1765, in floating condition. When the First World War ended, there was widespread concern that *VICTORY* might sink at her mooring in Portsmouth Harbour, and the Admiralty proposed to break her up, since they had no funds available for the comprehensive restoration required for her weak and rotten hull.

Nelson's old flagship had earned a place in the affections of British people, but an appeal to the public produced much less in donations than was required to save the ship. Only the support of a wealthy ship-owner made it possible to carry out all the work required to support the ship in a steel cradle inside the oldest dry-dock in Portsmouth Naval Dockyard. New masts and spars were paid for out of the money donated by benefactors, and a new Museum was built adjacent to the ship, now part of the National Museum of the Royal Navy. Continuous upkeep and restoration have been necessary to oppose the natural decay which affects any wooden structure in the open air, but HMS *VICTORY* continues to attract millions of visitors each year to Portsmouth.

## MERCHANT SHIPS

The popularity of *VICTORY* as a museum ship provided encouragement for a scheme to preserve a merchant ship. The fast clipper *CUTTY SARK* was built in Scotland in 1869 to carry expensive cargoes of tea from China to the London markets. The opening of the Suez Canal in that year made it difficult for sailing



■ **Figure 1** Tea clipper Cutty Sark (1869)  
*Preserved at Greenwich in London since 1954.*



■ **Figure 2** Steamship Great Britain (1843)  
*Returned from the Falkland Island to her building dock in Bristol in 1970.  
Restored to her condition as the first Transatlantic iron steamship.*



■ **Figure 3** The Maritime Trust, established 1969  
*The coastal steamship Robin, (built in London in 1890) was brought back from Bilbao in Spain in 1974 for restoration and display.*



■ **Figure 4** Emigrant ship City of Adelaide (1864) at Scottish Maritime Museum  
*The resources of some museums are not sufficient for all of the vessels in their care.*

ships to remain profitable in the tea trade, because steamships were then able to deliver tea more rapidly via Suez to London where fresh tea commanded the top prices. The *CUTTY SARK* carried cargoes of wool from Australia to London until she passed into Portuguese ownership in 1895. In 1922 she was repatriated to England to serve as a training ship in Falmouth harbour. Her importance as the last surviving tea-clipper prompted a campaign to preserve her in London, and in 1952 she was installed in a permanently-sealed dry-dock at Greenwich and re-rigged to her appearance as a tea clipper. More than 15 million people have visited the *CUTTY SARK* since she was opened to the public in 1957. The ship has been closed since November 2006 for extensive restoration. Nearly three years ago there was an accidental fire on board which caused extensive damage, although fortunately the deck-houses and some fittings escaped the fire as they had already been stored ashore. It is hoped to re-open the ship to visitors in time for the Olympic Games in London in 2012.

The next large ship to be considered for preservation represents the new technology that eventually eclipsed sailing ships like *CUTTY SARK* from the world's trade routes. The first transatlantic screw steamship built of iron was the steamship *GREAT BRITAIN*, launched at Bristol in 1843. Within a few years, improvements in marine technology made her uneconomic as a steam passenger ship, but she continued to trade under sail alone until 1886, when she took refuge in the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic after storm damage off Cape Horn. It was not economic to repair the ship, so she was used as a floating store for coal and wool in the harbour. Eventually the hull was towed to a remote cove and beached. Remarkably, it was sufficiently strong to survive more than 50 years without any attention in the hostile South Atlantic climate. A few maritime historians had long recognised the importance of this remarkable survivor, but it was not until the development of submersible barges for undersea oil drilling that there was any possibility of refloating the *GREAT BRITAIN*. In 1970, a private benefactor paid for the hull to be transported 7,000 miles to England and returned to the same dock in Bristol from which she had been launched in 1843. With scrupulous attention to historical accuracy, she has since been restored to her 1843 condition, and has won many awards for the excellence of her restoration.

### **PRESERVING SMALLER VESSELS.**

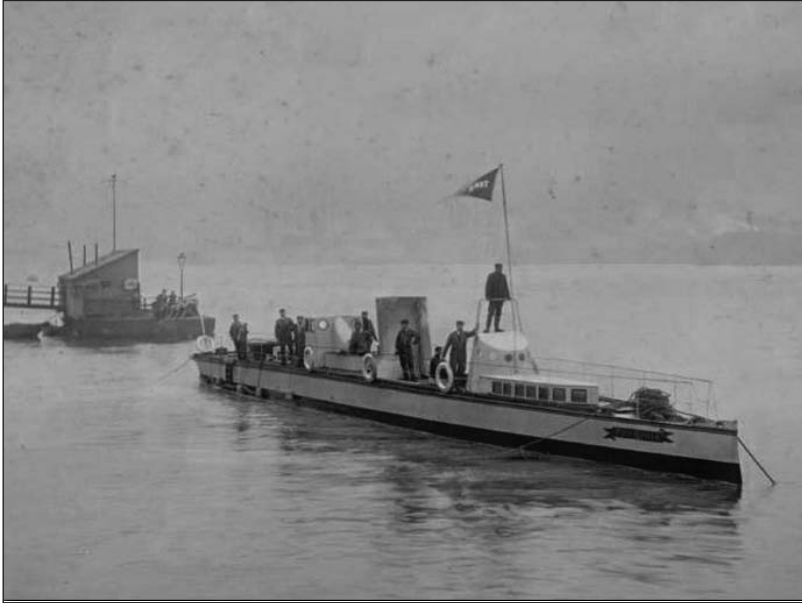
Each of the projects described so far involves a single large ocean-going ship, with a dedicated group of supporters devoted to its restoration and display. Smaller vessels are equally important in illustrating our maritime history, but it has often been difficult to mobilise support quickly for their preservation when their working lives come to an end. In 1969 Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, a professional sailor until he married into the Royal Family in 1947, called a



meeting to discuss this problem. It was agreed to create a central organisation to provide for historic ships the same standard of care and protection as had long been given to our castles and cathedrals. It was launched the following year as the Maritime Trust., with a mission to provide support and advice to local groups who wished to preserve historic ships. Occasionally it might intervene in an emergency by acquiring a vessel to prevent its destruction, and then transferring ownership as soon as a local support group could be created. But within a few years the Maritime Trust found itself the owner of a fleet of more than 20 vessels, some already in poor condition. The costs of managing these vessels absorbed all of the Trust's resources. Hoping that the largest vessels would be more attractive to paying customers, it concentrated its restoration effort on a few of them. Among these was the *ROBIN*, a small steam cargo ship built on the River Thames in 1890 and still trading under the Spanish flag when the Trust found her in 1970. They had also acquired the *LYDIA EVA*, a steel fishing vessel built in 1930, and the *CAMBRIA*, a wooden sailing barge built on the Thames in 1906 and the last British sailing vessel to carry cargo without an engine. All were exhibited at dispersed locations close to where they had originally worked. In an effort to achieve economies in supervision and upkeep, six of the Trust's larger vessels were brought together for display in St Katharine's Dock, a popular tourist and commercial centre in London where empty 19<sup>th</sup> century warehouses had recently been converted into residential apartments for sale, and where the sight of these preserved ships added to the aesthetic appeal of the area. But free public access to the quays meant that most people chose to enjoy the ships from ashore without paying to go on board. After 8 years it became clear that income from visitors was insufficient to pay the mooring fees due to the dock owner. The ships were dispersed to various ports in England and Scotland, where their upkeep is now the responsibility of local societies and volunteer groups. After more than 30 years of active involvement in ship preservation, the Maritime Trust is now a dormant organisation.

### **PRESERVATION BY OPERATION.**

Experience demonstrates that ships and boats in regular use last longer than those displayed in a static role. Salt water on a wooden deck kills the organisms that cause decay, whereas rainwater nourishes the same organisms. Opening the hatches of a ship ventilates the spaces below deck, contributing to longer life. Turning a vessel at least twice a year equalises the exposure to sunlight on each side. Engines and other machinery need to be operated occasionally if they are to remain workable. The activity associated with demonstrating a ship or boat at work adds an extra dimension to her heritage value, and keeps alive the traditional skills that would otherwise disappear with the passage of time.



■ *Figure 5* World's first steam turbine vessel Turbinia.  
A pioneer vessel built on the River Tyne in 1894.



■ *Figure 6* Turbinia displayed in Newcastle Museum.  
A vessel of world significance, preserved in the city where she was built.



■ **Figure 7** Sailing trawler Vigilance (1926), at Brixham  
*An example of what can be achieved by local volunteers with a passion for ship preservation.*



■ **Figure 8** Sailing yacht Rosenn, 1896.  
*Many sailors prefer traditional vessels to modern mass-produced sports yachts.*



Any visit to a yacht harbour here in Croatia will confirm the recent growth in popularity of sailing for pleasure. During the past 30 years, yachts that once were built of wood have been largely displaced by newer types produced on an industrial scale and using synthetic materials like glass-reinforced plastic in preference to wood or metal. Such sports boats may be relatively easy to maintain, but many sailors believe that they lack the individuality and personality of a boat built from traditional materials. In any yacht harbour, it is the older boats that attract the attention of spectators. Throughout Europe, there has been a steady growth of interest in saving examples of small fishing vessels and workboats from destruction at the end of their working lives. Here in Croatia you have an excellent example of such interest in the Batana House ecomuseum at Rovinj, where the Deputy mayor of the town, Marino Budicin and curator Dragana Ratkovic have led a remarkable campaign to keep alive the traditional skills of building and using the *batana* boats that are so characteristic of Northern Adriatic harbours. Without their efforts, the memory of these boats and the people who used them to earn their living might have disappeared altogether. If you go to Rovinj, you will see several examples of these delightful boats that have been saved from destruction and restored for a second life.

#### NATIONAL SUPPORT FOR PRESERVING SHIPS.

From 1970 many new industrial and maritime museums were established in the United Kingdom, as part of a European and world-wide recognition that technology was evolving at such a rapid rate that we risked losing all evidence of how our parents and grandparents had earned their daily living. At least ten new maritime museums came into existence during this period, and many acquired ships and boats for display afloat. Our National Maritime Museum at Greenwich is situated close to the River Thames, but has consistently resisted any temptation to accept any floating exhibits. Most of the United Kingdom museums that displayed floating exhibits discovered that they had insufficient resources to look after them. A few of these vessels were transferred to volunteer groups, while others were broken up when the parent museum closed.

In 1991 a seminar was convened by the National Maritime Museum to discuss the problems of ship preservation. In his closing remarks, the Chairman remarked on the steady stream of such problems, and the lack of consistency in solving them. The meeting supported the idea of a single organisation to agree an order of priorities, and to provide guidance and advice to individuals and groups who were planning to begin new restoration projects. In 1992 the National Historic Ships Committee came into existence, and commissioned a new survey of all vessels more than 12metres long or more than 40 tons, built in the UK at least 50 years ago and still in UK waters. A small team of researchers travelled throughout the Kingdom and identified more than 1,000 ships and

boats that met the definition. Photographs and other details were collected, and the National Maritime Museum agreed to accept custody of the National Register of Historic Vessels.

Most of the money required to preserve historic ships and boats in the UK comes from private sources, usually the owners. Our Government provides financial support for some of our larger museums, but has no separate budget for the preservation of historic ships. Our National Lottery provides grants for a wide variety of cultural, sporting and charitable projects. It is one of the grant-giving organisations that regularly uses the National Register of Historic Ships as a tool when deciding how to award its grants. Among the largest grants awarded by the Heritage Lottery Fund for ship preservation have been those offered to the 16<sup>th</sup> century English warship *MARY ROSE*, recovered in 1982 by archaeologists from the sea-bed off Portsmouth where she sank in 1545, and the *CUTTY SARK* mentioned earlier. Support from Lottery funds for these two projects already exceeds €50 million, or about Kuna 325 million.

### **SUPPORT TO PRIVATE OWNERS.**

Traditional ships and boats of all types and sizes are increasingly sought by people willing to restore them, even from ruinous condition, at their own expense. Their reward is the custody of an item of real cultural significance, and the knowledge that their intervention will help to save for posterity a vessel that might otherwise have been lost forever. Not all of these people have the technical knowledge and experience necessary to achieve the highest standards of authenticity and accuracy of historical detail. For their benefit, the secretariat of the Advisory Committee on Historic Ships has created a Register of Skills, an electronic database listing sources of special materials and professional craftsmen and craftswomen capable of undertaking specialist work on restoring historic ships. This can be freely consulted on the website [www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk](http://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk). The Advisory Committee has also sponsored the publication of a technical handbook entitled *Conserving Historic Vessels* This will shortly become available on the National Historic Ships website

Frequently it is not possible to save an old ship from destruction. Where that ship has important technical features, we recommend that detailed drawings are made, supplemented by photographs, so that her distinctive features can be recorded for posterity. Guidance on how to achieve this is in another technical manual *Recording Historic Vessels*, The special procedures necessary to ensure that historical evidence is not lost in the course of dismantling a ship at the end of her economic life are explained in a third manual called *Deconstructing Historic Vessels*. The text of these handbooks can be freely downloaded from the National Historic Ships website mentioned above.

### DOCK AND HARBOUR HERITAGE.

Modern yachts are typically assembled from pre-fabricated components, inside a factory building, and similar industrial techniques are used for commercial fishing vessels and work-boats. The small shipyards that were a familiar feature of our harbours twenty or more years ago are steadily disappearing, displaced in many cases by new residential developments which favour waterside locations. Particularly troublesome is the progressive loss of small dry-docks where traditional vessels can be repaired below their waterline without paying the expensive costs of a full-size commercial dry-dock. The National Historic Ships office is campaigning for the retention of a few such facilities around the British coastline, and is promoting an informal network of maritime craftsmen and suppliers so that the skills and components required to maintain and restore historic ships and boats can be found conveniently close to where the work is done.

### EUROPEAN CO-OPERATION IN SHIP PRESERVATION.

The purpose of ships is to transport people and cargoes across the waters that divide us, and it is logical that knowledge and experience in maritime preservation should also be shared across international frontiers. Since 1995, a voluntary organisation has worked to promote such co-operation, and to make it easier for the owners and operators of traditional and historic vessels to comply with modern safety regulations, most of which are intended for modern mechanically-driven ships rather than for those that proceed at a gentle speed under sail or with an historic steam-engine for propulsion. This organisation is called European Maritime Heritage (EMH), and it meets twice each year to discuss shared concerns. EMH recognises that traditional ships survive best when they can continue to operate, so that they can earn the money required for regular maintenance. This is summarised as *No income = no upkeep*.

EMH has created working links with the European Commission (it will host a Workshop on Maritime Heritage within the EC Maritime Policy Stakeholders' conference in Gijon on 19-21 May 2010) and with the European Maritime Safety Agency in Lisbon. It also works with Europa Nostra and with the European Sea Ports Organisation (ESPO). The United Kingdom is a National member of EMH, as also are Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. Galicia recently joined as a Regional member, a new category of membership which acknowledges that maritime culture does not always confine itself to modern political frontiers. Here in the Northern Adriatic you will understand easily what I mean by this observation. The port architecture and the everyday language of fishermen and sailors in this region provide a powerful illustration of the historical bonds that you have inherited from the era of Venetian domination of the seas.



- **Figure 9** A small drydock at Appledore in Devon. Many such facilities have closed and new houses are being built around them.
- **Figure 10** A large commercial dry-dock at Birkenhead. Many such facilities have closed as shipbuilding has migrated to other countries.



- **Figure 11** Richmond dry-dock at Appledore today. Houses will probably be built around it, and another facility for repairing historic ships will be lost.



- **Figure 12** Historic dry docks at Chatham. National Historic Ships promotes a network of regional centres for ship preservation, where traditional skills can be kept alive and taught to young people who want to make a career in historic ships.

At least sixteen of Europe's principal maritime museums support EMH as Advisory Members, providing specialist advice on the technical and aesthetic aspects of ship preservation. EMH also has a specialist Safety Council, made up of professional and experienced skippers who are well qualified to make recommendations on operating traditional vessels with due regard to safety. The Safety Council is particularly concerned with assisting the traditional ships of its member nations to visit each other's harbours and thus to generate more interest in the shared cultural heritage that continues to bind together the maritime nations of Europe, even though jet aircraft may be the preferred means of crossing international frontiers.

EMH holds its own Congress and General Assembly once in three years. The next such Congress will take place in Portugal on 23-24 September 2010, and it is hoped that Croatia will be represented at that meeting, since there is wide admiration throughout Europe for your country's interest in its heritage of ships and harbours, of which this symposium in Rijeka is an example. EMH would like Croatia's recent achievements in this area to be more widely known and applauded elsewhere in Europe .

### CONCLUSION.

The United Kingdom is proud of its long history as a world leader in using the world's oceans for exploration, for commerce and sometimes to fight wars. Its active merchant fleet is now in decline, but there is strong interest at popular level in preserving representative examples of the ships and boats that have helped to shape our history and our national character.

There is a reluctant recognition that we cannot possibly save *all* of the old ships and boats that we might like to. Most of them were designed and built with an intended life-span of up to forty years, and to preserve them much longer than that may be an unrealistic ambition. So we have to apply a rigorous process of selection when deciding which vessels should be accepted as part of the heritage we would like to hand down to our successors.

Experience suggests that the life of an historic vessel can often be extended by using it regularly, so that any defects in its structure become evident more quickly than if the vessel is left tied up in harbour for long periods, But the water can be a dangerous place, and the fact that a vessel is historic cannot provide an excuse for unsafe practices.

There are various initiatives at a European level aimed at raising standards of restoration, sharing skills and technical knowledge and enriching our understanding of a shared maritime heritage. European Maritime Heritage

works to improve co-operation between maritime nations where the traditional skills of seafaring, fishing and recreational sailing are cherished. As a nation



whose historic contribution to maritime culture and technology has been more than proportionate to its land area and population, Croatia has the capacity to exercise a significant role in celebrating the cultural links that bind maritime nations together. *The seas between us are a bridge, not a barrier.*

### Sažetak

Ujedinjeno Kraljevstvo može se pohvaliti dugogodišnjim i neprekinutim zanimanjem javnosti za očuvanje brodova koji su važni za njegovu nacionalnu povijest. Ove se godine obilježava stogodišnjica Društva za pomorska istraživanja, zahvaljujući kojemu je očuvan Nelsonov admiralski brod HMS Victory, kada je došao trenutak da ga se, na kraju službe, potopi. U ne tako davnoj povijesti prekrasni je čajni klipper Cutty Sark prenesen u London i izvučen na namjenski izgrađeni suhi dok, na vrijeme za Festival of Britania 1951. godine. Dvadeset godina poslije, nasukani trup pionirskoga preookeanskog parobroda Great Britain s Falklandskih je otoka vraćen u Bristol radi očuvanja i predstavljanja javnosti.

Tehnički uspjeh tih projekata očuvanja, kao i drugih projekata, potaknuo je iznalaženje novih načina očuvanja povijesnih brodova. Godine 1979. postalo je jasno da je Ujedinjenom Kraljevstvu potreban ugovoreni niz politika kako bi se spriječilo prekomjerno korištenje dostupnih sredstava za očuvanje velike flote kojom je raspolagala država. Nacionalni pomorski muzej sazvao je Nacionalni odbor za očuvanje povijesnih brodova kako bi kvantificirao predstojeće zadatke. Nedavno je imenovan Savjetodavni odbor kojemu je zadaća davati Vladi svoje mišljenje o svim aspektima očuvanja brodova i nadzirati raspodjelu skromnih subvencija vlasnicima i skrbnicima povijesnih brodova.

Društvo za pomorska istraživanja ([www.nationalhistoricalships.org.uk](http://www.nationalhistoricalships.org.uk)), koje pruža usluge Savjetodavnom odboru, radi i na tome da zaustavi stalni gubitak postojećih luka i suhih dokova te da potakne tješnje umrežavanje tradicionalnih pomorskih obrta (primjerice, izrađivača jedara, drvorezbara) kako bi te vještine lakše preživjele opadanje gospodarske aktivnosti. U referatu je predstavljeno uspješno djelovanje javne uprave na ovom području, ali i problemi koji se očekuju kao posljedica starenja povijesne flote i sve većeg broja posjetitelja. Ti su aspekti uspoređeni s paralelnim inicijativama u drugim europskim državama.

**Ključne riječi:** Društvo za pomorska istraživanja, Nacionalni pomorski muzej