

# NATIONAL HISTORIC FLEET AT RISK ASSESSMENT

April 2025





## Introduction

In November 2023, National Historic Ships UK (NHS-UK) published the [National Historic Fleet At Risk](#) report following an assessment to review the condition of vessels on the Fleet. This identified the number of craft which required ongoing monitoring and enabled vessel records to be updated, thus ensuring that the information held on the Registers is accurate and relevant.

Vessels on the National Historic Fleet, previously referred to as the Core Collection and Designated Vessels Lists, are distinguished by:

- 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 conservation.

Being part of the National Historic Fleet carries a level of significance over and above that held by craft on the wider National Register of Historic Vessels (NRHV). It can also enable access to funds not available to other historic vessels.

The 2023 At Risk Assessment identified key actions for NHS-UK moving forwards, the first of which was to implement a regular contact schedule for all vessels deemed at risk or marginal. Vessels with a Red/Amber/Green 'RAG' Rating of 'amber' or 'red' were divided between the project team for ongoing monitoring throughout the year. This included updating their records from vessel social media postings or websites, as well as holding online meetings with custodians or undertaking vessel visits.

To review further changes to the Fleet, a short survey was drawn up and circulated to custodians in January 2025 requesting them to provide a minimum level of information on current condition and what, if any, changes had occurred over the past 12 months. This also included the option to have a meeting or phone call with a member of the NHS-UK project team. The information gathered from this survey has been used to reassess the Fleet using the risk matrix previously developed, providing an updated risk rating for each vessel. This data provides the basis for this report, allowing us to track the overall state of the Fleet and any noticeable trends.

## Summary of Findings

### Changes to the Fleet

The National Historic Fleet has seen various changes over the past 12 months. In conjunction with the ongoing analysis of risk, the project team has been working to review service craft on the Register looking at similar craft group by group. In May 2024, the results of a detailed review of lifeboats were published which involved the rescoring of 157 individual craft – see: [Registers Review – Rescue Group](#). This led to four vessels being removed from the Fleet and 10 added, with a total of 15 rescue craft now listed on the National Historic Fleet. This group will be reviewed yearly, and so

further additions and deletions may be expected as new vessels are registered, or vessel condition and or significance is found to have changed.

The next group within the service category to be assessed is tugs and 104 craft are being analysed as part of the review with the outcome due to be published in May 2025. In addition to changes arising from the first phase of the Registers Review, several other craft have been removed from the Fleet due to loss of contact with owners, vessel abandonment or vessels moving overseas. Such vessels are archived, or placed on the Overseas Watch List and may be re-instated to the National Historic Fleet as their condition is updated or they return to UK waters.

Given these changes to composition of the National Historic Fleet, a straight numerical comparison of risk year on year is not necessarily meaningful, so this report, whilst published in association with the 2023 Report, should be viewed as a summary of the status of the current Fleet and the challenges reported by its custodians.

### Reported Condition

At the time of the 2025 mini survey which ran from January to February 2025, the National Historic Fleet consisted of 200 vessels as opposed to 197 when previously assessed. Survey replies or updated public information was available for 190 of these. Based on these reports and self-assessments, it was noted that:

- 76% of the 190 vessels were reported to be in average condition or better, with 24 owners stating that their vessels are in an excellent state.
- A total of 20 vessels were given as undertaking conservation work, or having a project in progress, some more active than others.
- 13% of the 190 replies, or 25 vessels, were indicated as being in poor condition, with 13 of these considered by their current owners as likely to be lost. Opportunities are still being explored for some of these vessels, with active custodians seeking ways to stabilize and save them, whilst other craft have been abandoned or appear to have little chance of an improvement in their circumstances.

### At Risk Outcomes

A full re-assessment of Fleet vessels was completed using the same risk criteria as that in the published matrix from the November 2023 report. This applies further risk factors in addition to the vessel's physical condition, such as its governance structure, funding and business model, community impact and other external factors. Each vessel was then given a new RAG Rating to indicate its current level of risk. After this analysis, the following conclusions were drawn:

- 10% (20 vessels) were given a 'Red' designation indicating that they have been deemed marginal or not viable
- 15% (30 vessels) received an 'Amber' designation reflecting that some challenges had been highlighted
- 70% (140 vessels) were overall rated 'Green' which means that they are considered secure – not at risk.
- 5% (10 vessels) were not assessed due to lack of information and by default are considered Amber rated until further details can be obtained to correctly categorise them.

In summary, 10% of Fleet vessels are considered at risk of being lost with a further 20% requiring additional monitoring.

When compared proportionately to the November 2023 survey, the overall at-risk numbers are very similar with 30% of the Fleet being at risk in some form – a concerning statistic when it is considered that these vessels are seen as the best representatives of their type which should merit the highest priority for conservation. It is also worth noting that there is an increase in the Amber rated vessels meaning that greater monitoring is required. A positive outcome is that it has been possible to accurately record data for a higher proportion of the Fleet this year with more returned survey responses which indicates the value of regular assessments.

### Ownership Challenges

During the gathering of data for the report, 10 custodians spoke or met with a member of the NHS-UK project team. During these conversations, and other visits and interactions with the custodians of both small privately owned vessels and larger museum craft, it has been possible to gather factual and anecdotal information regarding the difficulties currently facing our sector.

The following key challenges remain unchanged:

- Access to skilled boatbuilders / shipwrights
- Cost and availability of suitable materials
- Cost effective access to suitable moorings and dock facilities
- Aging demographic of owners and volunteers
- Availability of funding

The continual cost of living increase has impacted vessel owners and custodians, whilst changes in minimum wage and the impact of National Insurance contributions are having a significant effect on the running costs of museums with employee payrolls to meet.

Changes in climate are increasingly referred to as impacting historic vessels and the environments in which they are situated. This includes impact on moorings and shore access arising from storms and flooding, along with general maintenance required to vessels and buildings resulting from the variability of rain and temperature extremes.

Access to skills is likely to have been further hindered with the closure of the International Boatbuilding Training College (IBTC) Lowestoft in December 2024 which, for many years, has provided a route to bring skilled crafts people into the sector.

### Conclusions

The condition and circumstances for vessels on the National Historic Fleet have changed little over the 14 months since the last full survey and report in November 2023. On a positive note, funding has been secured for a number of significant projects involving Fleet vessels which, in the longer term, should lead to an improved overall rating for these craft. The [Historic Ships Research](#) commissioned by the National Heritage Memorial Fund and National Lottery Heritage Fund, together

with NHS-UK, which was published in 2024 also helped to shine a spotlight on issues affecting the Fleet, leading to a greater understanding of sector needs.

NHS-UK has made progress with the initial phase of its Register Review, publishing its findings on Rescue Craft which saw the first structured changes to the National Historic Fleet since 2011 and continuing its assessment with a report on Tugs due to be completed in May 2025. This process which assesses the composition of the National Historic Fleet is critical if the list is to remain relevant and meet the requirements placed upon it by government, funders agencies and the public.

The challenges facing historic vessels remain with many private owners investing significant time and funds into their upkeep. Those held by charities or not-for-profits which have taken a new approach to public engagement or diversified their stakeholder base can be seen to have benefited. Museums continue to face difficult decisions with increasing costs not being offset by visitor numbers. The impact of climate change is becoming a bigger factor in ongoing repair and maintenance costs of vessels and infrastructure regardless of who the custodian is.

National Historic Ships UK would like to thank all those who took the time to complete the survey this year and for the information provided.

For more information on the At Risk Assessment, please visit: [Vessels at Risk | National Historic Ships](#) or email: [info@nationalhistoricships.org.uk](mailto:info@nationalhistoricships.org.uk).

National Historic Ships UK

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