

NATIONAL HISTORIC FLEET AT RISK ASSESSMENT

April 2026



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 (NHF), 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 'RAG' (Red/Amber/Green) Risk Rating of 'amber' or 'red' were divided between the project team for ongoing monitoring throughout the year. This included updating their records from social media postings or websites, as well as holding online meetings with custodians or undertaking vessel visits.

To keep abreast of further changes to the Fleet, a short annual survey was drawn up and circulated to custodians requesting them to provide a minimum level of information on current condition and what, if any, changes had occurred over the past twelve 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 is used to reassess the Fleet based on the risk matrix previously developed, providing an updated annual risk rating for each vessel. The data from these surveys is published each year in a follow up report.

The latest survey ran from December 2025 - January 2026 and the findings are summarised in this report. A total of 55 responses were received via the online survey. A further 119 vessel records were updated following telephone conversations with custodians and, in a small number of cases, from reviews of recent social media postings. Of the remaining vessels, either no contact could be made with the owner, or they declined to provide information.

Summary of Findings

Changes to the Fleet

The National Historic Fleet has seen various changes over the past twelve 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 2025, the results of a detailed review of tugs were published which involved the rescoring of 104 individual craft – see: [National Historic Ships UK](#). A total of eleven tugs were listed on the Fleet following this Review, ten of which retained their original status and one which was newly assessed as being sufficiently significant to merit this recognition. In February 2026, a review of pilotage vessels was also completed with the results published online: [registers_review_pilotage_group_report_february_2026.pdf](#). Seven pilotage vessels were listed on the Fleet, six of which retained their original status and one which was newly recognised.

These groups will be reviewed yearly, and further additions and deletions may be expected as new vessels are registered, and vessel condition or significance is found to have changed. The next group within the service category to be assessed is ‘Public Services’ which encompasses some 17 customs, firefighting and fisheries protection vessels.

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 should be viewed as an independent summary of the status of the Fleet at the current time and the challenges reported by its custodians.

Reported Condition

At the time of the 2026 survey which ran from December 2025 to January 2026, the National Historic Fleet consisted of 194 vessels as opposed to 200 when last assessed. Based on the survey responses and our internal research in cases where details were not provided, the following provides an overview of vessel condition: -

- 147 vessels, or 75% of the Fleet, are considered in average condition or better. 28 of these are stated to be in excellent condition.
- A number of operational vessels continue to be used for commercial activities and hold some level of Maritime & Coastguard Agency coding.
- 26 vessels are considered conservation projects, although some have seen little if any progress over the past twelve months.

- 21 vessels, which represents 11% of the Fleet, are reported to be in poor condition with twelve of these considered likely to be lost.

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:

- 9% (17 vessels) were given a 'Red' designation indicating that they have been deemed marginal or not viable. However, a number of these have activities associated with them that may lead to an improvement in their situation.
- 19% (37 vessels) received an 'Amber' designation reflecting that some challenges had been highlighted or that updated information was not available at the time of the survey.
- 72% (140 vessels) were overall rated 'Green' which means that they are considered secure – not at risk.

In summary, 9% of the Fleet are considered at risk of being lost, with a further 19% raising causes for concern and requiring additional monitoring.

When compared proportionately to the previous surveys, the overall at-risk numbers are very similar. A positive outcome is the increase in number of survey returns and custodian engagement which underlines the value of continuing with regular assessments.

Ownership Challenges

Whilst there were no specific questions in the online survey relating to ownership challenges, the large number of follow-up telephone conversations allowed for the collection of anecdotal information related to this. The previous two surveys highlighted the following as key issues:

- 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

These were all mentioned again but, by far the most common theme, particularly amongst not-for-profit organisations, was the aging demographic. This is illustrated by one National Historic Fleet vessel being transferred from a long-standing trust ownership model to new custodians, specifically due to the demographics of the trust and their inability to bring in a more diverse membership to help with vessel upkeep and operation. This is an ongoing area of concern and we encourage organizations to place early focus on succession planning to avoid long-term risks to the vessel.

Its also clear from this most recent survey that the cost and availability of suitable coal is a major limiting factor for steam vessels, affecting the number of days on which they are able to operate.

Conclusions

Although the composition of the National Historic Fleet has changed as noted above, the overall condition of the Fleet remains in line with the findings of the last two surveys. A number of vessels have benefited from receipt of public funding during the past year and it is anticipated that this will lead to a significant improvement in the condition and future of these craft. Several private owners undertaking conservation projects that had previously stalled also seem to have gained momentum again and made positive progress during 2025. Offsetting this, are the red-rated vessels whose futures are at risk with no plans in place for conservation.

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

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

National Historic Ships UK

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