

Unravelling Heritage

Assignment 3 – Discussion paper

The promote discussion I have chosen the historic sailing ship “*Falls of Clyde*” story from a heritage perspective.

By the end of this paper I aim to have addressed the following propositions in respect of *Falls of Clyde*;

- should we preserve everything?
- what should be preserved, remembered and recorded?
- what should be used?



Upper image wikipedia.org

Main picture from Honolulu Star Advertiser article by Jim Delgado - September 2025

Both images depict a typical 19th Century vessel; but there were sufficient novel and unusual intrinsic values which made this vessel deemed 'special' from a heritage perspective.

During this essay it will be shown that successive generations of maritime enthusiasts from America and Scotland appreciated some or all these values. NB boats, dinghies, ships etc are gendered female. Reason unknown.

I should now declare an interest in sailing. On leaving school in 1977 I began a three-year boatbuilding apprentice at a semi traditional yard in Cowes, Isle of Wight. Much of my apprenticeship was spent working on a 55' steel framed and timber planked pleasure sailing yacht built in 1938. Bought by a consortium *Morva of Mevagissey* was intended to become a historic charter yacht out in the Caribbean. I mention this because *Morva* was, but a fraction of size compared to *Falls of Clyde* but I recall periods of inactivity when work stopped due to unresolved technical issues. This yacht this yacht did seem to have a viable future suited to her original purpose. Yet by 2021 she is reported to "*she is now in a sorry state in America*" Mevagissey Remembered J G Mitchell 9 June 2021

However, when I left Cowes *Morva* was still far from seaworthy. There is no doubt that I became emotionally involved with this vessel upon which I undertook only the most basic work but did take great interest in her restoration process. I learned from a former colleague that *Morva* did get completed but could not gain the necessary certification for charter work due to inherent design features now considered too dangerous for commercial voyages. I felt regret for the vessel herself but also for the disappointment that her cordial, enthusiastic and appreciative owners may have felt.

So, when a BBC Scotland online news feature item caught my eye in November 2025 about the loss of *Falls of Clyde*. www-bbc-co.-uk.cdn.ampproject.org I was interested in seeing what had happened. Initially, I assumed that the vessel had not been cared for but soon learnt that was not the case. Instead, I began to question whether full reinstatement of this vessel was unrealistic or mismanaged. Or a combination of both.

Major structural repairs or even some basic routine maintenance on ships is costly and complicated. Commercial ships design obviously evolves around function but typically with specifications intended to ensure 25 – 30 years in commission. This life expectancy 'rule' for most ships persists. Iron hulled ships had been produced for over forty years when *Falls of Clyde* was launched in 1878.

Around the time of her launch the availability of cheaper steel of a reliable quality due to refined smelting made possible by the Bessemer process (Encyclopaedia Britannica) had increased to the point where it began to replace iron which although cheaper has inherent

drawbacks in an era when design briefs required fresh thinking. The size or to be more accurate tonnage of timber ships was constrained by the strength/weight ratio of timber and eventually iron too. More of this later – but paradoxically, wooden ships can have a far greater working and museum life in some circumstances.

Given steels significantly greater weight/strength ratio when compared to iron steel had begun to be used in a variety of industrial uses such as railway lines, bridges, at multi-platform city railway stations with wider largely unsupported roof spans. As aluminium has today, steel began to be a commonplace material in ships by the time of *Falls of Clyde's* launch.

So, when launched *Falls of Clyde* was not a state-of-the-art vessel constructed using the latest materials. Steamships in one form or another had been in use for half a century by 1878. Thus as an iron hulled sailing ship without an auxilliary engine she was very traditional by the norms of late C19th ship architecture and design.

However, according to one account her sailing qualities were good and her passage times sufficiently fast to maintain a steady profit. [AI overview/Wikipedia](#)

So, what made *Falls of Clyde* sufficiently 'special' to warrant preservation?

Falls of Clyde was the last surviving iron-hulled, four masted full-rigged ship, and the last surviving sail-driven oil tanker. She was designated a US National Landmark in 1989 but deregistered in 2024 due to her condition. [Wikipedia.org](#)

By a quirk of history although *Falls of Clyde* origins were Scottish by 1899 when the United States of America incorporated Hawaii she had been registered as a US ship the previous year. This appeared to benefit *Falls of Clyde* when she became a museum ship as she effectively had two sets of supporters. However, whilst I am not 100% certain this may have blurred ultimate accountability. Before her demise there was a dispute of ownership. This may have led to a twenty plus year period of repair and maintenance inertia and provide an explanation as to why only temporary restoration was done after hurricane damage in 1982 and subsequent efforts to preserve failed. By 2008 she was closed to the public and her condition declared critical.

Assuming *Falls of Clyde* could have been placed in a suitably resourced dry dock the technical element of restoration would not have been insurmountable. The Friends of *Falls of Clyde's* website is still live and their aim to reinstate *Falls of Clyde* as a ship capable of sea voyages is prominent in their pitch for donations. However, hardly an inch of the ship would have remained original or unaltered if that goal was to be achieved. This is because

unlike wooden ships which are in essence a jig saw of relatively manageable components in terms of weight and size iron or steel hulled ships such as *Falls of Clyde* constructed using rivets are difficult to take apart. The frames (skeleton) of a wooden ship are set close together when compared to a metal ship. Ship builders able to fabricate hulls using large plates of iron or steel attached to frames set wide apart saved weight, material expense and time. The Evolution of Conservation by (O Millar, M Thomas, & J Monasta) outlines in depth the challenges now facing vessels such as Falls of Clyde from a restoration and maintenance perspective. www.becketrankine.com

After 2008 was the inability of *Falls of Clyde* to provide an attractive visual experience which benefitted Honolulu Harbour and sufficient tourist revenues, the wake up call that could not be answered?

By 2024 it was clear (to the Honolulu Harbour Department HHD) that the plan by the Scottish based Friends of Falls of Clyde had insufficient funds available to place *Falls of Clyde* into a dry dock to enable a full condition survey to provide the information needed to formulate a restoration plan. Nor was a last ditch plan to move her back to Scotland deemed viable either by HHD.

By 2024 *Falls of Clyde* may well have been beyond repair as whilst afloat her weight is spread evenly but once in dry dock or aground point loadings can cause catastrophic failure. Sunken vessels of any size where they pose navigational or operational hazards are often difficult to raise. Had the *Falls of Clyde* sunk at her moorings HHD would have had a major incident. Given her condition, *Falls of Clyde* was almost certainly uninsured, which is far from ideal.

HHD seemed to have no alternative choice but to remove and scuttle Falls of Clyde. This decision cost HHD \$4.8 million. State of Hawaii internet blog FallsofClyde 15/10/25

She did begin life as a square rigger with ordinary cargo holds as might be expected for a vessel commissioned to transport a variety of goods. Yet in 1899 her sail plan had been substantially altered to reduce crew numbers. A few years later in 1907 tanks were installed which in turn made her a specialist carrier. Wikipedia.org Falls of Clyde

Might one then argue that the only significant original remaining feature the *Falls of Clyde* retained when she became a popular Honolulu based museum ship in the 1960s was her iron hull?

By the 1960s what had the *Falls of Clyde* become?

At some point during her tenure as a museum ship a replacement replica of the original square rig was re-installed. This four masted configuration can be seen in the first photograph on page one.

Perhaps one might argue that the alterations to the *Falls of Clyde* during her commercial and museum periods might give rise to disqualifying an altered maritime vintage object such as *Falls of Clyde*. Did she lose some authenticity and consequent heritage value? Evidently, she was considered worthy of preservation for decades. Although my feeling is that she did remain authentic until the end irrespective of alterations to her structure, fixtures and fittings. I have not been successful in finding any academic references to this notion. Maybe, like Brunel's fabulous yet incomplete mid 19C *Great Britain* museum ship in Bristol's Floating Harbour bristol.gov.uk the rounded historic human experience aboard adds the necessary link to the past to produce the rationale to attain popular 'heritage' status. This ship was repatriated from the Falkland Isles ssgreatbritain.org

It is perhaps worth mentioning here that some time before 2025 most of *Falls of Clyde's* removable fixtures and artifacts of interest, such as her figurehead and ship's wheel had been taken off her by HHD. I wonder if this may have been the de facto point of no return.

Launched in Scotland in 1878 *Falls of Clyde* was built Russell & Co. A world-renowned shipyard In Port Glasgow using well tested materials with sound, well proven engineering techniques. *Falls of Clyde* was scuttled (deliberately sunk) off Oahu, Hawaii in October 2025. www-bbc-co.-uk.cdn.ampproject.org

That this vessel survived 146 years is I would argue testament to the efforts of two generations of individual and institutional endeavours to save this piece of maritime heritage. For a sailing ship the *Falls of Clyde* did have a long commercial career which concluded towards the end of a romanticized period sometimes referred to as the Golden Age of Sail. By WW2 most commercial sailing ships had either been lost in action, at sea or scrapped.

It may be informative for my reviewer to have a quick look at a YouTube video from SA Maritime dated 18 July 2013 called 'Windjammers' The Last Grain Races by Eric Newby.

In considering the vessel's size - 266' long with a beam of 40' with a laden draught of 23' and 100' plus mast height when fully rigged this is a large ship. Her size inevitably restricts where she could be moored. Her size, bulk and increasing fragility would have presented significant logistical challenges even if funds were available.

Placement of a museum ship this needs to be where visitors can assemble, park, get public transport and not be in an isolated region. Honolulu Harbour did fulfill the criteria

and until 2008 when the owners Hawaiian Maritime Center acknowledged the ship was in disrepair and that it lacked the funds to restore her, offered to hand over ownership to another museum or institution. Seahistory.org/fallsofclyde.

Iron, rope and timber have a propensity to degrade, especially if the object is outside in all weathers, sat in mildly corrosive salt water. Regular dry docking with replacement of hull plates and deck timbers as required should have been an integral aspect of her maintenance. *The Evolution of Conservation* by (O Millar, M Thomas, & J Monasta) www.beckettrankine.com

By the time the Scottish based Friends of the Falls of Clyde was formed Honolulu Harbour Department had by 2016 revoked the ship's permit. Meaning that in effect she was no longer welcome. Presumably HHD wasn't consistently deriving the usual harbour dues by this time.

Without sufficient readily available funds the *Falls of Clyde* was doubly vulnerable to the combined effects of her inability to generate a revenue stream and to the aforementioned propensity to degrade.

Other vessels of similar construction and vintage such as *Moshulu* also built in Scotland around the turn of the century is now seeing out her days in Philadelphia, US as a floating restaurant. *Moshulu* and (*Passat* see below) have fabulous back stories as they were part of a dwindling post WW2 fleet of large ocean going square rigged sailing ships (in 1949) to carry grain via Cape Horn from Australia to Europe. With improved media communications the progress of the ships on their voyages via Cape Horn has by the 1930s become the subject of informal annual races upon which the public were said to have bet on the outcome. Thus, these ships were well known beyond the maritime community. Plenty of aerial photographs from the time exist which appeared in national newspapers in the 1930 and 40s. The Daily Express newspaper donated a trophy to the winning captain. Though owners forbid captains from 'racing', they were doubtless proud of being able to make good passage times as remains the case today.

Likewise, *Passat* built in 1911 earns her keep as both a hostel and museum ship in Travemunde , Germany. www.visit-travemunde.com

There are obvious similarities between the *Falls of Clyde*, *Passat* and *Moshulu* which might suggest that *Falls of Clyde* could have been saved. However, I believe there are two key differences; both *Passat* and *Moshulu* had much longer active commercial lives. Whereas for fully thirty years *Falls of Clyde* acted as a floating storage facility for her owners. This meant that unlike *Passat* and *Moshulu* she was not subject to rigorous annual inspections as demanded by Lloyds of London (global insurance underwriters). Accordingly, both were

dry docked annually. Without Lloyds approval cargoes could not be insured. Additionally, both *Passat* and *Moshulu* were built of a high quality steel which by 1904 and 1911 had been developed to resist or more realistically to reduce rusting. This meant ships predominantly made of high grade steel were lighter and easier to repair. Maintenance was less onerous too.

When decommissioned *Passat* and *Moshulu* were not left semi abandoned.

The challenges to retaining and preserving the *Falls of Clyde* indefinitely proved insurmountable.

I would argue it is difficult to make the argument that *Falls of Clyde* could definitely have been saved. With unlimited funds, time and resources perhaps.

As mentioned, *Falls of Clyde* was an extremely large maritime object which made her a costly proposition for any agency or organisation to even maintain her in a satisfactory condition to continue service as a museum ship moored up within a protected harbour.

The Scottish based not for profit organisation Friends of the *Falls of Clyde* website www.friendsoffallsofclyde.org states that (it was) their intention to reinstate her to a level which would enable her to undertake voyages with paying passengers. I would say that *Falls of Clyde* could not have successfully gained a licence to operate commercially. This is because due to the length of time absent from active service she would not have been exempt from complying with present day construction, stability, and general safety requirements.

Therefore, I do not support or believe everything heritage can be preserved.

However, to preserve a memory/history is a far more achievable aim. Especially if the ship like *Falls of Clyde* history has an interesting, well documented past with plenty of photographs, cargo manifests and newspaper articles interwoven with comparisons. A wealth of human stories exist within the recorded histories of these vessels. For example, they were dangerous to work on. A hybrid approach using digital technology and modestly sized preserved artifacts such as the impressive ships wheel etc lend a degree of permanent authenticity.

It may be with smaller museum sized maritime artifacts or vessels can be housed in a building. I would argue a comprehensive digital history can add to a surviving objects heritage value.

In the context of heritage *Falls of Clyde* was being used until her condition rendered her unsafe for visitors by 2008 in Hawaii. For some purists she was not being used

appropriately. Given the age of the vessel and the challenges to make her seaworthy enough even for private use the purist's point of view seems both unrealistic and unreasonable. It is worth mentioning that these sailing ships operated with large numbers of highly skilled crews.

To conclude, the *Falls of Clyde* can be remembered and used in a viable, sustainable restricted sense if a hybrid display option was chosen. The manageable and sturdy artifacts could be transported to and from Scotland and Hawaii should there be a need to enhance any museum display.

The Evolution of Conservation paper by (O Millar, M Thomas, & J Monasta) 2025
www.beckittrankine.com

www.visit-travemunde.com

www-bbc-co.-uk.cdn.ampproject.org

ssgreatbritain.org website for IK Brunel's SS *Great Britain*

www.friendsoffallofcllyde.com non profit organisation who were unable to raise sufficient funds to repatriate *Falls of Clyde* to Scotland where she was built and first registered.

Honolulu Star Advertiser articles Nina Wu 15 Oct and Jim Delgado 25 Sept 2025 in
www.staradvertiser.com remembering *Falls of Clyde*

Mevagissey Remembered J G Mitchell 9 June 2021 viz yacht *Morva of Mevagissey*

