

Maritime history slipping away

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The world's oldest surviving clipper ship – and the oldest ship to have carried migrants to Australia – is mouldering on a Scottish slipway awaiting refurbishment. *The City of Adelaide*, built in England for Adelaide owners in 1864, is regarded by some experts as more important than the *Cutty Sark*.

The 54 metre, 900 tonne timber and iron ship, which survived the loss of its rudder in 1877 south of Kangaroo Island, is remarkably intact, having been consistently owned and reasonably well looked after right through until 1978. It sank in Glasgow dock in 1991 and stayed underwater for 13 months, but the stygian Glasgow ooze it sank into was no worse a medium for preservation than the sea air that the peeling paint is now subjected to at Irvine, on the lower reaches of the Clyde.

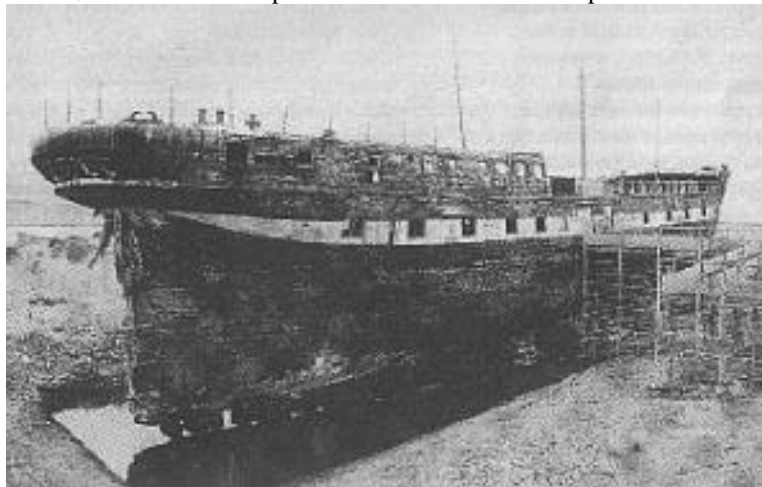
The *City of Adelaide* is five years older than the *Cutty Sark*, which sits in splendour in a Greenwich dock in London, and has reported claim to the fastest passage by a clipper from England to Adelaide, of 64 days. That is faster than anything achieved by the *Cutty Sark* and only a day over the record set in 1868 by the *Thermopylae*, under the legendary captain "Bully" Forbes, between Gravesend and Melbourne.

But the *Thermopylae* was sunk as a gunnery target off Lisbon in 1907 and the only other composite clipper ship still surviving is the *Ambassador*, built in 1869, which has beached in Patagonia for more than a century and has no timbers left.

The *City of Adelaide*, which in the late 20th century was better known as the HMS *Carrick* and served as a club and restaurant for retired naval officers in the centre of Glasgow, is at the "ground zero" stage of full restoration, which has yet to begin. It narrowly escaped being broken up last year after a negative report by the Scottish Executive. Because the ship had been classified as a A-listed building, the equivalent of a heritage order, the cash strapped Scottish Maritime Museum trustees were forced to apply for the right to destroy the ship, not because they wanted to but so that some public attention and possibly money would improve the old ship's desperate situation.

The permit was refused in February but the Scottish Executive did commit unspecified funds on April 1st this year. Until then, the Australian Government had been the only organisation to offer significant funds since the museum raised and spent one million pound on salvaging the ship from the bottom of the dock in 1993 and getting it up the slipway in Irvine.

Senator Robert Hill, Federal Minister for Environment and Heritage, said last year that Australia would provide \$1.5 million or 10 per cent of what were then expected to be the project costs.



City of Adelaide after recovery.

Isambard Kingdom Brunel's famous ship the SS *Great Britain*, which has been restored in Bristol and did make at least two voyages to Australia, was not a clipper and not a dedicated migrant carrier. The *Great Britain* was salvaged from the Falkland Islands in the 1970's despite being in significantly worse condition than the *City of Adelaide* is in now.

The SS *Great Britain* is now on permanent static display in Bristol and aside from earning money from casual visitors, the ship is regularly and very profitably used for catered functions.

The Scottish Executive recommended back in November last year that the *City of Adelaide* be offered for sale to authorities and museums in the UK, Australia and the US. The process began in February but no buyer appeared. But neither the Museum nor the Scottish Government has ruled out taking private donations from Australia, as long as they come via a museum type trust.

Whether the ship could ever return to Australia under its own sail is a question that has yet to be answered, but its iron frame and elm, oak and teak hull are still relatively intact. Jim Tildesley, the director of the museum at Irvine, says it would cost about 5.5 million pound to restore the *City of Adelaide* as a floating exhibit.

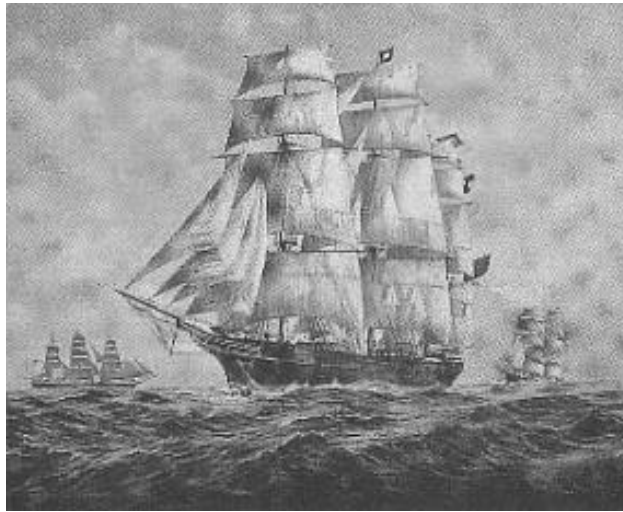
No work has been done on restoring her to sailing condition because the alterations required to meet modern safety requirements would effectively destroy most of the historic vessel.

He says if the ship were restored to that level it would cost between 12 million and 15 million pound.

One possibility that no-one has categorically ruled out, if funds permit, is to restore the ship to some degree in Scotland then ship it on a submersible barge to, say Australia for completion as a static exhibit.

Whatever its likely fate, the *City of Adelaide* has an awesome pedigree that should stifle debate on whether it is worthy of restoration.

Built at Sunderland by William Pile and Hay to an order from merchants Devitt and Moore of London, it was owned in equal shares to Joseph Moore, Adelaide businessman Henry Martin, Port Adelaide shipping agents Joseph and Daniel Harrold, and the ship's first master, Scotsman David Bruce.



Clipper vessel similar to the *City of Adelaide*.

It was built specifically as a fast cargo carrier with capacity for 270 passengers, most of who, were outgoing migrants who were replaced on the return journey by wool, wheat and copper from South Australia and Broken Hill. About eight of the passenger lists are already in the museum's hands and the rest are being actively sought.

Between 1864 and 1887 it made 22 return passages to Australia, all going out via South Africa and many returning via Cape Horn, which was faster but more demanding than returning via Cape Town.

Unlike so many of its contemporaries, which were wrecked on hostile shores or lost in storms with all hands, the *City of Adelaide* led a relatively charmed life. The loss of the rudder off Kangaroo Island in November 1877, eight days out of Port Augusta en route for London, was one of the more dramatic moments, along with briefly being beached at Kircaldy Beach, on the approaches to Adelaide. On losing the rudder Captain Edward Alston was able to bring the ship around by dropping chains overboard and returning to Fletcher's slipway at Port Adelaide, where the existing rudder of Australian ironwood was fitted. Alston subsequently took it back to England via Cape Horn without mishap.

Indeed it kept sailing under a reduced barquentine rig, for instance sailing five times to Canada for timber, until 1893 when the masts were cut and it became a hospital ship at Southampton.

The rest of the *City of Adelaide's* history was inevitably less glamorous but a critical element was that the British Admiralty owned it from 1923 until 1990, mostly for use as a training ship, although it was also used during WW11 as a detention centre for deserters. The old service adage of "If it moves, salute it, if it doesn't move, paint it" was well adhered to and it was only in January 1978 that the downhill slide began.

Despite the local theory that it actually sat on a bed of old gin bottles – as an impressionable youth who occasionally visited the ship in the 60's, I can remember interesting lurches as the tide went out – it sank at its moorings after a fender was caught under the quay on a rising tide. Indeed that happened once more in 1989. In 1990 the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve gave the ship to the Clyde Ship Trust to make it a feature of a maritime heritage centre. Possibly because many changes of use had involved lots of extra ports under the waterline, it sank in Glasgow's Prince's Dock on February 4, 1991.

The Scottish Maritime Museum acquired the ship in January 1992 for one pound then raised it in March of that year, towing it 50 km down the river and up the Irvine slipway in May of that year. Since then, the biggest job completed has been the removal of several hundred tonnes of rubble ballast.

Jim Tildesley makes it clear that it is nothing other than a shortage of money that's impeding the ship's restoration "We have felt with the *City of Adelaide* being the only vessel in Scotland to be listed as an A-listed historic building it would attract support for its preservation, but that was incorrect. We have received support from all over the world in our efforts to save the vessel but regrettably the support has been in the form of words and not cash," he said.

Everything else, if you are an optimist, is set fair. The ship is clearly for sale to an approved buyer, has at least been structurally stabilised to prevent further decay, and there are large numbers of drawings and documents that would aid a correct restoration, particularly of the first-class passenger area.

A website called www.cityofadelaide.org, devoted to the rescue of the old ship, offers a lot of useful information about its history and current condition. There have been reports about the ship in the Adelaide press and in specialist magazines but the overall story has had surprisingly little airtime in Australia, despite the compelling connections.