

# SOCIETY OUTING

## Portsmouth Historic Dockyard Saturday 16th May 2015

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An early (7am) start and a 3-hour coach ride took us to Portsmouth's Historic Dockyard, arriving just in time to avoid the usual Saturday morning queues for tickets, on a lovely sunny day. With so much to see, a conducted tour would have been impossible for over 30 people, so with the aid of a descriptive leaflet and plan, we were free to explore individually those attractions that most interested us. We personally made straight for the furthest away - the Mary Rose Museum, which proved to be a quite astounding exhibition, and a tribute to the imaginative use of modern technology to display and interpret, with plenty of interactive items to interest or amuse young and old. The entry is through timed air-lock doors, to preserve the atmospherically-controlled interior whilst conservation work is still being carried out.

The "Mary Rose" was Henry VIII's flagship, built in 1510, and he watched as she sank in 1545 - the cause of the sinking is still not proven, but one theory is that the ship had fired one broadside at approaching French ships in the Solent, and in turning to fire again, dipped her open gun-ports below the water and sank - shades of the "Herald of Free Enterprise" came to mind. Since the dramatic raising of the ship in 1982, kept under constant spraying with fresh water to prevent drying out, she has been on display to the public since 1983 under a temporary

cover; the new permanent museum opened in 2013 - the concept of which is based on an oyster shell, with the Mary Rose the pearl at its centre. The museum is on three deck levels, with three galleries running the length of the ship - only about half of the ship was preserved by being buried in the silt, and this is displayed through viewing windows in a dividing wall. After 'rinsing' the salt water out, the timbers were then sprayed with polyethylene glycol for several years, and now it is being air-dried through huge black fabric tubes suspended throughout the ship; the dividing wall is expected to be removed by 2017. The other side of the walkway displays some of the thousands of artefacts recovered, and presented in galleries as they were found - surgeon, carpenter, etc.

The Mary Rose Museum has won over 20



*The Mary Rose © The Mary Rose Trust*

awards for excellence in design, construction, exhibition, conservation, visitor experience, education and innovation, and received recognition on Saturday 16th May 2015 when it was awarded a Special Commendation at the European Museum of the Year Awards 2015.

After a snack lunch in the museum, the next visit was the HMS "Victory", sited right next door. Built in 1765 at Chatham, she was George III's largest battleship, and gained renown as Nelson's flagship at the Battle of Trafalgar; she is the oldest surviving warship in the world, had a crew of 820 and 100 guns or more. She first saw service in 1778 at Ushant, was battle-scarred after the Battle of Cape St Vincent (1797), thereafter being fitted out as a hospital ship. However, by 1799 she underwent an extensive 3-year "Great Repair" to become a first-rate ship again, and ready for service with Nelson in the Mediterranean in 1803. At the Battle of Trafalgar she was severely damaged, but after emergency repairs at Gibraltar, limped home to Portsmouth, carrying Nelson's body preserved in a cask of brandy. She was moored in Portsmouth Harbour since 1812, and then in dry dock since 1922, where continuing conservation is undertaken - although we could visit all decks, there were one or two areas closed, undergoing restoration during our visit. One had to be careful to duck, especially entering and leaving the ship, and we were warned to watch our step - some parts are quite low, and some ladders quite steep (I needed to go down backwards!). The spot where Nelson was shot on the deck is marked by a brass plate, and where he died on the Orlop deck is the famous portrait by Devis of his death scene. HMS "Victory" is still a working ship and the flagship of the First Sea Lord.

Our final chosen visit was to HMS "Warrior" - built in 1860 and, at the time, was the largest, fastest and most powerful warship in the world, built to counter and outperform the French iron-clad warship "Gloire" launched the year before. She was the first armour-plated, iron-hulled warship (frigate), and signalled the end of building wooden-hulled ships, spanning the transition between wood, iron, sail and steam. She saw only 22 years' service before, with the swift developments in ship design, she was relegated to lesser rôles - as a dépôt ship and then floating workshop to an oil rig. She was saved in 1979 by a costly restoration in Hartlepool, having had a chequered career as "pride of the nation, a forgotten hulk, and today a national treasure to be preserved for posterity". There are three decks to explore, and some of the ladders only had thin ropes as handrails, which daunted me, but we managed to find at least one at each level with a solid handrail, though still steep and I needed to descend backwards. Down in the engine room, it was interesting to see the engines gently turning over (though I rather think no longer back-breakingly coal-fired!). The ship is now used as a "venue" for parties, weddings, balls, etc (to help pay for its upkeep), and was being prepared for a naval reunion dinner for 60 that evening, including the Lord Mayor! The flags flying from the rigging spelled out "Discover Warrior 1860" I learned (having worked out the "Warrior" bit for myself!). There are many more attractions to choose from within the all-in ticket scope, requiring more time and/or energy, and we did not make it to the "Spinnaker" for fear of vertigo!

A big thank you to Pat and Patricia for an inspired choice of where to go - it was a long day, but well worthwhile.