

Local History Group: Victoria's Royal Navy

Nick Marshall came to the Methodist Church dressed in the uniform of a chief petty officer of the 1870s. As a founding member of the Bluejackets – a Leicester-based group that researches and recreates naval landing parties of the late Victorian era – Nick knew his subject very well: his talk was enthralling and delivered entirely without notes.

The ships

There were huge advances in naval design during Victoria's reign. When she came to the throne in 1837, warships were much like those of Nelson's time – built of wood, powered by sail, with smooth bore cannons firing broadside. By the end of her reign wood had given way to armour plate; sail had given way to massive steam engines; and cannons had given way to breach-loading guns firing shells from rotating turrets.

For much of this period ships were powered by sail as well as steam, because coal was expensive and not always found in distant parts. One such was HMS Warrior, built in 1860 as the fastest and most powerful warship of her day. She managed to escape the breakers yard, was restored in the 1980's, and is now berthed in Portsmouth along with HMS Victory.

The rate of development was so fast that by the time two or three ships of a class had been built they were obsolescent. Nevertheless, huge numbers were constructed: there were 165 ships present when the Prince of Wales reviewed the fleet at Spithead in 1887. Britain dominated the high seas, and no other nation came close to matching the firepower of the Royal Navy.

The sailors

At the start of Victoria's reign sailors who had been forced into service by the press gangs had been set free. Sailors would sign up for a voyage, then be paid off at the end of it. Not until 1857 was continuous service introduced, which was a key move as sailors could now be trained between voyages. The Navy was absolutely vital to the defence of the empire, and the public knew it: sailors became hugely popular and were feted in a way that soldiers in the army never were.

Nevertheless, life on board was harsh, and space was at a premium. Sleeping quarters were particularly cramped with hammocks strung below deck at 18-inch intervals. The food ration was tedious: bully beef and pork, suet pudding, biscuits. The only day it changed was Christmas Day, and then only if suitable birds could be bought or shot.

The battles

As the Navy grew more and more powerful, no other nation dared engage it in battle – indeed it was a hundred years after Trafalgar before there was another major battle at sea. But there were numerous small engagements, like that in 1896 when the Navy shelled Zanzibar for 36 minutes in what has been called ‘the shortest war in history’.

But there was much more to the Navy than battles at sea: there were actions on land which could be up to 800 miles from the sea – in the Zulu wars, in the Sudan, in the Boer war, and in China after Boxer rebellion. And the Navy didn’t just fight battles: they conducted oceanographic surveys and scientific expeditions, and when Victoria died in 1901 it was the Navy that pulled her funeral cortege up the streets of Windsor.

Roger Berkeley



HMS Warrior returning to Portsmouth in 1987 after restoration.