

The mary rose ship a historical perspective history essay



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A common myth states that the HMS Mary Rose sank on her maiden voyage. Contrary to this tale, the ship had a long and distinguished career as the flagship of King Henry VIII's budding fleet. Sunk on July 19, 1545 at the Battle of Solent, after 36 years of service, several refits, and countless voyages, the Mary Rose is still in service today. Her long and distinguished career has culminated in providing scholars - naval, archaeological, historical, - and maritime enthusiasts a vibrant window into the past. (The Mary Rose Trust 2007)

King Henry VIII ascended the throne of England in 1509, upon the death of his father Henry VII. When Henry VII died, England was a small agricultural country with a population of about four million. The small English fleet was devoted to keeping the Channel open to ensure that the wool trade, which was the lifeblood of the English economy, continued unabated and uninterrupted. (Rule, The Sinking of the Mary Rose 1982: 28)

In 1511, two years after he inherited his father's throne, Henry began a program of intense ship building and refitting. Included in this program was The Mary Rose. (Rule, The Sinking of the Mary Rose 1982: 28) The Mary Rose was named for Henry's youngest sister Princess Mary and the Tudor family emblem of a rose. The ship was one of the largest in Henry's fleet and would become his flagship in subsequent years. The Mary Rose had high castles fore and aft. (The Royal Navy 2009) Other characteristics of the ship were that it was 700 tons, a carrack (square-rigged 3-4 mast vessel) which, in addition to the fore-and-aft castles, had a load port aft that was useful for loading victuals and supplies. While there were gun ports on the castles that supported the heavy cannons, there is much speculation as to when the <https://assignbuster.com/the-mary-rose-ship-a-historical-perspective-history-essay/>

Mary Rose was outfitted with the gun ports along the hull, either 1510 when it was built, or 1536 when it was refitted. Whichever is the case, it is surmised that the open gun ports contributed to her eventual sinking. (Rule, The Sinking of the Mary Rose 1982: 29)

In addition to protecting Calais, the final English stronghold on the Continent that was a holdover from the Hundred Years War, Henry wanted to prove England was the military and naval equal to his rival France as well as his ally Spain. Traditional enemies, Spain and France were in constant turmoil over land, primarily in Italy - such as the Kingdom of Naples that switched hands all the time. Henry in the North was anxious to prove his battle prowess and took his troops to France in aid of his Spanish nephew-by-marriage Charles V. While he succeeded in France, his troops in Spain proved mediocre and returned home without much success. (Rule, The Sinking of the Mary Rose 1982: 28)

Although Henry's land battles were not spectacular, his flagship the Mary Rose, under the command of Admiral Sir Edward Howard, kept the Channel clear so that warships and men could be ferried to the battlefields of France.

At the battle for Brest in 1512, The Mary Rose endured her first sea battle, successfully firing her heavy weapons and causing the French galleys to flee. Admiral Howard mopped up his operations after burning several important vessels and capturing 800 men. (Rule, The Sinking of the Mary Rose 1982: 31) Brest may be the first Channel battle where ships fired their heavy weapons through their gun ports. (The Royal Navy 2009) As David Child's (2007: 41-42) writes:

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Henry, well pleased with Howard's achievements, appointed him Lord Admiral of England, and ordered him to sail again to blockade the French fleet at Brest, thus enabling the King to cross the Channel unchallenged to lead his army into France. (41-42)

After this battle, Henry VIII used his own political shrewdness and influence to marry his sister Princess Mary to Louis XII of France and end the hostilities with his enemy. Being married to Catherine of Aragon meant that his alliance with her nephew, Charles V of Spain, was secure and the King was able to turn his attention to increasing his fleet as well as his country's prosperity.

Admiral Howard was fond of the Mary Rose and even wrote about her to the King: " the Mary Rose, Sir, she is the noblest ship of sail and a great ship at this hour I trow to be in Christendom. A ship of 100 tons will not sooner be about than she." (Rule, *The Sinking of the Mary Rose* 1982: 31) He used the Mary Rose as his flagship until his death at sea in 1513.

Knowing he had to neutralize a threat to English sea sovereignty, Admiral Sir Edward Howard sailed into a trap set by French short range galleys that could cut and run quickly. The Mary Rose was a heavier ship and not as maneuverable as the speedy galleys. This did not deter Admiral Howard from throwing a grappling iron onto a French galley, boarding it and getting stuck there when the enemy cut his line and his men were unable to follow him. Needless to say, he was killed by the French in the heat of battle. (Childs 2007: 43)

Admiral Howard's younger brother Thomas led the fleet home after the

Admiral's death and it was established that the French galleys with their <https://assignbuster.com/the-mary-rose-ship-a-historical-perspective-history-essay/>

speed were a terrifying new weapon against the English fleet, so that even a heavy gunboat like the Mary Rose was at risk against their maneuverability and quickness. It would take until 1586 or so until the English fleet overcame their fear of the galleys through their own innovative galleon ship designs during the reign of Elizabeth I. (Childs 2007: 43-45)

Over the next several years, the Mary Rose remained in service to the crown and by 1536 was at Portsmouth for refitting. It is at this time that the additional gun ports may have been installed along the hull line. All that is certain is that on July 19th, 1545, the Mary Rose capsized and sank during the battle of Solent, as the King and his officers watched. Only 30-40 men survived the sinking, as it went down so quickly, there was very little time to respond. Even Sir George Carew, the captain went down with the ship.

Water breached the hull so fast and so hastily that the ship sank like a stone, heeled over on its starboard side in the mud only 2 kilometers outside Portsmouth Harbor. (Quinn R. et al 1997: 408) Except for an occasional foray, such as in 1837 when early salvage divers John and Charles Deane brought up a cannon from the wreck, the Mary Rose lay in its mud-coffin forgotten until the late 1960's. (Rule, The Raising of the Mary Rose 1982: 35)

Alexander McKee rediscovered the wreck and made it his life's work to salvage it as a testament to England's naval heritage. (Rule, The Sinking of the Mary Rose 1982: 36) For over 12 years there was an ongoing campaign to raise funds to bring the ship, its artifacts and weapons up, through the auspices of The Mary Rose Trust. (The Mary Rose Trust 2007)

The rapidity of the Mary Rose's sinking left many artifacts in situ. While the exposed timbers had rotted over the 400 years in seawater, those artifacts, and timbers covered in the Solent silt were remarkably well preserved. What is even more significant than their preservation is that these items offer a unique snapshot into the daily life aboard ship and a glimpse at life in Tudor times. (Quinn R. et al 1997: 409)

As techniques for salvaging wrecks have become more sophisticated, more artifacts have been discovered since the ship was raised in 1982. In 1994, using " a high resolution digital frequency modulated (FM) sub bottom profiling device" (Quinn R. et al 1997: 405) known as CHIRP, scientists were able to map the buried wreck and determine the geological context of its location when it went down and any geological shift that occurred in the Solent bottom during the 400 years the vessel was submerged. (Quinn R. et al 1997: 408) An advantage of the CHIRP profile is that it is non-invasive to the remaining site, and the analysis of what remains in the excavated site can help science determine currents and changes in the area of wrecks, and assist in mapping changes along the sea bottom.

While paleo-direction analysis is important to understanding the condition of the wreck and its history along the ocean bottom, the recovery of the artifacts that either came up with the ship is key to understanding the life aboard the Mary Rose. These artifacts are like a window into that time and have provided a scope of understanding that covers what was eaten aboard ship, leisure activities, weaponry, clothing, medicine and even animals.

A complete doctor's case was recovered (The Lancet 2002: 86), still holding its implements. In fact, in an ointment jar was evidence of his nails from where he scooped the ointment. There were also bleeding bowls, saws for amputation and other crude medical instruments. (Rule, The Raising of the Mary Rose 1982: 36) Other artifacts of the barber-surgeon found were two hats made of rich materials - silk and velvet. These hats provide an insight as to the status in which the surgeons were held. (Richardson 2000: 1200) Since the hats were packed and not being worn during the battle, it is easily surmised that these were not required for shipboard action and the surgeons used them for special occasions.

Other artifacts recovered from the ship are the complete skeletal remains of a dog (called Hatch by the Mary Rose Trust), shoes, several pairs of dice, clothing, medical equipment, weapons including several kinds of arrows, ordnance and remains of food barrels. There was even a Tudor-era violin. (The Mary Rose Trust 2007)

The dog called "Hatch" has sparked a huge amount of interest and has been displayed both at the Portsmouth docks and even during Chuff's Dog Show to help spur fundraising efforts for the forthcoming museum. The dog's purpose on board the ship, aside from being a pet, would have been to keep the rat population under control and away from the victuals. (The Mary Rose Trust 2007) Hatch was discovered in close proximity to a skeletal rat, and this indicates that he was "ratting" when the ship went down.

For centuries, there has been speculation as to why the Mary Rose, a ship that had been the flagship of the Tudor fleet for over 30 years, foundered

and sank so quickly. Theories range from overloading, with 700 sailors aboard instead of the usual complement of 400 so that the ship was unresponsive to handling, to gun ports drilled too low along the hull and taking in too much water. (The Mary Rose Trust 2007)

Another theory is that most of the crew were down in the hold sick with dysentery. Since it was found that the surgeon's quarters were empty at the time the ship sank, Sir James Watt, retired Royal Navy Medical Director, feels that the absence of the surgeons and the captain's last words that he crew were " knaves he could not control" as indicating sick men, not malingering ones. He further states that the King had been apprised earlier that summer that dysentery was rampant in the fleet and causing great troubles among the sailors (History Today 1983: 57-58)

The Mary Rose, which is actually more famous for sinking and being recovered than its 35 years as a working vessel, is the focal point of The Mary Rose Project. The project's purpose is to restore as much of the vessel in a carefully-controlled environment and its artifacts in a new museum opening in 2012. In the 20 years since the ship was raised, there have been a number of expeditions to recover artifacts, to record the site and to extol the Mary Rose as a perfect example of the English heritage of the sea. (The Mary Rose Trust 2007)

There are some who take exception to this aggrandizing of the Mary Rose as an example of the English superiority of the period. Simon Barker (1996: 51) holds that:

This process, by which the historicity of the Mary Rose is centered, is not governed by the vessel itself, nor by the archaeological concerns of its guardians, but by the media which have begun to dictate the terms on which the past is revealed, controlled, interpreted, and empowered in late twentieth century Britain.(51)

Baker (1996: 51-68) contends that despite the obvious archaeological window that the Mary Rose has provided, there are nefarious media and even government entities at work that would propagandize the ship as a symbol of the ideology of Britain's superiority and dominance in the world. (51-68)

Regardless of the controversy over how the Mary Rose is used - whether flagship, archaeological wreck, ideologue's dream of dominance, - the recovered ship provides a fascinating view into a world that has long vanished. The Tudor world is long gone, but what they left behind in the wreckage of the Mary Rose is a testament to how these sailors and officers lived. Their stories, once lost, have been recovered and returned to the surface where they can be told again and provide a solid historical record of life on the Mary Rose.

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