

H.M.S. VICTORY

The Worlds Greatest Warship

The last article I wrote for the Newsletter was about English Oak. (*Quercus robur*). This article is about the famous 'Ship of Oak', HMS VICTORY

One of the highlights of our trip to the United Kingdom in May/June 2008, was a side trip to Portsmouth, where we spent a whole day at the docks, much of it viewing the famous ship HMS Victory. The whole port reeked of the rich history of British naval heritage, but by far the most significant and moving sight was the famous ship in its black and yellow livery.



The World's Oldest Commissioned Warship

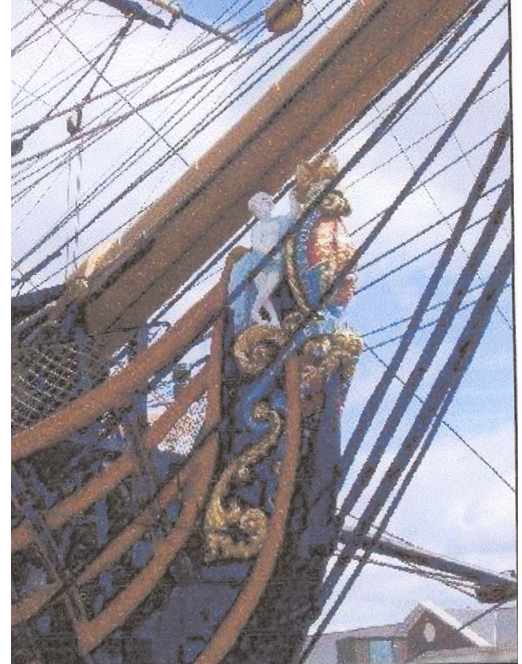
The keel was laid in 1759 and the ship was completed in 1765, but was put in reserve until 1768 when it was commissioned as the flagship of Admiral Keppel and thus started its illustrious career. In late 1780, after the American War of Independence, the bottom was plated with copper - 3,923 sheets weighing 17 tonnes. Wooden ships were clad in copper to prevent attack from the shipworm (*Teredo navalis*).

So followed a number of victories as the flagship under a succession of Admirals. Between 1800 and 1803 the "Great Repair" took place following which it became the flagship of Admiral Nelson. The battle of Trafalgar took place in 1805. After Nelson's death it continued service as Flagship, and today still serves that office.



Specifications

Overall length (includes the very large bowsprit) - 69.2 metres Length on gun deck - 56.7 metres. Compare with a basketball court which is about 30 metres; beam - 16 metres (a basketball court is about 15 metres); displacement - 3,600 tonnes; armament at Trafalgar - 104 guns, up to 32 pounders over four gun decks; crew at Trafalgar - 821 members - some 500 crew lived most of their time on the lower deck. The gun ports were usually kept closed creating a damp, dark and smelly environment. Rheumatism was a common complaint. There were fifteen 32 pound guns on each side, each pair manned by a crew of fifteen. Crew members ate and slept in hammocks by the guns. Mess tables were placed between the guns. Living conditions must have been deplorable.



More than 600 trees were used to build the Victory, about 90% of them English Oak, the remainder were elm, pine and fir. The hull was laminated with three layers of solid oak and was 600mm thick below the waterline. The mast was made up of several tree trunks shaped and bound together with large iron bands.

The lasting impression is its diminutive size. After having walked all over it, it is still difficult to understand how this ship which was only the size of two basketball courts could sustain a crew of more than 800 together with all of the food, water and ammunition needed for any lengthy engagement. It is also difficult to imagine it heading into battle with its guns being used as broadsides against enemy warships.

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