

Three Historic Ships



Three Historic Ships ~ a unique association

My father Stanley Spencer Noble, who was born in the Workhouse at Eye in Suffolk in 1908, broke his family link to an ancestry in farming that can be traced back to the Normans and “went off to sea”. How did this come about and what was unique about his chosen career?

The circumstances of my father’s illegitimate birth were all too common a hundred or so years ago and it is difficult to comprehend in pre-Social Security days the hardship experienced by those involved. His mother, Florence Barbara Noble from Redgrave, was abandoned not only by Stanley’s father but for a time also by her own family.

No one in my immediate family, including my father, knew anything about his early days and it was a complete surprise when my research revealed the name of his father in a Bastardy Order made by the Justices of the Borough of Eye. This was initiated by the Guardians of the Poor for Eye Workhouse, in whose Record Book I had found the details. In addition to naming his father it required him to pay maintenance of 2s 6d weekly until his son reached the age of 14. There is no evidence that he ever made a payment and I suspect he did not.

Meanwhile I assumed that my father had remained in the Workhouse but when the 1911 census became available towards the end of 2009 he is shown as living in Redgrave in the household of his grandfather Arthur Charles Noble. This was reassuring and in the absence of any other records he possibly continued to live there until 28th September 1920 when he joined the Training Ship “Mercury” in Hamble village, near Southampton.

It was here that the first of the three Historic Ships came into my father’s life. The records of “Mercury” had been sadly dispersed and mostly destroyed when it closed in 1968. However, through a “Mercury” website and help from “The Mercury Old Boys Association” I was able to access the Training School “Register of Trainees” showing:

Name:	Stanley Spencer Noble
Number :	1866
Age:	12 years 7 months
Height:	4ft 11.5 in.
Chest	29/27
Date of Entry:	28 th September 1920
Discharged:	13 th June 1924
Address:	East Suffolk Education Department
Remarks:	Shotley Royal Navy

Training Ship “Mercury” comprised a shore establishment with classrooms, dining rooms and other permanent buildings. An old hulk moored in the Hamble River, barely recognizable as the former Royal Navy ship HMS Gannet, provided dormitory accommodation and other facilities. HMS Gannet launched in Sheerness in 1878 and given to “Mercury” in 1914. It remained in use until the School closed and after some years of neglect it was acquired by Chatham Historic Dockyard, restored to its former glory and opened to the public. This photograph shows the result of a stunning restoration.

I have memories from the late 1950's of nostalgic visits to Hamble with my father and sitting in the pub as he recalled his days as a cadet. He often mentioned the severe discipline and harsh regime in the School including, as he told it, the daily swim from ship to shore every day of the year. It was only when I came into contact with "Mercury Old Boys" that I realized just how hard the life of trainees could be. The School was nominally run by CB Fry, a famous Olympian in the early 1900's, but it was his wife, Beatrice, who wielded the rod of iron and seemingly instituted the practice whereby the boys were never addressed by name but by their entry number, in my father's case 1866.



TS Mercury

The "Mercury Magazine" of 2011 features part of an unpublished autobiography of cadet William "Bill" Wildin (whose entry number 1848 is very close to that of my father) which highlights the shortage of food encapsulating the harsh life of a cadet in the 1920's.

.....On Monday mornings after breakfast a list was read out with the job every boy was to do. We all listened carefully to see if your job had anything to do with food. The best job was in the galley. The cook was a miserable old soul who nonetheless would give you a jolly good meal so long as she didn't catch you pinching a bit extra for your shipmates. The next good job was Post Boy when you were called early and taken ashore to report to the House kitchen to receive a slab of dripping and cup of hot cocoa before dashing off to the village on an old bicycle to collect the mail. If you made good time you might be lucky to get back to have your breakfast before your messmates scoffed it. Another good job was Officer's Mess Boy where there was often spare food available provided you were not caught hiding any for later consumption. Another on the list was House Boy that was not popular because you were always under the noses of the Frys. However, if the cook thought you had worked well, out would come all sorts of things from the pantry as well as cups of hot sweet tea or cocoa. I did all these jobs on and off but my steady jobs were Dispensary Boy or Rubbish Heap. The Dispensary was a wooden hut with a small camp bed. An old nurse was in charge; her remedies were confined to castor oil, aspirin, brimstone, sulphur, iodine and a sharp tongue. I had passed the first aid exam that we all had to do, whether it was that or whether she took a fancy to me I had the run of the place and cups of tea plus a few biscuits were always on the go. The rubbish heap was on the river bank a long way from the buildings. If you used your head you could lay a few fishing lines and fry any fish you caught on the gardeners shovel in the bonfire. If the gardener was out of sight it was possible to pinch potatoes, swedes, or apples, anything to fill the hole in our stomachs. I think the gardener was a bit sorry for us and now and then he would give me half a Woodbine.....

When I first traced the "Mercury" record of my father I was curious about the Education Department address quoted. There are no relevant records available to explain why, but reading about naval training schools it was commonplace in the early 1900's for Education Authorities to provide bursary's for cadets from poor backgrounds and to help place them in appropriate schools. In many cases they also supported cadets when on home leave. It is interesting that a half brother of my father was later sent to a farm in Canada by Barnardo's under one of their now discredited initiatives to "rescue" children from a life of poverty.

Despite the hardships my father clearly regarded his time at "Mercury" as a solid foundation for

his later Royal Navy career.

His life in the Royal Navy started on the lower deck. As World War 2 approached he rose through the ranks to Petty Officer and then in 1940 he gained Officer status as a Commissioned Boatswain. During the war he served on HMS Valiant in many engagements, including the Battle of Matapan, in the Mediterranean. A TV programme marking the 90th birthday of the Duke of Edinburgh noted that he also was on HMS Valiant at the Battle, so he and my father were shipmates. Later my father was on board when an Italian midget submarine blew a hole in its hull in Alexandria Harbour in Egypt. (This incident was made into a film in the 1960s).

After leaving HMS Valiant he returned to the Mediterranean as the Allied Forces invaded Italy. He never talked about this “most secret” role in “Operation Table Fustian”, but as he was a trained diver I have always assumed that he was involved in mine clearance in harbours and anchorages.

After the war he was promoted to Senior Commissioned rank and spent some time at his home base of Devonport including an appointment as became Master Rigger of the Naval Dockyard. Looking back it was at the time when the clothes line in our garden bore some resemblance to a ship rigged for sail with a very tall substantial wooden clothes post with appropriate heavy duty lines and pulleys!

His next seagoing appointment was to HMS Vanguard when it was being made ready for a state visit of King George VI to South Africa. Sadly the King died before the date of the planned voyage. At his funeral my father had the honour of leading a traditional “piping” party as the cortege made its way to burial in St Georges Chapel, Windsor. He is on the left in the photo.



An appointment in 1954 as Captain of HMS Victory in Portsmouth, was to a post traditionally reserved for the most senior Commissioned Boatswain prior to retirement.



HMS Victory

In the 1950s the Captain with his ships company, of both Naval and Royal Marine personnel, lived on board undertaking ceremonial and tourist guide roles. As Captain my father was involved in arranging and hosting dinners and other entertainment on behalf of the Admiral of the Fleet, Portsmouth Command for the many VIP visitors to HMS Victory.

It was also a time when the state of the vessel was deteriorating rapidly leading to major restoration work

which continues to this day. My father's appointment to HMS Victory coincided with the beginning of my working life in the Customs and Excise in London. From time to time I was able to spend weekends with him on board Victory joining in his busy life and enjoying what was then a vibrant dockyard and harbour full of ships.

In 1958 when he retired from the Royal Navy he moved not much more than half a mile across Portsmouth Harbour to become Captain Superintendent of a training ship, then named TS Foudroyant. The vessel lay on a mooring close to the submarine base HMS Dolphin. Foudroyant was built in India close to the time of the Napoleonic Wars along with many other "wooden wall" warships. By the time it was completed the threat of war had ended and it was put into reserve until the 1840's when it was brought back into active service, though it never fired a gun in anger in its short career supporting general naval activities in two world voyages. After being finally taken out of service it was used as a storage hulk until a Charitable Trust acquired it and moored it in Portsmouth Harbour to be used as a short stay holiday training ship for young people of secondary school age.



TS Foudroyant at Portsmouth

Groups spent a week or so on board taking part in rowing, sailing activities and occasionally making expeditions to explore the many creeks in Portsmouth Harbour and, if the weather was good, to venture to the Isle of Wight. Their living accommodation on board was quite spartan as the vessel had not been "improved" to any degree, but the young people enjoyed themselves in the unique environment.



Mess accommodation on TS Foudroyant

My family lived on board during the summer months, retreating to a warm and draught free flat ashore for the winter. Their quarters were centred around the magnificent stern cabin.

It is interesting to recall that the ships original cannons were then still in the hold of the vessel where they acted as ballast. They fascinated the young people.



Nurse (Mrs Noble) aboard TS Foudroyant



Captain's cabin TS Foudroyant

By the end of the 1960's the holiday scene had begun to change and "Foudroyant" was virtually abandoned. But for the inspirational interest of those who campaigned for its restoration it would have rotted away on a mud-bank. Instead an opportunity arose to move it to Hartlepool, where a skilled workforce was available to restore it to its former glory. It is now proudly bearing its original name, HMS Trincomalee as the central attraction in Hartlepool's Historic Dockyard.

My father's association with these three historic ships is unique. It is one he would have been justly proud, but sadly he died in 1973 and never saw the restoration of HMS Trincomalee and HMS Gannet and the stunning development of the Historic Dockyards in Portsmouth, Hartlepool and Chatham.

I have visited each of these beautifully restored historic ships and thoroughly enjoyed celebrating Britain's outstanding naval heritage. I would encourage readers to do the same and at the same time search out the interesting museums and exhibits that surround them. Take your children and your Grannies. They will love the experience.

You will be welcome aboard.



*Captain Superintendent
Stanley Spencer Noble
Aboard HMS Trincomalee*

Peter Noble

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