

The Restoration of HMS Trincomalee



Introduction:

From 1897 to 1931 the owner of our ship was Geoffrey Cobb, and during this period the ship was used for training youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds in seamanship. In September 1902, she was renamed the Foudroyant, after Nelson's former flagship that was wrecked off the North Pier at Blackpool on 16th June 1897.

After the death of Geoffrey Cobb in 1931, his wife became the new owner and the ship was moved to Portsmouth. Mrs Cobb transferred ownership of the Foudroyant to the Implacable Committee, this Committee being renamed the Foudroyant Committee in the later 1940s. In the 1980s the ship was being used as a training ship for school parties, scouts and sea rangers, but the number of people using the facility had declined making it uneconomical to continue in such a rôle. On 10th October 1986 the decision was made by the Foudroyant Trust to stop using the ship for training and to concentrate on the care and maintenance of the ship. By January 1987, Hartlepool was selected as the best site for the restoration.

On 22nd July 1987, the Dutch heavy lift barge, Pacific Goliath, came into Portsmouth harbour, was flooded down, and the Foudroyant towed into position on the base. The next day our ship was towed out of the harbour she had occupied for the previous fifty-five years, and she arrived in the River Tees on 27th July. The Foudroyant was then un-docked and towed across to Hartlepool for a civic reception.



It was only after securing adequate funding and a secure berth that the restoration of the ship could begin. The official date for the start of the restoration was 1st January 1990, and on 28th March 1990 the Chairman of the Foudroyant Trust announced that the ship would revert to her original name, HMS Trincomalee. A new Trincomalee Trust was formed with the same trustees who had been trustees of the now dormant Foudroyant Trust.



Preparatory Work:

The Trincomalee Trust was able to draw on the skills and experience of locals who had worked on the restoration of HMS Warrior and the paddle steamer Wingfield Castle. Preparation for the restoration required providing light and power on board, with office and workshop space ashore. New gangways allowed the removal of non-original cabins and clutter, inappropriate for a ship that was to be presented as she was when first built.

Bathrooms, showers and heating systems were all removed. The false forecastle which contained these “modern” appliances was dismantled, and a large poop cabin and a stump mast were similarly taken away. After the removal of some ballast the mastless hull floated high in the water, this allowed the construction of platforms to allow access to the outer topsides. Defective timber was identified to be subsequently replaced.

The dry-dock at the Historic Quay was not available straight away, indeed it was August 1996 when the ship was first moved into the then restored dock. The decision was made to restore the above-water hull before working on the ship's bottom. The topsides were stripped away from the weather deck down to the sound teak planks just above the copper sheathing. Fortunately the hull was found to be strong. Pumps, fire alarms and lighting were added to the ship for safety reasons, and research was made into providing her with three masts and a full sailing rig.

Phase 1:



Sufficient preparatory work had been done by May 1992 to move on to Phase 1 of the restoration, restoring the above-water hull. Woodworking machines, a fork-lift truck, an expansion of the workforce and over 50 tons of high grade West African Opepe hardwood were all acquired. Sheltered staging allowed the restoration team to work in most conditions.

The ship was repaired in twenty-foot stages, working from the stern, and the original gunport layout was reconstructed from a Leda class of ship drawing.

Autumn 1992 marked the completion of nearly half the restoration of the upperworks. On 18th May 1993, the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh visited Hartlepool in the Royal Yacht Britannia, the Queen opening the gateway of the then developing Heritage Quay area, The Duke, Patron of the Trincomalee Trust since 9th June 1992, inspected the ship and met those involved with the restoration.



Phase 2:

With Phase 1 of the restoration being near to completion, Phase 2, the masts, was already underway, with the welcomed funding of grants from English Heritage and the National Heritage Memorial Fund. In terms of total costs, at the close of the 1992-1993 accounting period £1.6 million had already been spent, and it was felt that a further £3.1 million would be needed to complete the restoration.

1993 marked the foundation of our group, the “Friends of HMS Trincomalee”, to help support the ship.

The Stern and Masts:



In 1994 work began on the bow and stern, the ship still being afloat due to delays in opening the dry-dock.

The ship's stern was substantially rebuilt in 1846, when she was being fitted out for service as a corvette, and when the restoration was started this was the structure apparent on the ship. The Trust decided to retain the 1846 stern although to return other parts of the ship to its 1817 state. It was felt that having an original 1846 stern was better than replacing it with a replica 1817 one, and it would be the cheaper option.

By Spring 1994 the mainmast was almost complete, consisting of three sections destined to reach over 160ft (49m) above the waterline. The main top – the platform at the top of the lower section – had been built in the workshop, and was over 17ft (5m) wide, weighing over 3 tons. Firms local to Hartlepool were entrusted with making the yards. The main yard at 84ft (26m) long would be wider than the ship itself, and on completion HMS Trincomalee would carry 27 separate yards, all different. In order to reduce the cost of maintenance these spars were produced using galvanised steel.

On 16th May 1995 Trincomalee's mainmast was erected without a hitch using a 200-tonne crane, and during the Summer of 1995 the lower mainmast, lower foremast and bowsprit were put into position. When the mizzen mast was added on 27th February 1996 our ship became fully masted again, for the first time in over 140 years. 2,000 feet of standing rigging was required, and visitors to the restoration site could see the craftsmanship involved in splicing, parcelling and serving the heavy ropes.

Dry Docking:



It was soon after dawn, on Saturday 31st August 1996, that HMS Trincomalee slipped her moorings at the berth in Jackson Dock which had been her home for over six years, and was edged into the former William Gray graving dock at the Historic Quay with the assistance of the fishing vessels Torus and Progress. With near perfect weather conditions the operation was completed without a hitch, the ship settling on to the keel blocks as the dock was pumped dry.

By Spring 1997 the remains of the hull's copper sheathing and its fastenings had been completed, some of the copper was melted down and cast into ingots for storage and recycling. Interestingly, as the copper was removed it became clear from an examination of the nails in the hull and the remnants of the felt behind the copper-plating, that this was the original coppering applied to the hull when HMS Trincomalee was first built. A system of staging and working platforms, allowing the restoration team access to all parts of the hull, had been constructed in steel and timber.

The process of re-caulking and applying new felt and copper sheets to the hull had begun by Summer 1998, with the removal and replacement of rotten timbers in the frames and planking. Fenders, chesstrees, boat davits and steps were fitted, and the hull above the

coppering painted, greatly enhancing the look of the ship. Bill boards for the ship's bower anchors were fitted and come Summer 1999 the staging around the hull was being removed.

On 8th February 2000 seawater was let into the dry-dock. The restoration team looked on as the water level rose, and subsequent examination showed that, as expected, the hull was sound and watertight, with only a very small amount of water detectable in the bilges following the reconstruction of the hull and its re-caulking, felting and coppering. At this stage the dock was not fully flooded and the keel remained on the blocks. Eight days later, on 16th February, the dry-dock was further flooded, and at around 10.30am the stern and then the bow lifted off the blocks as the ship came afloat on almost an even keel after three and a half years in dry-dock. After being lifted off the blocks, the ship was moved slightly forward so that the areas of the keel which had been sitting on the blocks could be exposed for coppering.

Restoration Complete:

The end of 2000 marked the official completion of the restoration of HMS Trincomalee. Among the final items to be completed were the sealing of the deck timbers, the replacement of the restored ship's wheels and the installation of the capstan. This did not mean that the ship was in a finished state in December 2000, the remaining work being classified as "fitting out" rather than restoration work. It was in Summer 2001 that the trustees of HMS Trincomalee were delighted to announce that both the restoration and fitting out of the ship was complete.



A set of caulking tools

Sources: Trincomalee News – The Newsletter of the HMS Trincomalee Trust
Quarterdeck – The Newsletter of the Friends of HMS Trincomalee
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