

Living on the Foudroyant 1958 to 1966



Living on the Foudroyant 1958 to 1966

On a cold February day in 1958 my father ferried my mother and I in a small dingy across a wintry Portsmouth harbour to the Foudroyant, which was to be our home on and off for the next eight years. What a difference from a semi-detached with a large garden on the rural outskirts of Torquay!

Our living quarters were aft of the gun deck, in the space which is now the captain's cabin. The main cabin, which ran along the stern, was kept warm with a fore runner of today's wood-burner and much to my delight the windows were opened by a series of pulleys. The kitchen was on the port side and my cabin, with its high bunk, was alongside this. As I had a history of sleep-walking, my father rigged-up a series of ropes which he and my mother hoped would prevent me from wandering out of my cabin in the middle of the night and coming to a watery end. Our bathroom was on the starboard side with a view of the Portsmouth dockyard. Baths were an adventure at first as we were used to being swamped one minute and left beached the next as the ship was caught in the wake of a powered vessel. An additional embarrassment was caused if a sight-seeing boat came past when someone was bathing as the small porthole had no covering. As the ship was moored fore and aft to large cylindrical buoys, the soundtrack of our lives soon became that of squawking gulls, which colonised the buoys.

When we first lived on the Foudroyant it was moored just off the Gosport shore near the entrance to Portsmouth harbour and the submarine base at HMS Dolphin. Portsmouth harbour has a very narrow entrance into the Solent and the tides are extremely powerful. One day mum was in the long cabin and dad nearby when she was heard to cry, "what's that big grey thing outside". Within seconds the ship shuddered violently as a submarine, which had been caught by the tide, tore the starboard gangway off! It was decided that in the interests of safety the Foudroyant should be towed further up the harbour. It was thereafter moored directly opposite HMS Victory off the Gosport shore where the tides were less strong and she was out of the main shipping lane within the harbour.

Foudroyant, as you probably all know, was run in the 1950s and 1960s as a sail training ship for young people and it was run as a charitable trust. Every Saturday between late March and the autumn a new group of boys would arrive accompanied by teachers or youth workers; girls were rare, usually once or twice a year. Some groups came back on a regular annual basis and we came to know the teachers and leaders quite well. Monks Park School from north west Bristol brought a group annually, often with the same boys. I remember that 60 was the optimum number of cadets and dad was pleased when they were from the same place as there was less likely to be any rivalry. All were of secondary school age. Teenagers were far less sophisticated then, no designer trainers, mobile phones, no iPods or other expensive items to misplace and often it was their only holiday, so they came with a will to enjoy it. They certainly had a good dose of fresh air and by the end of the week were ready to return home with a weather-beaten appearance as well as a load of smelly washing.

Off Scott Paine, the rather elderly picket boat, they would pour and up the gangway full of expectation. Bending low they would enter the gun deck, where they would eat, socialise and be instructed in nautical skills during their stay. That evening mum would be kept busy with sobbing



TS Foudroyant

younger boys, homesick and missing the normality of home. Any boy who turned up later in the week at my father's office feeling ill would be greeted with "have your bowels moved?" Often very embarrassed by this they would miraculously recover.

The boys slept in hammocks on the lower deck, which in itself was an adventure for them. At first they found the hammocks difficult to get into and until they mastered this there many sore heads and a few minor injuries. It must have been an amazing sight to see them all swinging to and fro in the gloom. What tales the "sea dogs" must have told when they arrived home, did they enjoy being back in their own beds or did they miss their cosy hammocks? Timmy, our cat, would add to the first night's excitement by leaping into hammocks and eliciting screams of "the ghost" which would wake the other boys and it was often quite late before quiet reigned.

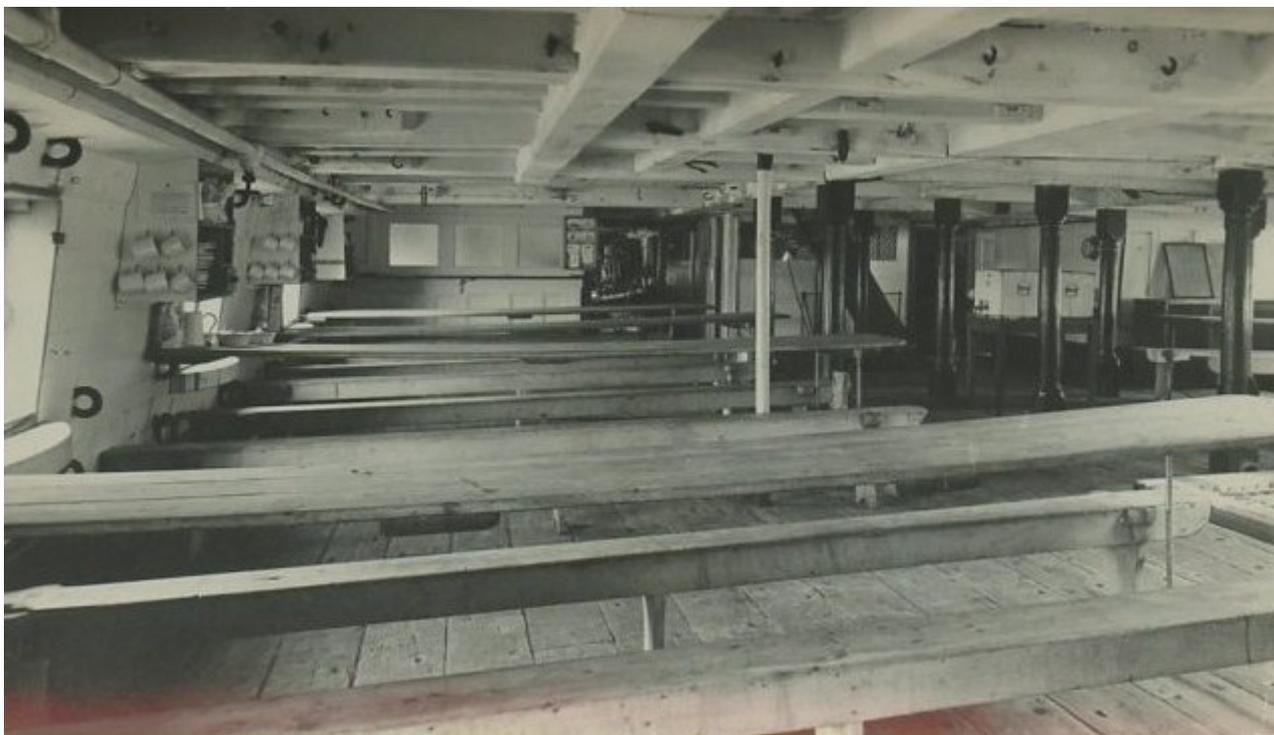
Sunday morning the boys would board Scott Paine again and set off to HMS Dolphin, the nearby submarine base, for church. Timmy the cat caused havoc one week when he somehow got onto Scott Paine and was seen to streak ashore when Dolphin jetty was reached. Off in hot pursuit went the boys, no church that week as it took quite some time before both cat and seekers were rounded up!

Prayers were said each morning on the top deck in a very loud voice by my father under the benign gaze of a cross-eyed lion which reclined across the front of the poop deck. The top deck looked very different then as there was only one partial mast and four cannons, in between which was the cat's grass patch replenished frequently by dad so Timmy would always have his natural medicine! There was also a fore-castle in which the boys' wash-rooms were situated.

By Wednesday the boys were deemed expert enough take part in a sailing adventure across the Solent to Sea View on the Isle of Wight. Accompanied by Scott Paine as guard boat the flotilla of sailing craft would pass through the harbour mouth and out into the rougher waters of the Solent, crossing to Sea View in time for lunch and some shore leave. Week after week this

happened without incident but one Wednesday a squall came up without warning and several boats got into trouble. After much anxiety the boys were rescued by the navy and the whole contingent returned variously attired, many of the boys in officers uniforms and the instructors, much to the boys delight, in ordinary seamen's gear.

On a Friday night they put on an entertainment to round off the week. It consisted of sketches and songs and as by then they had gelled into mess groups there was a sense of competition as they vied to be the funniest etc.



Messes 2,4,6 & 8 TS Foudroyant – photograph by Eric Stewart

The boys' food was all cooked on an open range at the fore end of the gun deck and the boys ate as a group, or mess, on tables ranged along either side of the deck, as in Nelson's day. Vast amounts of bread and potatoes were consumed as appetites increased as the week wore on and the fresh air had an effect. During the winter it was just dad and a few of the staff on board carrying out repairs and maintenance. They had a stew pot which was kept going continuously, the bottom of which was only seen in spring.

By the time that I started grammar school in the September following our arrival on the Foudroyant dad had acquired a motor boat so he ferried me across the harbour to school in Portsmouth each day. I had to wear a panama hat in summer and disliking to wear an elastic chin strap it blew off one day only to be retrieved from the water with a boat-hook. For ever after it had a ragged hole in the crown. Stood in his trademark bobble hat and puffing on his pipe, dad would often help with last minute homework, so he became quite good at steering the boat while parsing Latin or German verbs.

For many of my teenage years I was employed by dad to run the tuck shop, which stood alongside the galley on the gun deck and was opened after supper every night. Mum had to help with the initial rush as the boys would crowd around the hatch, eager to spend their money. Mars bars, fizzy drinks and chews were consumed voraciously for the first few days until pocket money began to run out .One summer the grandson of Jean Patou, the fashion designer, was

sent to the ship for several weeks to practise his English. Addicted to sweets and pop, he soon ran out of money and started to sell his designer clothes. Oh, how surprised some mums must have been by the attire their sons arrived home wearing. Every summer we had several foreign boys on board for varying amounts of time. Per, a very tall Swedish lad who came for several summers, was my mother's favourite. He drove the motorboat on his knees and had to bend double to walk between decks. Mum felt that his family could afford to send him with what they saved on his food. Breakfast for Per was a large box of cornflakes and a loaf of bread toasted! She often bought him an ice cream when he came to pick her up from on shore and to her amusement he would eat it in one!

After the first uncomfortable winter on board my parents had a flat down by the harbour in Gosport. We still spent the summers on board and some winter weekends, and usually every Christmas. This was celebrated in the wardroom, situated under the poop deck, which was decorated festively, as dad loved this. Some years we had overseas students or children from the naval orphanage for the holiday so there were lots of us. One year dad acquired a set of wind-up horses and a racing set and we spent hours playing with them on the large table.

The winter of 1962 was bitterly cold and the mudflats in Portsmouth harbour froze. My father was worried that the ship would be damaged by the ice being carried down on the tide and I remember that he and my brother spent many cold hours pushing the ice-floes away from the ship with boat-hooks.

As I grew older I wanted more freedom, especially during the long summer holidays. An elderly boatman gave me a very small, pram dingy and I was mobile, if a little wet by the time I reached shore. Most of my summers from age 13 were spent either on exchange in Germany or with my pen friend on the ship. Ingrid and I had lots of adventures in the dingy and were frequently being towed home when we couldn't row against the tide, she found this quite a change from her landlocked home.

I learnt to sail but, unlike my brother, never really liked it. Dad had his own "Victory" class yacht, Z1 which he named Disdane after the ship which brought the news of the approaching Armada to Sir Francis Drake. The victory class yachts were fast keel boats which had been designed by Uffa Fox, the legendary boat builder and sailor from Cowes on the Isle of Wight.

Dad really wanted mum to share his love of sailing so after he bought Disdane she agreed to try it. However, that entailed getting a natty outfit for the outing. Off to John Lewis in Portsmouth she went and a suitable pair of slacks and top were purchased. Out into the Solent they sailed but mum was never to be his crew for as the sails billowed and Disdane heeled over mum became frightened that she would meet a watery end. Dad should have known better and picked a calmer day!

Unbeknown to the family my father had been on the battleship HMS Valiant when it was blown up in Alexandria harbour in 1942. The Italians used a midget submarine to place limpet mines on the hull and dad was one of a handful of survivors. In the early 1960's a film was made of the sinking and dad was contacted so that he could give his first hand account. A group from the production team plus my mother's heart-throb, Jack Hawkins, came to the Foudroyant to see him. Would this have happened if we had lived in an ordinary street? Mum decided to cook the lunch herself and practised on us until she had her menu perfect which we all teased her about.

In 1965 my sister married and had her wedding reception on the ship, a Gosport ferry having been hired to take the guests from the shore to Foudroyant. Thankfully it was a calm day and she managed to climb the gangway in her traditional dress. I have a video of the event which

shows the guests mingling on the top deck, although I have a jumper on over my bridesmaid's dress, so it must have been chilly.

Foudroyant in those days was not much more than a hulk, of which there had been several in Portsmouth harbour in the first half of the 20th century. It was a struggle to keep it water-tight and in a reasonable state of repair, certainly the revenue raised by the fees charged to the groups of young people never covered the running costs. I had been told by my brother about the restoration of the ship and had always wanted to see it for myself. What a beautiful sight she is, a credit to all the hard work put into the project by all those involved. My father would have loved what has been achieved and proud that the ship has now a secure future.

The lines of the ship are much cleaner without the pontoon and davits and wow! the figurehead has got the top of his turban back. I must admit that when I saw her for the first time it brought a tear to my eye and it revived so many memories of my teenage years spent afloat.

Shelagh Sutherland

**QD21: Originally appeared In the "Quarterdeck" magazine
Ref: 2013 Issue 1 (Spring) pages 4 to 8**