

Memories of TS Foudroyant In the 1950s



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2nd Beeston Sea Scouts, TS Foudroyant, August 1954

In August 1953, and again in August 1954, I was part of a party of 2nd Beeston Sea Scouts who took part in a training week on board TS Foudroyant in Portsmouth Harbour. As we were based on the River Trent, near Nottingham, far from the sea, this would be, for most of us, a new experience.

In 1953, I was 14 and going there was a great adventure. It involved a long journey by train; as you can imagine this was great fun in itself. First we went down to London St Pancras and then crossed London, partly by tube and then walked along the Embankment and crossed over to Waterloo. As this was the first time I (and many of the others) had ever been to London, this was a very interesting experience.

We were supposed to have reserved seats on the Portsmouth train, so we stood back to let everyone get on – before finding the reservations were nowhere to be seen when we got on! There being no other room on the train, we made the journey sitting on the floor in the guard's van. Nothing daunted our spirits though!

The arrival at Portsmouth Harbour station was truly memorable. Towering above us, completely filling our view was what we soon discovered was the battleship HMS Vanguard. I had never imagined that a ship could be that huge.



TS Foudroyant at Portsmouth

We crossed over the harbour on the Gosport Ferry and were then ferried over to Foudroyant on her own boats and were then given a quick (but important!) lesson on how to sling a hammock as we would be using these for sleeping, slung in areas on lower decks while our officers were allocated cabins. We soon discovered that hammocks were very comfortable and most of us had no problem sleeping at any time.

Then there was also an important lesson to be learned, connected with washing up. The waste water, it was explained, went straight through the scuppers into the sea. We were strongly advised to check that nothing was left in the bowl before emptying it – using the little rhyme ‘Tinkle, tinkle little spoon, knife and fork will follow soon’.

Then it was up on deck to explore and look around - and to realise that we were right in the middle of a busy harbour in which, extending into the inner harbour, there was hundreds of Royal Navy vessels that had seen service during the war – most of which were then mothballed and were eventually to be broken up for scrap. For a bunch of teenage boys, all of whom were interested in boats and the sea, it was an interesting and exciting place to be.

The programme for the week – in each of the years - was a very busy one, with several formal visits to Navy establishments. These included a visit to the submarine base, HMS Dolphin – which was very close to Foudroyant – with the opportunity to go inside WW2 submarines. Another visit was to HMS Vanguard where we were shown around the crew’s quarters and operational areas – including the 15inch guns that, we were told, were not fired unless really required as it wrecked the Captain’s cabin. And, there was a visit to HMS Excellent, the Naval Gunnery School on Whale Island where discipline was particularly strict and everyone moved ‘at the double’. We also fitted in a visit to HMS Victory, Nelson’s flagship, which was and is, of course, in dry dock in Portsmouth.

Most of the remainder of the time was taken up with boating activities of various kinds – notably sailing the whalers that were part of the ship’s assortment of small boats. Perhaps, as a group, we were left more to our own devices as we already had some experience with the sorts of craft

available. One of the more memorable experiences was attempting to sail to the Isle of Wight – which, with little or no wind, turned out to be a row there and back, with the need to avoid the then elite passenger liner SS United States, which was making its way through the Solent.

On another occasion, one boating crew found itself becalmed and up against the side of HMS Vanguard and, much to the amusement of the watching ratings, were careful to use the blunt end of their boat-hook 'in case it damaged the ship'. With considerable amusement, they were told that, as the armour plate was built to resist torpedoes, a boat-hook wouldn't do a lot of harm.

Another highlight was during the week when our visit coincided with the annual dinghy race by the local yacht club in which they invited current trainees from Foudroyant to crew. The race was around a course into and around the inner harbour, and back. I was elated to be a member of the winning crew.

As you can see, it was a busy week and over only too soon. But the memories have lived with me ever since.

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