

The Frigate Unicorn



The Frigate Unicorn The Oldest Warship built in Britain still afloat



The frigate Unicorn, built at Chatham in 1824, and now docked in Dundee is well worth a visit. Although only seven years later than the Trincomalee in its completion, the Unicorn reveals the beginnings of the move forward from wood to iron in naval ship construction, and Friends of HMS Trincomalee visiting will soon be finding themselves identifying the similarities and differences of the two frigates.

The Unicorn belonged to the urgent programme of shipbuilding after the end of the Napoleonic wars, when many of the ships of the Royal Navy were worn out by years of conflict. It was standard practice to stockpile good hulls in reserve, or 'ordinary'. A hull of a large warship took over two years to build and only a fortnight to rig. Whilst in 'ordinary' the masts and rigging were stored out of the weather and a roof was built over the hull to protect it. The Unicorn still has this roof, which is the only known example left in the world.

The upper deck, protected from the elements and without masts and rigging provides a

spacious area on the Unicorn which is presently used to good effect for events such as caleidhs and performances of Gilbert and Sullivan (HMS Pinafore and the Gondoliers, naturally!)

Sir Robert Seppings, the Surveyor of the Navy from 1813 to 1832, was responsible for the Unicorn's design, and by 1817 he had already developed a round stern when building the Asia, this being fully framed and planked with only small windows. This design feature was a response to the construction weakness of the old men-of-war square stern which had consisted of elaborate, but lightly built windows for the office accommodation, and thus (as with the bow which had only a flimsy bulkhead) could be easily penetrated by enemy shot. It had become a standard manoeuvre for a ship to attempt to 'rake' her opponent by firing a full broadside in through the enemy's bow or stern.

Seppings in 1810 also developed iron 'knees' to replace the great curved pieces of wood called 'knees' which joined a ship's deck beams to its side. By the time of the Napoleonic Wars the Industrial Revolution was well under way, providing cheap and reliable iron to replace timber which was becoming scarce, particularly the curved 'compass' timber needed for 'knees'.

The iron 'knees' on the Unicorn represent the earliest use of iron as a major element for shipbuilding. Each one is formed to a slightly different angle from its neighbours, each iron fitting with great accuracy.

The Unicorn also has examples of thick iron diagonal strengthening straps, or 'riders', fixed to the inside of the hull. These were again devised by Seppings, first tried out in the Tremendous in 1811, and generally adopted in 1831.

The table below compares some facts and figures for the frigates Unicorn and Trincomalee.

The impressive figurehead for the Unicorn is ten feet long, including the horns, and was carved in Quebec Yellow Pine by Trevor Ellis, a carver based in Hampshire. It was unveiled on 17th July 1979 by the Prince of Wales (see the centre colour spread).

Friends of HMS Trincomalee visiting Dundee are likely to find the Unicorn more interesting than Scott's RNS Discovery also docked there. In 1968 the Unicorn Preservation Society was formed, chaired by Lord Dalhousie, and on 26th September 1968 Prince Phillip accepted HMF Unicorn from the Navy on behalf of the society which has the continuing task of preserving and renovating the frigate. The Society's hope is to have the Unicorn as the centre piece of the new marina planned for Dundee, with it masted and rigged.



Iron Riders



Iron Knees

The Frigates



Stern Views



Figurehead



Captain's Cabin



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