

HMS Trincomalee at Cowes Isle of Wight



In June 2022 we celebrated the late Queen's platinum jubilee after her 90 years on the throne, then in September her state funeral was held with King Charles III our new monarch. 125 years ago it was Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee that was being celebrated. She died on 22nd January 1901 at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight, with her son being declared King Edward VII. HMS Trincomalee was based at Cowes at that time, and the men attending to the ship would have been able to see some of the ceremonies associated with Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee and death at first hand.

HMS Trincomalee left Hartlepool under tow to Southampton Water in February 1877 and was moored there for the last 18 years of her naval service as a drill ship. On 12th October 1895 she was replaced by a new drill ship, HMS Medea, and our ship was left "in reserve" until she was sold on 19th May 1897 to Read's shipbreakers of Portsmouth Camber. The ship was bought for £1323 and it seemed she was to be broken down, supplying teak timber for re-use in ships or for furniture.

When Nelson's old flagship, HMS Foudroyant, was wrecked by a gale whilst it was anchored off Blackpool, her owner, Geoffrey Wheatley Cobb, approached the Admiralty for another ship. They suggested that HMS Trincomalee might be suited for his purposes, to be used as a training ship for boys. Cobb bought the Trincomalee from Read's shipbreakers and our ship was towed to East Cowes, on the Isle of Wight, where over the next five years she was refitted for her new rôle.

As part of the celebrations of Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee, the Diamond Jubilee Naval Review was held at Spithead on 26th June 1897. 170 Royal Navy ships, including 50 battleships, were all anchored in two seven mile long lines between the Isle of Wight and Portsmouth. Nearly all the ships were less than 10 years old with bunting on display, the crews standing in ranks wearing wide straw hats, and white uniforms as they took part in this great naval spectacle.

Guests to the Review were accommodated on board the Campania, the pride of the Cunard Fleet at that time, along with several other famous merchant ships. Unfortunately Queen Victoria did not feel well enough to go to sea and her son Bertie, Prince of Wales, stood in for her. He was accompanied by guests from all over the British Empire and around the World.

One uninvited vessel came to the Review, this was the revolutionary new turbine boat, Turbinia, brought to Spithead by its owner Charles Algernon Parsons. As the Prince of Wales, Lords of the Admiralty and other dignitaries looked on, Turbinia raced between the lines of big ships, and being much faster than anything else afloat was able to easily evade the Royal Navy's patrol boats. Parsons had invented the steam turbine in 1884, and in 1905 the Admiralty announced that all future Royal Navy ships would be powered by turbines. In 1906 the first turbine-powered battleship, HMS Dreadnought, was launched.

HMS Trincomalee was still at Cowes on the Isle of Wight when Queen Victoria died at Osborne House on 22nd January 1901. Her funeral was held in London eleven days later on 2nd February. A state funeral cortège travelling by ship made for a striking spectacle.

HMY Alberta carried Victoria's body from Cowes to Gosport with a number of yachts following carrying the new King, Edward VII, and other mourners. The assembled fleet fired minute guns as HMY Alberta passed by. The Queen's body remained on board ship overnight before being conveyed by gun carriage to Gosport railway station the following day for the train journey to London. As a break from tradition, the Queen had her coffin draped in white.

The Crew on board HMS Trincomalee at Cowes in 1901

The 1901 census return for the "Trincomalee, Cowes" lists who was on board the vessel on the night of Sunday 31st March 1901.

CREW ON BOARD THE TRINCOMALEE AT COWES 1901 (Census return)

NAME	AGE	STATUS	POST	PLACE OF BIRTH
William John Robins	52	Married	Master	Devonshire, Plymouth
William Brown	34	Single	Engineer	Glamorganshire, Cardiff
John Joseph Brown	35	Single	Steward	Glamorganshire, Cardiff
Watkin William Wynn	21	Single	Cook	Glamorganshire, Methyr Tydfil
Charles Alfred Henry Colby	20	Single	Ordinary Seaman	Norfolk, Yarmouth
Henry Edward George	19	Single	Ordinary Seaman	Suffolk, Gorleston
Charles Arthur Lacey	21	Single	Ordinary Seaman	Kent, Bromley
John Michael Vayne	21	Single	Ordinary Seaman	Monmouthshire, Newport
George Mynott Bester	20	Single	Ordinary Seaman	Bedford, Little Aylsey
William John Poole	20	Single	Fireman	London, Bethnal Green
Berthram Burt Dominey	15	Single	Ships Boy	Isle of Wight, Northwood
Harry Ansell	18	Single	Ordinary Seaman	Hampshire, Aldershot
Arthur Blake	17	Single	Ships Boy	Norfolk, Yarmouth

Of the thirteen men and boys listed I have found, so far, a little bit more about five of these crew members.

William John Robins

The Master of the ship, William John Robins, was born on 27th November 1848 at Plymouth, Devon. As soon as he was 18 years old, on 27th November 1866, he joined the Royal Navy and is recorded at the time as being 5ft 6 inches tall with light brown hair and dark eyes. William served in the following ships:

Northumberland 10 Jan 1873 - 30 Sep 1873
 Excellent 1 Oct 1873 – 2 Nov 1874
 Favorite (Coast Guard) 3 Nov 1874 – 7 April 1875
 Excellent 8 April 1875 – 13 July 1875

Diamond 14 July 1875
 " " Petty Officer 2nd Class 1 May 1877 – 7 Jan 1879

Excellent 8 Jan 1879
 " " Petty Officer 1st Class 7 May 1879 – 22 June 1879

Humber 23 June 1879 – 7 July 1879

Cruiser	8 July 1879 – 31 Jan 1883
Excellent	1 Feb 1883 – 20 Aug 1884
President	21 Aug 1884 – 2 Sep 1887

In September 1887 he was discharged to the “shore” with a pension at 38 years of age. In 1901 he is found to be the married Master of HMS Trincomalee at the age of 52 years.

Charles Alfred Henry Colby

Charles Alfred Henry Colby was born on 26th August 1880 at Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, his father, Charles Nathaniel Colby, was a fisherman. At the age of eleven Charles Alfred was still living with his family at Great Yarmouth and by then had a three year old brother called John James Colby.

In the 1901 census Charles Alfred is on board the Trincomalee at Cowes as an ordinary seaman. It would appear that he remained at Cowes, marrying there in 1903 and having three daughters and one son. In 1939 he is listed as still a resident of Cowes. During World War One he was a merchant seaman. His younger brother, John James Colby, became skipper of HMS Drifter and was killed in action at sea in 1918.

Henry Edward George

Henry Edward George was born at Gorleston-on-Sea near Great Yarmouth on 15th July 1881. His father died when the lifeboat “Refuge” overturned off Gorleston Harbour in 1888, and his mother died in 1890. An orphan at the age of eight, Henry was brought up by relatives of his parents and in March 1901 was aboard HMS Trincomalee as an ordinary seaman at the age of nineteen.

Three of the crew in the census of 1901 were born in and around Great Yarmouth. Charles Colby, Henry George and one of the two ship’s boys, Arthur Blake. Henry married in 1909 and in 1911 was resident at Falmouth at the same time that our ship, then TS Foudroyant, was moored there. After seeing military service in the First World War he died in 1956 at Portsmouth at the age of seventy four years. Interestingly TS Foudroyant in 1956 was anchored at Portsmouth.

Berthram Burt Dominey

Berthram Burt Dominey, the youngest member of the crew aboard HMS Trincomalee in 1901, at the age of fifteen years, like Arthur Blake was a ship’s boy. Berthram was the only locally born member of the crew, having been born at Cowes, the Isle of Wight. In April 1903 he joined the Royal Navy serving on many ships and becoming a Petty Officer in December 1908. His last posting, according to the records I have seen, was to HMS Vernon from 11th January 1924 until 6th April 1925 when he was “shore pensioned”.

**QD75: Originally appeared In the “Quarterdeck” magazine
Ref: 2022 Issue 3 (Autumn) pages 53 to 59**