

## Is It Worth a Visit...? Portsmouth Historic Docks

It was my birthday recently, and if asked what my perfect day would consist of, my reply would be a definite THIS ONE. We had spent the weekend in Hampshire with friends and were very near Portsmouth. I'd been to see HMS Victory and the Mary Rose when I was a child with my family but had been wanting to see the new exhibitions. We were not disappointed.

The Portsmouth Historic Docks are easy to find and there is an excellent car park within 5 minutes walk of the entrance. There are a few ticket options and they aren't cheap, in fact my husband nearly passed out when making the payment, BUT my goodness we realised within minutes it was totally worth every penny. We opted for the Unlimited Explorer tickets that provide access to all ships, exhibitions and museums included for a whole year (you can also save online by booking in advance).



Portsmouth Dockyard is exactly what it says on the tin: a dockyard. The Royal Navy have their base there so you're sharing the space with them too. We were lucky enough to see the two aircraft carriers that are still in service, HMS Prince of Wales and HMS Queen Elizabeth from the entrance to the Victory.



Our first visit was to HMS Warrior and the be honest I had no idea she was there! I'd never heard of her before so this was a really fun way to start the day. HMS Warrior is a Victorian ship launched in 1860 and is 40-gunned steam-powered armoured frigate. Warrior was one of two ships which were the first in history to be built armoured and with iron hulls. In its day it was the pride of Queen Victoria's Royal Navy and was the beginning of a new direction for naval warfare. This is a double edged sword, however, as the fast evolution of HMS Warrior's design soon made her out-of-date as newer, faster, bigger ships were being launched. It was HMS Devastation, a rather dramatic name I think, was launched in 1871 and was the Royal Navy's first mastless ship. While the Warrior was steam-powered, she also had masts and sails.

We were able to get onto the deck of the ship before going down to have a look below. The restoration of HMS Warrior has meant that she looks as she would have done in her heyday. The Captain's cabin and the dining room with full service and even place cards give you a sense of Victorian decadence rarely seen. The lower in the ship you go, the lower in rank the men working aboard would be. Eventually we arrived at the engine room and were faced with two rows of coal fired ovens facing each other. There would have been 1 man to 4 ovens and would shovel coal into the fires and keep them stoked for hours on end until finally it was their turn to rest and eat before beginning the process again. These men were paid a little more for this job due to it being extremely labour intensive - good thing too!



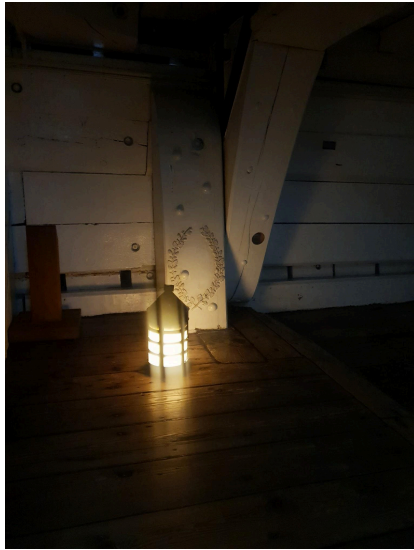
When we had finished with HMS Warrior we had to go and look for some facilities. We had our 4 year old son with us and while he was absolutely having the time of his life, he needed a short pit stop! We found Boathouse 7 which provides food and toilets (not at the same time) and a really cool shop. Plus a short exhibition about the type of men that would have worked at the dockyard doing shipbuilding. Once I'd managed to talk myself out of buying several bottles of Portsmouth rum, we made our way to HMS Victory and the Mary Rose museums.



HMS Victory is under reconstruction at the moment so she is partly covered by scaffolding, but we were able to see the bow of the ship beautifully! HMS Victory, as of 2024, the oldest naval vessel in commission. She is probably best known for being Vice-Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson's flagship during the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. The ship is being restored with its original Georgian colours and it really is a sight. One I can't wait to see again when all restoration is complete.

It is guided tours only so don't find yourself alone aboard or a Navy officer will find and enlist you! The tour starts (promptly) and you're taken up onto the quarterdeck from where the captain would have commanded. It is located just behind the main mast





giving a full view of the deck and beyond. The spot where Nelson was shot has been marked on the floor. Nelson's flag captain (the captain of an admiral's flagship) was Thomas Masterman Hardy and had been with him during the Battles of the Nile, Copenhagen and Cape St Vincent. Hardy was on the quarterdeck with Nelson when Nelson was shot and was with him down below when he eventually died. Nelson survived



for 3 hours which is remarkable considering the type of injury. The bullet was lodged under his shoulder blade having passed through a lung, an injury that would be hard to survive even today. Nelson died having been told a number of enemy ships had surrendered, he made his final goodbyes to his friend Hardy and his last words were "thank God I have done my duty. God and my country."

It was tradition for navy men to be buried at sea as to keep the bodies on board ship for what could be weeks and months was not good practice, but Nelson was different. He was a war hero and needed to be treated and buried as such. They placed him in a barrel of French brandy, lashed it to the main mast and kept it under guard and returned him to England for a state funeral.

From the quarterdeck we went below and were faced with the gun deck. It was incredible. The back of the ship was



where Nelson's rooms were. A large open space for dining and strategy that could be easily flat



packed for battle. All furniture was foldable and stackable and the lovely panelling you can see was hinged at the top so it could be folded up and preserved during fighting. Nobody wants to get splintered with decorative Georgian panelling during a gunfight!



We walked through Nelson's cabin and saw his bed, he was unable to climb in and out of a hammock as was the usual sleeping arrangements for naval officers due to his losing an arm in 1797. There was also a cannon either side of his bed. Hierarchy is very clear in the military, but nobody, not even Nelson is above a warship canon. If they needed a space, they got one.

Further down the gun deck is the kitchen. Each sailor had a square wooden plate and a wooden tankard for

their daily dose of grog (rum and water or beer). Beer was weaker than today's, which is a relief to know, for obvious reasons! Drunken sailors probably not the best idea.

Another deck below and there were more sleeping arrangements, rows and rows of tightly packed hammocks. The surgeon on board would also have had an area in which to work and sleep. We saw the storage room with every sailor's bag of belongings with their names written on, more cabins for the midshipmen and their pantry. At the very bottom there would have been a number of barrels in order to keep the ship balanced as well as having them for food and drink. This part of the ship was the most disgusting and smelly, rats lived here as it was where food was stored and the men working here would burn sulphur to cover the stench. If sulphur was a more pleasant smell then I can't even imagine what it was like down there. No thank you.

HMS Victory was wonderful, knowing that the further down you went, the more likely it was you were walking on the original wood was too exciting. The tour guide was great and really informative and the tour lasted just under an hour. Even Rory was hooked and stayed engaged the whole time. When you come out of the ship you have an opportunity to walk underneath her, from front to back.





You can get a view of the stern from an angle even Nelson would never have seen! My husband took Rory down, but it all made me feel a bit dizzy so I didn't brave it this time. Next time I'll do it. Probably.

After the Victory it was time for the Mary Rose. The one I was most excited about. It is in the same location as the Victory, just opposite so no need to walk really far. The first experience is a short video with Henry VIII (spoiler alert: not the real one) explaining why he ordered this ship and why it was his favourite. You then move into a room with projections either side as if you're on the deck of the Mary Rose. She sets sail and then minutes later she sinks. I genuinely thought I was going to fall over, even though the room is 100% not moving.



The Mary Rose was first launched in 1511 and was built for Henry VIII and served him for 34 years before dramatically sinking in the Solent while leading an attack on a French invasion fleet. There she stayed, underwater waiting to be found for nearly 500 years. In 1971 a team of divers discovered the wreckage. It took 11 years, but finally in 1982 she emerged from the sea and has been conserved and preserved ever since. For 30 years visitors were able to visit and what they saw was the side of the ship being sprayed with water and then a special type of wax in order to preserve her. That is the Mary Rose I remember.

Now, it is so different. It was always incredible to see a 500 year old ship right in front of your eyes, but now it's just on a different scale. You walk along past the ship as if you are walking on a particular deck, projections of videos depicting the men aboard ship show you what would have been happening in that part. At either end there are many of the Mary Rose's artefacts that were found alongside her. This brings her to life even more as you get to know the people who sailed her. As well as artefacts, there are also bones and skeletons. This may seem morbid, but with incredible technology they have been able to bring some men back to life. Of the 500 men on board the Mary Rose, only 35 survived the wreckage. This museum gives an amazing insight into Tudor life, which I must admit is the era I am most interested in.

We were all pretty tired by the end of this museum and we do need to go back to really take in all the artefacts and stories, but it was a long day! One thing we finished with

though and we would have been so silly not to see was the immersive 4D short film at the end. It is the story of the discovery of the Mary Rose and how she was brought to the surface. Its unreal to watch what it would have been like while diving and excavating. It really is magical!



The whole day was superb and we can't wait to go back. In my opinion, the main testament to how great everything is run is the fact my 4 year old didn't complain once about all the walking and climbing. He would have carried on for longer if my husband and I hadn't been totally pooped!

I really hope this has inspired you to go and visit Portsmouth Historic Dockyard. A perfect day out for every member of the family!

So...Is It Worth A Visit?? YES!