

Hamble's Training Ship, TS Mercury

7th September 2017 - Roy Underdown Pavilion

Snowy White (4151), the Mercury Old Boys' Association archivist and magazine editor gave a very interesting talk to a full house of the Society about Hamble's Training Ship, TS Mercury. In 1952 at the age of 13 he joined the TS Mercury at Hamble and 4151 was his Mercury Boy number. Mercury Boys would often be called by this rather than by their name.

Training Ship Mercury was founded in 1885 as a charitable venture by a rich London banker benefactor, Charles Hoare, as a nautical training school for "poor but honest working-class boys to receive training for life at sea". At this time, there were either fee-paying training ships for prospective officers or reformatory ships for juvenile delinquents. He bought a sailing barque 'Illovo' to train boys for the Royal and Merchant navies. She was kept as a sea-going ship based at Binstead on the Isle of Wight and in 1888/89 made a voyage to the Mediterranean. In the early years most of the cadets were poor London boys and some were as young as nine.

In 1892 'Illovo' was permanently moored on the Hamble River where gradually a shore establishment was built in Satchell Lane. These buildings included classrooms, a theatre, band room and a chapel which was dedicated to St. Agatha. Throughout its history the boys slept on the training ship in hammocks, not ashore. Charles Hoare had caused a scandal by having an affair with a girl aged 15, Beatrice Holme Sumner and as his mistress had two of his children.

Charles Hoare shared a common interest in cricket with the famous scholar and sportsman, C B Fry, and when he died in 1908 C B Fry took charge of TS Mercury. He was mostly a figurehead and the school was run by his wife Beatrice known by the boys as 'Ma' Fry. He had married Beatrice ten years earlier who was the girl who had been Charles Hoare's mistress. Mrs Fry 'ruled with a rod of iron' and the boys endured a tough regime to prepare them for a career at sea but they also enjoyed sporting and other activities.

Little money was left to run the training ship so C B Fry had to use his connections to raise funds for it to continue and it could no longer provide free education so had to take boys from the poor houses. By the First World War 'Illovo' was not big enough so was replaced by the 'President'. The training ships were accessed by a rowing boat via a pier. The original pier was further up river than the one built for the 'President' whose remains you can still see today. During the war, there were Admiralty Inspections and it received very good reports.

Between the wars a sailing tender 'Vishalla' was purchased to provide sailing experience. In 1930 there was a disastrous fire and many of the buildings had to be rebuilt. Music was very important to Mercury life and the band took part in many local events. The band was led by Chief Officer 'Bandy' McGavin who is buried in Hamble churchyard.

During the Second World War many of TS Mercury officers, who had been in the reserve service, were recalled to sea. Previously most of the boys went to the Royal Navy but from this time many more of the boys joined the Merchant Navy.

In 1946 Mrs Fry died and this was not mourned by many Mercury boys and in 1950 C B Fry was persuaded to retire. This saw the end of the tough regime such as having to travel to and from the ship in bare feet and having to have a tally to go to the toilet. Subsequently Commander Bradby took over in 1950, followed by Commander Hoyle in 1960. After the war Inspectors of Education were critical of the education given at TS Mercury and it was clear more time had to be spent in the classroom. After a fire in 1954 a new classroom block was built and another fire in 1959 St Agatha's chapel was burnt down and eventually replaced.

By the mid 1960s Educational Authorities were not keen to send boys to TS Mercury to sleep aboard ship and it would be too expensive to provide ashore accommodation. There were also less boys that wanted to go to sea, therefore, due to financial difficulties, it was forced to close in 1968 having prepared over 5,000 boys for life at sea.

In 1972 the training ship was towed away and an active Mercury Old Boys' Association (MOBA) formed and this helped it survive to be restored and it is today displayed at Chatham Dockyard under her original name 'HMS Gannet'. The MOBA having maintained close association with the village over the years, with an annual church service at St Andrew's Church and preserving many of its memorials but it has now decided it is an appropriate time to disband.

Its records are being deposited at the Hampshire Record Office but it has a brilliant model of TS Mercury and the Mercury band's base drum for which it wishes to find a home in Hamble to maintain its connections with the village's residents. The MOBA is asking for suggestions for appropriate places for them to be displayed to be passed to the Society.

A number of Mercury Old Boys were present to share their memories of TS Mercury and many residents of the Mercury Area Residents' Association attended to find out more about the former establishment on which their homes were built. A very informative, worthwhile and enjoyable evening.

(For more information and pictures see www.tsmercury.com)