

March update

Through March I've been working with the rigging team at NMRN. This has been a huge learning curve as the work is incredibly specialist. There was one point in our weekly meetings where I actually thought that if there was someone who had no idea about sailing, rigging, ships in general then the whole thing would be a completely different language! Although I have sailed and am used to the sailing jargon, rigging terminology is very unique. Once you get going though, it starts to all come together.



The first week I started with the team we went through some basic rigging skills; knots, splicing, serving and seizing. All these things I have come across at some point during my experience sailing or

on the SHTP project, but the idea was to get me comfortable understanding when to use them. Since that first day, I've served topgallant footropes standing up on the topgallant cap (explanation of masts below!), quickly spliced three-strand rope to take aloft, and seized tiny decorative rope for rope barriers. I've also learnt new skills such as mousing. Mousing shackles is when wire is used to lock the shackle in place so it won't come loose (and potentially fall and kill a customer....) When the weather was quite windy and cold, rigger Eli and I went out to mouse all the shackles on the port side of M33. There were a lot.

I've been climbing on ships before, and I was always surprised at how quickly I've become accustomed to working aloft. I was expecting this would be the same working on HMS *Warrior* and it is. Once you get over how high you are! I'll give a brief explanation of *Warrior's* masts. She has three; foremast, mainmast and mizzen. Ships masts are divided into three or four separate masts to allow for the weight of sails and yards. The top (cap) of each mast is attached to the next but they sit fore and aft of each other for stability. You don't want three huge pieces of wood or metal balancing on top of each other in the elements with heavy canvas too! I've been working on the mainmast this month. *Warrior's* mainmast lengths are:

Lower mast from deck: 86ft 3inches (approx 26.3meters)

Topmast: 65ft (approx 19.8 meters)

Topgallant mast: 31ft 6inches (approx 9.6 meters)

The tops (lower platform) on *Warrior's* mainmast is just below the cap of the lower mast. So you can see where the lower mast and topmast are attached together. The crosstrees (upper platform) are just below the topmast cap where the topmast and topgallant mast join together. So when I was serving the footropes, as I mentioned earlier, I was standing *on* the topmast cap!

Here's my experience of climbing to the topmast cap:

Getting to the tops is exhausting enough, you start out fresh-faced but quickly lose breath and wonder how much there is left to climb. You then manoeuvre yourself onto the platform and feel good – a wonderful view of Portsmouth. You're already high enough to see over to Rye on the Isle of Wight, just under 86ft in the air! But then you're told to keep going. Right. So you clip on (always) and work your way to the edge of the tops platform and up the next set of ratlines. Ok. Now it's getting windier, you're out of breath, the uneven ratlines making your legs hurt from pushing yourself up further and further... And for god's sake don't look down. You get up to the crosstrees. This isn't as big as the tops below, this is a wooden grill with holes everywhere. Knuckles white, you carefully work yourself round. You daren't look down, but looking out you can see to Cowes, further even! You can see the Motorway running East and West! Its cold, its windy, you're constantly aware that people look like ants down on the quayside. But its exhilarating! And then... you're not done. You are told to manoeuvre onto the Jacobs ladder, "which will swing about a bit" to keep going up to the topmast cap. It's not far – a meter or so further. But you actually have to step onto the edge of a piece of metal, very aware that there is *nothing* behind you, and unfortunately nothing beneath you as the crosstrees platform doesn't extend out that far. And you clamber up, don't look down. Until you have to swing yourself around the ladder and onto the cap, which is only big enough for one person. And then you're there for a couple of hours. You get used to it, do the work (and when Eli asked me to go out on the topgallant yard and bounce on the footropes to test the length... well lets just say I'm very proud of myself.) You start to look down at all the people scurrying by (you're around 140ft up at this point), you enjoy seeing all the way to Cowes... Only to have to go down and do it all in reverse.

To be honest, I only went up that high once. Most of the time working aloft I've only been going up to the tops and scurrying up and down the shrouds. We've had to bash away rust up there, make leader boards, re-lead some of the lines which includes hauling the rope from deck all the way up to the platform, then lowering it back down to a new pin on deck. Pretty tiring work! But you do get used to it.

I helped Eli make block strops. Which means making wire gromits (circles with no ends), parcelling them (covering them in sacking and daubing them in tallow), serving them, then having to squeeze the gromit around a block at one end and a thimble in the other, then make a seizing with wire in the middle, trying to get it as tight as possible, and not losing any tension. There were lots of contraptions involved, and eye protection against unruly wire.



I also went around with rigger Ben checking the shore stays on HMS *Victory*. These are wire stays that are attached at the top of the three lower masts that go fore and aft to the shore. This prevents the ship from moving. Since we had a very windy week earlier this month, it's necessary to check whether the stays have tightened or loosened. This means we had to attach a load cell and measure the amount of tonnage the stays have on them. We also visually checked the 'bounce' in the wire to see whether it looked particularly loose or tight. Obviously shore stays are not used at sea, and are a necessary precaution with a static vessel in dry dock such as HMS *Victory*.

It's been a really great, very varied month. Thoroughly enjoyed working outside and up masts and gained very interesting and specific skills! What have I learnt? You can do anything with a bit of rope!