

April update



This month has been a lot of chopping and changing which has been good fun!

The first week I worked with a Senior Curator, Vicky, to set up a Jolly Roger exhibition. National Museums Royal Navy (NMRN) are hosting the Horrible Histories Pirates exhibit which is very child orientated. To counteract that with some collections from the museum, the Jolly Roger exhibition was organised.



The museum houses a large number of submarine Jolly Rogers. When submarines were first introduced into the Navy, they were called “pirates” because of their under-hand way of doing things. As an answer to this, submariners made their own Jolly Rogers and flew them when coming into port. As the years went on, the flags became more elaborate, with different symbols representing different activities. A ‘cloak and dagger’ operation, for example, is represented as a dagger. There was one with two swastikas in a life ring because the submarine had picked up two prisoners after torpedoing their boat! They also have an original Jolly Roger from a pirate ship in the eighteenth century, taken from a captured pirate ship.



It’s a really interesting exhibition as it also highlights how negative pirates are, that they shouldn’t just be viewed as the ‘Pirates of the Caribbean’ version and that they are still active across the world. My role was to help hang the flags themselves, and other paintings and pictures.

It was really interesting being able to handle the collections, and see how decisions are made with regards to exhibitions.

The second week I went over to the Marines Museum. This has closed down and the collections are being moved to various places across the NMRN sites. My job was to barcode, scan and wrap up photo albums. Once again, handling collections is really exciting and seeing some of the pictures from old marines was really interesting. I came across a scrapbook with a telegram to a wife informing her that her husband is wounded. I’ve never seen a telegram before, let alone one with that sort of news. The Marines Museum building is quite old itself and a real maze of weird corridors and abandoned rooms – quite fun just to roam around a bit.



For the last few weeks I've been working with the conservators. The first week involved understanding what their role is, and reading up on the vessels and their various conservation plans/pest problems. The Historic Ships department of NMRN have a huge number of vessels to take care of, and it includes the submarines in Gosport, *Trincomalee* and *RML 497* in Hartlepool, *HMS Caroline* in Belfast and some coastal forces vessels in the Fleet Air Arm Museum in Somerset. The



conservators also take care of large objects on display and historic objects that come off the vessels.

We went over to the Mary Rose Conservation workshop and looked at a gun from the *Stirling Castle* wreck. It's been sitting in a solution for seven years that draws out the sodium from the iron. We cleaned the tank and took off the gauze which is on the gun. It looked like some oozing wound, I've never seen metal like that before. Utterly fascinating.



Then we popped a dehumidifier in the tank and sealed it to dry it out.



We also had a look at some objects that are making up a new exhibition and what treatments they might need as they haven't properly been looked after in a while. We had a list, and a room filled with objects. It was like a treasure hunt! Very interesting to hear the best ways to conserve the objects, or how they would go about cleaning the material

Ultimately I've learned NEVER USE POLISH! You will take away the fabric and any engraving. Such a waste. Don't do it!

My most recent task has been cleaning *HMS Victory's* fore topsail! I think it is my favourite artefact I've come across so far here. I've seen it before when I visited years ago; it's quite remarkable. It survived the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 ("Did Nelson bleed on it?!" asked a friend... "Who knows??!!" is my answer... but probably not) and has moved around the Dockyard for 200 years ending up in a Naval gym at one point! Now it's safely stored in a dark room, lying flat. Having been on display for a while, with spotlights on it at points, it's time to properly clean and cover it up to prevent any damage. This includes wearing a full white suit, gloves, blue covers over the shoes and a head torch. Think *Silent Witness* or *CSI*.



The sail is raised above the ground on lots of crates side by side which are temperamental. There are holes everywhere and if you end up putting weight on the side of one crate (which you won't know you're doing because of the sail), it will tip up. So you gently stagger across the largest single original



artefact that has survived from Trafalgar, being as careful as possible with a little museum vacuum, a small brush and various bits of foam for padding on the knees. You set up, and you carefully sweep dust in the vacuum nozzle. Then you move to the next square area. And you carefully sweep dust in the vacuum nozzle. The sail is 3,618ft.

It's bewildering if you look up after a long time of looking closely at the material, seeing if you've missed a bit. It's painful and tiring. But totally, 100% worth it. It is, after all *Victory's* topsail.