

Meshellae Payne - March Blog Post

Old Experiences in a New Context

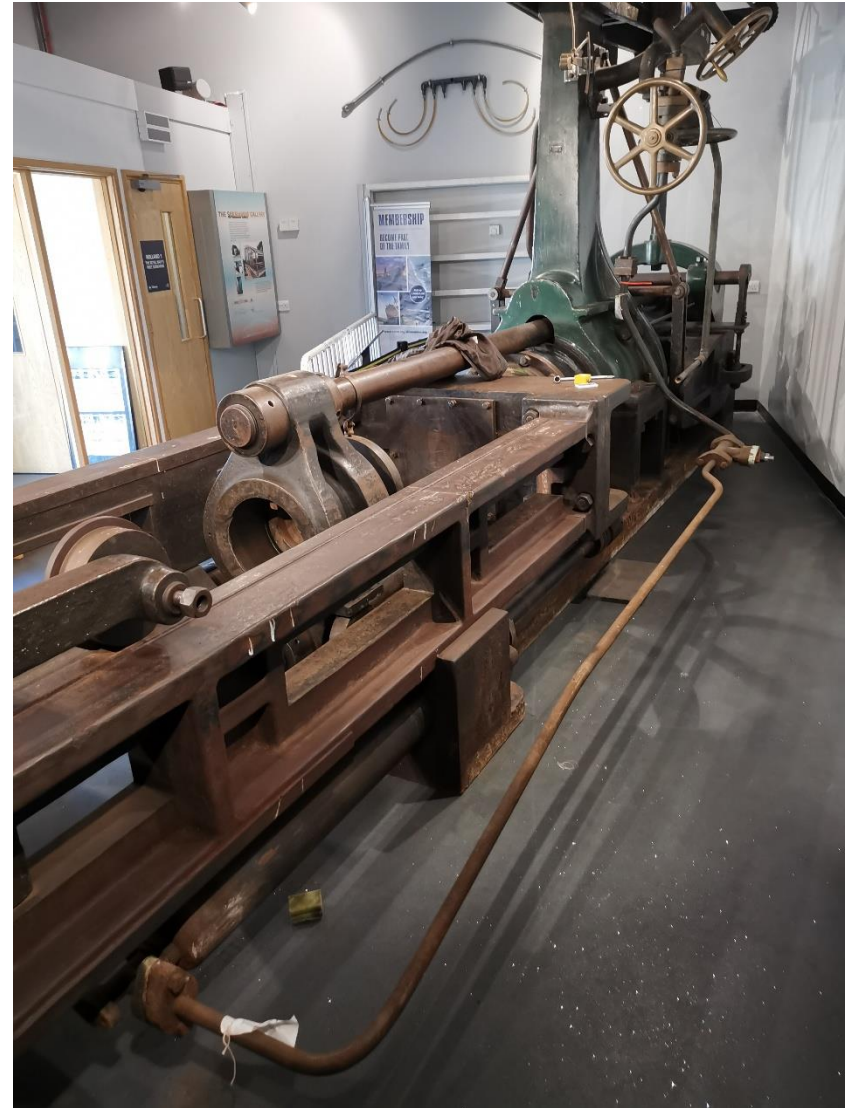
Joining the Conservators



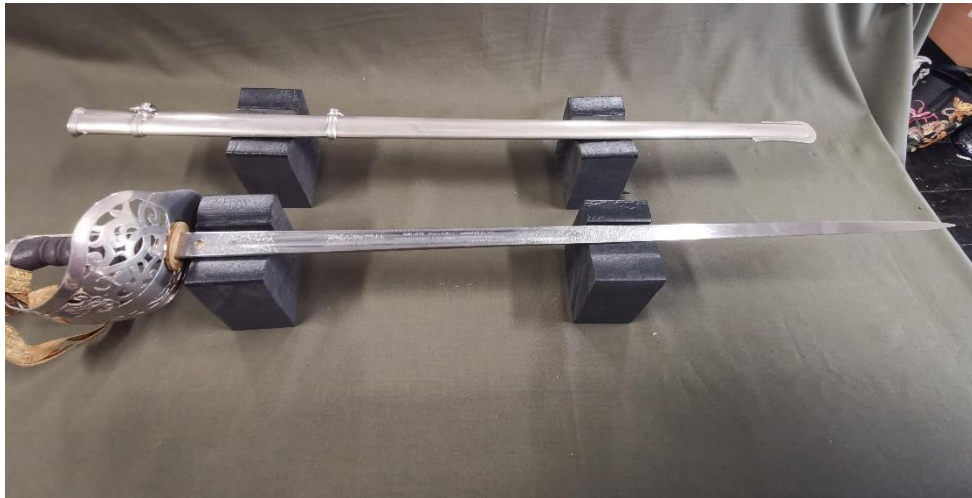
Although my time working with the conservators at NMRN was sadly cut short due to the shutdown of the museum as the Coronavirus pandemic escalated, it was enough time for me to realise that I definitely want a career in maritime conservation. For the first time during this traineeship I felt that not only was I learning new things and getting to take part in incredibly cool projects, I was also able to contribute to those projects using the knowledge and skills gained from my university career. It was great to feel like a definite part of the team, rather than a fish out of water, and to be trusted to carry out different tasks completely unsupervised.

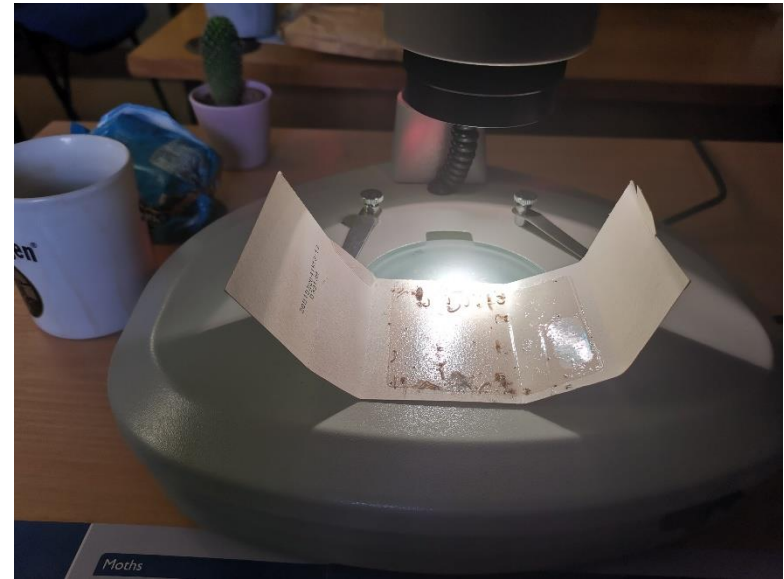
My first week began at the Royal Navy Submarine Museum in Gosport. I had never visited the museum before, so it was great to get a chance to walk around the exhibits and see the amazing submarines they have in their collection. First, we headed to the building that houses *Holland 1*, the Royal Navy's first submarine, to empty out her dehumidifiers and check the relative humidity was still stable. The building is in need of a new environmental management system, so for now we're reliant on the dehumidifiers to regulate the relative humidity. We then turned to *Alliance*, and began working on depressurising her periscopes. It was cool to see the difference between the foggy view pre-work, and crisp one post depressurising.

The next project to we tackled was moving one of *Holland 1*'s batteries on display near the Buxton steam engine to a small alcove behind *Holland 1*. The battery contained lead, and its prior position would have allowed it to be easily approached, whilst its new one would require climbing over a ramp rail. The battery was incredibly heavy, so this was a great lesson in moving difficult artefacts safely. Another advantage of moving the battery was being able to place it in a clearer spot contextually, as it should be associated with *Holland 1* rather than the Buxton engine.



The next day was also spent in Gosport, but this time we were in the Explosion! Museum of Naval Firepower, cleaning the various swords that are a part of that collection. This was the first time I had gotten to conserve an artefact since my Masters, and after an hour or so I felt like there had never been a break, as I eased into the task and became completely absorbed into the conservation work. The day seemed to fly by, and I really appreciated finally getting to work in a field I fell in love with years ago.





Wednesday bought something completely new, as I spent the day at NMRN working through pest traps collected from *Victory*. My task was to use a microscope to identify and count the bugs on each trap, recording the information into a spreadsheet so we could build a picture of the infestation on the vessel. Whilst spending the day looking at bugs did end up making me feel a bit queasy, I also found the task quite fascinating, and enjoyed getting to learn more about the common pests that attack our cultural heritage.



I spent the rest of the week working on conserving the artefacts that are going to be part of the new Victory Gallery exhibition once renovation of the building is complete. I got to work on a good range of artefacts, from the tools of the shipwrights who worked on *Victory*, to other historical artefacts like sextants and memoranda books. It was an important opportunity to expand my knowledge of how to work with different material, which will serve me well when I begin looking for jobs in the industry.



The rest of my time with the conservators basically followed that same pattern, spending Monday and Tuesday in Gosport, then the rest of the week at NMRN. At Subs, I helped put the Buxton engine back together, assisted with the *Alliance* deep clean, along with a multitude of other mini tasks that made the days pass surprisingly quickly. One Monday, I also got to visit the Diving museum in Gosport, which is housed in a Victorian military battery and run by the Historical Diving Society. It is completely run by volunteers and it's inspiring to see how much effort and care they have put into running the museum. This became especially clear when we got to visit the museum's storage area and library, which were incredibly well organised (a very rare phenomenon when it comes to museum storage areas!)

When working at the NMRN site my time was mostly filled with writing condition reports and working on the artefacts for the Victory Gallery, as well as some time spent on the various vessels either collecting pest traps (the conservator's version of an Easter egg hunt), or helping out with other mini projects, like putting a canvas under a set of stairs on *Warrior* to prevent dirt from gathering on the ships engine. As a lockdown due to the coronavirus began to seem more and more likely, I was told to bring the pest traps we had collected from the ships home with me, along with a magnifying glass, as pest identification would be something I could easily work on from home.

It was a bit disheartening to have to end my time with the conservators prematurely, but thankfully before I left I was provided with loads of conservation texts to help build my knowledge whilst at home. These, along with the pest traps, helped fill my time for the rest of March. As the lockdown continues, communication from those I worked with at NMRN, and those in National Historic Ships network, has reassured me that I will still be able to build my skills whilst working from home. I will spend this time focusing on the Historic Vessels Conservation course, identifying pests, reading conservation texts, and getting involved with any other opportunities that come through from the community this traineeship has built. Although the world seems to have gone topsy-turvy, the support remains, and with it I feel like I will still be able have a fulfilling experience from home.