

TS Mercury Old Boys' Memories

20th September 2018 - Memorial Hall

TS Mercury trained boys for the Royal and Merchant navies and was part of Hamble village life for 76 years. By the time it closed in 1968 it had prepared around 5,000 boys for life at sea. Afterwards the Mercury Old Boys' Association was formed but, due to the present-day age of its members, it has decided to formally disband in the 50th year anniversary of the closure. To open the weekend of its final events the Society held a meeting where some former Mercury Boys shared their memories of life at TS Mercury.

Each former Mercury boy spoke about a different era and films were shown to illustrate what was happening there at that time. Barry West (1950-1952), MOBA President, spoke about the end of the Fry era when Sybil Hoare, Mrs Fry's daughter, continued to run the tough regime that her mother operated. All the boys had a number issued to them that they were known by during their time at Mercury and their clothes and equipment had their number attached to them.

The boys slept on board the ship in hammocks and not ashore and Barry recalled that when they took a shower ashore the first and last group of boys to use them got cold water. They had very little free time and their letters home were censored so they did not write anything bad about Mercury or they would have suffered afterwards. The boys were not allowed out into the village and all them were required to attend Church Service on Sunday in TS Mercury's chapel.

Mike Ball (1957-59) recalled the Commander Bradby era when the food was shocking and just kept you alive but they looked forward to the cakes in the morning breaks especially the Chelsea buns. The Mercury staff were split into two, uniformed and teachers. The education was not good and if you got a GCE you were known as a boffin. If you misbehaved you did not get your tuck on Saturday. Most days of the week you had to go to church and twice on Sundays.

Sport was important although they only played cricket and football. They had to run to the sports field by Hamble Halt before they started and ran back afterwards. Mike said his local northern Council had paid for him to go to Mercury and he felt it did him good and he enjoyed it although, whilst there, the boys did not know what girls were.

David Sayer (1962-68) said during Commander Hoyle's era it continued to run on Royal Navy lines and the boys were in one of four Divisions. He explained the punishments handed out for misdemeanors and that if you had a medical problem there was a tough hospital nurse who used a red ointment for everything. There was some bullying during his time and you were allowed to go ashore twice a term. He explained about the shore facilities and that the library was particularly popular as it was dry and warm although very few books were lent out. Getting into a sports team was important as you went to away games where you received good food.

David recalled some of the escapades with hammocks and hiding teacher Scruffy Harrison's Riley car in the reeds. Sometimes they undertook sabotage including setting fire to the reeds and in his time there was a great riot in the dining hall due to the poor taste of the pudding and the subsequent consequences. When you had a cold lonely night on ship you thought of the legend of the ghost on board ship of a red-headed gunner who had his head blown off while looking down the barrel of a gun. A leaving tradition was to drill a hole in the bottom of the ship.

David said he hated it at the beginning but it gave him an excellent grounding for the Royal Navy and at the end it was a more civilised place with better education. In 1968 there was a national slump of boys who wanted to go to sea and government inspectors took a poor view of this type of education and the inevitable closure occurred.

During the question and answer session at the end there were a number of interesting and amusing recollections such as going to the dentist who used a foot power drill. Stoking ship was another unpopular task as they had to take the coal in bins along the long path to the pier and then into a rowing boat to the ship. The coal was needed for the boiler to heat the ship by a pipe which went around the inside but it was always cold with the corrugated iron roof. The junior cadets slept in the middle of the ship away from the heating pipe and as they became more senior they moved towards the warm pipe. To use the heads (toilets) in huts alongside the field you had to sign in and you had 3 minutes to use them. The contents of the toilets were removed and used by the gardener and that is reason why the residents of Fry Close now have good roses. The answer to a question about the length of their day was that it started at 6am and finished at 8pm although towards the end of TS Mercury the bugle reveille had ceased as Hamble residents did not want to woke up at that time.

Other former Mercury boys were present as well as a display of photographs of the training ship. This was a fitting conclusion of the Mercury Old Boys' Association's connections with Hamble sharing their memories with its residents. After the meeting people remained and continued to talk about their recollections of TS Mercury and nearly everyone said they very much enjoyed the occasion. Mike Ball and other Old Boys said they will miss coming back to Hamble for reunion events.