

# Henry V's Ships and the Grace Dieu

**4th & 11th February 2016 - Roy Underdown Pavilion**

This meeting was so popular that all those who wished to attend could not be accommodated, so an extra meeting the following week had to be arranged.

Dr Craig Lambert, lecturer in Maritime History at Southampton University gave a fascinating and very informative talk about 'King Henry V's Ships and the Grace Dieu'. He started by setting the scene about naval warfare during the Hundred Years' War against France (1337 to 1453) and the Hamble River communities contribution.

During the Hundred Years' War, although many of the battles were land based such as Crecy and Agincourt, the Kings relied on ships to transport horses and soldiers, supplying the forces, as well as for offensive and defensive operations. There was no Royal Navy so the Kings had to rely on requisitioning merchant ships.

Fleets of between 400-700 ships were raised and for the battle of Agincourt it took 4 to 9 months to raise the fleet from about 80 ports. For a major battle about a fifth of the men from a port were used. It is recorded from 1320-1410 Hamble raised 19 ships and 384 mariners. Hook provided 39 ships and 866 mariners, although some of the mariners may have been recorded more than once over the period. The Hamble River ships were on average larger than those supplied by other ports, being around 120 tons rather than 80 tons.

For the Battle of Crecy in 1346, Hamble supplied 7 ships & 117 mariners and Hook provided 11 ships & 208 mariners. By comparison, Portsmouth contributed 5 ships and 96 mariners.

In 1373 when King Edward III's ships sailed for Brittany, some Hamble ships and their crew are recorded. The *Michel* had a master and crew of 28 mariners and the *Bartholomew* 23 men, plus some boys. Seven ships were taken as prize and crew members took a portion of this prize money, so brought their gains back to Hamble.

The size of the requisitioned English ships depended on the needs of the merchants and the Battle of Harfleur in 1416 showed there was a need for larger ships. Naval battles at this time were mostly by ramming or going alongside and boarding followed by hand to hand fighting.

William Soper of Southampton was commissioned to build these larger ships which included the *Grace Dieu*, which was the largest ship ever built at that time and over twice the size of the *Mary Rose*. The *Grace Dieu* had two support ships propelled by oars built for her the *Valentine* and the *Falconer*. The other three large ships were the *Trinity Royal*, *Jesus* and the *Holigost*. The *Holigost* was rebuilt from a captured Spanish ship.

Entitled "Keeper of the King's Ships", William Soper was responsible for the King's ships for two decades and he used the Hamble River. Craig showed records of the details of purchases to build the *Grace Dieu* and some of the items were recycled from old ships such as anchors. The *Marie Knight* was broken up at Hamble and

provided a mast for one of the ships. The estimated cost of the *Grace Dieu* was £3,830 (£1.5 million in today's money) over a tenth of the crown's income.

Soper built a wooden tower at the entrance of the Hamble River, known as the Bulwark, for a garrison of soldiers to protect the river, plus two giant chains were laid across the river which could be raised to prevent enemy ships entering. He also had two storehouses at Hamble. In 1417 three of the great ships, six captured carracks and two royal ships were anchored in the river. The *Grace Dieu* was launched at Southampton in 1418 and was towed to Hamble for fitting out.



The *Grace Dieu* only made one unsuccessful voyage in 1420 that was abandoned off St Helens, Isle of Wight, the reason for this is unclear. At this time there was a strategic shift as Normandy had been captured by King Henry so there was no need for these large ships. With Henry's death in 1422, Soper was instructed to sell some of his ships to pay off some of the King's debts, although the large ones were kept. Richard Patyn and Richard Preste of Hamble with John and William Gladwyn of Satchell took advantage of this and they bought the *Marie Sandwich* and the *Paul* for a bargain price of £26 each.

The *Grace Dieu* was laid up on the Hamble River and Craig gave details of keeping her there, such as costs of watch keepers and repairs. She was used as a local diplomatic meeting place for entertaining, such as in 1430 when an Italian Captain of Galleys dined aboard and said she was the largest and most beautifully constructed ship that he had ever seen.

In 1433 the *Holigost*, *Trinity Royal* and the *Grace Dieu* were laid up in mud berths above Bursledon. In 1439 the *Grace Dieu* was struck by lightning and burnt to the water line.

Little was heard of her until 1859, when a directory described her as an ancient vessel supposedly burnt by the Saxons. In 1874 Mr Crawshay explored the site but caused more damage than good. Until 1933 it was thought to be a Viking ship, when Dr R C Anderson proved it to be the *Grace Dieu*.

Southampton University took over responsibility for the *Grace Dieu* in 1970s and she is a nationally protected wreck. This summer the University will be undertaking more archaeological research on her and a survey to search for the other ships. Craig said of the recent press news of the potential discovery of the *Holigost*, it had

been known for sometime *Holigost* or the *Trinity Royal* might be in this area. This summer's survey work will be a public event and people will be able to view the activities.

What a great pleasure to have an expert such as Craig to give a talk to the Society, providing more information about the importance of the Hamble River in these early times.