The Life and Death of Henry V's Navy in Hampshire

Intro: Welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts as well as enthusiasts, asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold stories.

Emily: Hampshire has been a hub of maritime activity for thousands of years and with the remains of two of Henry V's great warships perhaps lying in the River Hamble we thought it was a good idea to uncover the story of the King's navy.

Hello and welcome to this week's episode of Hampshire HistBites. I'm Emily Griffiths and my guest today is Ian Friel, a local museum consultant, writer and maritime historian. Ian, can you give us a bit of context and perhaps a brief introduction to Henry V?

Ian: Yes, sure. A lot of people only know Henry V, if you know anything about him, it's through the Shakespeare play, which celebrated him as an ideal king. He was shown as principled, resolute, able to joke with his soldiers and with a princess and indeed I think the real Henry was brave, principled, resolute and pious, but I don't think he was humble in any sense. Apparently, he didn't like people looking him in the eye and he could be ruthless and indeed vengeful. Despite his undoubted gifts as a soldier and as a strategist, I think you hero worship him at your peril, and in my opinion, Shakespeare's Henry was a much better man than the real one.

Emily: So as we're going to be talking about Henry V's navy, could you perhaps tell us what ships were like in the early 1400s more generally?

Ian: In some ways, it's quite a simple question to answer because, in Europe at the time, in Northern Europe, broadly speaking, ships were clinker built and one masted. Clinker built means that the hulls were composed of shells of overlapping planks, which were fastened at the edges by nails called - well various things, but clench nails is one name that will do, and within that the hull was held together by a frame most of which was inserted once the shell had been built up. The one masters of the time carried a single four-sided sail, which was usually rectangular in shape, but is known as a square sail, and these were sails that work best with the wind from behind or from perhaps the side, although it did allow ships a limited capability to sail into the wind. And by the mid-14th century, there was a new type of ship. Something that north Europeans came to call the carrack. It was a big ship by contemporary standards, up to maybe 600 tons, which was a lot for the 14th century. It had a huge square sail, but from the mid-13 hundreds carracks often carried a second sail on the mizzenmast, behind the main mast, which carried a small lateen, which helped these vessels to manoeuvre and the reason I'm going on about carracks that they come to feature in the story of Henry V's navy.

Emily: So what about the Kings ships? What were they like?

Ian: Well, the King's ships, were quite literally the ships that belonged to the king. They were his personal property. So in wartime, they might often lead war fleets, but they're also used for other purposes. And Henry's ships were used to escort convoys on the important wine route to Bordeaux in Gascony for example and carry cargoes themselves. Other ships were used for transporting VIP's, things of that sort. So it was not like a modern Navy in that sense.

Royal ships were known as Ships of the Tower, meaning the Tower of London because, before Henry's time and indeed, through part of his reign, the royal ships were normally moored near the

Tower of London and it was a very, very small fleet. There was nothing in the way of a Royal dockyard and the funding was a bit intermittent.

Henry in point of fact only inherited two ships from his father, but within a few years he had one of the most powerful fleets that medieval England had ever had. He's known as one of the few medieval kings who really understood to how to use sea power. And he very clearly went on to use his fleet and other ships as a weapon in his war against France. And he knew how to deploy it, even if he never commanded the ship in battle himself. And by November 1417 he had 32 vessels, which is an amazingly powerful fleet on a European scale, and indeed Henry's fleet was the most powerful Royal fleet that England would see for another century, you'd have to go to the reign of Henry VIII, a hundred years later, to see anything comparable.

Emily: What sorts of ships did Henry actually have?

Ian: It ended up being a very varied sort of fleet, and not all of it was English. England was not a great sea power in Henry's time, at least not when he came to the throne. There weren't that many big ships in the country and the country also seems to have been short of sailors, but the types of vessels he had consisted of ordinary one masted sailing ships, which, you know, the sources just call ships, so we can't always be certain about what shapes they were. His forces later on went to capture some Genoese carracks, which was a huge coup really for the period. But alongside these there were various old fighting ships called ballot barges and balingers. They were ships that could move under oar and sail and they tend to be a lot faster than ordinary sailing ships for that reason. But they were very different. Because they used oars they had to be quite low and long, so the oars could reach the water and as I say, they seem to have been quite fast. Alongside all these Henry had four vessels called Great Ships and each one successively was the largest ship in English history, up until that time. He started with the Trinity Royal, which was rebuilt from one of his father's old ships between 1413 and 1415. The second one was called the Holigost. The Holigost was 740 tons. Then the third of the great ships was built at a place called Small Hythe, a bit north of Rye and that was a thousand tons. It was called the Jesus and was launched in 1417. And the fourth of the great ships was called the Grace Dieu which was French for Grace of God and that was a vessel of 1400 tons, and there was nothing that big built in England, as far as we know, for the next century. Again, you have to go to the Henry VIII's time to find something comparable. The sheer scale of them is something quite incredible.

Emily: So I think a name that comes into this story is John Hoggekyn. I think he was one of Britain's shipbuilders. Could you perhaps tell us a little bit more about him?

Ian: Well, I always think that John Hoggekyn is one of the country's great unknown engineers. We know next to nothing about him beyond the fact that he was a master shipwright who seems to have operated in the Southampton area. He was involved with the Kings ships between roundabout 1415 and 1420 or so. He's known to have been in charge of the construction of one of the oared fighting ships for Henry V, a balinger, as I say an oared fighting ship, called the Anne, which was built at Southampton in 1416. But, much more importantly, John Hoggekyn was the master shipwright who built the Grace Dieu, which was an incredible piece of work. It was insane. It took years to complete. We know from the remains of the ship that it was clinker built, but it was a very special kind of clinker building because, because of the size of the ship, in order to stop it falling apart as it was being built, they had to have three layers of planking. So each run of planking, each strake as it's called, had three layers of planking and then they overlap. So when nails and vine nails and tree nails, wooden nails, were being driven through the planking at the overlaps, they had to go through five thicknesses of planking. Every single one would have been pre-drilled almost certainly. So a long and slow job and over and above that, Hoggekyn somehow conceived this enormous ship, which later was the biggest one there had ever been in England. Sadly Hoggekyn is almost forgotten. His achievement was all to building a very large church or even small cathedral really. And unlike cathedrals his piece

of work had to float, go to sea, carry a crew, and, in theory at least, fight in battles, which it never did, but, it's really, really sad, I think that we know so little of him, you're talking about achievements on the scale of, you know, Brunel in some ways, but unless someone finds some hitherto unknown documents, I don't think we're going to learn much more about him.

Emily: It's nice to be able to share parts of his story at least. So from this, I'd like to move on slightly. So could you tell us a little bit about what sea warfare was like in the early 1400s?

Ian: Ships going to war in the Middle Ages normally carried contingents of soldiers on them, who were there to fight alongside the sailors. For the most part, the weaponry found on ships was similar to that used on land:- swords, spears, axes, bows and arrows, crossbows as well. And the reason that all these hand weapons were used was because the only way of fighting against other ships, for the most part, was by fighting boarding actions. Ships would crash together; they'd put out these huge iron grapples to fasten themselves to the enemy. And then one crew would try to overwhelm the other by fighting hand to hand, and sometimes you find that pots of lime powder were chucked to burst on the enemy deck, so the powder would get in the eyes of the defenders, sometimes ships were set alight, but, in terms of sea battles, that was a desperate thing to have to do because, one of the things you would get in the sea battle, if you captured the ship, you'd get money, prize money in effect from capturing it. So it was worth while taking the ship reasonably intact if you could. But in the boarding actions, like this, things thrown from the top castle, even lumps of rock, but also particularly the iron gads could be deadly. It was said that a gad could go through the top of the helmet of a soldier wearing armour and basically skewer him to the deck, it would go right through him. So the battles were undoubtedly bloody and nasty and very, very personal. And these defensive superstructures I was talking about, the castles, were part and parcel of that.

Some of the Henry V's ships actually acquired two-stage castles. They put additional stages on to give them more height because in a sea battle the size of crew and the height of your ship were quite crucial advantages. If you could fire down on a smaller ship or have more men to overwhelm them, you had a better chance of winning.

Emily: It sounds like a particularly dangerous form of warfare.

Ian: Well I think all warfare is dangerous, but this must've been particularly nasty. And you think these men were probably wearing half armour, and even if you weren't hit by a projectile or if you fell overboard, even if you could swim your chances of not going to the bottom were probably nil.

Emily: So this brings us on more specifically to talk about Henry's war with France. So where does Hampshire fit into this story? When did it become important in Henry's plans for war with France?

Ian: It's really a couple of years into his reign. For the first two years, most of the naval activity emanated from London, from the Thames. But, aside from the building of the Holigost, the Royal ships would call into southern ports, you know, when they're escorting convoys and things like that. And there was quite a lot of that going on in the early years of Henry's reign, but it's only really from about 1415 that Hampshire started to become a key part, indeed, the key part in terms of England, in Henry's naval war.

We can't be certain exactly when Henry decided to invade France, but he was very keen on the idea of making himself King of France as a dynastic claim, and indeed possibly obsessed by it. But the build-up of his fleet, and the construction of things like the Great Ships, I think it's a sign that his mind was turning that way. He was having munitions made in 1414, and in 1415 he took the decision to take an invasion fleet to France. In the summer of 1415, a very large invasion fleet gathered in the Solent, and

it was a fleet that wasn't just English. Because of the apparent shortage of ships in England, Henry went out and hired possibly 300 Dutch ships as transports, not as fighting ships but as army transport, as he took an army of maybe nine/ten thousand with him to France. And on 11th of August 1415 the fleet sailed, and from this Henry was able to return home as a hero, with a reputation as a great soldier.

I know we're getting away from Hampshire a bit, but we're about to come back to it. So here he is being cheered to the rafters in London as he processes back in, but things started to go downhill. In the following year, the French began to turn the tables on the English when it came to sea fighting. The French had something of a naval force, but they went out and hired vessels from the great Italian city port of Genoa. And they hired eight oared galleys and nine big war carracks, ships of up to 600 tons, so they're very, very big indeed. And the French and their allies began raiding the south coast of England. They burned settlements on the Isle of Portland and Dorset, and again, coming back to Hampshire, they raided the Isle of Wight and put in sea-borne blockades at both Portsmouth and Southampton. They apparently destroyed some ships and because the Royal ships were quite a lot of them concentrated in Southampton Water, if the French had managed to get in and burn those that would have been possibly game over for any English response.

But by July 1416, the French blockades were lifted and Henry decided to put together a large fleet of both royal and private ships. They were formed up on the south coast, again Hampshire playing its part, but the fleets were in different places and they were brought together off Beachy Head in Sussex, in order to set sail for France, with two of the Great Ships now, the Trinity Royal and the Southampton built Holigost, leading it. They got to France, and on the morning of the 15th of August 1416, the opposing fleets crashed together, somewhere near Harfleur. We don't know exactly where, the land's changed around there for one thing, so it's possible the battle site is actually underground now, rather than in the sea. But in the early morning on this day the fleets started fighting. We've only got the impressionistic accounts of the fighting. It's possible the English manoeuvred to get a greater advantage over the French and the Genoese. It's mainly the French and Genoese who were in the force opposing them, but we don't know. But we do know that the fighting was vicious and very bloody with heavy casualties. It is said that all of the Genoese crews were killed, amongst other things. And on the English side, it's pretty clear from the records of the Holigost that [*inaudible*]'s flagship was actually boarded, because it lost nearly half of the rigging that was supporting its mast. The fighting itself, lasted certainly for hours and perhaps until the early evening, and at the end of it, the French and the Genoese had lost. The English captured three Genoese carracks, which is a real achievement for battle because carracks were some of the biggest ships going and they were difficult to take. And, so the English could declare a victory. The news got back to Henry when he was in Kent looking at the Jesus being built at Small Hythe and he went to Canterbury cathedral to have praises sung, a Te Deum, in thanks to God for his victory as he saw it.

But it was, you know, like all of these battles, extremely brutal. It was said that the Seine estuary was filled with floating bodies for days after the battle had happened.

So thereafter, the English and French concluded a treaty that ran for several months over the autumn and winter. But by this stage, Henry was pretty clearly plotting the second invasion because if he was going to make himself King of France, he had to do more than just win a naval battle and hang on to Harfleur. But the French still, at this stage had a sizeable naval force, including more of the Genoese, alongside Spanish ships.

And Henry put together another war fleet, which probably included the Great Ship Jesus, which was available from about the middle of 1417, and sent this fleet to France. They met the French and their allies at the headland, just to the north of the Seine estuary called the Chef de Caux on 25th of July 1417. And in a battle that lasted in this case, probably no more than a few hours, they inflicted a shattering defeat. One of the French Chroniclers talks about the English having big ships in their fleet,

and that's probably a sort of a rather vague reference to the presence of the Great Ships, which were real assets. In the course of the battle, French sea power, and that of the allies that got with them, was essentially broken. The English captured four more carracks, and the way was open for Henry's second invasion and this I think is one of the keys that he understood the use of sea power because he crossed to France less than a week after the victory off the Chef de Caux and began his conquest of Normandy, which would last for the next three years and would lead to a treaty with France, the treaty in 1420, that recognized him as heir to the French king Charles VI, and gave him the hand of Princess Catherine of France.

Emily: If French morale had been shattered by this, what did Henry's fleet get involved in between 1417 and 1420?

Ian: It's easy from our perspective to think that, well we know French sea power was broken by the second battle and the French really couldn't recover at sea and with Henry now ashore in France, things were going badly for the French. It's easy to think that the English were quite easy about what was happening around their coast and in what little sea warfare there was in the English Channel, but they weren't. For one thing the French still had the Kingdom of Castille as an ally in Spain, and Spain had naval forces and there were recurrent fears that the Spanish would get involved and possibly even raid or, perhaps even invade England.

And so Henry kept sending out sea patrols of course. It was a process called sea keeping, you know, sort of keeping a fleet at sea to attack enemy shipping. They were capturing enemy merchant ships and so on but there wasn't a lot in the way of major fighting, certainly nothing that seems to be on the scale of the battle of Harfleur or the one off the Chef de Caux There was still activity, but partly because of the fear of attack, again, Hampshire became particularly important for Henry's fleet because in November 1417, Henry or Henry's government, started using the River Hamble in Hampshire, on Southampton Water as a fleet anchorage. And the reasons, probably several of them, one of them, it was wide and deep enough to accommodate Henry's ships, both the big ones and small ones, it offered shelter from storms and that was quite important because, in a separate action, the English had captured another Genoese carrack early in 1417, and they'd been repairing it in Southampton. But, in that year there was a storm, and the storm was fierce enough as one of the accounts said, it smashed the carrack against the walls of Southampton, and wrecked it and it was just, you know, match wood after that. So Southampton Water itself was quite an exposed anchorage for a war fleet and this helps to account for using the Hamble, but also with its relatively narrow mouth compared to Southampton Water the Hamble was much easier to defend and Henry started taking other defensive measures. He began defending Portsmouth Harbour, most people who have been to Portsmouth, been around the sea front, they've probably been to the Round Tower, although it's a much later rebuilding, that owes its origins to a tower that was started by Henry V in 1418. And around the same time, the English began building defences at the mouth of the Hamble. There was a wooden tower built there - the Round Tower originally was probably wood as well, but the round tower of the tower at the Hamble was called the Bulwark and it was meant to contain a military garrison that would guard the mouth of the Hamble they put in what were probably sharpened stakes to prevent small boats landing. But also, a couple of big iron chains were laid across the river mouth. They're the ones that would be raised when needed and these were big chains. They were, each of them were 146 meters long. Must have been huge and expensive, but the idea was that you'd raise them, and they would stop ships or boats getting into the river if you didn't want them to.

So that was going on, the English were busy defending themselves. There were, as I say various patrols going out, but not much action. And then in 1420, in the spring of that year, the fleet was brought together, particularly the King's ships in this case, to mount a big sea patrol led by the Grace Dieu, this huge ship. It was the only occasion on which the four great ships are known to have sailed together. So you have the Grace Dieu, the Jesus, the Holigost, and Trinity Royal, all mustered in Southampton Water along with other ships. But it was all a bit of a fiasco. There was discontent of

some kind. There was a mutiny amongst the soldiers on board the Grace Dieu and they forced the crew to put the ship into St Helen's on the Isle of Wight. So he had what was medieval England's most expensive weapon or weapon system sort of going about as far as a Wight Link Ferry or maybe a little further, but not much. And that's, so far as we know, is the furthest the Grace Dieu ever sailed.

The fleet thereafter, all the Royal fleet anyway, went back to the Hamble and there it stayed. The sea war was, you know, there's nothing much for them to do. They carried on work on repairing and maintaining the ships. Some of them were sent out on voyages to Bordeaux, probably as convoy escorts, but also to carry wine cargoes. And then 1422, Henry V died, he caught a fever at a siege and that was that. It wasn't quite the end of the story of Henry's Navy, but it was close to it. There was his infant son, Henry VI. There was a Royal Council in place to look after the kingdom's affairs and they didn't have the money to maintain the Navy. And indeed, there was no obvious need for it.

Henry had built up his Navy to use it as an instrument to invade France. And now there was nothing really for it to do. And in the three years after Henry's death, 19 of the Royal ships were either sold off or given away depending on their condition. And by the mid-1420s, only the four great ships and two balingers were left. They were moored in the Hamble. They were probably used to impress visiting foreigners because they were huge symbols of Royal power, they were decorated, they were painted; gilding and all that kind of stuff. But also they were huge and we know they did impress at least one foreigner because in 1430, there was a visit from a galley fleet from Florence, and the commander of this kept a diary, and he records being wined and dined aboard the Grace Dieu. And this was a man from one of the most developed maritime economies in Europe and he was absolutely blown away by the Grace Dieu. He said something like, I've never seen so large and beautiful a construction and he had the ship measured and he was so impressed by it. So the ships were still serving a function allbeit a rather passive one, but at the same time the ships were deteriorating. they were starting to leak, they even called in a diver - he must have been a Welshman - who was called Davy Owen to dive underneath the Holigost to try and stop up some of the cracks in the hull.

But these were basically timber vessels and time told of them and 1426, the Holigost was put into a dock, the Trinity Royal followed a few years after, then the Jesus. And eventually in 1432, the only one that was really left in the Hamble was the Grace Dieu, which was starting to leak. They took out some of the gear, cut down the main mast, but even that wasn't enough to help keep the ship afloat because two years later it was towed upriver to Bursledon and placed in a wet dock which had been dug there. And that was almost it. Henry's fleet was basically starting to moulder away, but there was one sort of last, significant event as regards the Grace Dieu as it was, 1434, it was placed in this dock, but, nearly five years later, on the night of the 7th of January, 1439, the Grace Dieu was struck by lightning and it caught fire and apparently completely burned out.

Emily: Quite a strange and sad ending to such great ships really.

Ian: Yes. I mean it's possible that the Holigost might lie somewhere near the Grace Dieu, but that's yet to be excavated but maybe the remains of the Trinity Royal are somewhere down near Hamble, but we don't know where.

Emily: Thank you very much for talking to me today, it has been an absolute pleasure.

Ian: Thank you very much, Emily. I've enjoyed it.

Emily: And that brings us to the end of this week's episode. If you're interested in finding out more about Ian and his research into maritime history, do you check out his website at

http://www.ianfriel.co.uk/ or follow him on Twitter @drianfriel, you can find these details and the link to his website in the show notes on the HistBites website. Thank you for listening.

Outro: We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you would like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, www.winchesterheritageopendays.org, click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.
Thank you.