The Second Flowering of the Mary Rose

Secrets of Tudor England are surfacing from the world’s most exciting underwater find:

King Henry VIII’s flagship, preserved in her prime

BY ROUL TUNLEY

Completed at Portsmouth in 1511, the Mary Rose — a beamy four-master with towering castles at the bow and stern — was one of the first ships to mount heavy guns between decks. Says naval historian Lt. Comdr. Peter Whitlock: “The Mary Rose was in fact the beginning of the Royal Navy.”

Nobody knows for certain why this proud ship, which had safely weathered winter storms, sank on a glorious summer’s day. She had been becalmed in the Solent at the head of a 56-strong English fleet defending Portsmouth from 235 French ships. The Mary Rose’s castles bristled with huge guns and were crowded with 300 armed soldiers, supplementing the ship’s normal company of 415 men. When a breeze sprang up and the top-heavy Mary Rose hoisted sail to engage the French, she swung suddenly round to star-
board. Then she heeled over and the sea poured in, perhaps through gunports left open near the waterline.

The ship foundered in six fathoms of water. Only the tops of her masts protruded through the waves. Some 35 were saved, mostly servants not burdened with armor. The remainder, including Vice Admiral Sir George Carew, were trapped beneath the netting which enveloped Mary Rose's decks to keep off boarding parties.

The 700-ton vessel hit the bottom with such momentum that she entombed three quarters of her starboard hull in the mud. The result is a unique time capsule. Like the lava which preserved Pompeii, the creamy silt of the Solent has frozen Mary Rose in a moment of history: 2 p.m. on Sunday, July 19, 1545. No ship of this importance has ever been found before. "Every aspect of Tudor life at sea has been preserved," says Trust director Richard Harrison.

"Square Murderer." Already the bounty retrieved from the wreck is awesome. In all, the 10,000 and more firsthand insights we have into 16th-century England include leather jerkins, chests of clothes in the latest styles, an exquisitely wrought manicure set, lidded pocket sundials (the Tudor equivalents of pocket watches), 4000 arrows (hitherto, only one dubious arrow had come down to us from pre-Georgian times), and a barber-surgeon's medicine chest complete with two syringes, dressings, poultices, and jars of ointment still showing the surgeon's finger marks. We even know what the crew were to eat after the battle that fateful afternoon. The cook, in his brick-built galley, had been preparing fish and fresh peas.

One mystery in particular has been solved. A "square murderer" is mentioned in a 1628 ordnance manual, but nobody knew what it was until the Mary Rose turned one up — a square-mouthed gun, firing a lethal hail of iron dice shot. As well, the discovery of possibly the world's oldest surviving ship's compass, together with a protractor and dividers, tells us that maritime charts were more widely used at that time than anyone believed.

Within days of the Mary Rose sinking, an attempt was made to haul her afloat by means of ropes slung between two empty ships, rising with the tide. But the bid failed. The Mary Rose lay almost buried and largely forgotten until 1836 when John Deane, a salver from Kent who invented the first practical diving helmet, worked with his brother Charles to bring up some timbers and guns — many of them ready-loaded and primed. After four years though, the brothers felt they had found everything of value. They abandoned the site. The shifting seabed completely covered the Mary Rose and her secrets.

There she might have rested, hidden for ever, were it not for Alexander McKee, an author and historian who lives near Portsmouth. "I'd been intrigued by the Mary
Rose ever since I read about her as a youngster," he says. "I suppose it was a subconscious reason for my learning to skin dive. I knew that the most important wreck in Europe lay on my own doorstep."

But where was it, exactly? Books in libraries gave no clue to the wreck's precise location. Then by luck in 1966 McKee came across a 19th-century chart of the Solent. "It bore an X and the words Mary Rose. I was electrified," McKee persuaded Prof. Harold Edgerton, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, to lend a new scanner he had perfected for exploring under the seabed. "The device revealed a buried object the size of the Mary Rose," McKee recalls. "I sank a long pole with a hollow end, hit something solid and brought up fragments of ancient wood. Skeptics said the wreck was probably a French galley. But a blip on my own doorstep." McKee would persuade Prof. Harold Edgerton, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, to lend a new scanner he had perfected for exploring underwater.

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So Much Missing. For the first four years, McKee's excavation project was strictly shoestring. "We had no money, no boats, no facilities—nothing," McKee would persuade a friendly fishing-boat captain to take him and his band of dedicated aquanauts out to the wreck for an hour or two on weekends.

Then in 1970 the group found a Tudor gun. "It practically screamed 'Henry VIII!'" says Maurice Young, a Southampton shipwright. "At last people were convinced we had really discovered the Mary Rose." The publicity brought the boats, compressors, diving gear and other equipment needed.

By the mid-70s enough of the hull was exposed to reveal the full potential of the prize. The ship's port side, which was uppermost when she heeled over and sank at a 60-degree angle, had been almost totally eaten away by current erosion and marine organisms. "At first we were disappointed that so much of it is missing," says Margaret Rule, archaeological director of the Mary Rose Trust. "Then we realized how lucky we are. If the ship had hit bottom squarely, little of it might be left. But the half that remains is, after all, a replica of the missing half.

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Archeological goodies brought to the surface from the Mary Rose are sealed in plastic bags to protect them from air. They are then taken ashore for today's most advanced preservation techniques, including fungicidal sprays, chemical baths and freeze-drying. A brown silk velvet skullcap found in the medicine chest of the Mary Rose's barber-surgeon has been washed and air-dried and looks like new. A shawm was one of 1980's most fascinating finds. No other example of this popular 16th-century musical instrument, a predecessor of the oboe, is known to have survived in England.

At Alexander McKee's invitation, Prince Charles made a trip down to the wreck in 1975. The prince has described the Solent as "murky; rather like swimming about in lentil soup." He reported: "The transom, part of the stern, you could see quite easily. I looked down into a hole. Suddenly I came face-to-face with a skull. I must say it did give me quite a fright; marvelously preserved, beautiful teeth, absolutely perfect." The human remains in the ship show that all the crew were extremely fit. The oldest were in their early forties. The youngest was aged about 14.

By August 1980 enough of the excavating had been completed to make an important decision. Everything, including decks, would be removed from inside the hull and replaced after this year's big lift, which is becoming urgent. Explains Margaret Rule: "We are in a race against time. Excavations have exposed so much of the hull to microorganisms, currents and marine life that we must get it out of the water as soon as possible."

Thus the drama of the Mary Rose is far from over. The ship with many exciting moments in her history has perhaps her greatest yet to come. The hull, strengthened by special internal bracing, will be gently lifted off the seabed in a web of nylon straps. Then, still underwater and therefore still a comparatively lightweight 50 tons, it will be eased into a cradle, preformed to match its shape, for raising to the surface.

Whatever happens, the world's most intricate, ambitious and expensive project of its kind has already paid off handsomely. Not only is it unlocking many secrets of 16th-century life, it has enhanced the knowledge of both divers and conservators. In fact, the undoubted success of the 15-year struggle to capture and preserve this Tudor time bubble has, in the opinion of Trust director Richard Harrison, opened up a whole new era of exploration. "The golden age of underwater archeology is just beginning," he says. "And amateurs will play a vital role in it, just as they did with the Mary Rose."

Relief Pitcher

SIGN on the bedroom door of a Little Leaguer: "Help wanted. Young boy needs understanding parent to help ease pain of losing game 0-25. Must be skilled in carrying large platter of chocolate cookies and large glass of milk. Apply in person. P.S. Hurry, Mom." —Marylyn L. Diebold