

PORTSMOUTH – Harlots, Dung and Glory Part 4 1930 – the present and beyond

The final talk of the 2022-23 season was preceded by a celebration! It was 15 years since the beginning of HADS and we recognized this milestone by sharing drinks and an amazing cake that featured Stonehenge and two dowsers. Paul and Don shared some memories of that time, and then we all looked forward to enjoying the programme arranged for this year.



So how could we follow that?

Andrew Negus provided the perfect solution as he presented the final part of the series of talks about Portsmouth. He was, however, at pains to clarify the title, as the Dung had largely disappeared from Portsmouth by the 1930s!

It had always been an important place. It was an ideal spot for Norman kings to 'pop home' to Normandy, and latterly it became the biggest shipyard because of the size of the British Empire. By the 1930s castles and fortresses had been built to safeguard the dockyard and Portsmouth enjoyed fame as a garrison town. The population was 180,000 and of those, 10,000 were working in the dockyard. It was, and is, a poor city, due at this time to a world recession, disarmament, unemployment, poverty and a war on the horizon.

Interestingly, it boasted 28 corset factories! Oil was then discovered on Portsdown Hill, but there was never enough to make it viable. 9 underground oil tanks were built under the chalk, which held 180,000 tons of heavy oil and the pipes are still there!

In 1935 Portsmouth got its own airport, but accidents and a lack of space to expand ensured that it closed in 1973. Amy Johnson flew over the city and cheered everyone up. Hitler sent a zeppelin and when Edward VIII abdicated, he left from Portsmouth. In 1939 the football club tasted glory and won the FA Cup. They held it for the longest time because of the war.

Preparations for war were in full swing. On Whale Island the sailors had created a zoo to house the animals they collected on their travels. Sadly, all the animals had to be slaughtered. There was only one road off Portsea Island at Hilsea so a reserve bridge was built. Fort Cumberland was prepared for the emergency and Southwick House was taken over by the Admiralty. The personnel of HMS Vernon

were told to pack everything up and go to Roedean School. Vosper's ship builders were on high alert and the canoe lake was taken over by the scientific branch of the Royal Navy for experimentation. The last 2000 years had seen the building of defensive forts and castles, but they were now useless in the face of German aircraft. People living in Portsmouth knew they would be blitzed. They dug a mile of tunnels in the chalk pits under Portsdown Hill and thousands of people took shelter there, saving many lives. In the Blitz there were 67 air raids, 40,000 people dead, 46,000 injured and 970 buildings destroyed or damaged. On January 10th 1941 there was a particularly damaging raid when the Guildhall was set on fire. There was a Chubb safe in the cellar. All Portsmouth's regalia was in there, together with the FA Cup. This was later put in another cellar where you could take it out and make money.

The Nazi Air Force had a map of the city. They knew where the 9 oil tanks were, but they missed hitting them! In WW2 there were 23,000 workers in the dockyard. The city sustained huge casualties as whole families were bombed out. The King and Queen came to Portsmouth to see the damage for themselves. They, together with the Lord Mayor, visited one house where they heard about the Cockleshell Heroes. In December 1942 10 Royal Marines paddled 70 miles in the dark. They took 5 days to reach Bordeaux where they laid explosive charges on enemy shipping. The 10 men went in 5 canoes (cockles), but only 2 returned.

Mulberry Harbours were built in Portsmouth and Southampton. Southwick House became the D-Day centre. They planned the end of the war in the famous map room. The map is on the wall, and the workmen who put it there were not allowed to leave for 2/3 months in case they let slip what they had seen. Under Portsdown Hill there are huge rooms where D-Day was managed. After the war these became the NATO communications centre.

The hospitals got ready for a blood bath, but the reality was not so bad as everyone had feared. On the night of June 5th 1944 Pegasus Bridge was taken and the first house to be liberated is now a café. The black and white stripes that were painted on the planes were only done 1 or 2 days before they were needed. Peace finally came in 1945. All the countries that sent troops for D-Day are remembered by having their badges displayed in Portsmouth Cathedral.

Portsmouth had been blown to bits during the war, so prefabs were built to house those who had been left homeless. They could be erected in hours and those who lived in them always said how comfortable they were.

By 1951 the population was 234,000. The council estate, Leigh Park, was built at this time. We heard about the Dockies. At 12 noon a siren would sound and all those working in the dockyard would go home for lunch. Eastney swimming pool became famous because 'Octopush' - (under water hockey) was invented there.

In 1956 Buster Crabb did one last spying job. He was a Royal Navy frogman who vanished during a reconnaissance mission for MI6 around a Soviet cruiser berthed in the dockyard. He was presumed dead on 19th April when he failed to return. Official British government documents regarding the incident will not be released until 2057.

The world's oldest hovercraft service runs from Southsea beach, and work on the Cathedral was started in 1965. The Tricorn shopping centre was blown up and the following people were remembered for their link with Portsmouth:

James Callaghan – Portsmouth boy who became Prime Minister

Alec Rose – sailed alone around the world in Lively Lady. She is berthed in Port Solent.

Marilyn Cole – the first playboy bunny to feature naked in the centrefold.

In 1967 there were 2 plane crashes over the city, so the airport was closed a few years later. The Falklands War was in 1982 when some of the ships left from Portsmouth. That was also the year when the Mary Rose was lifted. The Cathedral was finished in 1994. Portsmouth Grammar School has some notable past students including 3 holders of the Victoria Cross. Also W. Hammond the cricketer, Roger Black the runner, James Clavell who wrote 'Shogun' and Paul Jones member of 'Manfred Mann'. Portsmouth Football Club won the FA Cup in 2008 and Volders Corsets are still going! The Royal Dockyard became HM Naval Base and employs 2000 people.

Portsmouth has the densest population in the country, and welcomes people to Gunwharf Quays its waterside shopping complex. The university has 28,000 students, and 3,500 people work there. Thus, Portsmouth looks to the future – diversifying and fighting climate change.

What a fascinating, whistle-stop tour! We loved it and responded with enthusiastic applause.

E. Cole
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