

The Great Harry Stuart Vine

Building the Ship

The Henry Grace a Dieu, otherwise known as the Great Harry, was constructed as a replacement for the Regent, lost in battle in 1512. In December 1512 an entry in the Venetian Senate Diaries records...

In place of the great ship Regent which was burnt the King of England is making a greater."¹

A further entry from the same source...

Describes the carrack which the King is building, of 4,000 butts, the largest ship afloat. Its name is the Regent, the same as the other which was burnt with that of France.²

The ship was obviously meant to be ready for the campaign of 1513...

"The names of the ships, captains and masters, with the number as well of soldiers as mariners and tons, which be appointed to be in the King's army royal by the sea this next year":- The Gret Carrack, corrected to (?) [The Great Henry Imperyall; Edmund Howard and Sir Robert Morton captains, corrected to "My Lord Feres"; John Toborowgh, master...³

This was further corrected to...

The Henry Imperiall, portage (tonnage) 1,000; Sir William Trevenyan captain, with his own retinue of 400; John Toborow master; 300 mariners...⁴

Unfortunately the Great Harry was not completed on time, but despite not being in service an inventory of weapons and stores was drawn up for her..

Soldiers: 400, Sailors: 260, Gunners: 40, Bows: 2,000, Bowstrings: 5,000, Sheaves of Arrows: 4,000, Bills: 1,500, Morrispikes; 1,500, Stakes: 2,000, Gunpowder: 5 lasts, Harness: 500.⁵

There are a number of accounts detailing the equipping of the ship, for instance...

A splendid banner, 51 yards long, "fringed with Cadow fringe" and other streamers, banners and flags were delivered to the ship on the 10th of April by John Brown, the King's painter. ⁶

Further deliveries in April included ordnance sent to William Borythan, the purser, from Cornellys Johnson, the King's iron gun-maker, and "apparel" pertaining to the foremast, mainmast, foretop etc. Shot had to be manufactured for the guns as well...

Application to the Lords of the Council by Nicholas Ryng, master gunner of the Henry Grace de Dieu, for payment of 22 gunners at 10s. a month and 9

at 6s.8d. a month, employed in making gunstones and casting pellets, for one month ended 6 May "last past."⁷

The bills kept coming in...

Indenture witnessing receipt by William Bonde, Clerk of the Poultry, from Sir John Daunce, of payments "in a further prest" towards making and finishing a ship at Wolwiche called the Henry Grace a Dieu, viz., on 18 Feb, 10 March, and 6 April 5 Hen. VIII., £500. each time, on 8 May 6 Hen. VIII., £400. and on 18 June 6 Hen. VIII., £300.⁸

The ship was dedicated on the 13th June 1514...

Went with all diligence to the King. Found him on Tuesday in his great new ship of 1,500 tons, which was that day dedicated with great triumph. Met the Queen, the Princess Mary, the Pope's ambassadors, several bishops, and a large number of nobles were most honourably received, and conducted by the King through the ship, which has no equal in bulk, and has an incredible array of guns. In the scuttle on the top of the mainmast are 80 serpentes and hackbuts. The ship contains seven tiers, one above another. On the ambassadors leaving the ship, a salute was fired from all the guns.⁹

The final bill for the Great Harry is itemised in a very comprehensive document, with the total coming to £8,708.5s.3d. for her and three small galleys.¹⁰ There is also an inventory detailing all the fittings, fixtures and ordnance for the ship.¹¹ The ordnance is a mixture of large and small bronze and, predominantly, iron guns. All the iron guns listed are breech loading, chambered guns, and the bronze guns are muzzle loading.

The Career of the Great Harry

I can find no record of the Great Harry taking part in Henry's first French war, the next record tells of her being brought out of Barking creek to be rigged and caulked in March 1518.¹² In December 1521 she was still laid up in the Thames, being cared for by the master, Thomas Sperte and 11 mariners.¹³

When she was at sea, she proved to be a good sailing ship for the period, as recorded in a letter from Fitzwilliam to Henry on the 4th June 1522..

On Friday last, the day that the King left Dover, the wind changed to W.S.W. and blew so hard that they were obliged to go into the Downs and stay there all Saturday and Sunday. On Monday the wind changed to W. by N. Started for Hampton, intending to have stopped at every flood and gone with the tide. Was obliged to put back to the Downs, as the wind went back to S.W., in which quarter it keeps still. Will go to Hampton by the next wind. The Henry Grace Dieu sailed as well and rather better than any ship in the fleet. She weathered them all, except the Mary Rose; and on a wind, there would be a "hard chose" between them... All yesterday the wind blew "sore strainably;" but the Henry rode as still at anchor as the best ship in the fleet...

The fleet was in Portsmouth by the 30th of June, without the Great Harry, who appears to have been delayed by storm damage. On the 8th of July a letter from Surrey to Wolsey records that... The Harry had lost her fore..?, bowsprit and main topmast.¹⁴ She put into Portsmouth for repair, with some of her victuals being given to other ships.¹⁵ She was moored near Porchester in June 1522 and was dry-docked for repair in Portsmouth in 1523.¹⁶ She may have remained in Portsmouth at least until July 1524.¹⁷

By October 1525 she was back in the Thames, being recorded as being of 1,000 tons and 12 years old.¹⁸ Another document states that...

"[Firs]te the Great Herry Grace Dieu, being of portage 15[00 ton, r]ideth at Northfleet, betwixt Gravesend and Erith, being in good reparation, calking except, so that she may be laid in the dock at all times when the same shall be ready. And Brygandyne, the clerk of the ships doth say that before the said ship be laid in the dock, it is necessary that her mast be taken down, and bestowed in the great storehouse in Erith; and also he saith that the said Great Herry be not housed over in such wise that the same may be sufficiently defended from snow, rain and sun, it shall be utterly destroyed within few years, and also he esteemeth that the charge to house it will amount to the sum of 100 marks or above."¹⁹ (She was finally docked and repaired in 1527-28).²⁰

The records are scanty for the next few years, but she appears to have been rebuilt around 1536, the same time as the Mary Rose. In this year Cromwell records...

He has purchased woods beside Portsmouth in Hampshire sufficient for the new making of the Henry Grace a Dew.²¹

Between 1539 and the end of Henry's reign, England lived under the threat of war, or was actively engaged in it. The ambassadors to Henry's court naturally passed on naval intelligence to their monarchs. The French ambassador Marillac wrote to Francis I on the 1st of October 1540...

The Constable wrote that Francis desires to know how many ships of war the King has, how they are armed, and whether any are being newly prepared for sea; and how many, with those of his subjects, he could make at need. He commonly has 30 or 40 of his own at the most, and last year, when there was suspicion of war, they were put in such order that they are still well equipped. Three of them, which are much larger than the rest, lie in this river, viz., the Great Harry, of 1,500 tons and the Marie Roze and Pomme Grenade of 900 or 1,000 tons each; the rest are of no great size, but all are well furnished with artillery and with pilots and mariners, mostly strangers.²²

Two years later, Marillac had further naval news for Francis...

It is that this King's ships of war are being equipped and the Great Henry, one of the finest vessels afloat, and eight or ten others, are being laden with artillery, hacuebuttes, pikes and other munitions of war.²³

In 1543 Chapuys informed the Queen of Hungary that...

Extreme diligence is made in equipping the rest of the ships and putting in them an incredible quantity of artillery. Among the other pieces the Great Henry will carry 12 double cannons and the Marie Roze 6; and within these two ships will go 1,200 men at least.²⁴

Recorded as weighing 1,000 tons and having a crew of 800 men,²⁵ the Great Harry was Admiral Lisle's flagship in Henry's last war. After an embarrassing incident with deserting merchantmen, the main English fleet gathered together around the 24th of June.

A spoiling attack was mounted on the huge French armada gathered at Le Havre, this was not particularly successful, but a skirmish with the French galleys off Alderney was allegedly won by the English.²⁶ The fleet retired to Portsmouth to await the French assault and gather reinforcements.

The skirmish in the Solent (it could hardly be described as a battle) was preceded by Lisle entertaining on board the Great Harry. The Imperial Ambassador, Van der Delft, was among the guests and reported on both the entertainment and the fighting that followed...

Meanwhile the Queen's Chancellor showed him the fleet and the flagship called the Great Harry; and the Admiral asked him to dinner on the following day when he was handsomely entertained, with three or four knights of the Garter. The fleet did not exceed 80 sail but 40 of these were large and beautiful and 60 more were expected from the West. After dinner the Admiral said that the King would rather see him that afternoon, as next day his Majesty was to visit the ships and dine on the flagship... Next day, Sunday, while the King was at dinner on the flagship, the French fleet appeared. The King hurriedly left the flagship and the English sailed to encounter the French galleys, of which five had entered the harbour while the English could not get out for want of wind (the Cowdray engraving shows the Great Harry firing at the galleys, with the masts of the Mary Rose showing above the water)... On Monday firing on both sides lasted all day and at nightfall one of the French galleys was damaged... On Tuesday the French landed in the Isle of Wight and burnt 10 or 12 small houses; but they were ultimately driven to take refuge in a small earthwork fort, and a large force of 8,000 is now opposed to them. Yesterday, Wednesday, and the previous night, nothing could be heard but artillery firing, and it was rumoured that the French would land elsewhere.²⁷

The fleets clashed sporadically off the coast of Normandy around the 15th of August, with the French retiring without having achieved anything of note. Lisle got his revenge for the invasion of the Isle of Wight by burning Treporte in Normandy and two or three villages, before returning to Portsmouth.

In March of the next year she was again rated at 1,000 tons, with a crew of 700 men, and named as a reinforcement for the ships "appointed for the Narrow Seas."²⁸

The Great Harry does not seem to have played any further active role during Edward VI's reign, and at the start of Mary's reign in 1553, she caught fire and sank at her mooring at Woolwich... "by neckclygens and for lake of over-syth," according to Henry Machyn.²⁹

¹ Sanuto, xv., 533

² Sanuto, xv., 533

³ Exch Accts., 62 (15) RO Navy Records Soc., X.,77

⁴ Navy Records Soc., 79

⁵ SP Hen VIII., 5, f.1. RO

⁶ Stowe MS. 146, f.111. BM

⁷ SP Hen VIII., 8, f.94. RO

⁸ SP Hen VIII., 8, f.133. RO

⁹ Lettres de Louis XII., iv., 328

¹⁰ SP Hen. VIII., 8, f.146. RO

¹¹ Chapter House Book Vol. XIII

¹² Navy Accounts 26 November 1518. RO

¹³ Shipping 28 December RO

¹⁴ Calig. D. VIII. 243. BM

¹⁵ Earl of Surrey to Wolsey 15 June RO

¹⁶ Chapter House Books, vol. vi

¹⁷ Navy 17 July 1524. RO

¹⁸ RMS 148 XXII.A. BM

¹⁹ OTHO. E. IX. 64 BM

²⁰ The King's Ships 5 Jan 1530 RO

²¹ Cromwell's Administration RO

²² Kaulek 226 Abstract

²³ Kaulek 423

²⁴ RO Spanish Calendar VI. II., No.199

²⁵ The Navy 19 April 1545

²⁶ T. Herage to Mr. Eaton 18 July 1545 RO

²⁷ Spanish Calendar VIII No.101

²⁸ The Navy, March 1546 RO

²⁹ J.D. Nichols, ed., The Diary Of Henry Machyn