VISIT TO THE MARY ROSE
12th November 1997

Following an opportunity to view the many fascinating items on display in the permanent Mary Rose exhibition, there followed what to many was the highlight of this visit – the chance to see items from the reserve collection. Looking at these items would have been exciting in itself, but provided with gloves we were free to handle and inspect the articles in detail. Having been ushered away from close inspection of pieces of furniture on other visits, how refreshing it was to be openly invited to handle such valuable artefacts.

The items included a turned bowl in alder (most of the others found were of beech), and a boxwood comb – something that most of the crew appear to have possessed. There was a staved tankard, the lid oak, handle poplar, staves pine, base beech and hoops willow. A yew bow was accompanied by a boxwood embowing plane (a small rounder, ie. having a concave sole) used for preparing arrow shafts. It was fascinating to speculate over the adjustments to the mouth and blade positions of this small tool. How often do we come across 16th century woodworking tools together with items they could well have fashioned?

Other pieces included a shoe, a pewter dish and a couple of small turned items, one of which looked at a glance like the end of a small woodwind instrument. These in fact turned out to be a Spile and Shive used to form a plugged tap in barrels. Many of these were found on board the ship.

Of greatest interest to me were the pieces of furniture. Many of the finds had been dismantled as part of the conservation process. These included a small Chest (fig. 5 in David Knell's recent article in the 1997 Journal) This, still in a dismantled state, gave a unique opportunity to study joints and construction detail normally hidden. The chest, of boarded construction, with the ends extended to form legs is made from elm, with the exception of parts of the till and one of the two decorative front spandrels which are oak.

I would venture to suggest that the oak spandrel, which is of a different profile to the one of elm, was cut by a different hand. Could this be an original 16th century restoration? Whilst being boarded a good deal of time had been spent making this chest. In addition to being nailed, all the joints are rebated and all of the ironwork was recessed into the wood.

A second Chest of oak, again boarded, had an applied frame around the top of the lid creating the impression of a panelled construction. It was interesting to note that the simple bead that ran round the inside of the frame was mitred in the corners, imitating a joint that is not thought to have been widely used much before this date (1545). The pegs which had held this Chest together, being neatly stored in plastic bags and therefore easily examined, are oak.

Perhaps the most fascinating piece of furniture was a folding trestle base (again covered by David Knell, Fig. 10). With the large amount of effort spent on purely decorative aspects, this was clearly part of an important piece of furniture.

This was a Regional Furniture Society visit with a difference. For once, many of the doubts over originality, authenticity, and even use of the items seen were removed, enabling them to be viewed in a clearer light. When one pewter dish was noticed with what appeared to be a folded rim, surprise at the early date of the feature was the reaction where elsewhere the age of the dish may have been questioned. (In the event, the folded rim turned out to be a lip formed in casting.) However, the absence of these doubts still left room for many questions. Surprisingly to some, eight Chests of dovetailed construction were found on board, a method not widely thought to have been common in England at this time. Were these imported? No candles were found in the tills of chests – does this dispel that popular explanation for their use or reflect a cautious policy to fire prevention on board ship and what did that folding trestle support?

Viewing and handling these items was a privilege and one greatly enhanced by the generous manner in which all those at the Mary Rose Trust were prepared to share their knowledge and information on the finds.

Chris Currie

Following a convivial lunch in the Trade Winds restaurant, Maggie Richards, a research archaeologist working with the Mary Rose Trust, gave us a fascinating and informative illustrated talk about the years of work that lay behind what we had already seen in the morning. She outlined the succession of painstaking operations, starting with the actual discovery, followed by precise recording of every item, recovery, cleaning, description, conservation, storage and eventual presentation. The result is a detailed collection of mid-sixteenth century artefacts from the ship itself, through the mass of fittings, armaments, weapons, furnishings, chests, stores, musical instruments and the personal belongings of individuals. Many of the everyday objects that have been found are unique examples of their kind from the period. All this will provide an invaluable archive for researchers for many years to come.

Maggie Richards focussed on those aspects which were of particular interest to the audience, mainly the large number of chests found lying around in different parts of the ship with their contents spilt around them. Drawings have been made recording the exact position where each was found, the method of construction, type of handle and timber used. Elm predominated with oak, poplar, beech and ash also being used. There was only one of walnut, with carved front, recovered from the barber-surgeon's cabin. Construction methods included butt, rebated and dovetailed joints; nailed and pegged; some chests were open with no lid, others with lids nailed down and no hinges, others with hinged lids;

some plain, some with carved and scratched decorative embellishments; some standing directly on the floor, others raised on end-boards of various shapes.

Six chests were found in the carpenter's cabin on the main deck of the stern-castle, completely enclosed from the main gun decks and entered through a sliding door. Work benches (which may have also served as bunks) were on each side of the doorway. The contents of the chests included block and moulding planes in beech and oak, braces (ash), saw(?) handles (oak, ash and elm), rules (oak) calibrated in inches; axe handles (ash).

Chests apart, there was not a lot of furniture on board: some beds, stools, a single folding trestle (for a table?), and a plastering bench in the barber-surgeon's cabin.

The care and attention to detail in this massive rescue and conservation project is impressive. It is perhaps worth recording here the main outlines of the method used for conserving wooden items after some 450 years under water. There are seven stages:

1. clean all surfaces by soft brushing with distilled water;
2. treat with anti-fungal biocide and wrap in polythene pending further processing (re-wrap and refresh biocide at regular intervals).
3. immerse in solution of polythene glycol (PEG) in water; gradually increasing the concentration of PEG over a period of months until the absorption of PEG is complete, replacing water within the fibre structure of the wood;
4. freeze rapidly;
5. freeze-dry under vacuum to remove all residual water;
6. surfaces treated (painted) with PEG – repeat from time to time;
7. maintain in atmosphere at 19C and 55% RH.

Enlightened by Maggie Richards' lucid explanations the remainder of the afternoon was spent happily in the museum. A relevant publication *'Artefacts from Wrecks'* is now available from the Mary Rose Trading Company. Tel 01705 839938.

Giles Hopkinson