

JULIAN STOCKWIN

In Nelson's Footsteps

Thomas Kydd's creator journeys back in time aboard HMS *Victory* and in the Historic Dockyard at Portsmouth, England.

By George D. Jepson

SINCE THE THOMAS PAINE KYDD sea stories were launched nearly a decade ago, English novelist Julian Stockwin has journeyed to far corners of the world in which the Royal Navy sailed during the French Revolutionary War and the Napoleonic Wars. Stockwin and his wife and literary partner Kathy have visited Gibraltar, the Caribbean, Brittany, Malta, the Channel Islands, and the former smuggling village of Polperro in Devon, as they have sought to create the fabric of Kydd's life.

The new Kydd sea story, *Invasion*, which follows *The Privateer's Revenge* (*Treachery* in the UK), will be published simultaneously in America and the United Kingdom in October. In October 2010, a new novel – with the working title *Victory* – will be published in the US and UK.

Soon after the manuscript for *Invasion* was sent to their publishers, the Stockwins embarked on another research expedition, this time to Portsmouth, following in Nelson's footsteps as he prepared for the Battle of Trafalgar on 21 October 1805.

During 10 days in Portsmouth, Julian was allowed complete access to HMS *Victory*, and the Historic Dockyard and environs, from which Nelson embarked for the last time. As the new novel develops in the coming months, Trafalgar will play a significant role.

While in Portsmouth, the Stockwins also met with Ken Yalden, past president



Julian Stockwin (left) aboard HMS *Victory* with Keeper and Curator of HMS *Victory* Peter Goodwin (Photo by Kathy Stockwin).

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of the International Guild of Knot Tyers, in Julian's ongoing quest for authenticity in his books.

The author recently chatted with *Quarterdeck* about his time in Portsmouth, researching his new novel.

Julian, how were you able to arrange for such intimate access to HMS *Victory*?

I have known Peter Goodwin, Keeper and Curator of HMS *Victory* for a number of years. We both served in the [Royal] Navy at about the same time, although in different areas of the Service (Peter was a nuclear submariner). A few months back, I rang Peter to see whether it might be possible to obtain special access to *Victory*, and he very kindly arranged this for my location research visit to Portsmouth in early December, 2008. Although I did know the ship pretty well after many visits over the years I was amazed at how much more work Peter has done to bring this iconic ship back to how she was in Nelson's day. To give just one example he has reeved nearly all the running rigging. Most display ships from that era around today only have standing rigging – i.e. the stays, shrouds etc., holding up the masts. The main reason for this is that rigging for the standing rigging is tarred and preserved, and lasts a long time. Running rigging – the operating machinery of the ship – used for braces, sheets, etc., is not tarred and as such is costly to maintain. It also makes the ship look extremely complex. With what Peter has done for all intents and purposes you could bend on sail on *Victory* and go. Along these lines I

was impressed with what he has done with one of *Victory's* boats, which sits on the dock alongside. It is rigged with full fore and main yardarm stay tackles for launching exactly as it was in Nelson's day (there are no davits for the big boats on the skid beams amidships, and up to two hundred men would be needed in swaying up and out the four-ton boat and crew).

Did ghosts from the ship's past "speak" to you as you walked her decks in ways that will enhance the

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writing of your new novel?

Of course! From Nelson and the captain, Hardy, right down to the powder monkeys. I stepped out where they all would have worked and lived, even to inspecting the heads in Captain Hardy's cabin. The work Peter Goodwin has done has really brought the ship alive in a way that is hugely atmospheric – his attention to detail includes locating

surviving iron foundries to cast real shot and finding a master rigger to ensure the breeching for the massive 32-pounders is not only left-hand lay [direction in which its strands are twisted], but also properly doubled with a cut splice [weaving the ends of two lines] around the casable [aft end of the gun, with an opening in the line passing around the button].

Did you make new discoveries during your time aboard *Victory*, compared to previous visits?

The 2005 [bicentennial] anniversary of Trafalgar concentrated minds wonderfully on this precious piece of heritage, and since then Peter, as curator, has been encouraged to research and discover all kinds of fascinating detail about life aboard and how the "machinery," simple and complex, all came together in the most powerful expression of naval might for three generations. He will not accept things merely because a book says so – he'll go to the specific fitting and test and work it until he has it understood. In another field, I suppose he'd be recognised as an experimental archaeologist.

Was there anything different about this time aboard *Victory* than your previous visits?

If any reader and lover of the great age of fighting sail has not visited this historic ship in the last five years or so, I urge you to do so. She is now in as handsome a condition as at any time in the last two centuries, and must now be close to when she sailed against the

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Combined Fleet in 1805. It will be the scale of the old battleship that will take the breath away – with all the rigging in place now you can see blocks so big they need four men to lift them, ropes as thick as a man’s leg, and cleats fully the size of an adult! Do tarry until dusk and take in the breath-taking view of the great black tops and soaring rigging lined against the sky – the very picture of arrogant grace and fighting splendour! And then into night when the admiral’s lanthorn is lit (she is still the flagship of Commander-in-Chief, Home Command) and the ship’s floodlit with a blaze of light upwards which brings out her warlike beauty to perfection.

What did you learn from knot expert Ken Yalden that will be helpful as the new Kydd novel evolves?

A chief boatswain’s mate of the old school, Ken meets up with fellow old salts to actively promote the arts of the seaman around the world, and specifically the knots and splices that were so essential to keeping the seas in Kydd’s day. Ken scolded me for having *Teazer’s* seamen tricing up their hammocks with half hitches when the marline hitch was more preferred for the regulation seven turns. This is because due to the lay of the rope the marline hitch does not dig into the shoulders when carrying a hammock. Ken presented my wife with some ingeniously worked tiny rosebud knot earrings, and for me there was a puzzle – a stout stopper knot joining two lengths of rope. But this one joined a three stranded right-hand lay hawser-laid rope over three inches in

circumference with a four stranded equivalent, the place of join concealed under whipping, so I can drive myself witless wondering how it was done.

Did the artist William Wyllie’s panorama of the Battle of Trafalgar in the Royal Naval Museum provide new insights into the action?

Not really new insights, but his splendid panorama does give you an excellent overview of the battle. Wyllie chose to set the scene at 2:00

“... take in the breath-taking view of the great black tops and soaring rigging lined against the sky – the very picture of arrogant grace...”

PM on the afternoon of 21 October 1805, at the height of the battle when the British had broken the line of the combined French and Spanish fleets. The Royal Naval Museum has now incorporated the Wyllie Panorama into “Trafalgar!” – a multi-media presentation where you can stand on the gundeck of a man-o’-war and feel what it must have been like in battle. I highly recommend a visit. Wyllie was nearly 80 when he started this monumental work!

Tell us about your thoughts as you viewed the new Nelson bust in the Nelson wardroom.

First, it was a trip down memory lane, for as a naval officer I had stayed at the Royal Navy base at Portsmouth, Hampshire, HMS *Nelson*, on numerous occasions when I was working on a software project for NATO. The bust itself, let me tell you, is a splendid rendition of my great hero. It has pride of place in the wardroom, and was commissioned by an anonymous donor to mark the 250th anniversary of the birth of Nelson. The bust is apparently based on a life mask of Nelson produced in Vienna in 1800. It seemed such an appropriate setting, and after we had admired it we were taken to lunch in the historic mess with mighty paintings and Nelson memorabilia on all four walls, a wonderful place for a naval officer to dine, believe me.

You also visited the *Mary Rose*, the Royal Marines Museum and the Historic Dockyard. What did you learn that will be helpful in your writing?

These other venues were largely to do with research-checking material for my non-fiction book project, *Stockwin’s Maritime Miscellany*, which covers the Golden Age of Sail from the voyages of discovery in the fifteenth century through the Napoleonic wars to the era of the clipper ship. However, I also took away various facts and anecdotes from the Royal Marines Museum and the Dockyard to salt away for future Kydd books. I am never without my little dictaphone, and I can

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quickly note down material to be transcribed later into my historical/sea relational database, which is quite sizeable now, and which is constantly referenced when I am writing.

Is there anything else you would like to share about your time in Portsmouth?

Kathy and I were delighted to renew a number of naval friendships. Admiral Paul Boissier kindly took time out of his very busy schedule to talk to us in his office at Whale Island, with its view of Portsmouth Harbour overlooking the very spot mentioned in the new Kydd book coming out this year (*Invasion*). We also looked up Commander Richard Morris, who had invited us to spend time aboard his destroyer previously, sailing from Plymouth to Portsmouth.

We stayed at Gunwharf Quays, a vibrant commercial/residential complex right on the harbour. The site was established as a naval ordnance yard in the late seventeenth century. Gunwharf (previously known as HMS *Vernon*) was the home of the Royal Navy's Mine Countermeasures training facilities. The present site is a sympathetic mix of twentieth century buildings and older ones from Kydd's day, including the Vulcan Building, where we stayed. It has been converted into loft-style apartments. Ironically, it is, as well, where I studied for promotion to lieutenant quite some years ago, and initially I felt quite disoriented to be within what I remember as a proper Royal Navy shore base.

Of course Portsmouth has a long tradition of the Navy and the sea.

But not everyone always thought highly of the town – Jack Tar could be quite boisterous on the ran-tan ashore! Nelson himself is on record for once calling it “a horrid place.” However, visits to Portsmouth punctuated Nelson's career, and the town saw him develop from an awkward midshipman to a great national hero. It was from Portsmouth that he first went to sea to join his uncle Captain Suckling aboard *Raisonnable* in 1771, and it was at Portsmouth that he took his last steps on English soil in 1805.

“After Nelson embarked in his barge, men and women ran knee deep into the water. Then came the cheers as he was rowed out to Victory ...”

One of the most poignant aspects of our visit was reconstructing that last walk of Nelson. Although the hotel in which he stayed, George Inn, was bombed during the Second World War, it is possible to find the location of the hotel and trace his steps, as we did.

Nelson arrived at the George at 6:00 AM on the morning of 14 September 1805, had breakfast, and then paid a call on the Dockyard Commissioner. Meanwhile *Victory* had gone to single anchor in St.

Helen's Roads, not far from Spithead, and at 11:30 AM hoisted Nelson's flag. News had quickly gone around Portsmouth that the sea hero had arrived in town and great crowds gathered in front of the George.

Nelson decided to leave by the back entrance of the hotel, in Penny Street, to avoid the huge press of people. He walked along the north side of Governor's Green, by the King's Bastion to Spur Redoubt, and then down to a little shingle beach away from Sally Port, the usual place that naval officers embarked.

Crowds flocked all along the route, and Nelson had to push his way through the throng. He greeted them with great good humour and said he wished he had two arms so he could shake more hands.

Perhaps the people had some sense of the future as there was no cheering, but a respectful quiet. Men doffed their hats and women were seen to be in tears. A fortune teller in the West Indies had once told Nelson that she could see no further than his forty-seventh birthday, and at this stage this birthday was only a few weeks away.

After Nelson embarked in his barge, men and women ran knee deep into the water. Then came the cheers, as he was rowed out to *Victory*. Nelson, touched, said to Hardy in the barge, “I had their huzzas before, I have their hearts now.” *Victory* sailed at 8:00 AM on Sunday, 15 September 1805, and Horatio Nelson met his death at one bell in the first dog watch, 21 October.

Visit Julian Stockwin online at
www.julianstockwin.com.