

# A MONUMENT AFLOAT IN PORTSMOUTH HARBOUR

THE STORY OF THE T.S. *FOUDROYANT*  
LATE H.M.S. *TRINCOMALEE*

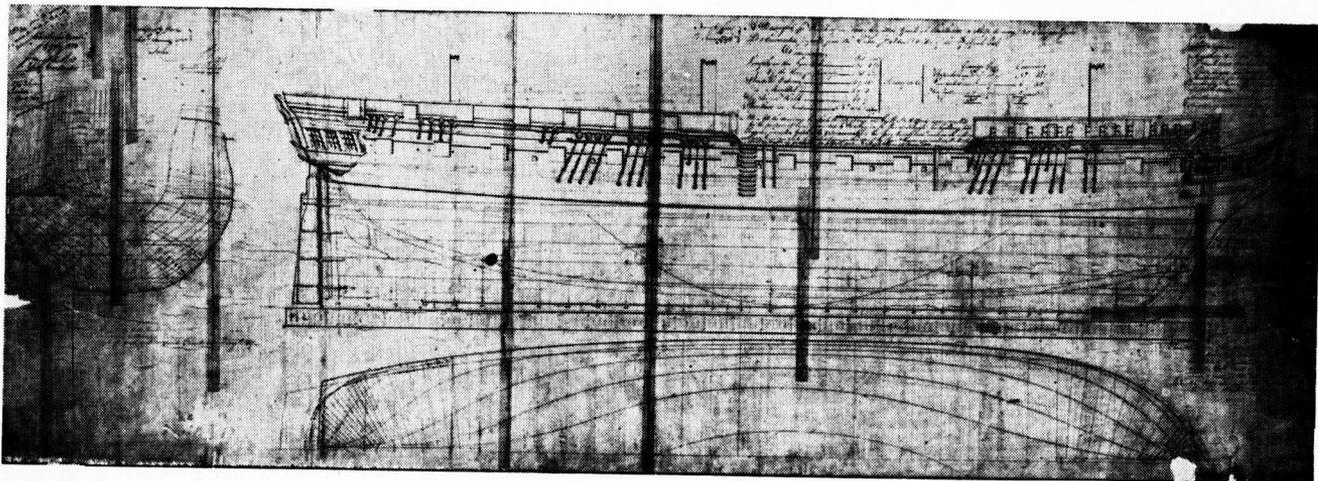
*built at Bombay in 1817.*

*By George P. B. Naish.*

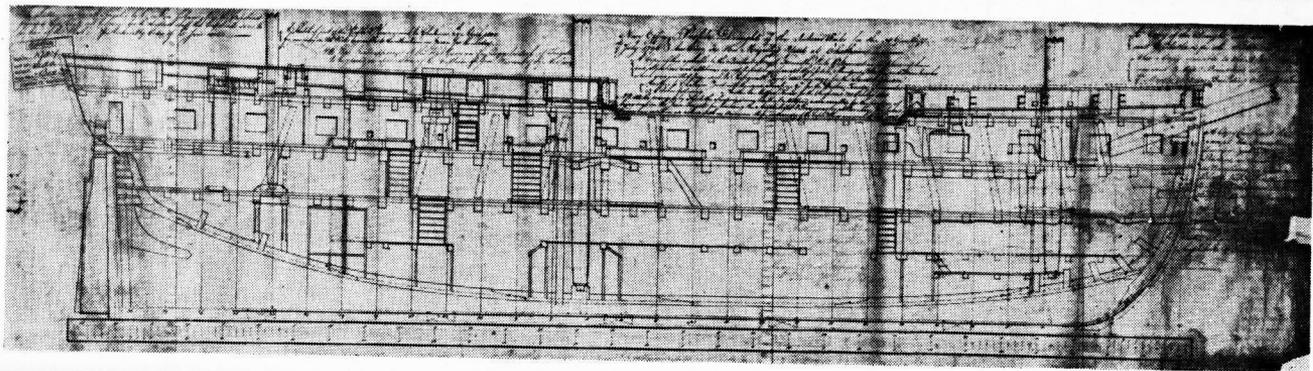
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THE naval term "frigate" acquired a new lease of life, halfway through the last great war, when it was applied to a new class of warship, an escort vessel for ocean convoys, able to steam long distances without refuelling and armed principally with anti-submarine weapons, yet much cheaper and quicker to build than the fleet destroyer. Frigates may be said to form the backbone of the modern navy. There are several types and some may soon be armed with guided missiles. But their main duty is still the protection of the trade upon which the safety of the empire depends. The word was originally applied to fast open rowing boats used in the Mediterranean. In Tudor times English seamen called large open boats used as tenders for larger vessels by the name of frigate. And in the 17th century the term was applied to state-owned warships of all sizes. It implied grace and speed. By the mid-18th century the word frigate was the official designation in the Royal Navy of warships carrying their main armament of at least 24 guns on a single deck, with further guns mounted on the quarter deck and forecastle. In 1757 there were 28-, 32- and 36-gun frigates. They served as the eyes of a fleet, they convoyed merchant ships and they cruised independently against the enemy's trade. Frigate captains stood the best chance of making a fortune from the prize money which was the constant theme of naval conversation, fore and aft, in wartime. The first ironclad in the Royal Navy, H.M.S. *Warrior*, was called a frigate because her armament, the most powerful afloat in the world at the date of her launch in 1860, was mostly mounted on a single deck. Soon afterwards the term was dropped in the Royal Navy for the designation of modern construction, until it was revived in 1942.

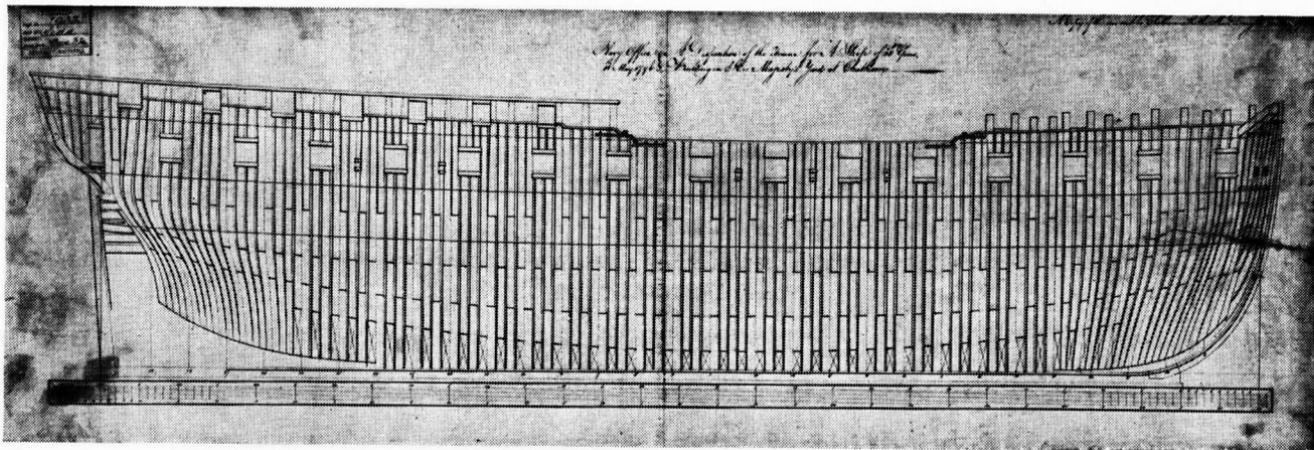
H.M.S. *Trincomalee*, a 46-gun sailing frigate (in the sense Nelson, who never had enough of them, understood the word), was built at Bombay in 1817. Today, as the Training Ship *Foudroyant*, administered



(a)



(b)



Plans of the frigate *Leda* built 1796.

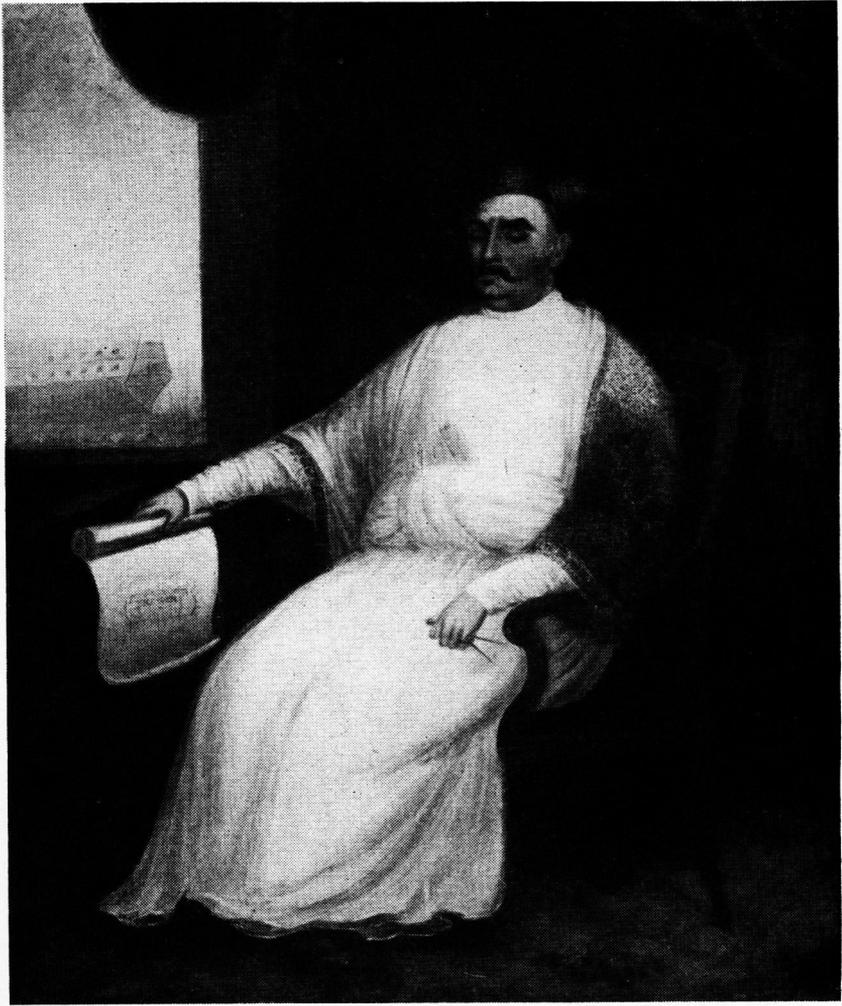
A note states that similar plans were sent out to Bombay in 1813 for building the frigates *Amphitrite* and *Trincomalee* (page 92).  
From the originals in the National Maritime Museum.

- (a) Sheer draught, half-breadth and body plans.
- (b) Profile of inboard works.
- (c) Disposition of the frame.

by a Society named the Foudroyant Trust, she lies at her moorings in Portsmouth Harbour, off the Gosport shore, opposite Messrs. Camper and Nicholson's flourishing yacht yard. Near her, in Portsmouth Dockyard, are the tall masts of H.M.S. *Victory*. The *Foudroyant* is a hulk floating high in the water. Shorn of her own tall spars it is difficult to imagine the flash frigate well known in the West Indies and Pacific a century ago. But she still spells romance to the many boys and girls who each summer learn on board of her, in happy surroundings, something of a sailor's life, and how to tie his knots and read his charts and pull and sail boats.

It is a noteworthy comment on the slow development of the ship in the 18th and early 19th centuries that the frigate *Trincomalee*, still afloat after 142 years, was one of a class of at least thirty-three ships, launched between 1806 and 1830; all were built to the same lines, those of an even older frigate, the *Leda*, laid down at Chatham in 1796 and launched in 1800, well called by Sir William Symond's biographer "the fruitful mother of about thirty English ships". Of the thirty, two, the *Amphitrite* and *Trincomalee*, were both built at Bombay and of teak. Another of the thirty survives and is still in commission. This is H.M.S. *Unicorn*, an R.N.R. Drill Ship afloat at Dundee, and built at Chatham in 1824.

The East India Company had had a Dockyard at Bombay since 1735 but only since 1805 had ships been built there for the Royal Navy. English shipwrights swore by English oak. The best quality oak tree took one hundred years to reach maturity and about forty of these oaks could grow on one acre. To build a ship of the line of 2,000 tons meant the clearing of fifty of these ideal acres and in wartime the Royal Navy kept in commission some 100 ships of the line. An oak built ship required very extensive repairs at the end of twelve or fourteen years. It was pointed out that a ship built of the best teak lasted some thirty years by comparison. And the teak was not affected by extremes of heat or cold, did not corrode iron fastenings as the oak did and also resisted the teredo navalis. In addition, it required little seasoning and did not splinter under shot fire. The English shipwrights on the Thames resisted the introduction of teak built vessels from India but the increasing shortage of English oak and the difficulty of securing adequate supplies of timber elsewhere, especially after the defection of the North American colonies, forced the Admiralty's hand. Some very fine wooden warships were built at Bombay under the direction of members of the Wadia family. Jamsetjee Bomanjee Wadia was one of the two Master Builders at the Bombay Dockyard from 1793 until



JAMSETJEE BOMANJEE WADIA 1756—1821.  
Master Builder in the dockyard at Bombay 1793-1821 (page 90).  
From a painting by Edward Nash in the National Maritime Museum.

his death in 1821. In 1838 the fifth generation of the Bombay family of Master Shipwrights visited this country to study the building of steamships. They were hospitably received and published an interesting journal describing their visit, on leaving London in 1851. They studied the different timbers used in shipbuilding, remarking proudly "after all we have seen we think there is nothing like teak. It is almost everlasting . . . ."

The plans from which the *Leda* was built have been preserved at Greenwich. Notes in red ink on them state:

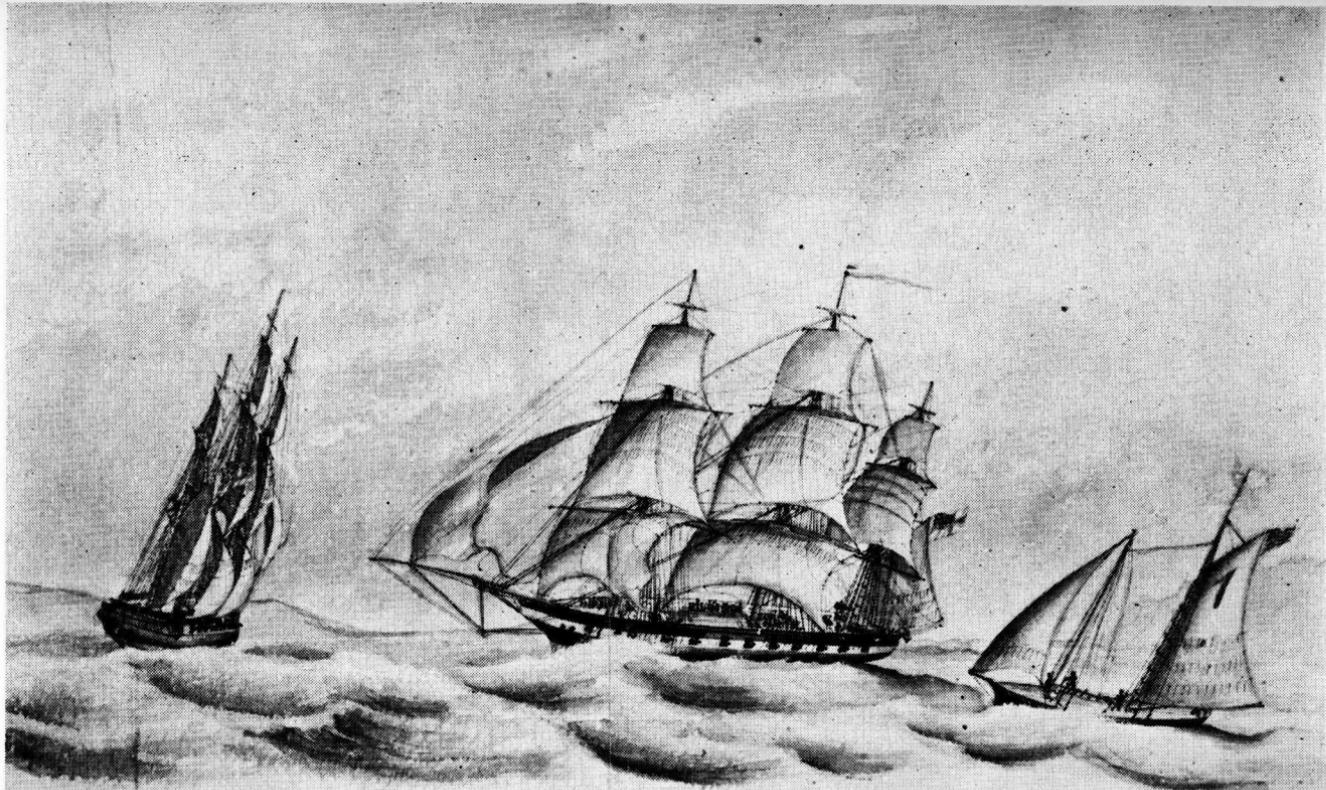
"N.B. All the drawings by which the *Surprize* was built at Milford were recalled for the purpose of being forwarded to Bombay in the *Java* Frigate for building two Frigates, named *Amphitrite* and *Trincomalee*; the *Java* having been sunk in an action with an American ship of superior force, another copy of the Sheer and Frame was sent in H.M. Ship *Stirling Castle* of 74 guns in April 1813 and Profile and Plans 18 December 1813".

"N.B. A duplicate of the Profile and Plans was sent to Portsmouth 5 May 1814 to be forwarded in the Hon. Company's extra Ship *Tigris* for building *Amphitrite* and *Trincomalee* at Bombay".

The *Java* was captured by the U.S. Frigate *Constitution*, Commodore Bainbridge, 29 December, 1812. The ship was such a wreck that she sank soon after, carrying down with her a quantity of copper, stores for building the *Cornwallis* at Bombay. The Americans thought she had been carrying gold and were deeply disappointed until told of their mistake by the British survivors.

The *Trincomalee* was laid down in 1814 and built of Malabar teak. On the 29th May, 1816, the Parsee ceremony of the Silver Nail was performed. The Governor of Bombay drove a silver nail into the keel. The ship was launched on the 19th October, 1817. Her dimensions as built were: length of gun deck, 150 ft. 4½ ft.: extreme breadth, 40 ft. 3¼ in.: tons, 1,066 (1,447 load capacity). The frigate reached Portsmouth in April, 1819 and was laid up "in ordinary". The long French wars were over and the Royal Navy was being reduced from its war strength.

The *Trincomalee* spent a long time at Portsmouth, where her armament was changed. Originally 26 thirty-two pounders and 2 eight-inch guns on the upper deck and 4 thirty-two pounders and 10 thirty-two pounder carronades on the quarter deck, in 1845 this was reduced to 24 thirty-two pounder guns on the main deck and 2 eight-inch shell guns, fore and aft. At long last, in 1847 she was commissioned by Captain Richard Warren. In those days the newly appointed



*Her Majesty's Ships "Amphitrite" & "Trincomalee" Beating out of San Francisco on Sep<sup>r</sup> 25<sup>th</sup> 1854.*

Sketch of the *Trincomalee* beating out of San Francisco in 1854 (page 95).  
By Henry Hand, acting Mate of H.M.S. *Amphitrite*.  
From the original in the National Maritime Museum.

captain commissioned a hulk with only the lower masts standing. He had to collect his own crew and even some of the officers did not join for a week or two. The ship had to be entirely rigged by her own men and fitted out in every way. Stores of every kind had to be drawn from the dockyard and properly stowed, boats applied for, arms of every kind got on board. There might be a draft of men from the *Victory*, flagship of the Port Admiral, and some little grog shop would be labelled The Rendezvous and posters put out, headed VOLUNTEERS, "none but the right sort need apply". While fitting out, officers and men were billeted in a hulk, alive with rats. The Admiralty supplied places to eat in and sleep in but nothing else and all mess traps had to be provided by officers and men.

The ship's company of 220 persons included the captain, three lieutenants, the master, chaplain, surgeon, paymaster, naval instructor, six midshipmen, first lieutenant Royal Marines, Gunner, Boatswain, Carpenter and a number of junior officers. A youngster joining the ship would be expected quickly to know the ropes, box the compass, be able to sail the ship six points off the wind. Gunnery was taught on board H.M.S. *Excellent*. Elaborate lists were kept by all watchkeepers of Watch, Station and Quarter Bills so that every man on board knew where he should be and what he should do on all occasions. Every man on stepping on to the quarter deck saluted by touching or raising his hat. Watches were set and bells struck. At sea the log was hove twice each watch. The men were allowed to choose their own mess mates. There was an old saying. "A messmate before a shipmate. A shipmate before a dog. And a dog before a soldier." There was plenty of hard work. From the deck to the main truck at the masthead measured 174 ft. and the main yard was 78 ft. 6 in. in length. Constant vigilance was required to guard against the dangers of fire or of some failure aloft.

After a period on the North American and West Indies station the *Trincomalee* returned to England and paid off at Devonport in 1850. In 1852 she was recommissioned at Devonport by Captain Wallace Houston and joined the Pacific Squadron of six ships. The Rear-Admiral David Price wore his flag in the *President*, 50 guns. There was the *Pique*, 40 guns, and the *Trincomalee* joined her sister frigate the *Amphitrite* built at Bombay the year before her. There was also the *Dido*, 18 guns and the steam sloop *Virago*, 6 guns. Being built of teak, both the *Trincomalee* and *Amphitrite* were regarded as especially suited for service on distant stations. British sailors were inclined to desert in South American ports. The declaration of war against Russia found some of the squadron at Valparaiso and the speech made by Captain

Frederick of the *Amphitrite* has been preserved and reads strangely today.

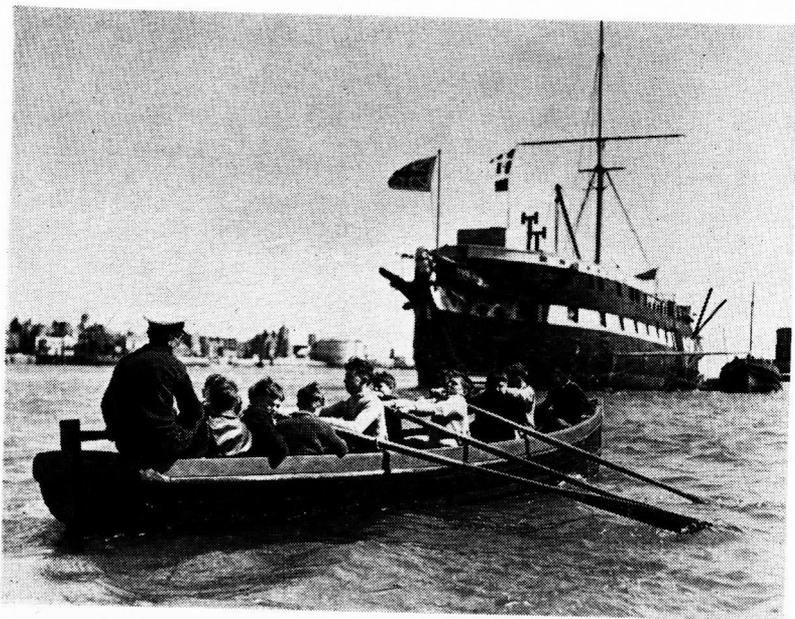
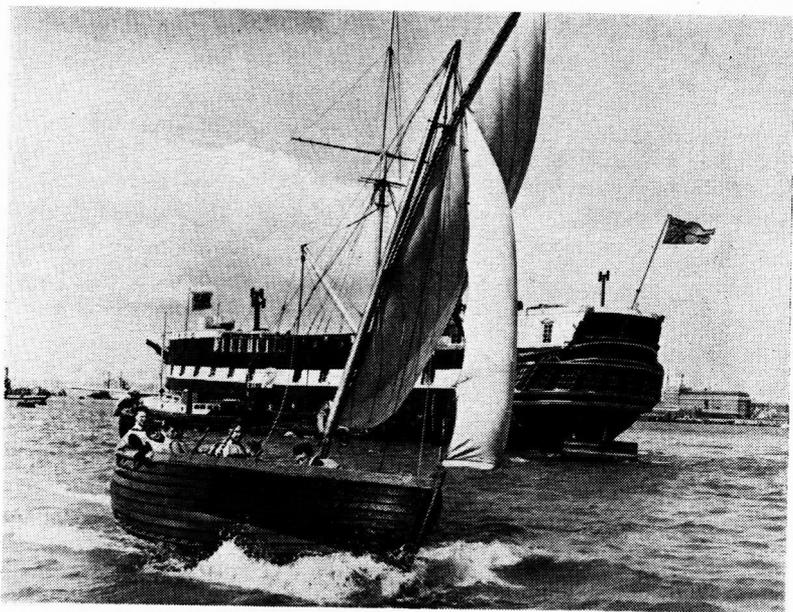
“My men, I have to tell you that war has been declared, and we have to join the Flag without delay. I am as sorry as any of you that I cannot give you leave, but in times like these we must all put up with such little inconveniences, which I hope you will all do. I am sorry to say that all have not done so, but I am sure any who would desert their country in times like these are much better away than here and if you only look at that wheel, and recollect who spoke those words on it, I am sure there are very few who will not do their duty manfully and cheerfully. Pipe down.”

It proved very difficult to man the navy on the outbreak of war and very many officers served afloat again who had been ashore for many years. The army faced the same troubles. Lord Raglan in the Crimea could never get rid of the habit of calling the enemy the French.

Admiral Price, who enjoyed a distinguished record and had proved himself a gallant officer in the far off French wars, joined up with a French squadron in the Pacific and looked around for Russians to fight against. Disgusted at criticism, the admiral committed suicide off the Russian port of Petropenlovski and the attack carried out the next day was unsuccessful. But the *Trincomalee* was elsewhere and probably did not fire a shot in anger. Captain Wallace Houston appears to have been a man of some character of whom it would be well to know more. It is recorded that he had all his ship's company dressed in red shirts and fancy caps. The *Trincomalee*, *Amphitrite* and the French frigate *Artèmise* were sent to cruise off the coasts of California for the protection of trade.

A journal kept on board the *Amphitrite* gives some ideas of life at the same time on board of her sister ship. There are theatricals at Honolulu, the pieces being “Rifle Brigade”, “Raising the Wind” and “Valet de Sham”. “Getting up a theatre” is noted on another occasion with profits for the Pitcairn islanders. On Christmas day the captain dined in the gunroom with the midshipmen, the warrant officers in the wardroom and the men had a double allowance of grog. Sixteen bells were struck at midnight to mark the new year. The ship's company is mustered by open list. We have a picture of the work going on all the time on board of this floating township, the sailmaker and his crew, stitching, the blacksmith at his forge. The *Trincomalee* is referred to affectionately as the “Trincy”. Her ship's company as the “Trincies”. A sketch by a mate in the *Amphitrite* shows the two chummy frigates beating out of San Francisco together on the 23rd September, 1854. The *Trincomalee* paid off at Chatham the end of 1857.

The Russian war had sounded the knell for wooden warships.



The Training Ship *Foudroyant*, late *Trincomalee*, in Portsmouth Harbour to-day. The sailing and pulling boats are manned by schoolboys, here getting their first experience of a sailor's life.

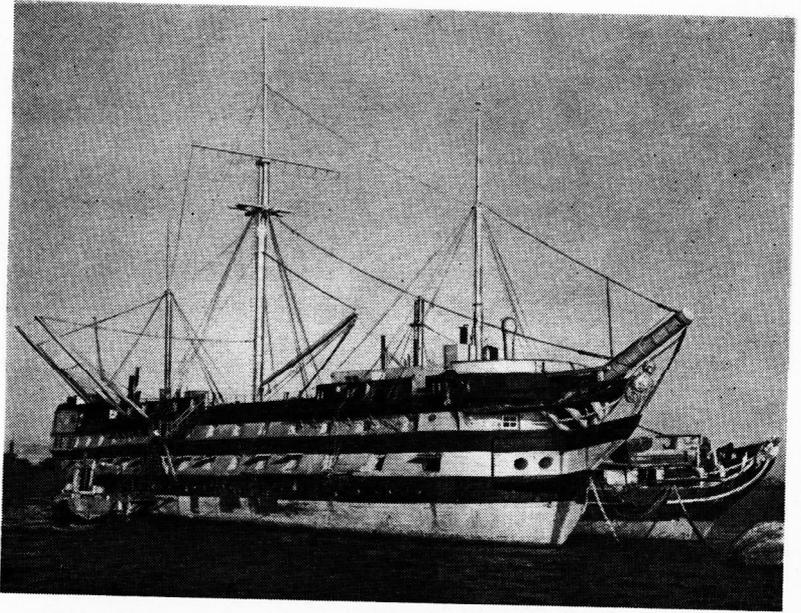
Wooden frigates were being disposed of fast, because outmoded, although not worn out. The navy was quickly acquiring a new look which many progressive officers thought long overdue. In 1853 naval ratings were enlisted for certain terms of continuous service and in 1857 they were given a naval uniform. In 1853, when Queen Victoria reviewed the fleet at Spithead, the press first commented on the new steam fleet, for of 25 warships assembled only three were sailing ships, whilst 13 were screw and 9 paddle wheel steamers. As late as 1867 the *Victoria* sailed home from Gibraltar, the last wooden three-decker to serve as flagship of the Mediterranean fleet.

But the *Trincomalee* still had a duty to perform. In 1859 the Naval Reserve Act, which applied only to seamen, encouraged men to do 28 days drill on board drill ships under the orders of the Comptroller General of the Coastguard. This act was followed in 1861 by a similar scheme for R.N.R. officers. The *Trincomalee* was commissioned as an R.N.R. Drill Ship in 1861 and sent to Sunderland. Here in 1862 she was inspected by Gladstone, then Chancellor of the Exchequer and an Hon. Elder Brother of Trinity House, who visited Sunderland in October and spoke to the R.N.R. then training in H.M.S. *Trincomalee*, under Captain Thomas Heard.

In 1863 the *Trincomalee* was at Hartlepool, at West Hartlepool from 1864 to 1877, when she was moved to Southampton Water. She was sold to Mr. Wheatley Cobb in 1897. He had recently assisted in the repurchase of Nelson's *Foudroyant* from a German firm of shipbreakers in 1892. The *Foudroyant* had been restored and was sailed round the coast until wrecked off Blackpool in a gale on the 15th June, 1897. Mr. Wheatley Cobb lived on board his new frigate which he renamed the *Foudroyant* and trained on board of her various young men who later took up the sea as a career.

So much for the story of H.M.S. *Trincomalee*. As the T.S. *Foudroyant* she provides a home and a background for youngsters to get the feeling for the sea life. A small staff inculcates them with the traditions of good fellowship and the trained discipline which seafaring demands. The same pupils in many cases return again and again. But the old ship has suffered much at the hands of time and man. The Malabar teak is sound but above the waterline inferior woods have been used to make the many alterations necessary to convert a sailing frigate into a drill ship and a holiday training ship. The *Foudroyant* Trust, although handicapped by lack of adequate funds for a complete restoration, has in hand a long-term programme for keeping the ship habitable and afloat and slowly improving. She is a monument to the old sailing navy

which we must not let die. There are fascinating nooks and crannies between decks recalling the daily life of the 220 officers and men who formed her ship's company a century ago. The capstan, the bitts, the wheel, old guns serving as ballast, the carpenter's walk, all these remind us of the jolly Jack Tars about whom Dibden sang. The Tars, gathered together by the Press Gang, kept in order by the cat of nine tails, yet capable of carrying a British frigate, as Napoleon remarked, wherever there was a meadow covered with dew enough to float her.



The *Foudroyant* and the *Implacable* (in foreground) at Portsmouth. The *Implacable* was destroyed in 1949. (page 12).

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