March 30, 2004

We started out the morning with friends in Bath and then drove to Stonehenge, arriving about 11:00 am. Drizzle began falling as we approached the parking lot and purchased tickets. We approached the ancient monument through a tunnel under the road, following a timeline that helped me realize that Stonehenge was begun ten times longer in the past than the time that has passed since Columbus first sailed. The stone circles were impressive; the mystery of their purpose remains. The rain became heavier and shortened our visit.

We left Stonehenge and drove toward Salisbury, stopping at Old Sarum on the way. Sarum is the name of the city that preceded Salisbury on a sight about 3 miles north of the modern city. First inhabited during the Stone Age, the a huge earthen mound is still surrounded by a deep ditch, characteristic of hill forts at a time before the Romans arrived in Britain. The site was later inhabited by the Romans and Anglo-Saxons, and a church stood where now only foundations remain. We stopped in Salisbury for lunch and to see the Cathedral, a magnificent structure built in the Middle Ages. We then drove on to Portsmouth.

The Portsmouth Harbor is the sight of the Naval Heritage Center. The Royal Navy Museum contains exhibits from several centuries of the British Navy, including a number of ships. We toured the museum, the hull of the Mary Rose, the HMS Victory (Nelson's flagship at Trafalgar), and the Mary Rose Exhibit. I'll examine the Mary Rose Exhibit more thoroughly as a museum exhibit that reflected life and society in Tudor England. The Mary Rose was a favorite warship of Henry VIII, but it sank near Portsmouth Harbor in the 1540's and was salvaged along with many artifacts in the 1980's. The exhibit contains unique items which provide of glimpse of life in Tudor England.

A number of items from the ship are on display. The hull itself is about half intact, with lots of additional timbers also having been salvaged. Numerous weapons, including bows and arrows, cannon, and shot were on exhibit. Tools for mending, making cloth, navigating and sailing, and barbering were displayed. Different kinds of clothing and personal items such as games were also present.

The navy was developing as an important institution in Britain at this time, based on what I saw. A large ship like the Mary Rose would require considerable resources to build, arm and man; Tudor England and specifically Henry VII and Henry VIII were willing to devote these resources. The nation itself was surrounded by water and therefore the navy was a means of defense and ships provided transportation to explore and settle new territories. The Mary Rose sank less than fifty years before England defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588, which was about the same time Sir Walter Raleigh and other settled Roanoke. Jamestown (1607) and Plymouth Colony (1620) came in this same era. The navy, and the Tudor/Stuart society that developed it, made possible the defense, exploration and settlement that ultimately led to the British Empire.

Everyday life must have been hard for individuals. The quarters on the ship were cramped, and the food must have been limited in quantity and quality. The tools of the barber surgeon indicate the primitive state of health care at the time. Clothing was simple and limited. The games, musical instruments and writing equipment demonstrate the variety of activities for spare time.

All of the people on the ship when it went down were men--many of them "pressed" into service, which meant that they were basically kidnapped and sent to see. I wonder what happened to the women who were left behind. A social hierarchy on ship reflected that on shore, with the crew generally coming from the lower classes and the officers from higher classes.
This exhibit was impressive. I came to realize how important the navy was to Britain; if the nation could rule the seas it could explore, conquer, settle, defend itself, bring in raw materials, and export finished products.