

## **Sea and Learn – All About Nelson: The Powder Monkey**

Samuel (Sam) Robbins was born in London on the 12<sup>th</sup> March 1792 and as a boy he would have grown up in poor conditions. His parents may not have been able to clothe or feed him. One way out of this type of life was for Sam to join the Royal Navy. This could be done as a volunteer, to enter the Marine Society or on the rare occasion his parents could sell him to the Navy. Sam went to the Marine Society where he would remain till he was fit to join a ship. During his stay he would get preliminary training aboard a ship in the Thames. This training was carried out by a Boatswain and his mates. Sam would have been given basic seamanship lessons and the chance to learn to read and write. On completion of his training Sam was taken from the Society to Portsmouth to join his first ship, HMS Victory, at anchor at Spithead, on the 20<sup>th</sup> August 1805.



On reaching the Dockyard Sam would have been taken to one of the boats going out to the Victory. Arriving at the ship Sam would climb the side till he reached the upper-deck where he would be taken by a Boatswain's Mate to be entered on to the ship's books. The ship's books are a record of all the Officers and Sailors on board that ship. Sam would now be given his ship's book number. He used this to identify his kit, belongings and hammock it would be used by him when he collected his pay. After this he would be given a mess where he ate his meals and have his duties on board HMS Victory explained to him. Sam is now a ship's boy Third Class: the bottom of the Navy's seaman class. From here he could work his way up to Ordinary Seaman, then to Able Seaman. As a boy he would have been paid between £7-00 and £8-00 a year which was sufficient to keep him in clothing and other small items he might require.

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The duties of a boy were many; he could be rated servant either for the wardroom where the Officers lived or the Gunroom where the Midshipman was to be found. These were the future Officers of the Navy. The Warrant Officers were the Shipwright, Cook, Sailmaker and other such people. All were grim jobs as servants were treated like dogs at the beck and call of everyone, or he would do menial duties such as cleaning out the manger where the ship's live stock was kept. He may have had to clean the ship's toilets known as the Heads and swab and scrub the decks.

Sam would also be given training in seamanship and ships duties along with the other boys. At 6am (0600) the Boatswain's Mates would wake the ship's company. They would tumble out of their hammocks and if they were not fast enough they could be hit with a Boatswain's starter (a length of tarred rope) to get them moving, get dressed and lash up their hammocks. This had to be done very tightly as a hammock could be used as a life jacket. The hammock was then taken to the upper-deck and put in the netting around the ship's side.

Then would come the first meal of the day - breakfast- which could be cold porridge called Burgoo, ships biscuits, cocoa or Scots coffee. There was no hot food for breakfast as the cook did not get up until 5am (0500) when he would first light the galley fire. This would take time to get going, but not in time for breakfast. After breakfast Sam would take part in the ship's routine duties which were planned for all the ship's company.

### MONDAY

The men were to wash their clothes in the morning and drill with the great guns in the afternoon.

### TUESDAY

In the morning the hammocks are to be scrubbed, Marines to exercise with muskets. In the afternoon the seamens' bedding was to be aired.

### WEDNESDAY

The boats sails are to be scrubbed, exercise reefing and furling sails. In the afternoon the great guns to be exercised.



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### THURSDAY

The men are to clean themselves and their clothes and be inspected by the Officers. In the afternoon the men will make and mend their clothes.

### FRIDAY

The men will wash their clothes and the great guns will be exercised both in the morning and afternoon.

### SATURDAY

The fire pump is to be used to wash down the poop deck. If the weather is dry the lower deck and orlop deck are to be scrubbed.

### SUNDAY

The men are to draw clean hammocks then to dress in their best clothes to be inspected by their Officers. A Divine service will be held or the articles of war are to be read to the men. After this, except for any emergencies, the men would have the rest of the day to themselves.

Every day there were jobs and work to be done. Cooks of the messes would collect that day's victuals (food) from the stores which was then prepared ensuring that it arrived in time to be cooked for lunch. Around the ship other tasks would be going on like pumping the water out of the ship's bilge or washing the overhead beams with vinegar to disinfect the insides of the ship. At 11am (1100) it was compulsory that everyone witness that day's punishment on the Quarter deck where a man could be flogged with the cat-of-nine-tails.



After the punishment the man would be taken down to the ship's surgeon who would rub salt into the wounds. Salt was the cheapest antiseptic available to the seamen and they had to pay for their own medicines.

12(noon) 1200: the first rum issue is made, and the only hot meal of the day was eaten made up from salt beef, pork or fish that would have been boiled. To this would be added dried peas, rice or

oatmeal. To drink, the men could have either four pints of beer or one pint of wine if there was no rum. The men's drinks would be laced with lemon juice if available to help combat scurvy. At 1-30 (1330) return to ship's duties for the afternoon. At 4pm (1600) supper. Unless the men had saved some food from lunch they would have to put up with ship's biscuits (which were infested with weevils), cheese (riddled with worms), or butter (which was so rancid they used it in the same way we use oil today).

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Also at this time the second spirit issue would take place. The rum was always watered down so the men could not store it for use at a later time. Drunkenness was forbidden in the Navy. The boys were allowed half a man's amount. After supper the ship's company would be beaten to quarters (they would be called to quarters by the beating of a drum). Each member of the ship's company would go to their action station as if going into battle.

If all went well they would be inspected and then stood down. The sailors then collected their hammocks from the netting and slung them on the gundecks in the right positions. Sam and the other boys would be berthed in separate parts of the ship away from the men. They slung their hammocks in the cable tiers or on the upper gun decks, according to the size of the ship.

A break in the ship's routine could take place at any time when the ship went into battle. The ship's company would be beat to quarters; Sam would run down to the hanging magazines to collect the bags of gun powder then take them to the guns to keep them in action. As the action continued Sam could find himself supplying several guns with powder cartridges as other boys were killed or wounded. Sam would be kept running to and from the magazines over the blood soaked and splintered decks.



He had to carry the powder cartridges cases or if this was not possible the bags of gun powder under his coat so as to avoid the sparks from the guns' flintlocks. Sam and the other boys got their nickname of "Powder Monkeys" from carrying the bags of powder. It was a hard life for one so young and some of the boys were bullied or mistreated. In time, those who survived the horrors of war or did not desert became ordinary seaman earning a £1-5-0 (£1-25) a month.

For Sam the greatest battle he would have taken part in was the Battle of Trafalgar 21st October 1805 when Lord Nelson was the Commander-in-chief of the Mediterranean Fleet.

Lord Nelson was killed in the battle and his body was brought back to England in H.M.S. Victory. He was buried in St Paul's Cathedral in London on the 9th January 1806. Victory's ships company was split up and sent to other ships. Sam left Victory in January 1806 and was sent to H.M.S. Ocean. It is possible that Sam lived to be an old man or he may have been killed in his next battle.

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Boy's powder monkeys on HMS  
Victory's upper deck



A guns crew on HMS Victory