

## **Sea and Learn – Lesson Plan: A Letter Home**

**Key Stage:** Two

**National Curriculum Links:** En1 4a, 4b; En2 3a; En3 1a, 1b, 1d, 1e, 2b, 2c, 5g, 5h

**Main Subject Focus:** English

### **Learning Outcomes:**

Children will:

- Know about life on-board HMS Victory.
- Know about some of the jobs the crewmembers carried out.
- Be able to write in the first-person.
- Be able to use a joined cursive style of handwriting

### **Resources Required:**

- Internet access
- Selection of relevant non-fiction texts
- Whiteboard and pens
- OHP
- Handwriting pens

### **Lesson Structure:**

1. Ask the children to suggest the types of jobs that would be performed on HMS Victory – note all ideas on a whiteboard.
2. Tell children that they will be taking on the role of a crewmember of the HMS Victory and that they will be writing a letter home.
3. Ask the children to work in pairs to find out the jobs on-board HMS Victory and what life would have been like for the crew. (See Teacher's Notes & Worksheets 1 & 2) You may wish to read the provided information to your children or read altogether as a whole class guided reading session.
4. As you read through the notes, children can jot down key words. You may wish to make these notes available to children who have difficulty locating the relevant information. Make children aware of the websites available and any non-fiction texts you have gathered in school.
5. Once the children have their information, ask them to draft a letter home to their family. Remind them about writing in the first person and demonstrate this if necessary. Once they have drafted their letter, they can use a drafting partner to read through and check their work before showing you.
6. Once the draft has been edited, ask the children to write a final copy that could be used for display. Insist on cursive joined handwriting and give children handwriting pens to use if they do not have one.

**Extension/Homework ideas:**

- Children could perform a role-play with each crewmember returning home and telling their families about their life and job on-board. Perhaps the rest of the class could ask the crewmember questions about their life (hot-seating).
- Ask children to write a letter in reply from the family. They may need to find some background information about life in Georgian England to help them.

## **Sea and Learn – Teacher’s Notes**

### **Working at sea**

#### **The Marines**

Marines served as a professional military unit, both afloat and ashore. They also protected the ship’s officers from the crew. During battle they provided extra manpower to operate guns, small arms fire and disciplined defence at close quarters. Under normal sailing conditions they were employed as sentinels guarding the powder rooms, magazines, the spirit room and other storerooms, and the entrances to the admiral’s and officers’ quarters. This precaution was considered essential after the mutinies in 1797. Their other duties were to give general assistance to seamen when unskilled heavy labour was required, such as hauling on ropes when the ship was manoeuvring. They also supplied manpower to help turn the capstan to weigh (pull up the) anchor or embark (take on) heavy stores.

#### **The Gunners**

The gunner, William Rivers, was responsible for the maintenance of all guns and carriages. He ensured that gunpowder kept in the magazine was safe and dry, and that there was a plentiful supply of ready-to-use cartridges available. Assisting him were six mates, twelve-quarter gunners and two yeoman of the powder room. He was also responsible for all small arms: muskets, bayonets, pistols, cutlasses, pikes and hatchets. For this equipment he had an armourer, his mates and a gunsmith. The gunner was also in charge of the gunroom situated at the after end of the lower gun deck where he kept a watch over the ship’s boys.

#### **Powder Monkey**

A ‘powder monkey’ was the term given to anyone who passed filled cartridges and shot during action from the magazines below decks. For speed and to ensure a continuous supply of powder, teams of men, older boys and women (when carried on board) were organised on each deck to relay cartridges in a continuous chain between the powder magazines and the appropriate gun decks, with some men stationed at hatchways to hand cartridges up to the next deck. Younger boys were used on the gun decks to convey powder from hatchways to the guns and to douse (dampen) down loose powder around the guns to prevent explosions. In most cases, the ship would be fighting on one side only - leaving the deck on the opposite side relatively free for the powder monkeys to run back and forth from the hatches to replenish the salt boxes placed well behind the guns. Each saltbox, containing two ready charges, was the responsibility of a member of the gun crew designated as the powder man.

## **Sea and Learn – Teacher’s Notes**

### **Life on board**

#### **Pay and conditions**

The seamen on HMS Victory had no official uniform. A recruit had to buy clothes from the purser, or cloth from which he made his own, often with great skill. The cost was deducted from his pay, which was 23s 6d a month. He didn't receive his pay until the end of a voyage, and often not even then, which was a great hardship.

The seaman lived on the gun deck where he also fought in battle. He slept in a hammock slung between the deck beams. The hammocks were only about 20 inches apart, but as the crew was divided into two watches, each man had 40 inches to himself.

The confined and stark conditions on board ship often created a good sense of friendship and sailors enjoyed each other's company off duty. Seamen made the best of their cramped living quarters, enjoying games of dice and cards, telling tales, playing musical instruments, carving, drawing, practising knots or model making. Sometimes sailors sang sea shanties. These were rhythmic work songs sung on board to help repetitive tasks such as hauling on ropes.

#### **Diet**

The problem of finding and storing food was a large one on a man-o-war. There was no refrigeration or tinned food. What was called fresh meat had to be packed into wooden barrels with salt. Cooking would help kill some of the putrid meat and on journeys to the cold Arctic, meat would sometimes last longer than on journeys to the tropics. The same applied to water. Fresh water kept in wooden barrels soon turned green and slimy. Ships put into port as often as possible to “wood and water”. The wood was for the cooking stove. Coal stocks did not last long. Fresh meat in the form of live animals was carried.

He ate with his messmates at a narrow table hooked up between the guns. He had beef or pork stew, but the meat was salt and often so hard as to be almost inedible, even after being boiled for hours. Instead of bread he had ship's biscuit, and instead of water, which did not keep well at sea, he had a gallon of beer a day. The beer ration was replaced by wine in the Mediterranean and by rum, mixed with water to make grog, in the West Indies. This description of the diet, given by an 11-year-old midshipman killed at Trafalgar, was not exaggerated:

*“We live on beef which has been ten or eleven years in the cask and on biscuit which snakes your throat cold in eating it owing to the maggots, which are very cold when you eat them! Like calf's-foot jelly or blomage [blancmange] — being very fat indeed. We drink wine, which is exactly like bullock's blood and sawdust mixed together.”*

## **Sea and Learn – Teacher’s Notes**

Midshipmen may have found the food worse than on land but many of the seamen were glad of the opportunity to eat regularly. In fact the lure of three square meals a day, coined because of the square wooden plates they ate from, was appealing.

### **Health**

During the time of HMS Victory life at sea bred disease. The worst killers were yellow fever, spread in tropical climates by infected mosquitoes, and typhus, spread by body lice. The lack of fresh fruit and vegetables often led to another serious disease, scurvy. The cause of this ailment was already known, and Nelson took care to obtain fresh provisions. He himself said that a seaman on a ship of the line was finished at the age of forty-five. In fact the seaman’s daily routine was far more dangerous than the occasional combat: during the French wars, thirteen times as many seamen died of disease and accident as were killed in battle.

### **Discipline**

A seaman could be flogged and given as many as thirty-six lashes for drunkenness, quarrelling, insolence or neglect of duty. Such behaviour was often as offensive to a man’s own shipmates as to the officers. According to Victory’s log, ten of her seamen got thirty-six lashes each for drunkenness two days before Trafalgar. The offender was stripped to the waist and tied to a grating on the upper deck. The whole ship’s company was called up to see him flogged by the boatswain’s mates. The ship’s surgeon was in attendance. A worse punishment was “flogging round the fleet.” The victim was put into a boat, rowed round the fleet, and thrashed before each ship’s company. A man could be hanged at the yardarm for serious crimes such as desertion or mutiny. To us such punishments seem brutal, but this was a brutal age hanging and flogging were still common penalties for ordinary citizens who broke the law on land. Ship’s captains had great power and they had to be harsh disciplinarians to keep their rough unruly crews under control.

*Information supplied by Portsmouth Historic Dockyard*

### **Useful Websites:**

[www.flagship.org.uk/welcome.html](http://www.flagship.org.uk/welcome.html)  
[www.royalnavalmuseum.org](http://www.royalnavalmuseum.org)

[www.nmm.ac.uk](http://www.nmm.ac.uk)  
[www.hms-victory.com](http://www.hms-victory.com)

## **Sea and Learn – Worksheet (1)**

Using the resources available to you, do some research on what it was like to be a sailor on-board HMS Victory during Georgian Times.



### **Firstly, you will need to:**

- Find out about the different jobs on-board HMS Victory
- Find out what things a sailor ate, wore, what they did their spare time.
- Select a job that you think is interesting and create a character around that job. Give him/her a name, hobbies, personality.

### **When you have collected enough information:**

- Write a letter home to your family.
- Explain to them about your daily routine and your life on a warship.
- Think about the kind of things you would report about your everyday life on-board.
- Remember to write it in the first person.
- Draft it first, then asking a drafting partner to check it before showing your teacher.
- Make any necessary changes and then write the letter again so that it can be displayed. Use a cursive handwriting style.

**Sea and Learn – Worksheet (2)**

Use this research sheet to help you collect the information you need:

**Jobs for the crew**

Job	What they do

**Life on-board HMS Victory**

	Important Information
Pay	
Diet	
Health	
Discipline	
Leisure	