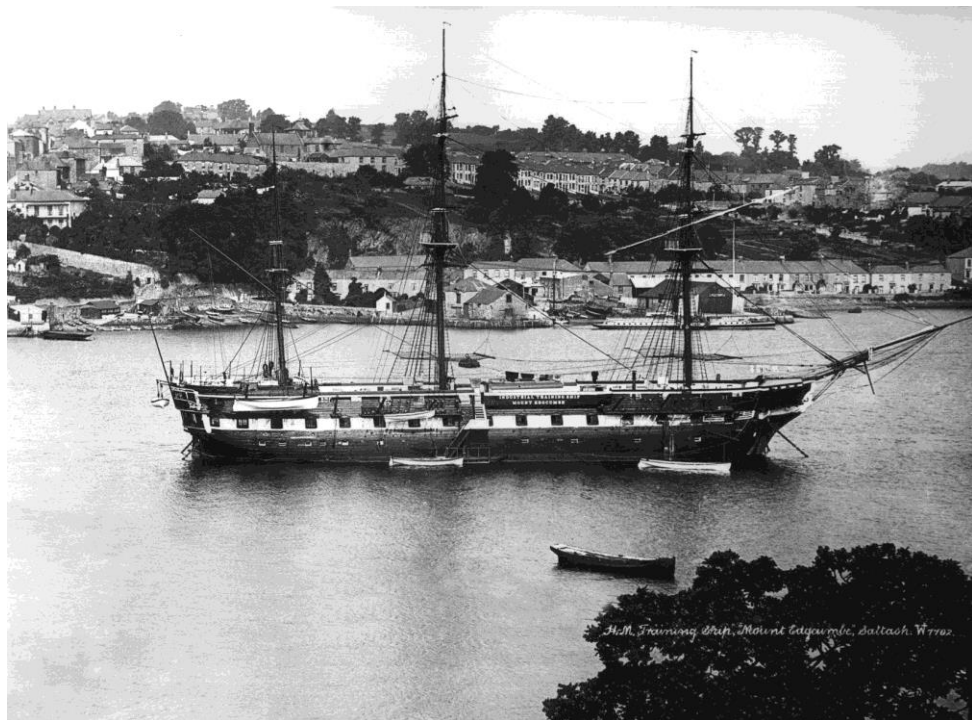


Training Ship Mount Edgcumbe



The *Training Ship Mount Edgcumbe* lay at anchor in Saltash Passage for over 40 years and would have been a familiar sight not only to everyone who lived in Saltash but also to travellers crossing into Cornwall via the Royal Albert Bridge and the Saltash Ferry.

At first Saltash residents feared, suspected, and shunned the boys on the ship regarding them as convicts until the owner of the *Saltash Gazette*, Mr. Dingle, reassured them that the boys were well-behaved. They had to be; they were strictly disciplined. From then on those who lived along Saltash Passage accepted the boys.

Although shore leave was restricted the boys of the Mount Edgcumbe became a familiar sight in Saltash taking part in sports and regattas. The ship's boat crews were highly regarded and frequently won races, even against crack Royal Navy crews. The ship's band was popular, playing at church fetes, garden parties and town fairs. On Sundays the band could often be seen playing on St Budeaux Green or at Saltash Waterside.

Life was hard aboard the Mount Edgcumbe, particularly in winter with no electric or heating. Funding was poor but Saltashers helped with the occasional fund raising concert and church collection.

Although much is known about the ship and its routines from official records and reports there was little written from the boys' perspective until Alfred Smith, (who served on the

Mount Edgcumbe 1910–1912) read an article in the *Western Morning News* (1974) and wrote this letter to the author of the article, local historian Marshal Ware.

Recollections of Alfred Smith 1910 to 1912 (written in 1974)



Alfred Smith serving as an Able Seaman, HMS Vivid WWI

Being a regular reader of the *Western Morning News* I was very interested in your article which appeared in Saturday morning's issue of March 16th, which also showed photos of the Training Ship *Mount Edgcumbe*. They brought back memories to me for I was one of the boys that served under Captain Harkcom from May 1910 until May 1912. When I arrived onboard in May 1910, Captain Bickford was Superintendent, so far as I remember Mr Kitt was Chief Officer, Captain Harkcom taking command later in that year, and coming from *Goshawk*. Other officers I remember at the time were Mr Bartlett, Chief Officer, Mr Dean, Gunnery Officer, Mr Parsons, Boatswain, who trained the boat crews for the various regattas, and Mr Andrews, Headmaster of the elementary school. As the boys were in school one day, and taught seamanship the next alternately, according if you were port or starboard watch. I also remember the quay where we landed and took aboard important

visitors, Captain Harkcom and his family, also the officers of the ship. I also remember the bell at the Saltash wharf that was used to call the ship, when wanting to go on board. For replenishing stores we used the beach at Saltash Passage, and I have landed many times myself.

A lot of boys went into the services, but you will be surprised to know that many went into the fishing industry as apprentices at Brixham and Milford Haven, and there were those that even went farming. I have been happily settled in the community with all my family and have had a very successful career in fishing, thanks to the wonderful training of Captain Harkcom, and the officers of the *Mount Edgcumbe* of the period. Being now 78, I still think Captain Harkcom was a wonderful man.

Alfred Smith's recollections

Sport

A kind farmer used to allow us to use a field on the Saltash side for the boys to indulge in sports such as running, football, cricket, etc., only on Saturdays. Alternately the boys would be landed at the St. Budeaux side, with the ships band for route marches, much to the annoyance of some of the residents I think, for they should surely hear us coming when the band struck up.

Firearms drill

There was firearms drill. Mr Dean was the Gunnery Officer, and each day Monday to Friday he took a class mainly for rifle drill. I may tell we all knew what the butt end of a rifle was with Mr Dean, if anyone was not paying attention.

Boatwork

Then also we trained to man and manage the cutters and gigs, all under the watchful eye of Mr Parsons. There was also the jolly boat which was an eight oared boat, and a coxswain, which was solely used by Captain Harkcom and his family and very important visitors. It was deemed to be a great honour for the boys who were selected to man this boat. Character and ability were factors and to be made coxswain, well that boy was near perfect in every way and would also be a Chief Petty Officer.

Rowing, racing

Mr Parsons also trained the racing boats crews for the regattas. A cutter and a gig was entered for most of the Plymouth regattas, such as Saltash, Mount Wise, Mutton Cove and Sutton Pool, competing against adults and also the *Impregnable* boys. We could always hold our own competing against them all, of course not always winning. Mr. Parsons did not worry about how many strokes of the oars to the minute, it was a case of the oars going in deep, and the following stroke though and if you were rowing against the wind, the oars had to be feathered at the end of the stroke; we were so well trained in this that the rhythm and the speed of the boat was great. The four oared gig that we used to know as 'the white cat', was Mr Pearson's pride for the bottom of the gig was like glass itself and the last preparation he made for a race with it was to give the boats bottom a coat of isinglass which he paid for out of his own pocket.

Punishment

Up to the time of leaving the ship the birch was still used, but only for very serious offences, so it was very rare, but if there was a birching to be done, it was by two or three officers, according to how many strokes were awarded. This was done so the receiver of the birching would not have any hatred towards one particular officer, and all hands on board, Captain, officers and boys would be assembled to witness this punishment, and even the doctor would be called on board, and if he assumed the boy could not take all the punishment he would ask for it to be stopped, and everything was carried out in a very fair and humane manner. The main method of punishment was the cane, if there were any offenders this was carried out after morning divisions and prayers. Captain Harkcom awarded the number of strokes to suit the offence. There again no one officer did all the caning.

Reward

There was another side to Captain Harkcom's way for running the ship which proved what a fair minded man he was. If any boy or boys had done anything good or heroic, without thought for his own person, such as say saving any boy from drowning, praise from Captain Harkcom would be very high, and generally the boy would be rewarded in some way.

Officer's accommodation

Captain Harkcom and his family were the only officers to actually live on board, and had their quarters in the stern of the ship, but each other officer had his own cabin, which he used on his watch on board, which was every other night and alternate weekends. Otherwise they lived ashore with their families, going ashore at about 4 pm if it was the end of their duty period.

Religion

As regards religious services, these took place on board on Sundays. All denominations gathered on the half deck, except for RC's who were taken ashore for their service. The headmaster during the week prepared the boys for the Sunday Service aboard, which was usually conducted by a visiting Padre. Sunday evenings the boys would again be assembled and the Captain would have hymn singing, and give talks on various subjects, sometimes concerning his own life and career. For any special services and confirmations I remember we went ashore to the St. Budeaux side to Church, but I cannot place the Church now. I know it had a cemetery there, for I remember two boys on different occasions who had died at the cottage hospital being buried; this was quite an occasion, as all the C of E boys were assembled and with the band the deceased were given full honours. I also remember we ended the Sabbath Day with the whole ship's company assembled on the fore upper deck just before dusk, weather permitting the boys singing the hymn "The day thou gavest Lord is ended", and many times the singing must have reached out across Saltash.

Shore leave

I remember Captain Harkcom saying at divisions once that he was going to put the boys on trust, and that led to shore leave. He allowed the boys of the watch off duty, that would be the port or starboard watch alternately, who wished to go ashore, leave on Sunday afternoons. We were landed on the St. Budeaux side and naturally most made tracks for the dockyard to see the ships. We had to be back on the beach for going aboard by 4.30 pm, and I never remember any boy breaking this trust, and Captain Harkcom was a very proud man because of this.

Desertions

In other ways during my period of service, I remember about three cases of desertions, and they never got very far away before being brought back to face their punishment, which was one of the cases where the birch was used. But I always remember the Captain saying if you want to run away, I will give you twenty four hours start before raising the alarm, but we will settle up when you are brought back.

Invitations

Also in those days it was amazing the invitations that were sent to the Captain, to allow the boys in parties to different entertainments such as pantomimes around the Christmas season, trips up river to Weir Head on the paddle steamer. We even went to parties at Mount Edgcumbe Park. This was of course through the kindness of the Earl of Mount Edgcumbe, and mainly for the ship's band to entertain. I also remember on two occasions a party was picked out to go camping. The first time we took stores to last three days, put into the cutters, and rowed up the River Lyhner to St. Germans and camped in a field beside the river; this episode ended in disaster the second night out through foul weather.

The second occasion we went to Downderry, but I cannot remember how we travelled, only that the expedition was a complete success.

Food

I think the meals were very good. I cannot say the boys were overfed, but according to those responsible for allocating a meal per boy I suppose they deemed the rations were enough, anyway I cannot say that I was ever hungry. For breakfast we had porridge, a ration of bread and a mug of cocoa. This was made from chocolate bars, and was very fatty and bitter to taste. I believe sugar was added in the making of the drink. The midday meal was varied during the week. Monday was lentil soup with bread. Tuesday and Friday was split pea soup. This was considered by the boys to be the best meal of the week as the soup was yellow and so thick that one could almost stand a spoon in it, and vegetables were added. The rest of the week the dinners consisted of meat, either beef or mutton, boiled potatoes, cabbage or peas. I believe Sunday's dinner was added to with a boiled fruit pudding of duff as we called it. For tea it was just bread and butter and occasionally a ration of old familiar plum or apple jam. I believe it was known as Ticklers jam at the time. This was the last meal of the day; of course it was all rationed out, and it must have been enough for all the boys were fit and well.

Christmas

Christmas was a very good time aboard for the boys as there were turkeys or geese sent aboard, I believe by the Earl of Mount Edgcumbe, and the familiar Christmas pudding, and surprisingly enough, even fruit, all sent aboard by the kind persons who had the welfare of the boys at heart. On the whole I think we were well cared for. Some of the boys who had relatives were given leave to travel for the Christmas period, of course the relatives having to send their fares for this purpose, and on condition that they were strictly responsible for the boys returning to the ship at the end of their leave.

Daily routine

We were aroused by the petty officer of the watches boatswain's whistle at six am. We then had to stow hammocks, as every boy slept in one on the lower deck. We then had to get washed and dressed in the rig of the day, which was a white duck suit. Seven o'clock was breakfast. Every boy sat at the mess tables on the main deck, the same procedure being for each meal. Then there was the general cleaning up to be done ending with the sweeping of all decks and general cleaning. 7.45 boys were assembled for the hoisting of the ensign at exactly 8 am. This was done by the sound of the bugles mainly, but on special occasions the full band was used for the ceremony. Then we assembled on the main deck for divisions and inspection. There were eight divisions, each comprising about thirty boys. These were numbered one to eight, the odd numbers forming the starboard watch, even numbers the port watch. Each division had an officer in charge, who was assisted by a chief petty officer, first class petty officer, a second class petty officer and two leading seamen, all the boys earning these ratings through ability and character. The chief petty officer ran his division, but being answerable to his officer. At 8.30 we assembled for morning prayers after which the Captain read out the orders for the day, letters were read if any, mainly for boys wanted for such careers as the fishing industry, farming and all sorts of careers. I remember that besides going into the navy, there were those that went into the merchant navy and even the cable ship service. At that particular time a couple of boys joined the cable ship *Sir John Pender*, all these boys being time

expired, or nearly expired. I have not mentioned much about Mr Bartlett the Chief Officer, yet this is where he came in as he ran the ship's routine only answerable to the Captain. He gave him all his reports, good and bad, and if there were any boys in the report for any offence this is where the Captain ordered the punishment, mostly with cane according to the offence, but everyone had a fair hearing.

After this assembly was over, one watch port or starboard went to school. There were three classes, the headmaster taking the senior class and his two assistant schoolmasters taking the others. One of the schoolmasters had to be a Roman Catholic, and his particular job was to look after the RC boys in their religious studies. The other watch went to their nautical under officer who taught that particular item. But the boys who had passed out of these classes were called the working party and under Mr Parsons the boatswain carried out all the work required to keep the ship efficiently working. Some of the boys were detailed into the galley to assist the officer cook, the shoemaker's shop, and the tailor's shop, for all the boots and clothing were made aboard ship and the officers concerned taught the boys their trade. Each new boy after arrival was kitted out with a No. 1 blue suit, with navy collar, silk handkerchief and lanyard and an old blue suit belonging to a boy who had left the ship; this was for evening wear, two white duck suits, which was the working rig of the day, the cap and cap band, with ships name, a clothes marker, for all boys clothes had to be marked with his particular number; my number was in fact 104, so I was in the port watch. The boots were only for going ashore in as all the boys were bare footed all the year round whilst aboard, even when in boats' crews. A boy was allocated as cabin boy to each of the officers whose cabins were situated in the after part of the lower deck. Their duty was to keep the cabin clean, also to look after their respective officer's uniforms. The officers' mess was also kept clean and tidy by a couple of boys who also waited on the officers at meal times. Then two boys at a time were selected as cabin boys, for Captain and Mrs Harkcom's quarters. Naturally these were picked boys as being of excellent character and ability, but none of these duties were allowed to interfere with the ships normal routine.

Between noon and two o' clock was dinner time when the mess tables were lowered in position on the main deck, and each mess had a leading seaman in charge and in rotation two different boys of each mess would go to the galley each day to receive the whole ration for their mess, and their job was to serve out equally between the number of boys in the mess. The food was not touched until everyone was seated and grace was sung. After the meal was over, the same boys would wash up the utensils and crockery and generally tidy up. The next day two more boys would assist the leading seaman, until all the boys in the mess had had their turn of the chores. The petty officers had their own mess tables and were also waited on by the boys detailed each day.

The afternoon was a repeat of the morning school and classes for seamanship, the working party continuing with what work was still to be done, until 4 o' clock when school classes and other work was halted. The off duty officers from that time either port or starboard went ashore to be with their families, thus leaving half the officers aboard for the night. Thus alternately every officer was one night aboard and one ashore, except weekends when the officers who came aboard Saturday morning were on duty till Monday four o' clock. This method worked out for the other set of officers next weekend. This is where the Chief Petty Officer of a division came in; if his officer was on weekend leave he was responsible for his division to be properly dressed, clean and orderly, for all inspections,

notably Sunday morning before church, when it was the Captain's inspection. After tea the evenings were spent leisurely, two or three evenings a week the Captain would give lectures and talks, even fire drill may occur. This may mean the order to abandon ship, and everyone with the exception of the fire fighting parties would have to leave the ship in the cutters. I have known even Mrs Harkcom and the children having to go into the jolly boat until the order was given to return. I don't know if she liked the idea or not, but it was all in the routine of the ship. Thankfully this was never needed for a real fire, but we were well trained and always ready. Then at sunset the ceremony of lowering the ensign was pre-formed, again mostly to the sound of the bugle. The boys then had to get their hammocks from the store room and hang them in their own places on the lower deck ready for the signal from the officer of the watch to retire to bed. This was around nine and nine thirty pm according to the time of year. Believe me the boys were then ready to get into their hammocks, for during the day there were never many idle moments. Nor was that the end for some, as night watch had to be kept; this was in two hour sessions for both officers and boys. One officer in charge and two boys on each deck and again a boy petty officer having a sort of wandering job of seeing that the watch was being kept observantly. This method went on until all the officers except the Captain and Chief Officer, and all the boys on the ship, with the exception of special duty boys had their turn, and it started all over again.

That was the end of the usual day's routine, except Saturdays when the whole morning was taken up scrubbing decks and messes and generally cleaning the whole ship right through ready for Captain's inspection. The afternoon was spent on sport ashore, or anything that was arranged to keep the boys interested. Saturday evening was bath night. The huge bath was situated in the fore peak on the main deck, and the boys had to go in a division at a time. The soap was severely rubbed into the hair of the head, so you had to thoroughly rub and wash to get it out, and of course you came out to be inspected by the duty officer to see if you were clean. Then early Monday morning each boy had to wash his own clothes in tubs placed on the upper deck. These consisted of a navy flannel, a duck suit, and probably the navy collar if they had been worn, the working party rigging up the clothes lines in the forepart of the upper deck for drying the clothes and generally cleaning up afterwards.



*Alfred Smith on his wedding day
May 1918*

Band

Lastly I never joined the band. This was entirely voluntary and with all I achieved in the *Mount Edgcumbe* I was never musical minded enough to join although at that time it was a band to be proud of, and although I cannot remember the bandsman's name I do know he was a dedicated musician.

Well Mr Ware I have tried to rack my memory to do this for you. I only hope you will be able to get together enough material out of this to get a book dedicated to Captain Harkcom.

Yours Sincerely Alfred S. Smith

Alfred Smith follow-up

Alfred Smith (Alf). Alf's seamanship was first class and he worked as a master fisherman out of Brixham. (A master fisherman is one who can fish each and every method and make any type of fishing gear from trawls to pots to lines).

Alf worked the famous red sailed Brixham trawlers. His training on the *Mount Edgcumbe* gave him the edge during WW1 when he took his mates ticket in 3 months and went into the Royal Navy on the mine sweepers at a higher rank, a position he carried out long after the end of the war. (1923) He was also active in WW2 by taking the Brixham fishing smacks up the channel to Dunkirk. Due to his training on *Mount Edgcumbe* he was the only one of the fishermen that could read a sextant properly. So you see that his training on the *Mount Edgcumbe* gave him so much.

Alf died in 1991 aged 95.

Peter Budd (grandson of Alfred Smith)