

Return to Portsmouth

June 2025

After a drizzly morning, we were delighted when the sun came out on cue for our visit to Portsmouth. It was a return visit because our previous attempt had been hampered by road works that prevented some members from getting there!

10 of us met at the Cathedral where Don outlined the early history of Portsmouth as recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. By AD 1086 the Domesday Book recorded 3 island villages which were to form the basis of the town. By 1180 the town was built on a grid system on the south of Portsea Island. It was called Portsmouth after the de Port family who had owned the land.

The first church was built in 1188 and called St. Thomas's after Thomas a' Becket. This church later became the cathedral. The town takes its coat of arms from the badge of William de Longchampe who adopted a crescent moon and star in honour of the third crusade. We heard that the first hospital, Domus Dei, was built in 1212 to act as a shelter for overseas pilgrims travelling to Winchester or Canterbury.

The town was mostly built of wood, and the French burnt it down several times before the Round Tower was built of stone in 1418. By 1485 the first dry dock is built. The Square Tower was built in 1495 (again of stone) and had several uses over the years. The Navy was established here and in 1513 King Henry VIII ordered breweries to be built for the sailors. Southsea Castle was built in 1544, and it was from there that Henry watched as his flagship the Mary Rose sank during the Battle of the Solent.

The Black Death hit Portsmouth in 1563 and a few years later the walls of the town are rebuilt in stone. In the Civil War (1642) Portsmouth declared for King Charles 1st and in 1662 Catherine of Braganza landed at Portsmouth to be married to Charles II. Our walk took us past many of the places we were hearing about, including the Landport Gate. We heard a lot about Lord Nelson on our walk and learnt that he would have entered the town through this gate which was the main route in and out of the fortified town until 1875. We then came to Portsmouth Grammar School. We heard about several famous Old Portmuthians like James Clavell, Paul Jones and Roger Black.

We passed 12 High Street where there was a meeting in 1898 to found Portsmouth Football Club and then heard about John Pounds who established a school for neglected boys and girls in his cobblers' shop. This was the start of the ragged school movement, and we could see the replica of his workshop school.

We then came to the Millennium Promenade and walked for a while following the chain motif set into the path. This represents the chain that was tightened across the harbour

entrance at times of potential risk. This eventually led us to the heart of Old Portsmouth where we stopped for a well-earned drink. We had enjoyed sea views and historic sites on a glorious summer's evening and thanks must go to Don for repeating this walk for the sake of those who missed it the first time.

Details of walking in Portsmouth can be found on visitportsmouth.co.uk

Ed Cole

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