

At its height 120 people were employed to work in the Ropery, but today just eight people maintain this tradition in the Royal Navy's sole surviving Ropeyard.

Of course, during the buttoned-up Victorian era, the Admiralty was concerned about preserving the women's moral welfare and went to great lengths to keep the sexes apart in the Dockyard.

A new staircase was built, a separate mess room created, and the women's working day was half an hour different to the rest of the dockyard. However, despite these efforts many romances blossomed, although if a woman decided to marry a colleague she faced being sacked.

For centuries, the sea was seen as a male domain. Women were not integrated into the Royal Navy as fully fledged sailors until as late as 1993. However, during the Age of Sail an astounding number of women did go to sea in warships.

Some were the wives or mistresses of captains and other officers; others were sometimes prostitutes smuggled aboard by sailors. In recent years, stories of young women dressing in men's clothes and working alongside sailors for months, sometimes years, without revealing their gender have been discovered.

Reporting on the Battle of Algiers, Admiral Edward Pellew, Viscount Exmouth wrote: *'British women served at the same guns with their husbands, and during a contest of many hours, never shrank from danger, but animated all around them.'*

Indeed, wives were regularly present during naval battles, taking on the strenuous and nerve-wracking role of carrying powder to guns and nursing the wounded.

It is thanks to the letters of Fanny Palmer Austen (1789-1814), wife of Captain Charles John Austen - the youngest brother of novelist Jane Austen - that we have a series of rare and honest accounts of what it was to be a young wife living at sea with her daughters. They also reveal a close connection to her literary cousin and offer clear inspiration for the naval wives in Jane Austen's novels, notably in *Persuasion*.

Fanny often sailed with her husband whilst he served on the North American Station of the British Navy and later lived with him onboard the 90-gun *Namur* when stationed off Sheerness, Kent as the Napoleonic War drew to an end. Taking a few servants with them, the family redecorated and converted Charles' quarters into a home, with Fanny embracing the new challenge of household management, education and nurturing her children. She spent her time furnishing the cabins, finding the best sources of food, planning meals, keeping the accounts, needle work, and occasionally attending formal dinners with the ships' officers in the wardroom.

In 1847 it was announced a Naval General Service Medal would be awarded to those women who had fought in naval actions between 1793 and 1840. Three applied; Jane Townsend who served in the *Defiance* at the Battle of Trafalgar, Mary Ann Riley and Ann Hopping who were at the Battle of the Nile. A committee of four Admirals approved their request, but later changed their decision as Queen Victoria objected. The Queen opposed the campaign for women's rights and believed a woman's place was in the home.

Hidden Heroines also reveals two remarkable stories of sailors in disguise. Hannah Snell would achieve 'celebrity' status after spending several years dressed as a man. In 1747 she joined the marines, sailed to India onboard HMS *Swallow* and took part in the siege of Pondicherry. During which she was shot and wounded in her right leg, left arm and groin. At the hospital, she allowed the surgeons to treat the gunshot to her leg and arm but was said to have extracted the musket ball from her groin herself. In 1750, aged 27, Hannah became one of two women to receive a pension for her injuries from the Royal Hospital. The other being Christian Davies, aka Christopher Welsh, who was discovered by army surgeons after an injury at the Battle of Ramillies, 1705.

'She is a smart, well-formed figure, about five feet four inches in height, possessed of considerable strength and great activity...' noted London's Annual Register of 'William Brown' (1794-unknown).

Brown is the first known Black female to serve in the Royal Navy. She spent over a decade on British warships and showed incredible nerve, strength and ability as she rose up the ranks to become Captain of the foretop. Here she led a team of sailors in all weathers to set the sails on the foremast. At over a hundred feet high this was a very dangerous job indeed.

A married woman she joined the Royal Navy around 1804 to escape her husband. It wasn't until 1815, that Brown was discovered and her story made the papers, but this did not affect her naval career and she returned to serve on HMS *Queen Charlotte*. Sadly, it is not known what happened to this remarkable woman after 1816.

Almost a century later, the First World War (1914-18) saw the lives of women again overturned, as they replaced men in the workplace to support the war effort. At Chatham, women were employed in warship construction and repair for the first time. Although dockyard workers were protected from conscription, such was the social pressure - and during its early stages, the zeal - to 'fight for King and Country' was strong, creating the need for 2,000 women to fill a multitude of roles.

By the time of the Second World War (1939-45) severe labour shortages meant women were actually conscripted to work in industry, or in the auxiliary services, from December 1941. Even more women joined the dockyard workforce.



However, it was not until 1971 that the Dockyard employed its first female apprentice, Zandra Bradley.

Zandra had initially been rejected when she applied to become an apprentice engineer, instead being recommended to join the clerical department. Undeterred, she persisted and attended night school to ensure she would pass the entrance exams. Her perseverance paid off and Zandra eventually joined the Dockyard as an electrical fitter. She later transferred to a technician apprenticeship and became something of a poster girl, appearing in *Periscope*, the Dockyard newspaper, wearing a short dress that was wholly unsuited to her job and posing with a huge wrench, which also wasn't necessary for her duties (*left*).

The exhibition concludes with memories of the Dockyard's sad closure in 1984 and with it, ending over 400 years of shipbuilding and naval tradition for local men and women.

"As Hidden Heroines clearly demonstrates, the Royal Navy has progressed from women having to dress as men to gain opportunity to go to sea to being named one of the UK's top employers of women. The exhibition serves to celebrate the success of women in the workplace, which was made possible by some of the amazing women highlighted in Hidden Heroines, who bravely broke down barriers, challenged gender roles and paved the way for others," says Alexandra Curson, *Hidden Heroines* Curator.

"Visitors today will certainly see and experience how Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust has moved the museum forward from gender segregated roles to an inclusive culture. Women make up 57% of our workforce and are represented across all departments. They have the responsibility to champion the heroines of the past and through learning more about their stories, the Trust pledges to promote further equality and inclusion in its workforce, empowering future generations."

For those people not able to make it to Chatham right now, *Hidden Heroines: The Untold Stories of Women at the Dockyard* is also an online exhibition that can be enjoyed here - [The Historic Dockyard Chatham - Your Big Day Out in Kent \(thedockyard.co.uk\)](https://www.thedockyard.co.uk)

NOTES FOR EDITORS

Journalists are welcome to make 121 visits to *Hidden Heroines* from Monday 24 May.

There will be a Zoom Press View at 11am on Thursday 27 May, with a physical Press View / Photocall / Interview opportunity at 2pm the same day, for those who want to attend in person. Both events will include *Hidden Heroines* Curator Alexandra Curson, Zandra Bradley (the first female apprentice at the Dockyard), ropemaker Leanne Clark and Linda Brown (who is currently employed at the Dockyard).

[HIGH RESOLUTION IMAGES FOR MEDIA USE CAN BE DOWNLOADED HERE](#)

FOR MORE INFORMATION, INTERVIEWS AND IMAGES

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