What caused the loss of Henry VIII's favourite warship?

Despite decades of study, the reason for the sinking of the Mary Rose is still a mystery...

What happened on that fateful day, 19th July 1545?
The Mary Rose sank during the **Battle of the Solent**, a confrontation between French and English troops on the Isle of Wight, as well as a face-off between their respective fleets in the Solent between the Isle of Wight and Portsmouth.

The only confirmed eyewitness, a Flemish sailor who escaped from the sinking vessel, claims that the Mary Rose had fired all of her guns on one side and was turning when her sails were caught in a strong gust of wind, pushing the still open gunports below the waterline.

From correspondence between Van der Delft, German Emperor's Ambassador, and Charles V, 24th July, 1545

"Next day, Sunday [19 July], while the King was at dinner on the flagship, the French fleet appeared. The King hurriedly left the flagship and the English sailed to encounter the

French, shooting at the galleys, of which five had entered the harbour while the English could not get out for want of wind. Towards the evening the ship [the Mary Rose] of Viceadmiral George Carew foundered, all the 500 men on board being drowned save about 25 or 30 servants, sailors and the like. Was told by a Fleming amongst the survivors that when she heeled over with the wind the water entered by the lowest row of gun ports which had been left open after firing. They expect to recover the ship and guns..."

Other accounts agree that she was turning, but there could be a number of reasons why she sank during this manoeuvre.

Below we present a few of the most common suggestions.

Poor design?

Was the Mary Rose badly designed?
Despite what you may have heard, the Mary Rose did not sink first time out of harbour. She was 34 years old when she sank, and had travelled hundreds of miles, from Scotland in the north to the Atlantic coast of France in the south, during her career.

While it's often claimed that the gunports were cut too low, there is no evidence for this. The presence of scuppers along the main gun deck would suggest that they were a decent height above the waterline.

While it is true that the ship had a refit in 1536, this refit did take place on the Medway, near the river Thames. The Mary Rose would therefore have had to traverse much more turbulent waters than those found in the Solent, so if the ship had been poorly designed she would have sunk then, rather than in the relatively calm waters between Portsmouth and the IsIe of Wight.

Human error?

Were the officers or crew incompetent?
This was Sir George Carew's first naval command, so maybe he was unfamiliar with his new vessel's capabilities, and he gave an order that endangered the ship? Or perhaps the crew just ignored his orders, or were even unable to understand them, leading to disaster?

It is claimed that the admiral called out that he had "the sort of men" that he "could not rule", but this claim comes from his cousin, possibly trying to protect the family name?

It has also been suggested that some of the crew came from overseas, causing communication problems. However, it wasn't unusual for foreign sailors to work on English ships; in the Mary Rose's first year at sea, she hosted the trial of a Flemish sailor on one of the other ships in the fleet, the eyewitness mentioned earlier was a Flemish survivor of the sinking, and others recovered from the seabed appear to be from as far as Spain, Italy and even North Africa! If the language barrier was such a big issue, why was this standard across the fleet?

Bad weather?

Did bad weather take out the Mary Rose?
Did a gust of wind hit the sails at a crucial moment, making the ship unstable? Eye-witness accounts described a sudden breeze as the Mary Rose made a turn, causing her to capsize.

With the gunports opened for battle, the ship could have flooded and quickly foundered. So why had she never foundered before? Perhaps she had simply become too heavy after a recent refit, which had added extra guns to her firepower.

Overloaded?

Had they put too many guns and soldiers on board?
The guns had been put aboard in London, so she'd managed to traverse the English Channel without mishap, so why did she topple in the Solent? Studies of the size and shape of the Mary Rose, and the weight of the guns that were listed as being onboard during the period in which she sank, suggest that while the ship was carrying a large number of guns for a ship of her size, it was still within the safe limit.

She'd also carried large numbers of soldier before; in 1513 she had been able to transport nearly 1,000 soldiers to Flodden Field in Northumberland, so why would 500, or even 700 as one source claims, make her more unstable?

The French?

Did the French get a lucky hit with their guns?
A French cavalry officer present at the battle stated that the Mary Rose had been sunk by French guns. A cannonball low in the hull would enable water to flood in, making the ship unstable and leading to her sinking.

Perhaps that was why the ship turned so suddenly. Was she aiming to reach the shallows at Spitbank only a few hundred metres away?

A cannonball made of granite, similar to a type found in France, was found in the hold of the Mary Rose. However, it was found in a shot locker, and the stone is also found in areas of the English west country. Were the French trying to justify their failed invasion attempt, which had seen two flagships damaged and the possible loss of a galley, by claiming to sink one of Henry VIII's flagships?

The sinking of the Mary Rose is only part of her story...

Contrary to popular belief, the story of the Mary Rose didn't begin with her loss.

The History of the Mary Rose - 1510-1545

Thought the Mary Rose sank first time out? Think again...

The Mary Rose was a successful warship for Henry VIII for 34 years: almost the entire duration of his reign.

1510-15201520-15301530-15401540-1545THE SINKING OF THE MARY ROSE

The Mary Rose and the birth of the Royal Navy
Henry VIII was an enthusiastic shipbuilder, whose pride in his "Army by Sea" would see his fleet grow from 5 at the start of his reign to 58 by the time of his death in 1547. While he may have had many ships, it is the *Mary Rose* that is remembered as his favourite. Notably, the life of the *Mary Rose* coincides almost exactly with the reign of Henry VIII.

Before the development of a standing Navy, English kings relied upon requisitioning merchant vessels in times of need. This was certainly cheaper than building, maintaining and manning ships in times of peace, but it was inefficient and difficult to mobilize. With the threat of Scotland to the north and France to the south, Henry VIII began to build his Navy as soon as he came to the throne.

Construction and War: 1510 – 1520

The Mary Rose and the Peter Pomegranate
The earliest reference to the *Mary Rose* is 29th January 1510, in a letter ordering the construction of "two new ships". These ships were to be the *Mary Rose* and her sister ship, the *Peter Pomegranate*. The ships were built in Portsmouth, making the sinking of the *Mary Rose* in the Solent and her eventual resting place in Portsmouth's *Mary Rose Museum* all the more poignant.

The first account that names the *Mary Rose* is a letter from June 1511. It is often claimed that the ship was named after Henry's sister, Mary Tudor but no evidence supports this. Instead, it was the fashion to name ships for saints and the pairing of the *Mary* with the *Peter* supports this. The badges of the ships – the *Rose* and the *Pomegranate* – celebrate the royal couple; the rose being the symbol of the king, and the pomegranate being that of his first wife, Katherine of Aragon. Neatly, the Virgin Mary was known at the time as the 'Mystic Rose'; the name of the *Mary Rose* therefore signifies not only the power of the Tudor dynasty, but also that of the Virgin Mary.

The *Mary Rose* was larger than her sister ship - 600 tons to the *Peter Pomegranate*'s 450 - but this was not the only difference between the ships. While both were carracks designed for war, the *Peter Pomegranate* was not built to carry heavy guns. The *Mary Rose*, on the other hand, carried six or eight large guns from the beginning of her career. This required a new design feature: gunports. The *Mary Rose* was therefore of a state-of-the-art design. It has been suggested that Henry himself insisted on the design, which would add to the reasons why he was so proud of the *Mary Rose*.

Six months after the launch of the *Mary Rose*, Henry VIII was at war with France; the nineteen year old king wanted to show his mettle against the might of France. Against the advice of his father's old advisers, Henry VIII declared war in 1512.

The Battle of St Mathieu

While the *Mary Rose* was not the largest of Henry's ships – the 1000 ton *Regent* held that position – it was the *Mary Rose* that the Admiral of the Fleet, Edward Howard, picked as his flagship. This was to be a matter of significance in the Battle of St Mathieu on the 10th August 1512.

In the weeks leading up to the battle, Howard led successful raids along the coast of Brittany, capturing 40 French ships and sacking French towns. He returned to Portsmouth in late July in order to resupply where he was visited by the king. On the 6th August, Howard received word that the French navy had mobilized and he left Portsmouth to return to Brittany.

The French did not expect the English to arrive for several more days and were celebrating the Feast of St Lawrence when the English fleet arrived. Many French officers were celebrating the saint's day on land, while local dignitaries and their families were feasting aboard the fleet. Upon seeing the English fleet, the large majority of the French ships fled, their retreat guarded by the French flagship, the *Grand Louise*, and the *Cordelière*.

The *Mary Rose* drew first blood; she shot out the mainmasts of the *Grand Louise,* killing 300 men and taking the ship out of commission. This short engagement marks the first instance of ships fitted with gunports engaging each other at range without an attempt of boarding, a watershed moment in naval history.

Despite this historic action, the most dramatic action of the day did not include the *Mary Rose.* While the *Mary Rose* was engaged with the *Grand Louise*, the 1000 ton English *Regent* grappled with the *Cordelière.* As with many of the French ships, the *Cordelière* was hosting families as the English fleet arrived and her captain, Hervé de Porzmoguer, made the hard decision to fight with civilians on board. As the ships grappled with one another, there was a suddenexplosion aboard the *Cordelière.* The flames spread to the *Regent* and both ships went down. Over 1500 people died from the two ships, including women and children aboard the *Cordelière.*

In September 1512, the campaigning season came to an end. The Mary Rose returned to England and moored in the Thames throughout the winter.
She did not sit idle for long, however. In March 1513, Admiral Howard organised a race of the fleet along the coast of Kent to "test their abilities". The *Mary Rose* finished half a mile ahead of the *Sovereign*, the next fastest ship, with Howard declaring that the *Mary Rose* "is the noblest ship of sail of any great ship, at this hour, that I know in Christendom".

The death of Admiral Sir Edward Howard
In April 1513, the English fleet, including the *Mary Rose*, returned to harass the French coast at Brest. The French retreated, taking a defensive position against the English. Itching for a fight, Howard entered several skirmishes, anxious to achieve some sort of victory.

On the 22nd April 1513, the French attacked the English fleet, sinking one ship and badly damaging another. Howard retaliated, leading a force to board the galley of the veteran French commander Prégent de Bidoux. Howard was last seen shouting "Come aboard again! Come aboard again!" to his men before he was cut down.

Demoralised after the death of the Admiral, the English fleet fled back to Plymouth. Lord Thomas Howard, older brother of Sir Edward, was appointed Admiral of the Fleet and also choose the *Mary Rose* as his flagship. Incidentally, Lord Thomas Howard would later

become the third Duke of Norfolk, and was uncle to both Anne Boleyn and Katherine Howard.

The Battle of Flodden
The next significant moment in the *Mary Rose's* career was her involvement in the preparations for the Battle of Flodden Field. While Henry VIII was campaigning in France, King James IV of Scotland made the most of the opportunity and led an invasion of England.

The queen regent, however, successfully organised the defence of the north with the assistance of the Earl of Surrey (the father of Lord Thomas Howard). The *Mary Rose* was part of this victory as a troop transport ship. King James IV of Scotland died at the Battle of Flodden Field on 9th September 1513.

By 1514, enthusiasm for the war was diminishing on both sides.
Skirmishes continued until a peace was signed, with the *Mary Rose* involved in the final fighting of the war on the 14th June 1514. On the 9th October 1514, a peace between England and France was officially sealed with the marriage of Henry's sister, Princess Mary Tudor, with King Louis XII of France.

In July 1514, the *Mary Rose*, along with most ships in the king's navy, was decommissioned in Deptford. This saw the dismantling of the masts and rigging, the removal of anchors, pulleys and other such equipment, as well as the removal of the armaments of the ship.

The *Mary Rose* briefly returned to service in June 1520 as Henry mobilized all of his most prestigious ships to escort him to France for the meeting of the Field of the Cloth of Gold. This meeting between Henry and Francis I of France was a glamourous display of the wealth and grandeur of the two countries, as the two rival kings attempted to find solutions to their differences and prevent future wars. Everything about the meeting was designed to awe the opposition; as such the inclusion of the *Mary Rose* in the king's escort was inevitable.

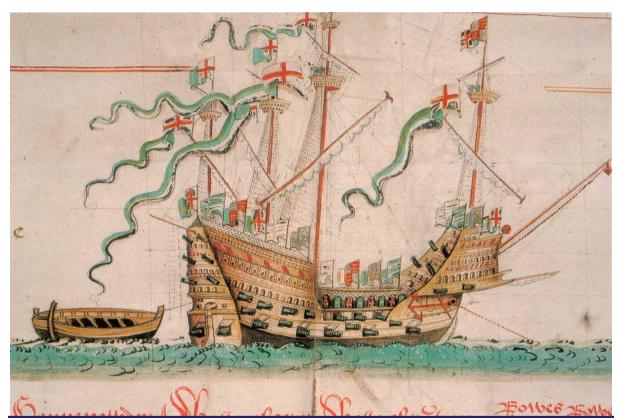**Favourite of the Fleet: 1520 – 1530**

In 1522, just two years after the Field of the Cloth of Gold, England and France were at war once again, with Henry siding with Charles V of Spain, the nephew of Queen Katherine. In May 1522, Charles arrived in England. At 2pm on the 30th May 1522, the two kings boarded and inspected the Henry Grace a Dieu and the Mary Rose; Henry was showing off his favourite ships.

Shortly afterwards, the fleet set off from Southampton. Lord Thomas Howard, now the Earl of Surrey, decided to use the *Mary Rose* as his flagship; the superior sailing of the *Mary Rose* trumped the size of the *Great Harry*. Surrey successfully attacked the Breton port of Morlaix on 1st July 1522 but the supplies that he requested in order to take Brest never arrived. He had no choice but to return to Portsmouth. The Admiral was redeployed and given command of a land force at Calais at this point; the Vice-Admiral, Sir William Fitzwilliam, also chose the *Mary Rose* to be his flagship. The *Mary Rose* had now been the preferred ship of Sir Edward Howard, Lord Thomas Howard and Sir William Fitzwilliam.

The second war with France was mostly a collection of skirmishes, with very little actually happening until 1525 and the Battle of Pavia, which ended the war. The English, however, had nothing to do with Pavia, which saw King Francis captured by Spanish forces. The fleet does not seem to have been mobilised at all throughout 1525 and the *Mary Rose* was moved to Deptford that summer to be recaulked.

The Refit: 1530 – 1540

The Mary Rose was largely inactive for the first five years of the 1530s.
From January 1536 to March 1537, the *Mary Rose* could be seen in the Thames without her masts. As tensions mounted in Europe as a result of Henry's break from the Church of Rome, Henry began reinforcing his warships and the *Mary Rose* underwent a refit. Extra gunports were added and the sides of the ship were strengthened in order to accommodate the extra weight.

Unfortunately, the new alterations to the *Mary Rose* may have cost her her impressive sailing. In April 1537, Vice-Admiral John Dudley reportedly that some of the ships were "unweatherly" and that "the ship that Mr Carew is in" was particularly bad. While it's not

clear which ship "Mr Carew" was on, George Carew was the captain of the *Mary Rose* when she sank eight years later; it is not impossible that the problematic ship was the *Mary Rose*.

In 1539, Henry mobilized the fleet once more, in fear of a joint invasion from France and Spain. Henry had been excommunicated by the Pope for declaring himself Head of the Church of England and he feared the Catholic powers of Europe would attack. In the summer of 1539, the *Mary* Rose was anchored at Deptford, ready to defend the Thames.

The Last Years: 1540-45

Henry's fears of a combined Franco-Spanish invasion came to nothing as the treaty between Francis and Charles fell apart by 1539. However, Henry's fleet remained prepared throughout the campaigning months of 1539-1542.
In June 1542, Henry entered an alliance with Charles of Spain against Francis, thus beginning Henry's last war with France. The reasons for Henry entering this war are unclear, although it is worth noting that his fifth wife, Catherine Howard, had been found guilty of adultery and executed just four months previously; perhaps Henry was desperate to prove his power and masculinity in the face of this humiliation.

It is not known whether or not the *Mary Rose* was part of the fleet that took Henry himself to Calais in 1544, although it is likely, since most of the fleet was involved. In September 1544, Henry captured the French town of Boulogne. However, his alliance with Charles of Spain fell apart and England was left isolated against France.

The French retaliation for Boulogne was to prove fatal for the *Mary Rose*.

July 1545: The Battle of the Solent and the sinking of the Mary Rose

Claude d'Annebault, the French Admiral, gathered over 200 ships in the estuary of the River Seine. This fleet was significantly larger than the Spanish Armada nearly 50 years later, which totalled 130 ships. Against this number, the English amassed around 80 ships.

John Dudley, Viscount Lisle, was Lord Admiral of the Fleet and he did not intend to sit wait for the French attack. Lisle sent fireships in amongst the anchored French fleet at Le Havre to burn the French ships; the French flagship, the 100-gun *Philippe,* burned. Ominously for the French, the next ship chosen to hoist the Admiral's flag then ran aground and had to be abandoned.

On the 12th July 1545, the French set sail, reaching the Sussex coast on the 18th. After an insignificant raid in Sussex, the French fleet entered the Solent on the 19th July.

The night before (18th July 1545), King Henry VIII dined aboard his flagship, the *Great Harry,* with Viscount Lisle and Sir George Carew, where Carew was appointed Vice-Admiral of the Fleet and given command of the *Mary Rose*.

When the French fleet arrived, Henry watched from Southsea Castle. The lack of wind gave the French the advantage, the oared French galleys able to advance while the large sailing ships were immobile. Towards the afternoon, however, the wind rose and Lisle led out his large ships, including the *Mary Rose*.

The *Mary Rose* fired from her starboard side, then came about to fire from the port side. As she turned, she listed to one side, her starboard side low in the water. The Spanish Ambassador Francois van der Delft, an eyewitness to the battle, wrote that the ship "heeled over with the wind". The starboard gunports were, crucially, left open, and, with the final nudge from the wind, they fatally dipped below the waterline. The water flooded in and the ship went down in a matter of minutes. Of the nearly 500 men on board, no more than 35 survived.

Despite the tragedy of losing the *Mary Rose*, she was the only loss of the battle. The two fleets sat in a deadlock in the Solent, a situation that favoured the English, who only needed to hold the port and who had supplies and reinforcements. On the 23rd July 1545, d'Annebault made the decision to retreat.

After the battle, it was believed that it would be relatively easy to raise the *Mary Rose*. Divers were sent down to attach cables to the masts of the sunken ship; these cables were then attached to two ships that would sail away from one another. The resulting tension would then, theoretically, bring the *Mary Rose* to the surface.

On Saturday 1st August, Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk wrote that "I trust by Monday or Tuesday, at the furthest, that the *Mary Rose* shall be weighed up and saved". Unfortunately, this confidence was unfounded. The masts broke during the raising attempt and all further attempts to raise her in the following weeks failed.

Raising the Mary Rose: the 19th Century attempts

In 1836, pioneering divers John and Charles Deane were exploring wrecks in the Solent, notably the 1782 warship, the *Royal George*. While they were exploring, some fishermen requested their assistance; their nets kept getting caught in a particular area and they asked the divers to explore. The *Mary Rose* was rediscovered after nearly 300 years.

The Deane brothers recovered several large guns from the ship, attracting a large amount of attention. After a while, however, excitement over the discovery faded. It was the practice at the time to detonate shipwrecks lest they cause problems for modern ships; luckily the *Mary Rose* barely protruded above the seabed and so she was saved from this fate. However, it was largely believed that she had in fact been destroyed and, as interest in the wreck died, the *Mary Rose* was lost once more.
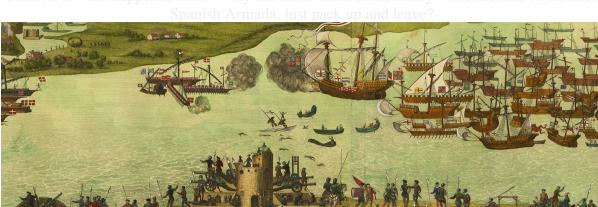
How did the battle of the Solent end?

Why did an invasion fleet, nearly twice the size of the later Spanish Armada, just pack up and leave?

The Battle of the Solent, on 19th July 1545, is one of those events in history that had the potential to be very important, but is pretty much unknown. Indeed, many people who live near the Solent probably would never have heard of this battle on their doorstep if it weren't for the loss of the *Mary Rose*, and her recovery in 1982.

Most accounts of the Battle of the Solent (which appears to be a name attributed to this conflict sometime later, as no contemporary accounts use this nomenclature) only cover the

period leading up to the sinking of the *Mary Rose*, as if that was the defining point of the battle. But what happened next? Why did an invasion fleet, nearly twice the size of the later Spanish Armada, just pack up and leave?

After the the loss of the *Mary Rose*, the wind died down, leaving the English fleet unable to engage the French. However, Lord Admiral Lisle, the commander of the fleet on his flagship the *Henry Grace à Dieu*, was able to use the tides and currents to get the rest of the fleet into position, preventing the French admiral, Claude d'Annebault, from positioning his larger ships. As Lisle had the home advantage of access to supplies and reinforcements, he was prepared to stand his ground and take a defensive position, creating a deadlock. The French attempted to find an advantage at sea, but were thwarted at every step by Lisle's skill, as well as the local weather and underwater geography.

The invasion of the Isle of Wight didn't seem to be going well either. While the attacking troops had been deployed at several points along the coast to divide the defending forces, they didn't, for some reason, venture inland or regroup. While they did gain some ground, especially around Bonchurch, the assaults elsewhere went less well. The troops who landed at Sandown decided to attack a newly built fort, which resulted in a hasty retreat after the death of the French commanders, while at Bembridge the assault had been badly organised, and an ambush by the defending English had caused panic amongst the French troops.

On a side note, the attack on Bonchurch went pretty much unopposed, but the invaders encountered English forces as they moved inland. The defenders gave stiff resistance, but were eventually forced to retreat. It's claimed that during this retreat, one of the defenders, Captain Robert Fischer, a portly gentleman struggling to escape up the steep hills surrounding the town, cried out "£100 for a horse!", which according to legend may have been his last words. Obviously when Shakespeare later used this as the inspiration for the (almost) last words of Richard III, inflation had turned £100 into a kingdom.

The French were left with a decision to make. Should they stay at their anchorage point, which was exposed to the elements and unable to get into a decent fighting position, but supporting their troops on the Isle of Wight, or should they cut their losses and leave. The French commanders concluded that the only way they could hold the Isle of Wight would be

to build three large forts, a construction job that would take three months in unfriendly territory with limited supplies and more enemy troops on the way.

D'Annebault was also having naval problems. Supplies were running low, illness was taking its toll on his crews, and his flagship, *La Maistresse*, was taking on water after an accidental grounding outside Le Havre. As this was his second flagship of the campaign, the first, *Carraquon*, having been destroyed by fire before leaving harbour, it wasn't in his best interests to lose another.

It was decided on the 22nd of July, only three days after the sinking of the *Mary Rose*, to abandon the invasion.The troops on the Isle of Wight were recalled, and the French fleet departed.

This wasn't their last act though, as a day later they attacked the town of Seaford, 40 miles east of Solent. Some 1,500 troops landed and attacked a nearby village, more with the intent to pillage than for any military purpose, but they fell foul of the local militia and their longbows, and were repelled with deadly force. D'Annebault decided to cut his losses, and headed back to France. The invasion was over, the English had won, and the **attempt to recover the Mary Rose** could begin.