1.6 Why did the Mary Rose sink?

The Mary Rose was Henry VIII’s favourite warship. It was completed in 1511 and is thought to be named after his younger sister Mary and the famous Tudor symbol of the rose. In July 1545, England and France were at war and the French sent a huge fleet of warships, full of French soldiers, to invade England. The English navy, including the Mary Rose, was sent out to fight them. Henry himself even stood and watched the action from Southsea Castle, in Portsmouth. However, when the Mary Rose fired her cannons at the French ships and turned to full speed… disaster struck! The ship began to sink. There was panic on board, as men began to scramble to get off the sinking ship. Many of her crew couldn’t swim and over 400 of them drowned.

The French invasion itself was a failure but the French soon claimed a victory of sorts. They said they had sunk the Mary Rose. However, when the Mary Rose’s admiral wrote: ‘Fortune followed our fleet. The Mary Rose, one of their best ships, was sunk by our cannon and of the five or six hundred men which were on board, only five and thirty escaped’.

So was this true? Did the French sink the Mary Rose? If not, then why did she sink? It’s time to be a History Mystery detective, so study the evidence carefully.

Evidence A

Alessandra Mildred, a marine expert, talking after analysing the ship. In 1982, the ship was brought back up to the surface and preserved in a museum. Sadly though, half the ship had rotted away.

‘There are no gaping holes in the ship where a French shot might have hit… but we’ve only got half a ship, so we can’t say any damage happened in any other place. We don’t know what damage might have been done’.

Evidence C

From a TV documentary broadcast in 2003 about the Mary Rose.

‘When the Mary Rose sank in 1545, she had all the latest weapons on board. The ship was too heavy and unstable! Our experts have worked out that the weight of the new guns had made the ship unstable… but the weight alone was not enough to sink her’.

Evidence E

Written by one of the men who helped to cut out the new gun-ports in 1536.

‘The new gun-ports were cut, low down, in each side of the Mary Rose to take big guns. It was hard to make them watertight. It seemed odd to be cutting holes low in the side of the ship. I remember saying that I hoped the ship would not lean over with its gun holes left open’.

Evidence H

This is one of the human skulls recovered from the ship when it was brought back up to the surface in 1982. Analysis of the skulls has shown that the majority of the sailors were not British, but from southern Europe. It has been argued that this might have meant that they couldn’t have properly understood the instructions of the English speaking captain. In fact, Sir George Carew (one of the admirals on board) apparently complained that he couldn’t control the crew. Could this have been because they didn’t understand his language?

Evidence G

From the archaeologist’s report after the ship was recovered in 1982.

‘The ship faced towards the harbour when she was discovered. Her position, in conjunction with the evidence from the guns recovered, suggests she sank as she was executing a turn while engaging the enemy’.

Step 1

Find any evidence that the French sank the ship. Does any evidence support the French claim? Can you find any evidence that shows this theory to be unlikely? What is your opinion? Make a note of your findings.

Step 2

Find evidence that the ship was too heavy or unstable. Does any evidence support this idea? If it was heavy and unstable, why was it so? Write down what you have discovered.

Step 3

Think – could the open gun-ports have sunk the Mary Rose? Find evidence to support this theory. Why might they have been left open? Could the crew’s behaviour have anything to do with it? Why were the gun-ports so low in the water in the first place? Make notes on the evidence you have found.

Finally, you must deliver your verdict. Why did the Mary Rose sink? Write a short paragraph to outline your theory. Be sure to use some of the evidence you have found to back up your ideas. Why not imagine that you are writing the report for Henry VIII?

Wise Up Words

Gun-port unstable
Edward VI: the boy king

Despite six marriages, Henry VIII left only three children behind when he died on 28 January 1547. Edward was nine, Elizabeth was 13 and Mary was a woman of 30. Henry had absolutely no doubt as to who he would leave in control of the country: the nine-year-old, of course! The young prince may have been the same age as a Year 5 student – but he was male! Henry believed this made him a much better choice as ruler than his older sisters. So what kind of king was young Edward? Which faith did he follow? And what did this mean for the way people worshipped God?

Changes in religion

As you have learned, Henry VIII had made some important changes to religion. He had closed all the monasteries (and taken their money), allowed the Bible to be read in English (not Latin) and, most importantly, made himself, and future kings and queens, Head of the Church of England (instead of the Pope). Henry didn’t make any more major changes to religion and most people, including the king, still thought of themselves as Catholic.

However, Henry’s son Edward believed deeply in the Protestant faith. As a Protestant, he thought that God should be worshipped in a plain and simple manner. As he was Head of the Church, he could alter it in any way he wished. Look at the two illustrations. Source A shows what a Catholic church would have looked like. Source C shows how it would have changed when Edward ordered people to worship as Protestants.

Religious turmoil

Many people, especially in the countryside, didn’t like all the changes to the way they worshipped. They loved the old services and churches, and in some areas there were rebellions. The leaders of one rebellion in Cornwall saw just how ruthless young King Edward could be… he sent in his soldiers to hang the rebels from the nearest trees!

Mission Objectives

• Explain how and why Henry’s son changed religion in England.
• Decide what kind of boy Edward VI was.

Edward had always been a sickly child and constantly in need of a doctor’s attention. He used to have his bedroom walls washed down three times a day to keep him free from disease. But by the age of 15, he was dying of tuberculosis, a lung disease called ‘consumption’. Edward died on 6 July 1553. He had no children, so, after Lady Jane Grey had ruled for only nine days, his older half-sister Mary became the new queen. She died on 6 July 1553 at the age of just 15.

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FACT!

There were rebellions. The leaders of one rebellion in Cornwall saw just how ruthless young King Edward could be… he sent in his soldiers to hang the rebels from the nearest trees!

Picture to explain Bible stories

Stained glass

Royal coat of arms

Sanctuary lamps kept permanently alight to show the continued presence of God

Stained glass smashed and replaced with plain glass

Wall plaques with the Lord’s prayer and parts of the Bible in English

Plain clothes

Stained glass

Pulpit for preaching the new English services

Gold crosses, candlesticks and chalices

Wooden table

Mission Objectives

• Explain how and why Henry’s son changed religion in England.
• Decide what kind of boy Edward VI was.

Edward VI, painted in about 1546.

FACT!

King Edward VI could be a cruel and vicious boy. He executed his uncle for accidentally killing his favourite pet! His uncle was trying to kidnap him, though…

Hungry for More?

Close to his death, Edward named his 15-year-old cousin, Lady Jane Grey, as next in line to the throne. She later became known as the ‘Nine days queen’.
• Who was she?
• Why did Edward choose her?
• How did she get her nickname?
• What happened to her?

Work

1 Why do you think Edward became king after his father’s death and not Mary or Elizabeth?
2 a Describe what you would have seen if you had entered a Catholic church before 1547.
   b Now imagine you visited the same church after Edward had made his Protestant changes and describe what you see.
3 Design and write an obituary for King Edward VI. An obituary briefly tells of some of the most important events, achievements and the personality of the person who recently died. Begin with Edward’s birth on 12 October 1537 and end with his death on 6 July 1553 at the age of just 15.