



## Information sheet no 044

# Bone models of Men of War

Thousands of French prisoners of war were taken during the Revolutionary Wars and were imprisoned in many places throughout England. Portsmouth collectively accommodated half the prisoner population by using all the facilities in the area, such as Portchester Castle, Forton Prison, Gosport (later T E St Vincent) and many prison ships moored in Portsmouth harbour. In 1815, after the final defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo, more than 24,000 French prisoners were repatriated.

The conditions they were held in were miserable and they were often confined in cramped quarters with much overcrowding. However, a lot of their conditions were due to their own vices. They gambled their food, bedding and clothing away and would relentlessly pursue their winnings.

Many of the prisoners were craftsmen and whiled their time away by carving models of ships, chessmen and other articles out of beef bones and used bedding straw to braid work-boxes and dinner mats. Many of the articles were fine pieces of work. These were offered for sale to sympathetic visitors and from the money they obtained in this way, could supplement the hard prison life.

Other more clever prisoners worked at forging money and around 1810, Portsmouth was flooded with counterfeit notes and coins manufactured by the prisoners.

The prisoners also made very beautiful thread-like lace, which commanded a high price. However, English lace manufacturers protested at the competition and the manufacture by prisoners was forbidden.

Examples of the articles made by the prisoners of war are held in the NMRN.