

Thurs 5th March 2015

Peter Warwick FRGS

### The Golden Age of the Royal Navy

Rule Britannia! Britannia rules the waves! On Thursday 5th March the Wells Evening Society heard the significance of the famous song in an excellent lecture by Peter Warwick. Peter is a naval historian with a huge range of images and facts to illustrate his theme. A marvellous series of prints and paintings flowed past on the screen as he covered three hundred years of history with a light yet informative touch.



One of the audience commented that many of us thought that it was King Alfred who was the father of the English Navy. Peter told us that in fact it was Henry VIII who expanded the navy to defend his newly Protestant country against Catholic Europe.



He had fifty eight ships built for his fleet and we saw images of these because he proudly commissioned artist Anthony Anthony to paint every one. Privateers such as Drake and Hawkins were really pirates with a royal blessing and during the reign of Henry's daughter Elizabeth they sailed the seas and fought the enemies of England very successfully. After victory over the Spanish Armada the Glorious Queen had herself painted with her fleet behind her and her right hand placed on an orb. Her finger rests on the oceans; already it was understood that England's destiny lay in controlling the seas.

Charles 1st did not have control over his Navy and this certainly contributed to his downfall. His

successor Oliver Cromwell saw clearly the necessity of naval supremacy, appointing Robert Blake from Bridgwater as Admiral to command the Commonwealth's fleet. Originally a general, Blake left the army to take command of his ship. He proceeded to lead the navy successfully, winning the first of three wars with the Dutch, the new enemy which arose at this time. The 'sea general' introduced military discipline into the navy and the first official Articles of War and Fighting Instructions to Naval Commanders came at this time.

After the restoration, Charles II also appreciated the value of a maritime force and he named his fleet the Royal Navy; as it is known to this day. We learn a lot about Britain's preoccupation with naval supremacy under the Stuarts from Samuel Pepys, the famous diarist, who rose to become Chief Secretary to the Admiralty. Amongst many

fascinating details Pepys recorded that £179,793-10s was needed annually to run the Navy of that time with its requirement for a constant supply of new ships and equipment. To help in the



protection of Britain's ever expanding trade overseas a strong maritime presence was needed to counter the threats from France and Spain. It was for this purpose that in 1698 the newly formed Bank of England sold bonds to raise money.



With clear contemporary drawings Peter showed us how naval battles were fought at this time. They were still following age old traditions, with up to a hundred ships from each side forming lines facing each other. Each side would then fire canon shot at the other, meaning that sea battles were effectively wars of attrition. It was a brave admiral who would take independent action, sneak through enemy lines or break rank and attack at an oblique angle. Admiral Benbow was well known for his original tactics yet in 1702 he died in action fighting gallantly in the Caribbean because his unconventional approach had no

support from the rest of his squadron.

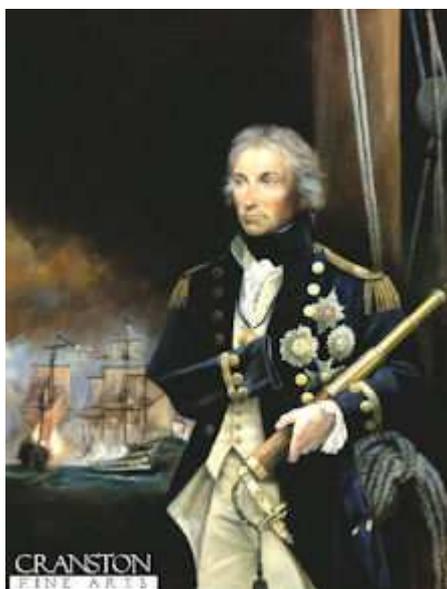
Arguments continued about how to conduct battles at sea. In 1756 Admiral Byng failed to behave according to the strict Articles of War and was blamed for losing the island of Minorca. It is now thought that the Admiralty was at least partly to blame due to the poor manning and repair of the fleet but he was perceived to have retreated from the enemy, court marshalled and condemned to death. On the quarterdeck of his ship and in command to the last, Byng waved a white cloth to order the fatal gun shots. Peter dramatically dropped a white handkerchief to echo's the brave admiral's last gesture. The French writer Voltaire wrote cynically "in



(Britain) it is good to kill an admiral from time to time, in order to encourage the others." It was something of a relief to hear that Byng has been the only admiral to die in this way.

During the rest of the century naval procedure became progressively more daring and aggressive. Canada was gained from the French by enterprising naval manoeuvres and although the American colonies were lost Britain kept the West Indies when Admiral Rodney turned the tables on the French at the Battle of the Saintes in 1782. He 'broke the

line' of the enemy's fleet, and in doing so used daring tactics that would had been previously unthinkable. Back in England enthusiasm grew for the navy and its successes. Each new victory was celebrated joyously and paintings of ships and their naval encounters became fashionable. People admired and collected the many beautiful, accurate depictions of vessels in action and at this time artists also began to paint the men who sailed the ships. We saw how the exciting paintings from this time reflected that Britannia was indeed now ruling the waves.



Everything seemed to lead to the arrival of the greatest admiral of them all: Horatio Nelson. We heard a vivid account of Lord Nelson's extraordinary powers of leadership and of his superb grasp of both strategy and unconventional tactics. A proficient swordsman, he was wounded several times in combat, losing an arm and the sight in one eye in different engagements. A fearless and inspirational leader, he famously said "... happiness is to command a band of brothers" and led his fleet to many daring and decisive naval victories.

Nelson became temporarily out of favour because of his dalliance with another man's wife, Lady Hamilton, but he became the saviour of the nation when in 1805 he led the British fleet at Trafalgar.



His famous signal went out "England expects that every man will do his duty", and under his command from the Victory the fleet completely disoriented the French by breaking the enemy's line in several places. The ensuing battle became Britain's greatest naval victory, with twenty seven British ships triumphing over thirty three French. Visibility would have been very low with smoke billowing out from the canon fire but during the action Nelson was fatally wounded by a chance shot from a French sharpshooter only fifty feet away in the rigging of the French ship Redoubtable. His body was brought back to England where he

was accorded a state funeral and immediately became acknowledged as one of Britain's most heroic figures. He was celebrated with paintings, statues, pottery and literature.



He is still considered to have contributed above all others to the golden age of the Royal Navy.

A board in Wells Town Hall celebrates the thirteen men and boys who fought at the Battle of Trafalgar, only one of whom is recorded as having been killed during the battle. A member of the audience asked Peter about these men. He explained that whereas a small percentage would have been impressed into service, most would have volunteered because their various trades would have been useful on board a ship. Peter's feast

of images and the tidal rush of history left the audience both lit up and informed and the chairman had to call time on the many questions.



Philippa Collings