

“Bold in the Senate House and Brave at War:” Naval Officers in the House of Commons 1715-1815

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David Cunningham, Enmore, October 2006.

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Chapter One: Introduction and Context.

Fig.1. Sir George Keith Elphinstone as Admiral Lord Keith, Baron Keith of Stonehaven Marischal and Banheath, Viscount Keith, G.C.B.

The Honourable George Keith Elphinstone, of noble but impoverished family, rose from the rank of an Able Seamen ultimately to that of Admiral, and was dubbed a Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath and created an Irish Baron and British Viscount. He spoke precisely once during his fourteen years as a Member of the House of Commons, protesting on 11 June 1788 against the closing of certain passages giving access to

Westminster Hall.¹ Lord Keith's reticence in the House was only one of the elements of his career that was typical of the 182 naval officers who sat in the Commons in the period 1715-1815. Long absences at sea on active service meant that the attendance of naval Members of Parliament was often patchy at best, illustrated by Elphinstone's election in 1796 whilst taking the Cape of Good Hope before passing most of the rest of his term in the English Channel, the Mediterranean and Egypt.² These absences were not unprofitable, however, and lucky officers could earn fortunes in prize money that were often invested in political careers, with Elphinstone earning 64 000 pounds by 1800.³ Such sums lubricated social mobility, and in Elphinstone's case restored the fortunes of his family. Born into impoverished nobility, his rise to high rank in the service on his own merits and to a seat in the Commons on the interest of his elder brother paradoxically show the importance both of meritocratic social mobility and of aristocratic patronage in the election of naval officers to Parliament.

Though the contribution of naval officers to debates in the House could be tangential verging on the bizarre, as Elphinstone's curious example shows, their technical expertise and professional obligations lent substance, if not always eloquence, to the considerations of the Commons on naval matters. Naval officers' motives for entering Parliament were as mixed as their performance in the House. Some obtained a seat as a means of furthering their chances of promotion and choice postings. Others were awarded a borough as a prize for long and conspicuous service, an honour not free of obligation,

¹ Sir Lewis Namier and John Brooke, *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1754-1790*, 3 vols. (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1964), vol. II, p. 400.

² R. G. Thorne, *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1790-1820*, 3 vols. (London: Secker and Warburg, 1986), vol. III, p. 705.

³ Christopher Lloyd, ed., *The Keith Papers*, 3 vols. (London: Navy Records Society, 1950), vol. II, p. 394.

however; officers so rewarded were expected to loyally support the government that endorsed their candidature, with the threat of professional atrophy to punish deviation from the party line.⁴ Provided they were loyal supporters, officers elected for Admiralty boroughs could expect to remain in their seats for life, although more dramatic exits, through death on active duty, electoral defeat or, as in Elphinstone's happy case, elevation to the peerage meant that the manner of naval MPs leaving Parliament was as varied as that of their entry. By studying the similarities and differences in the parliamentary and naval careers of those officers who sat in the House, we can achieve a greater understanding of how those officers resolved the conflicts and exploited the opportunities offered by the nexus in their persons of two organizations central to Great Britain in the eighteenth century.

Even the most cursory overview of the 182 naval officers who sat in the House of Commons between 1715 and 1815 is an undertaking of daunting scale, and this analysis is founded upon the work of the History of Parliament Trust. This body was commissioned in 1951, publishing its first volumes in 1964 and not completing the cataloguing of the period under study until 1986. This organization, originally overseen by the great parliamentary historian Sir Lewis Namier, has collated into ten stout volumes for the period 1715-1815 biographies of every man to sit in the House of Commons, encompassing within its complete survey much valuable raw data yet to be fully digested or ruminated upon by academia. This comprehensive collation represents a trove of information that has until now not been analyzed in a sustained fashion in relation to the

⁴ Romney Sedgwick, *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1715-1754*, 2 vols. (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1970), vol. I, p. 144.

small but significant group of naval officers in Parliament. The editors of the Trust's volumes, Romney Sedgwick for 1715-1754, Sir Lewis Namier and John Brooke for 1754-1790 and R. G. Thorne for 1790-1820, briefly touch on naval MPs in their introductory surveys, but their comments are confined to an overview of their respective periods. This approach misses substantial change and development over the entire eighteenth century, and instead treats naval representation as static, unchanging and therefore capable of generalization; Sedgwick devotes just eleven lines to naval officers in the House.⁵

What scholarship that does exist on the interplay between the Parliament and the Royal Navy is built upon the work of the Trust, with the most recent example being Stephen Conway's work on the relationship between war, the state and society in the eighteenth century, which stresses the limited input of the Navy into political life. Conway lumps the Navy together with the Army, a service of very different character and traditions in stating that between 1754 and 1774 naval and army officers never comprised more than 16% of MPs, creating a picture of heterogeneity and minimal importance erected entirely upon Namier's and Brooke's brief summary.⁶ More critically, N.A.M. Rodger, himself drawing upon the relevant volumes of the Trust's work, deals thoroughly with naval MPs, carefully examining the relationship between professional service, patronage and parliamentary representation, though his study is confined only to a snapshot of the Navy

⁵ Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. I, p. 144.

⁶ Stephen Conway, *War, State and Society in Mid-Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 140.

during the Seven Years' War.⁷ What has yet to be attempted is to build upon the History of Parliament Trust's admirable groundwork to examine in what ways naval representation changed over a substantial period of time. Such an analysis, illustrating and illuminating with salient case studies the statistical trends apparent from the study of the Trust's information, reveals the characteristics and role of naval officers sitting in the Commons to be a more dynamic and variable phenomenon than hitherto thought, when considered over a sort of salty *longue duree*. The purpose of this thesis is in large part to raise awareness of a field which has remained thus far largely fallow and unstudied in a systematic way, a field that would reward further study. Though this work integrates contemporary naval and parliamentary scholarship in order to properly contextualize its findings, it is original in much of its analysis. Perhaps the greatest value of this thesis' original statistical analysis, leavening graphs delineating clear change with anecdote and example, is in adumbrating avenues leading beyond the scope of this work, indicating areas in need of fuller exploration.

While academia has not thus far systematically examined the role of naval officers in the House of Commons or of Members of Parliament in the Navy, the possibilities inherent in the fusion of professional and parliamentary positions was realized by the great novelist of Britain's Navy in the Napoleonic Wars, Patrick O'Brian. In *The Letter of Marque*, the twelfth book of his voluminous series, O'Brian has his hero Captain Jack Aubrey, of respectable gentry stock, offered the fictitious seat of Milport when it is vacated on the death of his father by his cousin, who neatly sums up both the process and

⁷ N. A. M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (Annapolis, ML: Naval Institute Press, 1986), pp. 328-343.

potential of occupying a seat in Parliament: “Could you not spend an afternoon at Milport, to meet the electors? There are not many of them, and those few are all my tenants, so it is no more than a formality; but there is a certain decency to be kept up...I thought it might strengthen your hand in any dealings with the government. There is not much merit in being a Member of Parliament, unless perhaps you represent your county; but at least a Member with merit of his own is in a position to have it recognized. He can bite as well as bark.”⁸ It is significant that O’Brian’s work, a comprehensive social reconstruction of early nineteenth century naval life, creates a parliamentary career for his main protagonist Captain Aubrey, a naval officer *par excellence* distilled from the careers of several real officers.

This foray into historical fiction shows the importance that minds that have taken a more creative approach to the Navy as an organizational and social totality attach to the prominence of parliamentary connections in the careers of many sea officers. Such an approach offers a more meaningful insight on the Navy than the arid study of strategy and tactics in isolation of their wider context that characterized naval scholarship until recently.⁹ This aspect of naval history has not thus far been studied in anything further than cursory generalizations, and would repay a survey such as this one of how the background, selection, election and practices of naval MPs changed over a hundred years. For the purposes of analyzing change over time, the chronological divisions of the Trust’s volumes have been retained. Although the periods 1715-1754, 1754-1790 and 1790-1820 mark significant elections, they serve equally well for naval history, roughly marking

⁸ Patrick O’Brian, *The Letter of Marque* (London: Harper Collins, 1988), p. 228.

⁹ N.A. M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain 1649-1815* (London, Penguin Books, 2004), pp. 13-15.

significant naval epochs: the end of the War of Spanish Succession in 1713 and the outbreak of the Seven Years' War in 1756 and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in 1793, with this study ending in 1815 at the close of that conflict in the middle of the Parliament of 1812.¹⁰ Based upon the extensive collation of raw data by the History of Parliament Trust, an analysis of the changing nature of naval representation within the House of Commons yields a richer understanding of how power relationships were mediated between merging political and professional elites as naval officers became Members of Parliament in increasing numbers.

The Parliament that naval officers sat in throughout the period was unreformed, with the suffrage and franchise of individual seats varying in a system of Byzantine complexity. Parliamentary boroughs had remained fixed for centuries despite substantial demographic change, creating an “obsolete distribution of seats naturally producing electoral absurdities and corruption.”¹¹ Restrictions of the franchise, differing in complexity and nature from seat to seat, meant that few boroughs represented more than 500 voters, and many were inhabited by a hundred or fewer, with occasional ‘rotten boroughs’ such as Buckingham returning two Members to Parliament to represent precisely thirteen voters in the first half of the century.¹² This meant that many boroughs were small enough that, through judicious cultivation of a tiny electorate, a local magnate could become the patron of a seat, with either the formal right or customary privilege of nominating candidates, who would be dutifully elected by the voters in return for their patron’s good

¹⁰ Andrew Lambert, *War at Sea in the Age of Sail, 1650-1850* (London: Cassell, 2000), pp. 104, 114, 150.

¹¹ Sir Lewis Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, 2nd ed. (London: MacMillan, 1960), p. 63.

¹² Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. I, p. 197.

offices, entertainments and preferments.¹³ With patronage sufficient to confidently command an electoral result, otherwise known as ‘interest,’ largely vested in the hands of landed elites,¹⁴ many men, including naval officers, entered Parliament on their family’s patronage. Others owed their seats to the friendship of patrons who often turned their interest to profitable advantage by returning candidates amenable to the government for fee or favours.

While many naval officers successfully navigated the intricate labyrinth of private patronage and obligation that was the most common path into eighteenth century politics, there was a simpler and more direct route into the House of Commons, related to the sheer gravity that the Navy exerted on the nation by virtue of its vast network of logistical support. Along with Treasury, Revenue Commissions, Secretariats of State and the Board of Trade, supporting the Navy was among the most important and demanding functions of eighteenth century British government.¹⁵ The Royal Navy was throughout the century the largest organization in Great Britain,¹⁶ and the massive investment in infrastructure such as dockyards and arsenals necessary to keep its fleets at sea represented an important source of employment for skilled enfranchised craftsmen in many port towns. Military spending absorbed over half of government expenditure, rising in wartime to 61% in the War of American Independence and 71% in the Seven Years’ War, and even

¹³ Norma Landau, ‘Independence, Deference, and Voter Participation: The Behaviour of the Electorate in Early-Eighteenth-Century Kent,’ *The Historical Journal*, 22, no.3 (September 1979), p. 582.

¹⁴ Peter Jupp, ‘The Landed Elite and Political Authority in Britain, ca. 1760-1850,’ *The Journal of British Studies*, 29, no.1 (January 1990), p. 58.

¹⁵ John Brewer, ‘Officialdom of Eighteenth-Century English Central Government’, in John Brewer and Eckhart Hellmuth, eds., *Rethinking Leviathan: The Eighteenth-Century State in Britain and Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 127

¹⁶ Michael Duffy, ‘The Foundations of British Naval Power’, in Michael Duffy, ed., *The Military Revolution and the State 1500-1800* (Exeter: Exeter University Publications, 1980), p. 58.

though these figures also include the Army's budget, they give some idea of the impact of the armed forces, particularly the Navy as the senior service, upon the British nation during the eighteenth century.¹⁷ A more concrete idea of the sheer scale of the Navy's operations is suggested by its expansion from a wartime complement of 49, 860 officers and men in 1714, the year before this study, to a peak of 147, 087 in 1813 just before its close, with a commensurate increase in budget from 1,157, 642 to 23, 716, 390 pounds respectively.¹⁸

Keeping so many thousands of men at sea for extended periods in vessels of advanced technical complexity required vast amounts of food, seasoned masts and timber, cordage, ironwork and other assorted materiel, supplied by an army of artisans and contractors ashore in large proto-industrial complexes. For example, the docks and shipyards of Portsmouth were described by Daniel Defoe as early as the 1720s as being "like a town by themselves and are a kind of marine corporation."¹⁹ The scale and scope of naval administration is attested by the many coordinating and supervisory positions that existed at the Admiralty offices in Whitehall alone, including the posts of Mechanist, Chemist, Metal Master, Inspectors of Telegraphs and of Repairs under an Inspector General, not to mention Chief, Senior, Junior, Extra, Supernumerary and Temporary Clerks, and a "Necessary Woman" to keep house for them all.²⁰ It is by virtue of this extensive employment, with enfranchised, skilled dockyard employees beholden to the Navy and

¹⁷ John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688-1783* (Cambridge: University Press, 1989), p. 40.

¹⁸ Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean*, pp .636-637, 643-645.

¹⁹ Daniel Defoe, *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724-1726), quoted in P. N Furbank, W. R. Owens and A. J. Coulson, eds., *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (London, Folio Society, 2006), p. 68.

²⁰ J. Sainty, *Admiralty Officials 1660-1870* (London: Athlone Press, 1975), pp. 5-6.

its political heads for their sustenance, that the government could almost assure the return of candidates for ten seats on the ‘Admiralty interest.’ This extensive patronage meant that naval officers were regularly returned for the dockyard boroughs of Dartmouth, Plymouth, Portsmouth, Rochester, Saltash and Sandwich, while the great arsenal at Woolwich gave the Admiralty joint control of Queenborough, shared with the Ordnance Board.²¹ Although the Navy wielded great influence in these boroughs, its power was not absolute, and it was assailed by several challenges to its patronage, like the “revolt” against the Admiralty’s nominations in the 1770s by leading religious dissenters in the voting community,²² or the attempt by John Buller to wrest a controlling interest in Saltash from the Admiralty in the 1780s.²³ Despite these challenges, the Admiralty retained fairly stable control over its ten seats, keeping open an avenue to Parliament otherwise not open to aspiring officers of few connections. The twofold path into Parliament, via public or private patronage, helped shape the differing experiences of naval officers sitting in the House of Commons, influencing their political behaviour according to their background and political obligations.

To contextualize such behaviour, it is important to understand the place of the Royal Navy and its commanders in eighteenth century society, ideology and popular imagining if we are to reach meaningful conclusions about the character and activities of naval officers sitting in Parliament. In the eighteenth century, Great Britain was a vigorous imperial power, and the nation’s interminable embroilments, particularly with France,

²¹ Rodger, *The Wooden World*, p. 329.

²² Namier, *The Structure of Politics*, p. 137.

²³ Ian Christie, ‘Private Patronage versus Government Influence: John Buller and the Contest for Control of Parliamentary Elections at Saltash 1780-1790,’ *The English Historical Review*, 71, no. 279 (April 1956), p. 251.

meant that for much of the period under consideration, Britain was at war, and the Navy was a major medium of mediating contact between the British people and assorted foreign foes.²⁴ This is significant, because the many victories of the Navy over the course of the century ensured that it enjoyed a prominent place in the public eye at a time when an ideology of particularism was forming. The Navy helped foster a sense of unique Britishness based upon geography, language and culture to create a belief in an “Island Race” distinct from the rest of Europe,²⁵ a group that manifested its growing self-confidence in “bellicose popular imperialism.”²⁶

Burgeoning national pride, amply evidenced by the origin in the eighteenth century of many familiar songs of British patriotism such as *Rule Britannia*, *God Save the King* and *Hearts of Oak*,²⁷ was grounded both upon external foundations in wartime successes, but also internally upon the perceived essential excellence of British constitutional arrangements. Great Britain was lauded as a land of civil liberties, which were articulated in philosophy by the Whig placeman John Locke²⁸ and, more accessibly, through music in George Frederick Handel’s favourable comparison of Britain to the felicity of a delivered Israel in Old Testament oratorios.²⁹ Parliament, though badly in want of reform

²⁴ Lawrence James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), pp. 31, 57, 65, 162-167.

²⁵ Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 55.

²⁶ Bob Harris, *Politics and the Nation: Britain in the Mid-Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 105.

²⁷ Simon Schama, *A History of Britain: The British Wars 1603-1776* (London: Butler and Tanner, 2001), p. 397.

²⁸ H. T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), p. 67.

²⁹ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (Avon: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 31-32.

to correct abuses of rotten boroughs and rampant nepotism, nonetheless embodied these virtues as the seat of the rights of free-born Englishmen.³⁰

The Navy had an unambiguous place in this ideological system, which combined its credentials as the prime instrument of imperial expansion and the defence of the unique British Isles from invasion by foreign tyrants who would challenge its particular liberties with freedom from the ideological taint suffered by standing armies as traditional tools of oppression.³¹ In contrast to the Army, the Navy, and in particular the admirals under whose command its victories were won, were “among Britannia’s most cherished guardians, the seaborne defenders of king, constitution and country,” as demonstrated in Figure 2, a typical print of the period. The Navy and its sailors served as allegorical shorthand to embody the patriotic, anti-Catholic spirit of a Protestant island battling Catholic foes.³² An idea of the ideological investment and sense of involvement the nation had in the Navy is revealed in the relief felt at the vindication of Admiral Keppel after a controversial court-martial in 1779, when the news was rushed by special couriers from Portsmouth to the London presses within six hours.³³ The perceived importance of the Navy to the health of the body politic is captured by a comment in an issue of the *Gentleman’s Magazine* in 1803, which was referring to ideological as well as physical

³⁰ P. D. G. Thomas, *The House of Commons in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 14-15.

³¹ Dickinson, *Liberty and Property*, p. 81.

³² Gerald Jordan and Nicholas Rogers, ‘Admirals as Heroes: Patriotism and Liberty in Hanoverian England,’ *The Journal of British Studies*, 28, no.3 (July 1989), pp. 202, 205.

³³ Douglas Hay and Nicholas Rogers, *Eighteenth-Century English Society: Shuttles and Swords* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 10.

fitness when it asserted that “the anchor of Great Britain is the constitutional courage of her seamen.”³⁴

Fig.2. A popular view of the Navy: Gillray’s *Fighting for the Dunghill: or Jack Tar settling Citoyen Francois*.

If contact between an increasingly patriotic British public and the outside world was in large part mediated through the actions of the Royal Navy, reported in widening circles by the expanding reach of print culture,³⁵ the House of Commons was a similarly important point of interface between the Navy and the public. The presence in this chamber of 182 naval officers between 1715 and 1815 integrated them into the political life of the nation, representing not only particular boroughs, but also the Navy itself in formative debates on naval and national policy. That so many prominent naval figures of

³⁴ Gerald Jordan and Nicholas Rogers, ‘Admirals as Heroes,’ p. 224.

³⁵ Harris, *Politics and the Nation*, p. 106

this period sat in the House of Commons, including names such as Vernon, Anson, Hawke, Howe, Rodney, Pellew, Hood, Jervis, Nelson, Elphinstone, Cochrane and many more, is testament to the nexus that existed between the Navy and Parliament, a connection reinforced in the eyes of the public by the proliferation of prints and memorabilia that was a prominent expression of an exponentially expanding consumer culture.³⁶ In fact, with the exception of Nelson, the vast majority of fleet commanders of this period sat in the House, along with many more officers of less glamorous personal distinction. Even Nelson, who never aspired to the Commons himself, nonetheless enjoyed the benefits of naval MPs sitting in the House through the professional patronage of his uncle Maurice Suckling, Member for Portsmouth and Comptroller of the Navy.³⁷

The presence of these officers in the Commons, coupled with a compatible ideology that vested both Parliament and the Navy with protection of English liberties, meant that the character of naval representation was bound to be a complex interplay of personal, professional, parliamentary and public interests. Though these interactions can only be touched upon or hinted at in a work of this scope, that they were felt to be important in the eighteenth century, and therefore worthy of study in attempting to understand the period, is attested by the conflation of all the abovementioned themes in panegyrics such as this example to Admiral Vernon in 1741:

Loyal to Majesty, to Britain true:
His Country's Welfare ever in his View,
No Party Faction e'er his mind cou'd scare,

³⁶ Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Europa Publications, 1982), p. 9.

³⁷ Terry Coleman, *Nelson: The Man and the Legend* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), p. 18.

Bold in the senate House and Brave at War,
Britains [sic] revere with all the love you can,
The Patriot Hero and the Honest man.³⁸

³⁸ Jordan and Rogers, 'Admirals as Heroes,' p. 208.

Chapter Two: Identity and Incentive: Who were Naval MPs, and why did they enter Parliament?

Before examining the place of naval officers in Parliament, it would be instructive to consider the place that representing a borough had in the careers of those officers, for an understanding of the age and rank of officers entering the Commons is a useful indication of possible motivations for sitting in the House. Promotions in the eighteenth century Navy were a combination of meritocratic assessment by examination, reward for service, patronage and the inexorable march of seniority.¹ An aspiring officer could only obtain a commission as a Lieutenant after satisfying an Examining Board of Captains that he possessed the technical proficiency necessary to coordinate the complex machinery of a sailing warship,² a practice in stark contrast to the Army which had no such quality control at entry level, and where commissions up to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel were available by purchase.³ The next step on the professional ladder for a Lieutenant was to the rank of Captain which, whether directly or via the intermediate rank of Commander, was indissolubly linked to being posted to a ship rated as a Captain's command, hence the older title of Post-Captain.⁴

As the choice of who should be posted to what command ultimately rested with the First Lord of the Admiralty,⁵ the political head of the Navy, it is at this stage of an officer's career that patronage and interest played the most important role. After that, once on the

¹ Rodger, *The Wooden World*, pp. 273-302.

² Geoffrey Callender, *The Naval Side of British History 1485-1945* (London: Christophers, 1952), p. 109.

³ H. C. B. Rogers, *The British Army of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1977), p. 54.

⁴ Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean*, p. 204.

⁵ Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean*, p. 515.

Captains' List, naval officers were almost certain to achieve flag rank and die as Admirals provided they lived long enough, though patronage still exerted an influence in deciding which officers should be awarded glorious and lucrative commands, and to which should be relegated tedious, thankless tasks like convoy duty.

Given the nature of promotion in the eighteenth century, it would be expected that a seat in Parliament would be of most use in being made Captain of a post-ship and starting to accumulate the seniority that further advancement relied upon; however this was not so. As Figure 3 demonstrates, for the vast majority of naval officers throughout the period, a seat in Parliament came too late in the trajectory of their careers to be of assistance in promotion, with an overwhelming majority of naval MPs already Post-Captains or higher when they entered the House, up to 93% between 1715 and 1754, 94% between 1754 and 1790 before dropping to a still overwhelming 84% between 1790 and 1815. The ages at which officers entered Parliament, with some nepotistic exceptions like the Honourable John Rodney, Post-Captain at the age of fifteen,⁶ also reflect the fact that a seat in Parliament generally came later in officers' careers. Officers of common birth entered the House on average at 43 years of age, while those of aristocratic background enjoyed a substantially lower average of 31 years of age on entry, reflecting the advantages of birth into families with substantial, sometimes controlling influence in smaller boroughs. Although there is a slight increase in the number of junior officers in the final third of the century, testament to aristocratic officers entering Parliament, often at a very tender age, for family boroughs as discussed below, the predominant trend was that a seat in

⁶ Rodger, *The Wooden World*, p.326.

Parliament was only of the most tangential importance to professional advancement, if at all.

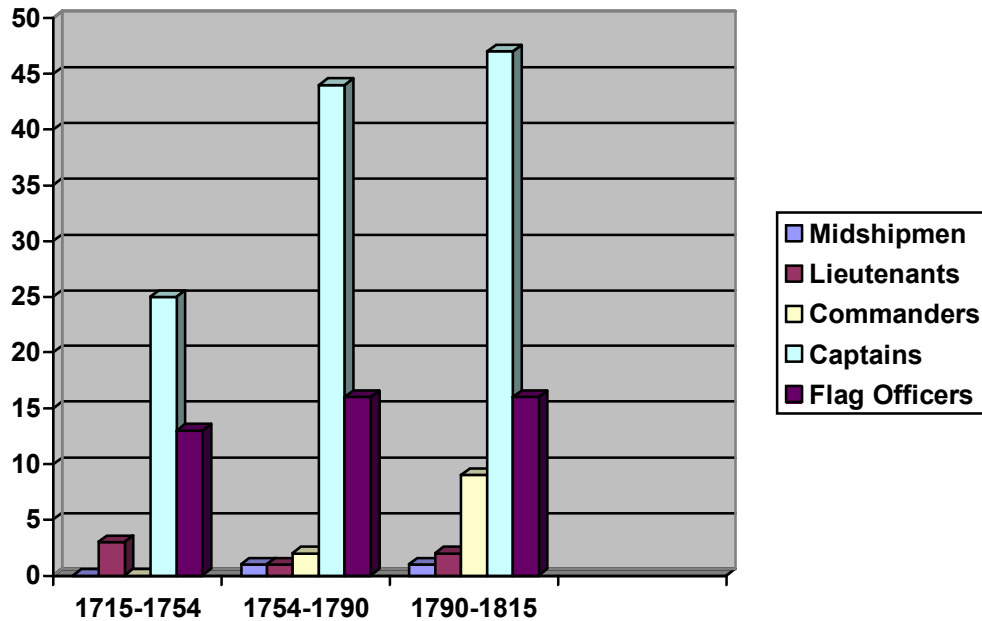


Fig.3. Naval officers' rank on entering Parliament.

This study has yielded very few instances of the application of direct political pressure in Parliament in return for promotion. The most salient example is an instance in 1762, when the Earl of Galloway stipulated that his son, the Honourable Keith Stewart, should be promoted to the rank of Captain in return for surrendering his seat as part of a complex electoral settlement known as the Galloway compromises.⁷ Similarly, in 1753, the Prime Minister, Henry Pelham, asked Captain William Trelawny to defer his ambition to enter Parliament as the candidates had already been settled for the 1754 election. After Pelham's death, Trelawny reminded his successor the Duke of Newcastle that "in the

⁷ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. III, p. 483.

mean time he said he would take care that I lost no ground in my profession by making that concession.”⁸ His patience was rewarded, for Trelawny sat for West Looe from 1757 to 1767 and was made post in 1756, after having requested of Newcastle in 1755 that he be employed “in a station that may not be too much out of reach when I am wanted to attend at either of the Looes.”⁹ Both examples are rather counterintuitive cases of professional advancement arising from acquiescing to patrons’ political convenience by staying out of the House, while there is no substantial evidence of promotion coming from an officer sitting in the House. The closest link between Parliament and promotion lies in Sir George Brydges Rodney’s unsuccessful request to have Commander Peard, a freeman and voter of Penryn, a borough Rodney hoped to win in 1761, made post as Captain of Rodney’s flagship to secure his electoral goodwill. However, this example is only indirect, and in any case his practice of advancing “men whose chief or only merit was their relevance to Rodney’s political ambitions” in fact placed him in bad odour in the service, with his unsuccessful political nominations regularly knocked back.¹⁰

With no clear connection between a place in the Commons and promotion, it is at first puzzling why a significant number of naval officers sought to sit in Parliament, echoing in varying degrees of intensity Sir George Brydges Rodney’s exclamation in 1780 that “to be out of Parliament is to be out of the world, and my heart is set upon my being in.”¹¹ In Rodney’s case, the urge was so strong that in twenty years of parliamentary life, he sat in a total of five seats before his ennoblement- Saltash, Okehampton, Penryn,

⁸ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. III, p. 561.

⁹ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. III, p. 561.

¹⁰ Rodger, *The Wooden World*, p. 338.

¹¹ Namier, *The Structure of Politics*, p. 1.

Northampton and Westminster. Juxtaposed against this furious struggle for incumbency is the languid sentiment of then Commander George Stewart, who decided in 1792 after lobbying from his seat in the Commons Pitt the Younger, Lord Chatham the First Lord and Henry Dundas for promotion that “I need not be very solicitous about Parliament since so little fruit is to be reaped from attendance.”¹² Given that a seat in the House came for most naval officers, as has been demonstrated, at an age and rank in life that meant that any political leverage gained from their seat was of little use in direct promotion, the indifference of Stewart and the eagerness of Rodney both beg the question of why naval officers bothered to pursue a political career at all?

Perhaps the most potent motive enticing naval MPs to sit in the Commons was the intrinsic honour, kudos or status that accrued to those who held that position, helping to reinforce, or in the case of men of lowly birth to create a sense of identity and place in society. Though a seat in the House might not very compatible with a naval career in practical terms, it was not inconsistent with an ideology that could apply equally to naval and parliamentary service. A shared rhetoric of defending liberty entwined the Navy with the Commons, with Parliament being the seat of the rights of free-born Englishmen and the “Grand Inquest of the Nation,” in theory preserving liberty from within,¹³ much as the Navy safeguarded those liberties from without. Unlike the Army, the Navy was a benign, “constitutionally unthreatening” force compatible with the deeply ingrained distrust in the national psyche towards standing armies.¹⁴ When the Navy and politics dramatically converged in the national consciousness, most particularly in the Keppel-Palliser affair of

¹² Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. V, p. 272.

¹³ Thomas, *The House of Commons*, p. 14.

¹⁴ Conway, *War, State and Society*, p. 141.

1778, the “wooden walls”¹⁵ of the fleet became a “bulwark of liberty.”¹⁶ Handbills entitled “Law, Liberty and Keppel” succinctly encapsulating the perceived link, as did more practical spoons and tablecloths bearing simulacra of Sir Joshua Reynolds’ portrait (see Figure 15) and the slogan “Keppel and Virtue.”¹⁷ The heroes of the Navy were held up for their courage and perceived integrity against the supposed corruption of politics ashore, as in an expansive *Epistle to Admiral Keppel*, which contrasted Keppel’s virtue with landed vice in flatulent verse:

Hail, to thee, Keppel! from perils saved,
Worse than thy courage on the deep has braved!
Trying the hour, when by the whirlwind’s breath
The billows teemed with darkest forms of death;
Trying, when England’s dauntless sons oppose
The shattered ship against her trebled foes;
But far more trying is Detraction’s dart,
And the dark stab of ministerial art.¹⁸

And so on for twenty pages, suggesting that salt water and active service somehow absolved and baptized naval officers from the taint of political jobbery ashore, whereas we shall see that in reality naval MPs were intimately involved in the deals and match-making of eighteenth century politics. While individual heroes like Vernon, Keppel and Rodney could be elevated by occasional outpourings of public frenzy to cult status, naval officers as a whole benefited from the rising status and social credit of the service stemming from the lustre of frequent victories and the gentrification of the officer corps

¹⁵ A. de Selincourt, trans., *Herodotus: The Histories* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 462.

¹⁶ Conway, *War, State and Society*, p. 142.

¹⁷ Nicholas Rogers, *Crowds, Culture and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 141, 153.

¹⁸ William Hayley, *Epistle to Admiral Keppel* (London, Fielding and Walker, 1779), revised 25 September 2006, Eighteenth Century Collections Online, <<http://galenet.galegroup.com.ezproxy.library.usyd.edu.au/servlet/ECCO>>, viewed 25 September 2006, p. 9.

discussed below. This aura of success and capability was manifested in an esteem for the Navy as an institution, occasionally approaching reverence, suggested by the naming of an ordinary sailor “The British Hercules” in a print of 1737.¹⁹ Even Thomas Rowlandson’s usually savage satirical pen graced his series of prints of all the ranks in the Navy with serene, even simpering visages (Figure 4) in contrast to the grotesqueries inflicted upon other groups in contemporary cartoons.²⁰ The standing of the Navy as an institution must have impacted upon the electoral desirability of quite unremarkable naval officers who aspired to Parliament as well as lionized heroes, though it remains undetermined just how appealing a naval uniform was in the eyes of electors of different constituencies. Further detailed study of canvassing in individual electorates would doubtless reveal nuances behind R. G. Thorne’s general statement that “a naval background undoubtedly proved an electoral asset.”²¹

¹⁹ John Brewer, *The Common People and Politics 1750-1790s* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1986), p. 66.

²⁰ A. B. C. Whipple, *Fighting Sail* (Amsterdam: Time-Life Books, 1978), pp. 20-21.

²¹ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. I, p. 317.

Fig.4. The Navy idealized: Thomas Rowlandson's *Captain and Sailor*.

If naval officers were lent a patina of glamour and status from their profession that could be turned to electoral advantage, sitting in the House of Commons also lent a degree of status to Naval MPs of humble background, cementing their rise to considerable distinction within eighteenth century British society. For officers who entered their profession on the lower deck and rose to its apex, like Samuel Cornish, George Darby and Thomas Griffin, each beginning their career as Able Seamen and dying Admirals,²² a seat in Parliament helped mark their arrival in polite society, showcasing the meritocratic elements of the eighteenth century Navy. Apart from the intrinsic honour of a seat in the Commons, representing a borough also demonstrated the Navy's ability to make a man's fortune, particularly through prize money. Throughout our period, members of the House of Commons had to hold land worth 600 pounds a year to be eligible to sit in

²² Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. II, pp. 254, 299, 555.

Parliament.²³ For naval officers of humble background, a seat in the House was a tangible demonstration of their means, or at least connections in the case of Sir Peter Warren, who had the necessary property qualifications satisfied by the grace of his Grace the Duke of Bedford, Warren's patron.²⁴ At the other extreme, George Anson, whose share in over a million pieces of eight and 35 000 ounces of virgin silver from a Spanish galleon in captured in 1743²⁵ allowed him to buy such extensive estates in Hedon that, in addition to representing it, he obtained a controlling interest in and patronage of the borough.²⁶

Given that most naval officers entering Parliament needed the support of a patron's interest, it is necessary to examine where they sought that sponsorship, and how patterns of patronage changed over time. The simplest route into Parliament was to be nominated for one of the Admiralty boroughs discussed earlier. Once elected to an Admiralty seat, the incumbent was, with very few exceptions, assured a place for life, which was often not that long given that these boroughs were often awarded to elderly officers, carried to the top of the service by seniority rather than conspicuous service.²⁷ As a proportion of seats that returned naval officers to Parliament, those controlled by the Admiralty decreased markedly over the century, meaning that naval officers increasingly entered Parliament for seats outside the gift of the Admiralty, suggesting an increasing integration of naval officers into the sophisticated structures of eighteenth century British politics.²⁸ This is largely linked to the rising social status of the officer corps, resulting in

²³ Barbara Tuchman, *The March of Folly* (London: Michael Joseph, 1984), p. 140.

²⁴ Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. II, p. 522.

²⁵ Richard Walter, *Anson's Voyage Around the World* (Glasgow: University Press, 1928), p. 363.

²⁶ Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. I, p. 415.

²⁷ Namier and John Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. I., p. 211.

²⁸ Christopher Dandeker, 'Patronage and Bureaucratic Control- the Case of the Naval Officer in English Society 1780-1850,' *The British Journal of Sociology*, 29, no. 3 (September 1978), p. 302.

and fuelled by an influx into the service and Parliament of officers of aristocratic or gentry family.

Blue-blooded officers, however, did not have a monopoly on family interest; some commoners had strong local connections to Admiralty seats that allowed them to represent them free from government patronage, such as Captain John Spratt Rainier.²⁹ Like his uncle Admiral Peter Rainier before him, the younger Rainier represented the seat of Sandwich from 1808-1812, both of whom owed their place to the local standing of his father, Daniel Rainier, wine merchant and Mayor of Sandwich.³⁰ In general terms, however, naval officers were returned for Admiralty seats based upon the choice of the Prime Minister, the Cabinet, and more immediately the First Lord of the Admiralty, with a letter from the Duke of Bedford serving in that capacity to Edward Hawke on 18 December 1747 illustrating how such seats were generally bestowed, in this case unanimously by the electors: “I have this day wrote to Mr. Mayor of Portsmouth, recommending you to the gentleman of the corporation to be their representative in Parliament. I most heartily wish you good success.”³¹ This sort of patronage was vital throughout the century to the careers of men who had risen through the service from very humble origins, and whose professional success was a passport to a place in politics.

Though the number of naval MPs increased, the number of naval seats, boroughs in which naval installations such as dockyards and arsenals were a major source of employment and electoral patronage, remained static, with the Admiralty not expanding

²⁹ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. V, p. 4

³⁰ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. V, p. 5.

³¹ Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. II, p. 117.

its patronage beyond determining who should represent Rochester, Sandwich, Saltash, Dover, Great Yarmouth, Plymouth, Portsmouth, Queenborough and Southampton, with significant influence in seats such as Bridport and Wexford.³² This meant that as the century progressed, the proportion of naval officers sitting in Parliament for seats within the gift of their profession declined from nineteen out of forty-two Members between 1715-1754 to twenty-three out of seventy-five in 1790-1815, a clear decrease from a half to a third. When considered in terms of which seats returned naval officers, as shown in Figure 5, the trend is even more readily apparent, with seats not within the gift of the Admiralty eventually predominating naval seats, though of course these figures yield a slightly different result from the total numbers of naval officers in Parliament, as examined below. This is because it was not uncommon for Members of Parliament, including naval officers, to sit in several seats during the course of one parliamentary term due to the constant, turbulent round of challenges, petitions and by-elections that characterized eighteenth century politics.³³

The drift from reliance on naval patronage to seat naval officers in the Commons is a clear explanation for the increasingly diverse political character and affiliations of naval MPs opposed to a more settled norm in the earlier half of the century. This quieter time was epitomized by Sir Chaloner Ogle, elected to the Admiralty borough of Rochester at the age of sixty-six, Admiral of the Fleet and with his most dramatic exploit, the capture

³² Rodger, *The Wooden World*, p.329, Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. I, p. 316.

³³ Tuchman, *The March of Folly*, pp. 140-141.

of the notorious pirate Bartholomew Roberts forty-four years in the past, described as being “snug at Rochester and will hardly to go to sea any more.”³⁴

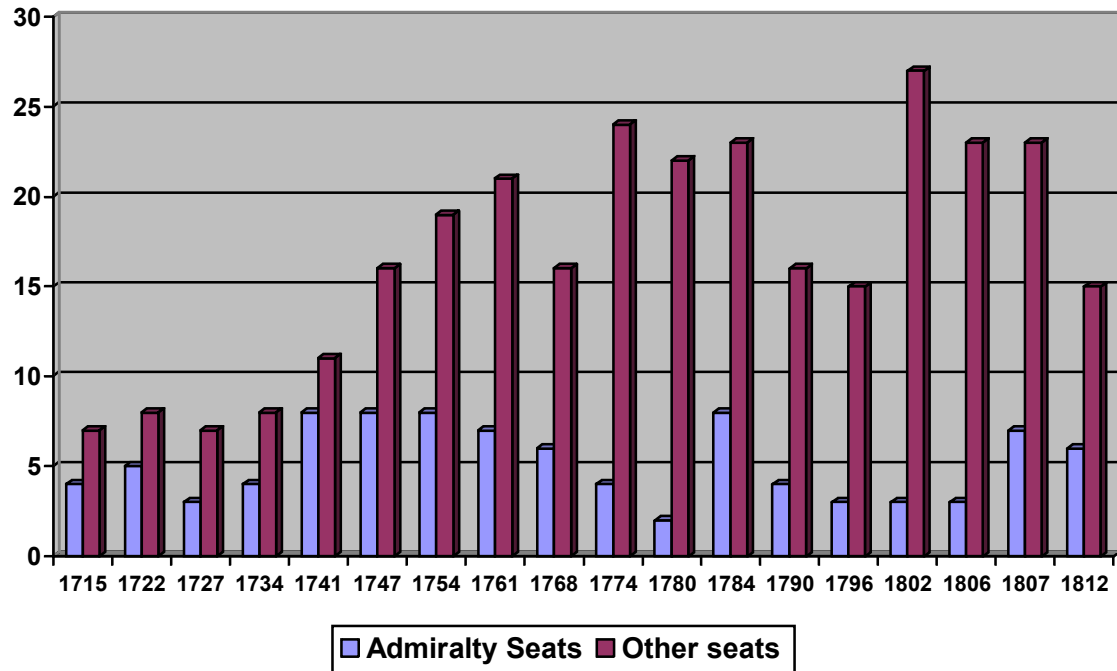


Fig. 5. The rise in private patronage for naval officers.

Of course, it is important not to overemphasize the impact of social mobility in the still highly-stratified world of eighteenth century British politics.³⁵ The rising status of the Navy over the period saw a significant change in the nature of naval representation that is counterintuitive to the assumption that the social changes that gathered pace throughout the eighteenth century promoted the rise of people not from a traditional background of public service to positions of power. Though in general terms this assumption is borne out in Parliament, with Ian Christie’s research into ‘non-elite’ MPs revealing a steady increase from 70 in the Parliament of 1715 to 147 in the Parliament of 1812,³⁶ this trend

³⁴ Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. II, p. 305.

³⁵ John Rule, *Albion’s People: English Society 1714-1815* (New York: Longman, 1992), p. 50.

³⁶ Ian Christie, *British ‘non-Elite’ MPs 1715-1829* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 206.

is not reflected in naval representation in the Commons. Indeed, the composition of naval MPs as a group grew more privileged as aristocratic officers became entrenched both in the service and in the House.

Throughout the eighteenth century, scions of aristocratic families, the overwhelming majority of them younger sons, began to join the Navy as the service rose in status, receiving an especial boost by George III's sending his son Prince William Henry to sea in 1779.³⁷ By 1800, it has been computed that 11% of naval officers came of titled families, with a further 27% from the landed gentry,³⁸ and it is to be expected that the proportion of blue-blooded naval MPs, drawn from the upper echelons of the service, should reflect this gentrification, which is the case. The number of aristocratic naval officers sitting in Parliament corresponded with this trend, and even exceeded it, with numbers increasing in raw terms, eleven in 1715-1754 and nineteen in 1754-1790 to thirty-four in 1790-1815. Aristocrats also increased as a proportion of naval MPs, with officers boasting an aristocratic background comprising 26% of naval representation between 1715-1754, rising to 29% in 1754-1790 before jumping to 45% in 1790-1815. This influx of aristocratic naval officers found seats in Parliament largely outside the electorates in which the Admiralty returned candidates, with naval seats accommodating only five aristocratic officers between 1715-1754 and 1790-1815 and four between 1754-1790. The remainder were brought into the House largely for family seats, relying on ties of kin-or-friendship with patrons of boroughs to ensure their return for such electorates. The beneficial effect of aristocratic connections on the careers of naval MPs is

³⁷ Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean*, p. 388.

³⁸ Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 129.

statistically suggested by the age at which those who represented Admiralty seats first entered Parliament compared to men of humbler birth. Such a comparison is illuminating because both groups relied on the same source of patronage for Admiralty seats, whereas aristocratic officers sitting for family seats often capitalized on their connections to enter Parliament soon after their majority. For naval MPs entering Parliament for Admiralty seats, scions of aristocratic families first took their seats at the age of 30, compared to a markedly more seasoned 47 for commoners. The steady gentrification of naval officers was paralleled by the changing character of naval representation in the Commons, clearly demonstrating an integration of the officer class into existing traditions of mediating power relationships within the landed elite.

Although drawn from an increasingly privileged background, there were nonetheless enough naval officers of common birth sitting in the House of Commons to form one of the most meritocratic elements in the unreformed Parliament, which can be shown by a brief survey of their backgrounds, as in Figure 6. The biggest proportion of naval MPs not from aristocratic families nonetheless came from the gentry, a category vague enough to encompass many gradations of prosperity, importance and influence. This category included thirteen sons of baronets and ranged from Captain Galfridus Walpole, son of Robert Walpole the Prime Minister to Sir John Norris, merely of “respectable Irish family.”³⁹ In addition to those whose fathers were of the gentry, seven naval MPs of common stock had been preceded by their fathers in the Commons. Not all naval MPs enjoyed this generally well-heeled pedigree, and some naval officers sitting in Parliament came of very humble parentage indeed. Sir Thomas Troubridge and Charles Vanbrugh’s

³⁹ Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. II, pp. 298, 508.

fathers were both bakers,⁴⁰ and seven naval MPs' parentage is unknown, though given that of those seven, Vice Admirals George Darby, Thomas Griffin and Samuel Cornish all entered the Navy as Able Seamen, it can be assumed that some officers' births were so low as to have been utterly obscured to history.

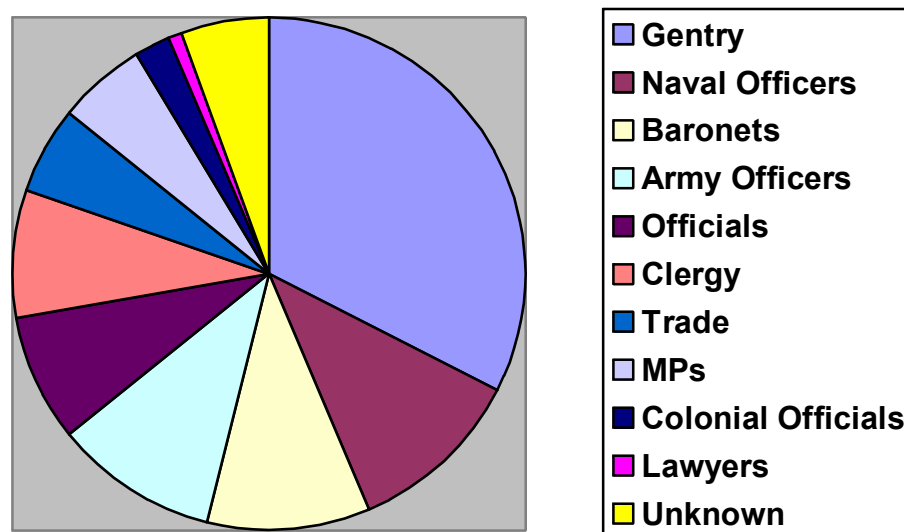


Fig. 6. Parentage of naval officers of common birth in Parliament

Between these extremes was a core of officers whose background was solidly middle-class and professional. Nine naval MPs were sired by Anglican clergymen, including the brothers Hood and Captain John Markham, whose father went on to become Archbishop of York,⁴¹ in addition to John MacBride, son of a Presbyterian Minister.⁴² Only one naval MP came from a legal background, but that was an exceptional man in the person of Sir Edward Hawke.⁴³ Ten officials in the service of the Crown sired naval officers who sat in Parliament. These included men with powerful naval connections such as the father of Sir

⁴⁰ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. V, p. 416, Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. II, p. 490.

⁴¹ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. IV, p. 546.

⁴² Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. III, p. 145.

⁴³ Rodger, *The Wooden World*, p. 279.

John Jervis, Swynfen Jervis, Auditor of Greenwich Naval Hospital and Solicitor to the Admiralty,⁴⁴ and Piercy Brett and Curtis King, Masters Attendant of Chatham dockyard and Woolwich Arsenal, all of whom doubtless exerted their influence at the Admiralty in their offspring's favour.⁴⁵ Able to offer less immediate assistance to their sons' advancement were other officials such as Sir George Brydges Rodney's grandfather, Envoy to Tuscany, Sir Charles Hardy's father, Commissioner of Garrisons for Guernsey, Sir Isaac Coffin's, Paymaster of the Customs at Boston, or Charles Pierrepont's, who discharged the picturesque functions of the Deputy Rangership of Richmond Park.⁴⁶ Even more exotic were colonial officials like Thomas Frankland's father, Governor of Fort William in Bengal, John Willett Payne's, Chief Justice of St Kitts or Henry Martin's, Speaker of the Assembly of Antigua.⁴⁷ Eight naval officers were from Army families, though all younger sons, as were the overwhelming majority of all naval officers, the principles of primogeniture vested in eldest sons almost never being jeopardized by a dangerous career at sea.⁴⁸

All naval officers were potentially patrons, especially those of high rank,⁴⁹ and active service together created networks as strong as bonds of political obligation ashore, with clear, unbroken lines of senior officers sponsoring protégés' careers being discernible.

⁴⁴ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. IV, p. 305.

⁴⁵ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. II, p. 115, Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. IV, p. 337.

⁴⁶ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. III, p. 368, Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. II, p. 109, Christie, *British 'Non-Elite' MPs*, p. 120, Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. IV, p. 800.

⁴⁷ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. II, p. 468, Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. IV, pp. 555, 736.

⁴⁸ Rodger, *The Wooden World*, p. 252.

⁴⁹ Daniel Baugh, *British Naval Administration in the Age of Walpole* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 125.

For example, Admiral Matthew Aylmer sponsored Sir John Norris' advancement, a relationship sealed by marriage to Aylmer's daughter, with Norris in turn fostering the career of Sir Charles Wager, and so on through Lord George Anson to Sir Charles Saunders then Sir Hugh Palliser, creating long lines of professional pedigree that were reproduced in Parliament through Admiralty Boroughs.⁵⁰ Given this established practice within the Navy, it is only natural that sons in the service should enjoy the benefit of paternal exertions of influence in their favour. Such patronage resulted in thirteen commoners sitting in Parliament springing from the salty loins of naval officers. This could create dynasties of naval patronage based upon blood to match those founded upon the professional relationship between patron and protégé, with the most salient example being that of the Bickertons. Sir Richard, Member for Rochester from 1790-92, was the third son of Captain Henry Bickerton, and he in turn sired a second Sir Richard Bickerton, Member for Poole from 1808-1812.⁵¹ The diversity of backgrounds from which naval MPs not of an aristocratic family were drawn shows that the element of meritocracy that characterized naval advancement also applied to the representation of the service within the House of Commons.

⁵⁰ G. J. Marcus, *Hearts of Oak: A Survey of British Sea Power in the Georgian Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 85.

⁵¹ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. V, p. 416, Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. III, pp. 204, 205.

Chapter Three: Patronage, Popularity and Polling

How the Navy's variable fortunes in war affected the number of its officers returned as Members of Parliament has yet to be considered across the full century of Britain's rise to naval dominance, which this brief overview rectifies. The most simple and direct means in which naval representation altered between 1715 and 1815 is in the fluctuating raw numbers of naval officers who sat in the House, which was fixed at 558 Members, with a further 100 Irish MPs added upon the second Act of Union in 1801.¹ The number of naval officers returned to each Parliament throughout the century may be seen in Figure 7, ranging from the ten members in the Parliament of 1727 to a peak of thirty in the Parliaments of 1806 and 1807. Although Namier describes the fluctuation in the number of naval MPs within his own period of 1754-1790 as "purely adventitious,"² a survey of the rates of representation over the course of a century reveals an interesting trend.

Comparing the number of naval MPs in each Parliament, their presence increased markedly in Parliaments formed from general elections close to years of notable naval successes, and dipped sharply in years of defeat or controversy. It is not inconceivable that the jump from sixteen to twenty-two naval MPs in the election of 1761 was owing to the recent spate of victories in which the Navy had a part, such as the capture of Quebec, Guadeloupe and Belleisle, as well as the exclusive spoils of the battles of Lagos and Quiberon Bay that crowned 1759, a year crowded with British victories.³ This hypothesis

¹ Edward Porritt, *The Unreformed House of Commons*, 2 vols. (New York: Kelley, 1903), vol. I, p. 15.

² Namier and John Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. I., p. 212.

³ Julian Corbett, *The Seven Years' War: A Study in British Combined Strategy* (London: Longman, Green & Co., 1907), pp. 300-361.

is borne out by the election in 1761 of Sir Edward Hawke, Augustus Hervey and Richard Howe, victors of Quiberon Bay, Augustus Keppel and Sir Charles Saunders, captors of Belleisle and Quebec respectively. Other commanders of the Seven Years' War elected in this year included Sir George Pocock, who had acquitted himself well in a series of battles off the Coromandel Coast of India in 1758-1759, as well as the rising star of Sir George Brydges Rodney.⁴

Similarly, the cumulative impact of the controversial engagement off Ushant in 1778, as well as the public fissure of the Navy in the Keppel-Palliser affair repeated American failures may well be responsible for the general election of 1780 returning only fourteen naval officers, the lowest result in the last half century of this study.⁵ Again, the recovery in numbers to twenty-three officers in the election of 1784 may be related to the public's restored confidence in the Navy following battles such as Dogger Bank in 1781 and the triumph of Rodney at the Saintes in 1782.⁶ Of course, the substantial increase of naval representation in the final years of this study may be related to the exponential increase of the Navy itself during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, with the officer corps swelling from 2000 in 1792 to 10 000 by 1806,⁷ also increasing the pool from which naval MPs could be drawn. Nonetheless, the credit that the Navy enjoyed from a string of victories in that conflict from the Battle of the Glorious First of June in 1794 to Camperdown, Cape St. Vincent, the Nile, Copenhagen and Trafalgar to name the most

⁴ Corbett, *The Seven Years' War*, pp. 258-263, 322-360, 409-413, 480-486, 528-529.

⁵ John Tilley, *The British Navy and the American Revolution* (Columbia SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), p. 269.

⁶ Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean*, pp. 337-367.

⁷ Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation*, p. 183.

prominent,⁸ cannot have failed to impact upon the electoral success of naval officers as a group in the final years of the period.

⁸ Lambert, *War at Sea in the Age of Sail*, pp. 154, 157, 158, 160, 166, 172.

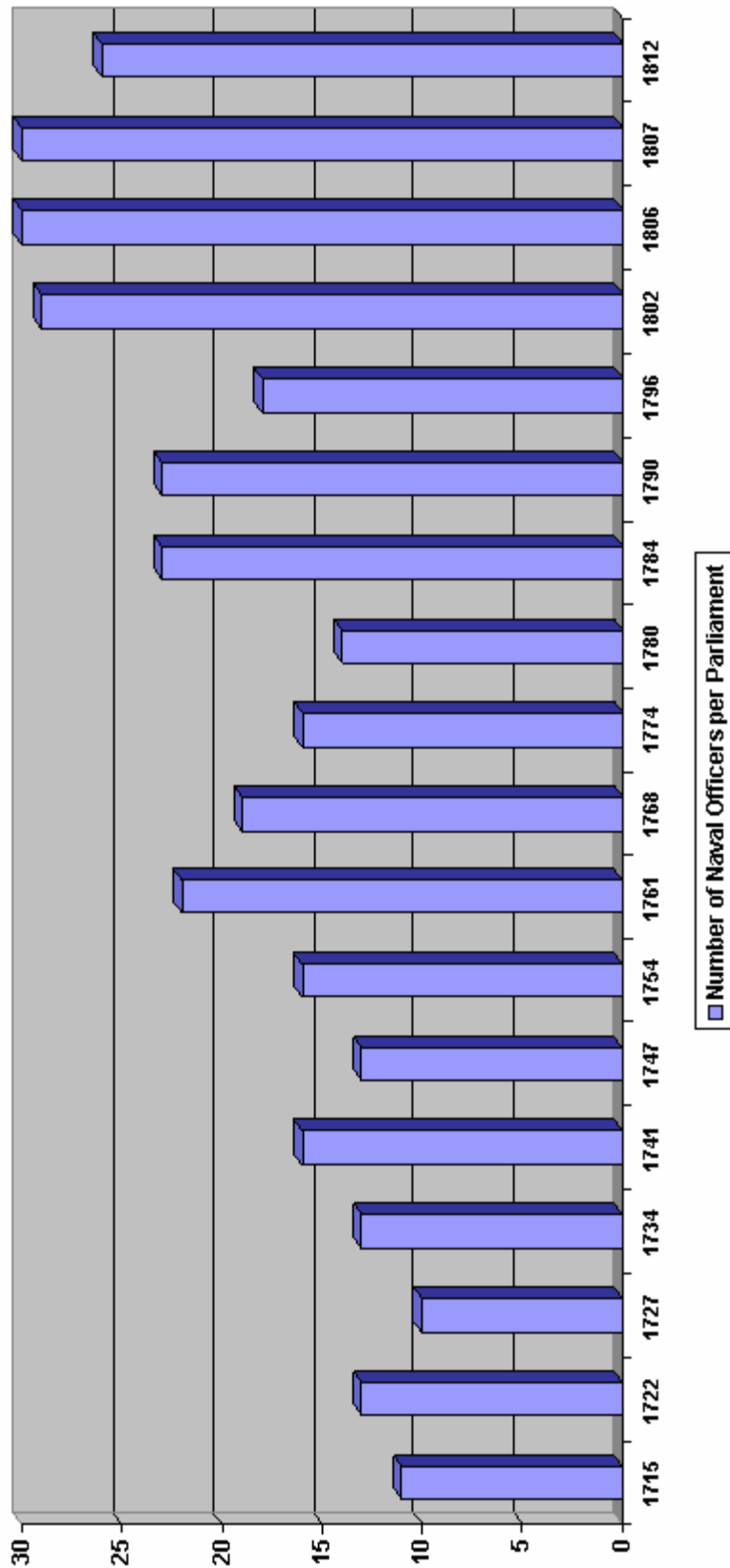


Fig.7. Number of naval officers per Parliament

Although it would take a comprehensive study of electioneering and popular politics in individual constituencies to determine how far the Navy's success in wartime determined the number of officers that were returned to Parliament, the case of Admiral Vernon in 1741 suggests a strong link between martial and political success. Admiral Vernon's successes in the Caribbean, particularly in the capture of Porto Bello, marked one of the first major instances in which a popular patriotic voice was manifested through all forms of media from prints and pamphlets to ballads and souvenirs,⁹ marking the growing importance of public opinion in eighteenth-century politics, which was very receptive to naval victories and the heroes they produced.¹⁰ Victories like Vernon's were lauded in Britain, receiving the official praises and encomiums of both Houses of Parliament.¹¹ More importantly, events like the capture of Porto Bello were also marked spontaneously by the public with such enthusiasm that, apart from bonfires and overflowing panegyrics, whole villages were renamed Porto Bello in Staffordshire, Sussex and Durham,¹² and 'Vernon Mugs' were successfully marketed by Staffordshire potters.¹³

Overflowing popular sentiment had an impact on parliamentary powerbrokers such as William Pulteney, whose letter to Vernon on 27th March 1740 praised his "late glorious success before Porto Bello...it adds greatly to the honour of your enterprise when mankind are at a loss to determine whether your conduct, your courage or your humanity is most to be admired."¹⁴ These acclamations made Vernon the hero of the hour and a

⁹Marcus, *Hearts of Oak*, p. 255

¹⁰ Conway, *War, State and Society*, p. 165.

¹¹ Douglas Ford, *Admiral Vernon and the Navy* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1911), p. 138.

¹² Schama, *The British Wars*, p. 375

¹³ Conway, *War, State and Society*, p. 214

¹⁴ B. Ranft, ed., *The Vernon Papers* (London: Navy Records Society, 1958), p. 79.

valuable electoral commodity, shown in the general election of 1741 where Vernon was nominated at Portsmouth, London, Rochester, Ipswich and Penryn, and was elected for the last three, choosing to sit for Ipswich. That a naval hero could be returned for three seats simultaneously, and Vernon was assured by the effusive Pulteney that “all places that send members to Parliament have been struggling to have you for their representative, and, I dare say, you might have been chosen in twenty more places than you are,”¹⁵ shows the sheer popularity that naval officers could attain. It is likely that the sheen of its most prominent heroes, coupled with the success and credit of the naval profession as a whole, may have impacted upon the electoral chances of naval officers as a group, helping to account for fluctuations in numbers that broadly follow the Navy’s fortunes throughout the century.

Fig. 8. Admiral Edward Vernon, simultaneously nominated for five seats and elected for three.

¹⁵ Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. II, p. 498.

The sort of successes that lifted the profile of the Navy as a whole had a profound impact on the lives of individual officers, often bringing great wealth in the form of prize money as well as a public profile that could be turned to parliamentary advantage. Seats like Ipswich and Westminster, with enfranchised populations of up to 12 000 out of 158 000 citizens in 1801 in the case of Westminster, were the closest thing eighteenth century Britain knew to democratic suffrage, and these electors had a taste for victorious commanders such as Sir Charles Wager, Edward Vernon, Sir George Rodney, Sir Samuel Hood and Lord Cochrane.¹⁶ For men like Vernon, success was so great as to free them from the need to seek a political patron, whose views they would then have to echo in the House. Originally elected on the back of a national outpouring of joy at his capture of Porto Bello in 1740, Vernon sat for Ipswich for sixteen years despite professional disgrace and being struck off the list of flag officers after quarrelling with the Admiralty in 1746.¹⁷ This lengthy term in Parliament was only made possible by his judicious application of prize money to cultivate his own interest “at an immense expense and unspeakable trouble,” supporting his erratic course as a “picturesque and turbulent politician” outside the usual structures of naval and parliamentary patronage.¹⁸

Similarly, a dashing and lucrative career¹⁹ allowed the flamboyant, proudly independent and originally indigent Captain Lord Cochrane to disburse his glamorously-won prize money to secure a seat in the Commons without professional or political support.²⁰

¹⁶ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. I, p. 316, vol. II, p. 266.

¹⁷ B. Ranft, ed., *The Vernon Papers*, p. 442.

¹⁸ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. III, p. 583.

¹⁹ Richard Woodman, *The Sea Warriors: Fighting Captains and Frigate Warfare in the Age of Nelson* (London: Constable, 2001), pp. 154-156, 223-225.

²⁰ Donald Thomas, *Cochrane: Britannia's Last Sea King* (London: Allen, 1978), p. 98.

Though challenged as apocryphal, Cochrane's account of his failure at a by-election for the venal borough of Honiton in 1806, followed by his subsequent success in the general election of the same year show the possibilities open to a naval officer willing to be generous with his prize money to secure the desired result. Requesting leave of absence to contest the borough from the Port Admiral in Plymouth, which "the prize money procured without scruple," Cochrane records that a voter, expecting that his money would be spent "sailor-fashion" in the constituency, told him during his canvass "you need not ask me, my Lord, who I votes for, I always votes for Mister Most."²¹ Cochrane records that he refused to outbid his opponents' offer of five pounds per vote before the poll but, though defeated, rewarded every person who had voted for him with ten pounds after the event, assuring his popularity in the borough for the general election a few months later.²²

Cochrane says he was returned on the rapacious voters' expectation of "post-facto consideration" as in his earlier failed election, but that this time he refused to pay the expected donatives on account of his reforming principles. Subsequent scholarship suggests that, in spite of his radical rhetoric, Cochrane in fact paid the usual douceurs for his election.²³ Nevertheless, the powerful nexus between a successful naval officers' supposed wealth, fame and his electoral appeal is clearly exhibited by Cochrane's arriving in Honiton for the general election in a coach and six, followed by several

²¹ Brian Vale, ed., *Memoirs of a Fighting Captain: Admiral Lord Cochrane* (London: The Folio Society, 2005), p. 71.

²² Brian Vale, ed., *Admiral Lord Cochrane*, p. 72.

²³ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. III, p. 462.

carriages filled with officers and seamen from the frigate under his command in a potent display of political theatre.²⁴

Fig. 9. Captain Lord Cochrane, who turned his prize money into votes.

Officers such as Vernon and Cochrane who enjoyed enough popular appeal to be independent in politics were generally looked upon by successive governments with wariness ranging to outright hostility. When popularity was tinged with notoriety, as in the case of the Keppel-Palliser Affair, where naval affairs and politics sharply intersected in the highly publicized courts-martial²⁵ following the Battle of Ushant in 1778, administrations could move to neutralize naval officers who might prove rallying points

²⁴ Brian Vale, ed., *Admiral Lord Cochrane*, p. 83.

²⁵ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture and Politics*, p. 138.

of opposition in the House. Admiral Keppel, who at the peak of his popularity was preceded by a band playing “See, the Conquering Hero Comes!”²⁶ and was presented upon his acquittal in 1779 by Trinity House with a “Freedom Box” engraved with figures of Britannia and Neptune paying him homage,²⁷ had his patronage withdrawn for the seat of Windsor in 1780, which he had represented since 1761. The extent of ministerial animosity towards Keppel is suggested by the *London Courant’s* report on 11 September 1780 that “every nerve was strained by government,” which enfranchised enough retainers of the Royal Household overnight to defeat Keppel by sixteen votes.²⁸ Though Keppel was found a seat in Surrey by Opposition Whigs,²⁹ the incident demonstrates the contingent nature of parliamentary representation, largely dependent upon patrons’ wishes, which most naval MPs not of Vernon’s, Keppel’s or Cochrane’s celebrity had to respect if they wished to remain in the House.

Though without the public esteem, sometimes adulation, that naval heroes enjoyed, even officers with quite unremarkable careers clearly remained sought after as candidates, bringing in their persons the dignity of the Navy as an institution to bear at the hustings. This could be particularly useful when candidates were not returned unanimously, as understood by a fretting Earl St Vincent, First Lord of the Admiralty, in a letter on 7 July 1802: “I am extremely concerned to learn that the peace of the County of Stafford is likely to be disturbed by a contested election.”³⁰ While few naval officers could match

²⁶ Whipple, *Fighting Sail*, p. 32.

²⁷ Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England 1715-1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 363.

²⁸ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture and Politics*, p. 148.

²⁹ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. III, p. 7.

³⁰ David Bonner Smith, ed., *Letters of Admiral of the Fleet the Earl of St Vincent Whilst First Lord of the Admiralty 1801-1804*, 2 vols. (London: Navy Records Society, 1927), vol. II, p. 87

Cochrane's popularity and force of personality, qualities that made him, like Keppel and Vernon before him, secure without need of family interest in a seat that provided a platform for taking an independent line in politics, the naval character of candidates remained an electoral asset. A naval uniform was felt to increase an officer's chance of success when coupled with patronage and interest in an age when in many seats, such as Dartmouth in 1757, made it known that "the corporation [of the borough] have desired a sea-man,"³¹ or Sandwich in 1812, where they were "crying out for a naval man."³²

³¹ Rodger, *The Wooden World*, p. 330.

³² Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. V, p. 675.

Chapter Four: Members of Parliament at sea, Naval Officers in the Commons

The demands of the service made great inroads into the time of naval officers, often detaining them in distant quarters of the globe for years on end. This had an understandable impact upon the attendance in the House of many naval MPs still on active duty, and in fact the globetrotting nature of a naval career represented the greatest conflict between professional and parliamentary loyalties. While of course many naval officers entered Parliament at such an advanced age and rank that active service at sea was no longer a serious option for them, there were many for whom long absences occasioned by naval duties rendered their attendance on the House often purely nominal, and sometimes non-existent. Stopgap candidates might serve their entire term overseas, or even without knowing they were Members of Parliament at all.

The short Parliament of 1806-1807 was an exemplar of such enforced absenteeism, with James Athol Wood in the Caribbean for the whole session.¹ Similarly, the Honourable Robert Stopford and Duncombe Pleydell Bouverie doubtless consoled each other on their absence from the House for the entirety of the Parliament of 1806-1807 while serving together off the River Plate in South America.² Equally galling was the case of Lord Robert Manners, elected in his absence “after a bitter and expensive contest” and killed in the Battle of the Saintes without setting foot in Parliament, or the Honourable Edward Legge, elected posthumously.³ Such instances were of course extreme, and were far

¹ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. V, p. 643.

² Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. IV, p. 826, vol. V, p. 301.

³ Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. II, p. 206, Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. III, p. 108.

outweighed by the many officers who were only absent intermittently, though it was not uncommon for more than half of a naval MP's term in the House to be spent at sea or, in the unfortunate case of Captain Edward Leveson-Gower, as a prisoner of war in France for three out of the five years he represented Truro.⁴

Fig. 10. Captain the Honourable Robert Stopford, who spent his entire Parliamentary career off South America.

It is difficult to quantify the precise extent of absenteeism caused by naval service, given that the sea-time of 71 out of 182 naval MPs is not recorded in the History of Parliament Trust's volumes, and any absences occasioned by naval duties are not recorded in a consistent way. Some officers' absences are captured in rich detail, recording where they were posted and how long they spent there, while others are marked only with the

⁴ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. III, p. 238, vol. IV, p. 422.

suggestive but unhelpful phrase of “infrequent attendance.” Despite the incompleteness of the data, however, the fact that over half of all officers had absences at sea noted is an indication that the phenomenon had a substantial impact on the group as a whole, even on the unlikely assumption that those without recorded absences were perfect attenders. Absences occasioned by official duty could last for years at a time, with Sir George Elphinstone providing a not uncommon example. He was elected for Stirlingshire while at the Cape of Good Hope in 1796, before serving with the Channel Fleet in 1797 and then on the Mediterranean station from 1798-1801 when he was elevated to the House of Lords, clearly leaving little time for attendance on the House.⁵ Likewise, Lord William Fitzroy is not atypical in taking his seat in the House in 1810, four years into a six-year term.⁶ Though mainly caused by active service, such absences were also partly due to the time delay inherent in eighteenth century communications, even in the relative proximity of the Mediterranean. Here, Augustus Hervey’s notification of his election in 1757 came from the Governor of Nice and Lieutenant General in the Sardinian service (incongruously named General Paterson), between dinner and the opera when “His Excellency shewed me an English newspaper that told me I was returned Member for Bury,” outrunning by more than a month the letter from “Brother Bristol,” the 2nd Earl, Hervey’s patron and elder brother.⁷

Even postings within the United Kingdom entailed duties that could keep naval MPs from the House for long periods, like Vice Admiral James Steuart, described in 1747 as

⁵ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. III, p.705.

⁶ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. III, p.768.

⁷ David Erskine, ed., *Augustus Hervey’s Journal: Being the Intimate Account of the Life of a Captain in the Royal Navy Ashore and Afloat 1746-1759* (London: William Kimber and Co., 1954), pp. 250, 254.

having “a command at Portsmouth which has kept him from attending Parliament as much as if he had been in the West Indies.”⁸ Likewise, Captain Nicholas Robinson’s seven years in Parliament between 1734 and 1741 were not unprofitably employed earning 500 pounds per annum in command of a sloop to prevent smuggling.⁹ It is also possible that, in addition to formal postings, a hard life at sea may have broken down the health of several naval officers pleading illness to excuse their absence, thus impacting on their presence in the Commons, while the accidental impact of a sounding lead during training at Spithead on the head of Vice Admiral the Honourable Hugh Seymour Conway in 1791 retarded his attendance in the House by incapacitating him for two years.¹⁰

Though the exigencies of the service certainly had a profound effect on the time that naval MPs could spend in the House, these absences have to be measured against the standards of the times. It must be remembered that government in the eighteenth century was in general characterized by laxity and absenteeism. Many Members of Parliament regularly neglected their duties in the House with a cavalier negligence that might be shocking to modern sensibilities, inventing excuses to avoid the official summons known as the Call of the House, or ignoring it entirely.¹¹ Indolent, stay-at-home civilian MPs could choose to attend the House or not to suit their own purposes and, even if they did not attend, could be in regular contact with news from the capital through the post and press. Naval MPs, however, were often posted to parts of the world where letters might

⁸ Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. II, p. 446.

⁹ Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. II, pp. 387.

¹⁰ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. V, p. 131.

¹¹ Thomas, *The House of Commons*, p. 105.

take up to a year to be answered,¹² effectively quarantining them from actively capitalizing upon their place in the Commons. With their presence in the House hampered by active service, Naval MPs as a group can be fairly summed up by the laconic description in Robinson's electoral survey of 1780: "he is not a good attender."¹³

Many active sea officers tried to strike a balance between their professional service and parliamentary representation by seeking leave of absence from their commands, with varying degrees of success. John Spratt Rainier, Sir Charles Hamilton and the Honourable Charles Paget all sought leave of absence from the Navy, in Rainier's case being "very desirable to remain on shore in attendance on the House of Commons."¹⁴

This was clearly a compromise solution, and Westminster powerbrokers trying to maintain a parliamentary majority remained frustrated at sea officers' continual absences, with an extreme case being Lord William Stuart, whose grandfather and patron, the Marquess of Bute, was pressured to nominate another candidate for his seat of Cardiff Boroughs on account of Stuart's always being at sea.¹⁵ Though many naval MPs made an attempt to balance their professional and parliamentary obligations, some were obdurate to the point of petulance in avoiding the House, particularly Captain Frederick Cornwall, who bore away the palm for absenteeism. Cornwall was Member for Montgomery 1771-1774 and an invalid after losing his right arm off Toulon in 1744, as Lord Nelson was to do in 1797 at Tenerife. The resemblance ended there, however, as Cornwall lacked Nelson's dash and activity; indeed he never spoke or even voted in the House, and his

¹² Zoe Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections 1815-1845: Patronage, the Information Revolution and Colonial Government* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 41.

¹³ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. II, p. 88.

¹⁴ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. V, p. 4.

¹⁵ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. V, p. 309.

term seems to have been taken up largely in correspondence as to why he could not attend. He complained in February 1773 that “the papers say there will be a Call of the House in about a fortnight. If there is I beg you will excuse me. I cannot plead my health which is better than it has been for many years,” and tried a different tack in December 1773: “By a letter I received last post from Lord North desiring my attendance at the beginning of the sessions as things of importance were expected to come under consideration. I fear a long attendance may be detrimental, as I never am well in the smoke of London,”¹⁶ and so on in two more letters, demonstrating the sheer intransigence of some officers unwilling to attend the House.

Fig. 11. A dull Nelson: Captain Frederick Cornwall, serial absentee.

¹⁶ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. II, p. 253.

Cornwall's stubbornly retiring case aside, the various ways in which naval MPs negotiated the conflict between professional and parliamentary obligations is testament to the existence of tension between service and representation. This problem plagued naval officers more than any other group of representatives within the House of Commons by virtue of the intrinsically alienating nature of their profession. Naval officers were quarantined for long periods from contact, both physically and socially, with the norms and practices of civil society wherein the power of patronage and promotion ultimately lay. That officers attempted the difficult balancing act between two sets of commitments suggests how important connections to civilian structures of power and patronage were considered to be for the furthering of a naval career.

When not absent, the most common contribution of naval officers sitting in the Commons was through their votes. Eighteenth century government majorities were cobbled together from negotiated deals and intricate webs of alliance between the ministry of the day and parliamentary powerbrokers wielding their patronage in the political arena. Members of Parliament were generally expected to follow their patrons' political wishes. Given that for many naval MPs, particularly those representing dockyard boroughs, their patron was the government, mediated through the Admiralty, and that officers had to retain the favour of the presiding administration to ensure good postings to advance their careers, it is safe to assume that many, though by no means all, naval members were government supporters. We are assured as much in a general sense by the History of Parliament Trust in R. G. Thorne's overview of 1790-1820.¹⁷ However, tabulating the voting patterns of a specific group like naval MPs from surviving divisional lists is a major task beyond the

¹⁷ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. I, p. 316.

scope of the Trust's work, and also of this thesis, though a deeper study of voting records would undoubtedly yield valuable insights that would give depth and nuance to the assertion of general government support. Voting patterns would also show how naval MPs fit into evolving party structures, with broad labels such as Whig, Tory, Country and Independent glossing over finely graded degrees of loyalty and commitment to crystallizing political parties.¹⁸ In any case, considering their relatively small numbers (a maximum of thirty out of 558 members in any given Parliament), the impact of naval MPs' voting patterns may have been significant, but it could never have been decisive. Far more instructive for how naval MPs contributed in an active and meaningful way to politics in the House, and happily easier to quantify from the information provided by the History of Parliament Trust, is the number and nature of their speeches.

Of those who did manage to attend in the House, the majority followed the eighteenth century practice of remaining silent members; it is estimated that less than half of MPs in this period ever spoke.¹⁹ Records of debates in the eighteenth century are by no means comprehensive, and the History of Parliament Trust does not quantify the number of Members' speeches in a consistent way, sometimes giving the dates on which naval MPs spoke, or a precise number of speeches (fourteen in the case of Captain Lord Harry Powlett, whom we are also told was a bad speaker),²⁰ other times mentioning 'several' or 'frequent' speeches in the House. Bearing these vagaries in mind, it is still possible to deduce from very patchy information some revealing trends.

¹⁸ B. Hill, *The Growth of Parliamentary Parties 1689-1742* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976), pp. 227-231.

¹⁹ Thomas, *The House of Commons*, p. 229.

²⁰ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. III, p. 314.

Apart from the deafening silence of most naval MPs, the increase in naval officers taking an active role in the House, as revealed in Figure 12, would appear to be closely linked to other developments in the character of naval representation. This increase made inroads into predominance of silent parliamentarians, who as a proportion of naval MPs declined from 83% between 1715 and 1754 to 57% in 1754-1790 and 49% in the final period up to 1815. Though it would take further study to satisfactorily account for this trend, a survey of the information contained in the History of Parliament Trust suggests that the rise of more active membership may be linked to the gentrification of naval parliamentary representation. This meant that, as explored above, representatives for Admiralty boroughs, dependent on the goodwill of successive governments for their place and therefore likely to support the current administration in obedient silence, an exemplar being William Cornwallis, in the house for thirty one years without speaking, declined as a proportion of naval MPs.²¹ Over the time, such men were overshadowed by new groups beyond the control of government patronage. These were the more outspoken officers whose parliamentary position was grounded in family seats, leavened with naval heroes like Vernon and Cochrane, secure enough in their own popularity to be able to pursue an independent line in the House.

²¹ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. I, p. 315, vol. V, p. 503.

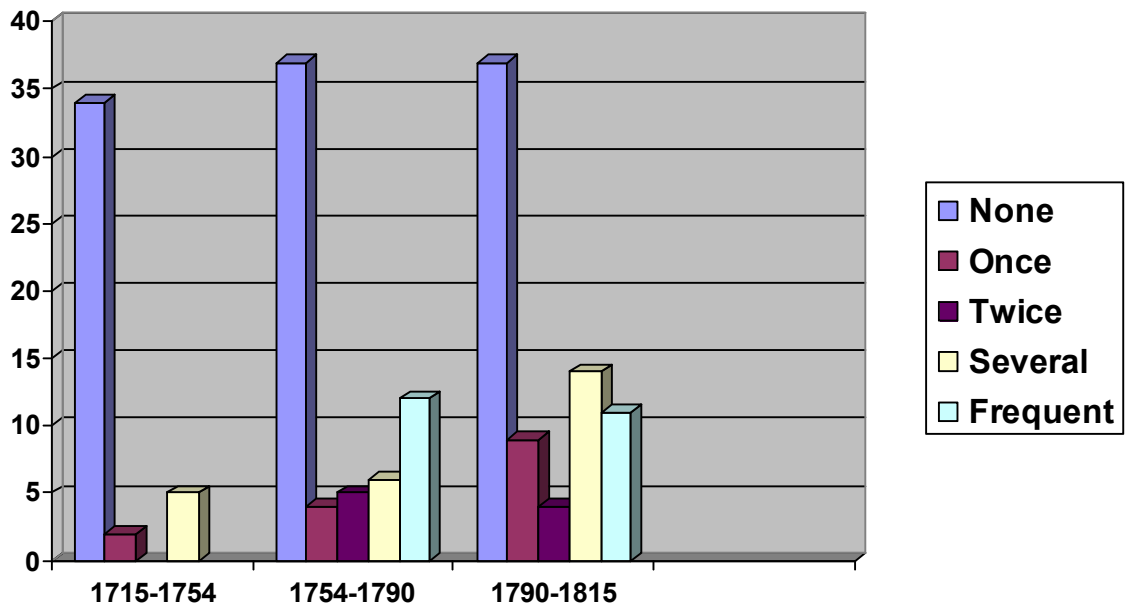


Fig. 12. Number of naval officers' speeches in Parliament.

Within the rising proportion of naval officers who spoke during their term in Parliament, the vast majority confined their contribution to debates on naval subjects, which was unsurprising given the influence that Parliament had on the service. This control ranged from the size of the Navy through regulating its budget in Supply Bills to its codes of conduct and discipline, including the regulatory foundations of naval life, the Articles of War,²² right down to trivial details of naval minutiae. An excellent example of Parliament's pervasive reach is found in "*Standing Order No.7: Hair Powder*," from Sir George Elphinstone, now Lord Keith, to the Mediterranean fleet in 1802, which is worth repeating in full:

²² Erskine, ed., *Augustus Hervey's Journal*, pp. 80, 297.

Parliament having thought proper to exempt Officers, under certain ranks, from the tax imposed on wearing Hair Powder, implies that powder was understood to be part of an officer's dress. It is therefore directed that all Officers on duty wear Hair Powder, except at sea or in bad weather; and they are not on any account to go on shore in Foreign Parts without that Article of Dress, the want of which gives serious Offence to the Inhabitants, and has occasioned great danger to some of H.M. Officers in the streets of Naples and Palermo.²³

With parliamentary intervention affecting every facet of naval life, naval MPs understandably devoted most of their speeches in the House to attempting to guide its deliberations on naval affairs. Comments on other topics like Sir George Elphinstone's sole contribution to parliamentary life being a complaint about blocked passages in Westminster Hall, Rear Admiral Eliab Harvey's opposition in 1808 to a veto on distillation from grain or Sir Thomas Rich's declaration in 1785 that "his wish that the tax on female servants might not be persisted in" were very much the exception.²⁴ Even those who spoke on the more esoteric facets of naval life, such as Captain John Bentinck's sole speech in 1765 on longitude, or the Honourable Charles Paget's only utterance in 1811, in commendation of a new lifebelt based upon "experiments made by himself"²⁵ were unusual. The History of Parliament Trust's volumes suggest that most speeches by naval officers were on serious administrative issues like the Navy estimates, accusations of corruption and malpractice in the dockyards, impressment of seamen and suchlike topics.

²³ Lloyd, ed., *The Keith Papers*, vol. II, p. 12.

²⁴ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. III, p. 352, Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. IV, p. 165.

²⁵ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. II, p. 84, Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. IV, p. 709.

Forbidden by the custom of the House from reading prepared speeches (perhaps a partial explanation for the high percentage of silent members),²⁶ naval members of Parliament spoke with varying degrees of elocution and effectiveness. A certain bluff brusqueness was expected from a life on the quarterdeck, though the range encompassed within those who spoke “in the language of an old sea-dog to the amusement of the House”²⁷ went from lucid to positively opaque. The parliamentary recorder Harris notes a typically obscure example of Lord Harry Powlett’s “perplexed motions...speaking of the various modes of opposition, he told us ‘there was another sort of opposition in the shape of cold water, where it ought to breathe nothing but vigour and firmness.’”²⁸ At the other end of the spectrum, the Honourable Constantine Phipps spoke with such clarity and force that he earned the appellation of the “Marine Lawyer.”²⁹

The manner in which naval officers spoke in the House is not an insignificant point, as it reveals a mindset that, uniquely shaped by a lifetime at sea, naval officers were rendered less tainted by worldly corruption, a sentiment expressed by Admiral Thomas Pye in 1773: “I had the mortification to be neglected in my education, went to sea at fourteen without any, and a man of war was my university. I therefore attempt to state facts only and value myself upon nothing but my integrity and zeal.”³⁰ This tendency towards plain-speaking, combined with a degree of technical competence assured by the quality-control

²⁶ Namier, *The Structure of Politics*, p. 203.

²⁷ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. V, p. 675.

²⁸ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. III, p. 314.

²⁹ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. III, p. 277.

³⁰ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. I, p. 14.

of the Captain's Examining Boards gave naval officers with at least a modicum of eloquence considerable authority in the House when speaking on naval matters.³¹

Fig.13. Captain John Bentinck, who spoke but once, on longitude, and his son William.

Officers who spoke in the Commons in naval debates did so either as private individuals, commenting on service matters, defending themselves when their conduct in particular operations was called into question by parliamentary inquiries, or conversely accepting the praise of the House for victories earned, or speaking as Lords of the Admiralty. These officers turned officials, combining professional expertise with an influence on naval policy, intervened in the House to justify their decisions on naval strategy and

³¹ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. I, p. 316.

administration to the Commons and, through increasing reportage of parliamentary debates, the wider public. Of the five naval MPs who spoke ‘several’ times before 1754, Sir John Norris and Sir Charles Wager did so in their capacity as Lords of the Admiralty defending the government’s naval policy within the House, setting a trend of relative loquacity for those in an official capacity.³² The other three all spoke on naval matters, with Vice Admiral and Irish Viscount George Forbes and Admiral Thomas Mathews speaking only on the 1745 inquiry into an indecisive engagement off Toulon in the previous year, Mathews defending his own actions in command of the fleet on that occasion.³³

It was inquiries of this sort, as well as motions of either thanks or censure proposed for naval officers, that led to their most active participation in the House. Sir George Brydges Rodney, having spent twenty years representing a total of five seats in Parliament spoke only once, on 30th November 1781, and that was in response to charges of embezzlement and peculation of prize money after the capture of the island of St Eustatius from the Dutch in 1781.³⁴ The degree of scandal caused by this action is suggested by the scale of the sacking, which yielded over five million pounds in booty, of which 150 000 was Rodney’s personal share.³⁵ Likewise, the ongoing clashes in the House between Admirals Augustus Keppel and Sir Hugh Palliser, one Whig, one Tory and both MPs, and their supporters over the indecisive Battle of Ushant in 1778 and the mutual recriminations and

³² Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. I, p. 316.

³³ Michael Palmer, *Command at Sea: Naval Command and Control since the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 92-97.

³⁴ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. III, p. 370.

³⁵ Barbara Tuchman, *The First Salute: A View of the American Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1988), p. 106.

courts-martial that followed,³⁶ reveal that naval officers used the Commons to air personal grievances. In this instance, professional enmity was aired in the House with such rancour that Palliser retired from public life in 1784, declaring “I feel my mind and spirits too much impaired and broken down by ill usage and injustice.”³⁷

The only instance to match the Keppel-Palliser affair for service rivalries being fought out in the House was the furore caused by the mercurial and garrulous Captain Lord Cochrane, who had disagreed with the conduct of his superior Admiral Lord Gambier during an attack on a French squadron in the Basque Roads in 1809. Cochrane therefore voted against Parliament’s expression of gratitude, saying in his colourful memoirs that “it was my duty...in my capacity as one of the Members of Westminster [to] oppose the motion, on the grounds that the Commander-in-Chief had done... nothing to merit a vote of thanks.”³⁸ Though Cochrane assured Lord Mulgrave, First Lord of the Admiralty, that “in my professional capacity as a naval officer, I neither did offer nor had offered, any opinion whatever on Lord Gambier’s conduct,” Mulgrave pointed out in one of the few explicit references to the potential conflict of interest in naval officers sitting in the House, that “the public would not draw the distinction between my professional and parliamentary conduct.”³⁹ Of course, most naval business transacted in the House was not so vitriolic, and many officers’ only active contribution to the House was in gracious reply to votes of thanks moved by the Commons for victories won and services rendered.

³⁶ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics*, pp. 128-129.

³⁷ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. III, pp. 247-248.

³⁸ Brian Vale, ed., *Admiral Lord Cochrane*, p. 175.

³⁹ Brian Vale, ed., *Admiral Lord Cochrane*, pp. 175-176.

These included Sir Alexander Hood on 2 November 1795,⁴⁰ or Sir Samuel Hood (no relation), whose reply to the House's vote of thanks in 1809 was met with "a roar of applause, so that he was quite delayed by it from beginning his speech."⁴¹

Congenial though it was to bask in the praise of the House, the speeches remarked upon in the History of Parliament Trust shows that officers were as likely to actively agitate for improvement in the conditions and pay of the officers and men serving in the Navy as they were to defend their conduct and execrate others'. As representatives of the service in the Commons as well as their boroughs, naval MPs could make known to the Parliament the concerns of the wider profession. Eliab Harvey's presentation in 1803 of a petition urging the reform of abuses in the system for distributing prize money amongst the officers and crew of warships capturing enemy vessels is a typical instance,⁴² as is Richard, Lord Howe's presentation of a petition on behalf of captains in semi-retirement on half-pay in 1773.⁴³ These instances of defending the interests of the naval community in the House follow in a tradition first established in our period by Sir John Norris, who laid before the Commons in 1749 a petition signed by five admirals and fifty-two captains against a Bill proposing to alter the 34th Article of War to make semi-retired captains on half-pay subject to the full rigours of naval discipline.⁴⁴ This was an understandably unpopular move, as "by this means the whole corps of officers may be kept in the utmost subjection and sent where the Admiralty please, even if in

⁴⁰ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. IV, p. 224.

⁴¹ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. IV, p. 225.

⁴² Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. IV, p. 165.

⁴³ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. II, p. 647.

⁴⁴ Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. II, p. 298.

Parliament.”⁴⁵ When applied to by the petitioners, Captain Augustus Hervey “entered the lists willingly” on their behalf, showing that there was a strong sense of identity and shared rights that united officers, which could assert itself through naval spokesmen in the House when those rights were perceived to be under threat.⁴⁶ Cochrane’s support in 1811 for an investigation into arrears in seamen’s pay⁴⁷ and Sir John Jervis’ 1792 proposal of a scheme “to relieve distressed superannuated seamen” likewise reveal solicitude for service personnel, though political motives were often read into such measures, with Jervis complaining of attempts “to misrepresent my motives, to describe them as a meditated attack on the Admiralty, and thereby prejudice me in the service.”⁴⁸

The tension that could arise between a naval officers’ sense of paternalistic, pastoral care for sailors and satisfying the requirements of patrons upon which a seat in the House was contingent is neatly summarized by Horace Walpole’s account of Sir Charles Saunders’ opposition to the Clandestine Marriages Bill of 1753. Though he spoke against the Bill “for the sake of the sailors, having once given forty of his crew leave to go on shore for an hour, and all returned married,” Saunders was nonetheless obliged to vote for it by his patron Lord Anson, who had in turn married the daughter of the Lord Chancellor, Hardwicke, whose Bill it was.⁴⁹ The varied topics on which naval officers spoke in the House, ranging from the trivial and tangential to impassioned pleas for improvement of sailors’ welfare to the airing of acrimonious service rivalries shows that many naval MPs

⁴⁵ David Erskine, ed., *Augustus Hervey’s Journal*, p. 80.

⁴⁶ David Erskine, ed., *Augustus Hervey’s Journal*, p. 80.

⁴⁷ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. III, p. 464.

⁴⁸ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. IV, p. 305.

⁴⁹ Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. II, p. 408.

actively engaged in parliamentary life, ensuring that the Navy had a significant place in public discourse at the heart of government.

Chapter Five: Death, Compromise and Reward: How Naval Officers left Parliament

Equally revealing as to why and how naval MPs functioned as a nexus between politics and their profession is the manner in which naval officers left the House of Commons. Many naval MPs died in office, some chose not to stand again, had their patronage withdrawn or lost elections, while others surrendered their seats to concentrate on their careers at sea or to take up sinecures and offices incompatible with sitting in the House. A lucky few ascended to the other chamber when they succeeded to family titles, or were ennobled for military, political or administrative services by a grateful nation, or to be more accurate, a grateful government, which is by no means the same thing.

How naval officers serving in the House of Commons became increasingly politicized is underlined by the manner in which they left their House, and it is instructive that no naval MP lost an election before 1774. This doubtless reflects the greater stability of parliamentary politics in the earlier part of the century, particularly in the long Whig ascendancy under Sir Robert Walpole until 1742, then the rise of the Tories under the Duke of Newcastle until the destabilization of the 1760s and 1780s.¹ Prior to this, officers were far more likely to leave the House through death rather than by failing at the hustings, as Figure 14 shows. Between 1715 and 1754, death ended twenty-five out of forty-two naval MPs' parliamentary careers. That only nineteen out of sixty-four officers between 1754 and 1790 died as Members of Parliament, less than a third as opposed to over a half for the earlier period, shows that a comfortable seat in the House was not to be

¹ Hill, *The Growth of Parliamentary Parties*, p. 28.

relied upon in the same way as previously. This tendency reflects the increasingly unsettled nature of politics, a trend that was accentuated between 1790 and 1815, when only sixteen of seventy-five naval MPs died in office, a mere 16 % compared to earlier figures.

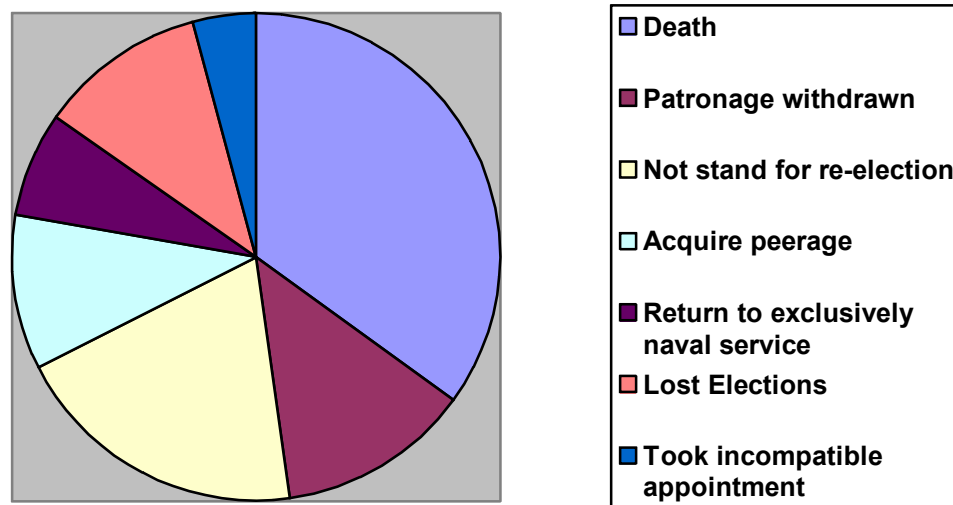


Fig.14. Naval officers' means of leaving Parliament

What is initially surprising in a study of an age of horrible wounds, when wooden worlds splintered in battle and dimly-understood diseases born of malnutrition and service in the tropics were rampant is how few of the naval officers who sat in the House of Commons perished on active duty when mortality in their profession was quite high.² The wear of active naval service did have an effect, however, with three officers explicitly recorded by the History of Parliament Trust as not standing for re-election due to illness, and there may be more officers who gave up a parliamentary career due to the toll exacted by a life

² William Barwick Hodge, 'On the Mortality Arising from Naval Operations,' *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, 18, no.3 (September 1855), p. 201.

at sea.³ Of the sixty naval officers who died while Members of Parliament, only two, Thomas Grenville and Lord Robert Manners, perished in action, while Sir Thomas Troubridge and the Honourable Robert Walsingham were lost at sea in storms, the latter being elected posthumously.⁴ Disease was more dangerous than battle, with four deaths at sea from unspecified causes and Lords William Proby and Augustus Fitzroy as well as the Honourable Edward Legge all succumbing to the febrile climate of the West Indies, the latter theoretically sitting in Parliament only for four days before news of his death some months before was announced.⁵ The unfortunate John Byng had a death related to his service when he was condemned by court-martial and executed in 1757.⁶ Of the remaining naval officers who died MPs, they were claimed by natural causes ranging from the banal to the bizarre, including the Honourable John Leveson-Gower's end in an apoplectic fit whilst shaving, or the inglorious demise of Admiral Peter Rainier, too corpulent to permit an ulcer on his thigh to be operated upon.⁷ The scarcity of deaths occurring at sea is a strong indication of the age and character of a significant proportion of naval MPs, with many sea officers quite elderly, particularly in Admiralty boroughs, enjoying a seat in the Commons as an honour and occupation at an age when no longer fit for active service, though this practice clearly declined as the century progressed.

If the nature of entry to and representation in Parliament altered over the course of the century with the increasing presence of aristocratic younger sons in the House, Members'

³ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. II, p. 338, vol. III, pp. 218, Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. III, p. 296.

⁴ Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. II, p. 85, Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. III, pp. 108, 604-605, Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. V, p. 417.

⁵ Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. II, pp. 37, 206, Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. V, p. 898.

⁶ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. II, p. 169.

⁷ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. IV, p. 422, vol. V, p. 5.

means of exiting the Commons also grew more gentrified as time progressed, with a small but increasing tendency for naval MPs of non-noble birth to be raised to the peerage, generally as a reward for a successful fleet action. Sir George Byng in 1721 and George Anson in 1747 were the only two officers to be so honoured before the War of American Independence,⁸ and like most of the MPs to follow, this mark of esteem was largely due to service, as with the brothers Hood in 1796 and Sir George Elphinstone in 1801.⁹ Naval MPs could also be elevated to the peerage by dint of their administrative services as Lords of the Admiralty, with Sir Edward Hawke, Constantine Phipps and Alan Gardner being ennobled in 1776, 1790 and 1801 respectively.¹⁰

Although comparatively few naval MPs were ennobled between 1715 and 1815, only ten in all, almost a third of these elevations to the peerage occurred in 1782, which saw Richard Howe, Augustus Keppel and Sir George Brydges Rodney granted patents of nobility in one fell swoop.¹¹ The year 1782 saw the fall of the North government, which had long presided over the many failures of the War of American Independence, and the new Shelburne administration created several peers when it swept to power. Though Rodney was in bad odour with the new government, having in fact been superseded in command, he had won the Battle of the Saintes before his replacement had arrived to relieve him. This victory established him as such a popular hero that the new administration was obliged to recommend his creation as a peer to forestall public anger

⁸ Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. I, pp. 415, 511.

⁹ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. III, p. 705, vol. IV, pp. 224-225.

¹⁰ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. II, p. 596, vol. III, p. 277, Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. IV, p. 3.

¹¹ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. II, p. 647, vol. III, pp. 7, 368.

at his recall.¹² The other ennoblements of this year, of Richard Howe and Augustus Keppel, were in reward for loyal and vociferous support of the new government from the opposition benches after both officers had met with professional disappointment and scandal earlier in the war.¹³ The politics surrounding the elevations to the peerage in 1782 reveal how the interplay between professional and parliamentary considerations, as well as the increasing intrusion of popular politics into public life could affect the manner in which naval MPs left the Commons as well as the way they entered it. This complex interaction is demonstrated by Rodney's noble apotheosis being forced upon the government by a fear of public opinion. While the elevation of Howe and Keppel reflect a more traditional reward for service, there was a twist in that their service was rendered in opposition, using the professional standing and gravitas of naval officers to strengthen parliamentary attacks on the previous government's wartime conduct.

¹² William Lowe, 'George III, Peerage Creations and Politics 1760-1784,' *The Historical Journal*, 35, no.3 (September 1992), p. 600.

¹³ Lowe, 'Peerage Creations and Politics,' p. 599.

Fig. 15. Admiral Augustus Keppel, created Viscount Keppel for services against the government.

Though the vast majority of naval MPs saw no difficulty in simultaneously being naval officers as well as sitting in the House of Commons, there were some who expressed qualms at the possible conflict between professional and parliamentary obligations. Some did so explicitly, as in the case of Sir Charles Middleton, who wrote to William Pitt the Younger in 1789 venting his concern at “the impropriety of my representing a borough so intimately connected with the civil department of the Navy as Rochester.”¹⁴ Middleton resolved this particular conflict of interest by not standing again in 1790, a decision perhaps influenced by devotion to the “novel and alarming doctrines of the Evangelical

¹⁴ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. II, p. 136.

movement.”¹⁵ Quite apart from moral qualms over the separation of powers, the eighteenth century Navy placed commitments of a global scale on its personnel that forced many to choose between professional careers afloat or political careers ashore. Even duties such as commanding dockyard facilities in Britain could impair the political functioning of a naval MP, for example the aforementioned James Steuart, whose posting at Portsmouth affected his career in the House as much as if he had been overseas.¹⁶ Several officers tried to solve the competing demands of active service at sea and attendance in the House by implicitly resolving the conflict of interest in favour of one side or the other. A substantial list of officers, including St John Charlton, Peter Parker, the Honourable George Heneage Lawrence Dundas, John Poo Beresford and Sir Charles Hamilton either retired from the House or did not seek re-election in order to seek active service at sea.¹⁷

For others, a posting to distant parts of the globe made untenable the maintenance of political leverage in politics ashore that a seat in the House represented. In this category can be counted Sir John Lindsay, Charles Wolseley and Sir Edward Pellew when posted to the East Indies, Sir John Borlase Warren when sent to the North American station, Sir Samuel Hood to India or Sir Home Riggs Popham to the Cape of Good Hope, who all gave up their seats to go overseas.¹⁸ None, however, were as dramatic as Thomas, Lord Cochrane, who resigned the seat of Westminster in 1818 when, having been

¹⁵ Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean*, p. 373.

¹⁶ Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. II, p. 446.

¹⁷ Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. I, pp. 543-544, Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. III, pp. 190, 635, vol. IV, pp. 132-133, 721.

¹⁸ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. III, pp. 44, 653-654, Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. IV, pp. 255, 493, 755-756, 868-869.

professionally ruined four years before in a trial for Stock Exchange Fraud, he gave up the rhetoric of radical politics for the practice of leading the Navies of Chile, Brazil and Greece against their colonial overlords.¹⁹ Though Harry Burrard took formal leave of absence from the House to attend to his naval duties in 1795, in general terms it seems that for a sizeable sample of naval MPs, this conflict of interest was insoluble without giving up either Parliament or the Navy.²⁰

While many naval officers clearly felt the value of a seat in Parliament was worth the time, effort and expense involved in the cultivation of a patron or an electorate, the civilian world of eighteenth century politics also had uses for naval officers. While the marketability or ‘brand power’ of naval heroes to electorates too large to be controlled by a single patron or interest has already been discussed, the difficulty imposed on naval MPs in attempting to draw advantage from their seat by frequent absences was a positive asset to many patrons. Naval officers frequently represented boroughs in Parliament as stopgaps to hold their seats temporarily on behalf of others, though how far their suitability for this role was based upon their naval character and how much upon their social and familial status largely as younger sons of the aristocracy and landowning gentry is unclear. Twenty-two naval officers lost their seats in the House when their patron transferred their support to another candidate. For officers of aristocratic extraction, it was quite common to be obliged to step down in favour of another relation, particularly nephews of the senior line of the family coming of age. Similarly, a blue-blooded naval MP might find his patronage withdrawn if his candidature should prove

¹⁹ Brian Vale, ed., *Admiral Lord Cochrane*, p. 208.

²⁰ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. III, p. 333.

too much of a financial burden to his family, as in the case of John Montagu, a relation of another John Montagu, the 4th Earl of Sandwich. This magnate, First Lord of the Admiralty and inventor of the eponymous snack, refused to pay the election expenses of his kinsman in 1754, thus bringing to an end the younger Montagu's parliamentary career.²¹

Naval officers were also useful at filling vacancies occasioned by unexpected events, such as John Fish (of Castle Fish) holding Wexford for the Irish powerbroker and family friend Richard Nevill during his illness until Nevill recovered. In happier circumstances, Captain Temple West briefly sat for in Buckingham in 1753 to fill the gap occasioned by his distant cousin Richard Grenville's elevation to the peerage as Lord Cobham.²² Naval officers sitting in Parliament sometimes found themselves unceremoniously ejected when their patrons no longer cared to accommodate them, as in the case of Samuel Campbell Rowley, who stepped aside in 1806 to make way for a nominee who had purchased his erstwhile patron's interest. Likewise, the Honourable Courtenay Boyle was not nominated again in 1807 when it was the other patron's turn to select a candidate in the shared borough of Bandon Bridge.²³ Almost overwhelmingly, patrons dropped clients, though some naval MPs refused to stand again when offered a difficult or contested borough, or as in the case of the Honourable John Rodney, son of the victor of the Saintes, an officer could decline the patrons' terms if he found them uncongenial, as the

²¹ Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. II, p. 269.

²² Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. II, p. 531, Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. III, p. 749.

²³ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. III, p. 238, vol. V, p. 58.

younger Rodney did to the Duke of Northumberland in 1796 for Launceston.²⁴ Of course, such placeholdering did not invariably work against naval MPs; indeed, Captain Pownall Bastard Pellew owed his representation of Launceston from 1812 onwards to his father Sir Edward Pellew's absence in the East Indies, holding the seat until the elder Pellew's return. As his father was created Viscount Exmouth on arriving in England in 1816, just beyond this study, the younger Pellew remained as the representative of Launceston beyond the bounds of this study until 1829.²⁵ Just how the majority of naval officers who did not hold Admiralty seats interacted with the patrons who placed them there is only hinted at by this brief overview. To what extent the profession of naval MPs placed unusual strains on the relationship between patron and client remains to be determined from a more comprehensive study of surviving correspondence. What is clear, however, is that naval officers fulfilled a number of roles in the intricate, delicately balanced machinery of eighteenth century politics, and patrons found them desirable, or at least useful candidates, even if some of them were little more than disposable fillers and stopgaps.

If some naval MPs found their parliamentary careers terminated when their continued tenure in the House no longer suited patrons' arrangements, there was also a small but significant group that chose to retire from the House themselves when faced with professional disappointment. Although promotion up the various grades of flag rank were governed by seniority,²⁶ and their attainment therefore largely immune from political influence, officers' employment was far more open to political manipulation. As senior

²⁴ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. V, pp. 33-34.

²⁵ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. IV, p.757.

²⁶ Rodger, *The Wooden World*, p. 299.

officers often looked upon certain choice commands as theirs by right, they were liable to keen disenchantment when others junior to them were appointed in their place. The professional disappointment of figures such as Sir John Jennings, Rear-Admiral of England, when junior Sir John Norris was appointed Commander-in-Chief over his head, seemed to resonate in their parliamentary careers, as Norris both resigned from the service and refused to stand for the Admiralty seat of Rochester, both in 1734.²⁷ Similarly, Admiral Sir George Pocock took offence in 1766 after forty-eight years' service at sea when the new Chatham Administration appointed his junior Sir Charles Saunders as First Lord of the Admiralty. Pocock was moved to write to Chatham saying "I take the liberty to...express my surprise you should put such an indignity as I find your Lordship has, upon fifteen flag officers" senior to Saunders, leading him to retire from the service, and stop attending Parliament until the election of 1768, when he did not stand.²⁸

That professional disappointment could manifest itself in withdrawal from Parliament as well as from the Navy suggests a connection in the minds of eighteenth century officers in which political ambition was linked to professional advancement, with the former being given up if the latter was not attained. These fits of pique did not seem to work in the opposite direction, however. When patrons withdrew their support from officers in the House, as discussed above, naval MPs did not also throw in their careers as officers, strongly suggesting that naval Members vested more meaning in their character and identity as naval officers than in their status as Members of the Commons.

²⁷ Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. II, p. 177.

²⁸ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. III, p. 305.

Another, less disagreeable way for naval Members of Parliament to leave the House was to take up remunerative postings that were incompatible with sitting in the Commons. Despite a growing clamour for reform, there remained hundreds of offices, many of so little utility as to be pure sinecures, in the gift of ministers who could therefore bestow substantial emolument on venal friends and followers, including the occasional naval MP.²⁹ Even the easy-going eighteenth century set some limits to the cupidity of men whose offices might compromise their political integrity, with Postmasters excluded from the franchise in the reign of Queen Anne, and Customs and Revenue Officers in 1782 in an attempt to curb the effect of patronage in the Commons.³⁰ The choice presented by the offer of such a post is substantially clearer than in the case of offices that could be held concurrently with Membership of the House, and little evidence understandably remains of such potentially murky transactions suggestive of buying support in Parliament.³¹

That conflict of interest aside, some naval officers forced to choose between a seat in the House and a lucrative sinecure chose the latter. Such postings could take the form of colonial governorships, as in the case of Captain Lord William Campbell, who retired from Argyllshire in 1766 to become Governor of Nova Scotia, likewise Captains William Trelawny and Charles Knowles who resigned their seats to assume gubernatorial responsibility for Jamaica in 1752 and 1767 respectively.³² Naval MPs who chose to

²⁹ Philip Harling, *The Waning of 'Old Corruption: The Politics of Economical Reform in Britain 1779-1846* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 23.

³⁰ Porritt, *The Unreformed House of Commons*, vol. I, p. 300.

³¹ C. Hamilton, 'John Wilson Croker: Patronage and Clientage at the Admiralty, 1809-1857,' *The Historical Journal*, 43, no.1 (March 2000), p. 51.

³² Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. II, p. 194, Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. II, p. 192, vol. III, p. 562.

become Revenue Officers also had to give up their parliamentary careers, like the Honourable Keith Stewart, who left Wigtownshire in 1784 to become Receiver-General of the Land Tax in Scotland, or Galfridus Walpole, whose father's nepotism and exalted station as Prime Minister secured him the Postmaster-Generalship in 1721 at the cost of his seat.³³ There were even a few specifically naval postings that could render an officer ineligible to sit in the Commons, as in the case of Robert Fanshawe, who resigned Plymouth in 1790 to become Commissioner of its dockyard, following the example set by Captain Paul Henry Ourry in 1775.³⁴

Apart from the inherent conflict of interest in being at once both a naval officer and a Member of Parliament, many naval MPs held other postings that did not disqualify them from the House, particularly the Lords of the Admiralty and Comptrollers of the Navy. Nonetheless, some officers were placed by statutory exclusions in the position of choosing between an active political career and the financial security of a comfortable sinecure, usually settling for the tangible reward offered rather than the putative hope of better things to come through Parliament. Just how far the gaining of such preferment was a reward for their abilities and merit, both professional and parliamentary, and how far it was due to the all-pervasive workings of patronage and interest is not entirely clear. It is, however, certainly ironic that legislation designed to limit abuses of patronage within the House by making holders of particularly remunerative sinecures ineligible to sit there merely resulted in those naval MPs offered such positions to yield their seats with alacrity.

³³ Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, vol. II, p. 508, Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. III, p. 483.

³⁴ Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754-1790*, vol. III, pp. 240, 414.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

On one level, this thesis has aimed to offer tantalizing glimpses into a hitherto secluded aspect of British, parliamentary and naval history. Naval officers sitting in the House of Commons have been demonstrated to be a group of diverse background who entered into and acted in Parliament in ways suggesting their integration into complex systems of patronage ashore and afloat, increasingly tempered by the force of popular politics. The superficially contradictory character of naval officers like Sir George Elphinstone, exalted with praise and honours for his achievements, sitting in the Commons for fourteen years and speaking only once, has been contextualized within naval, parliamentary and popular eighteenth century milieus. By considering the changing composition of naval MPs as a group over time according to their background, age, rank, means of entering and leaving Parliament as well as their activities in the Commons, this thesis has outlined a picture of dynamic nuance on a neglected topic hitherto impoverished by static generalization.

The intricacies of their naval and political careers make the 182 naval officers who sat in Parliament between 1715 and 1815 worthy of further study in their own right, but this kind of prosopographical analysis is even more valuable in representing a largely fresh avenue from which to approach both naval and parliamentary history, and the evolving links between the two. Combined with consideration of the growing importance of print media and popular culture throughout the eighteenth century, such an analysis would yield deeper insight into what this thesis has shown to be a potent nexus of parliamentary, professional and popular politics in the persons of naval Members of Parliament.

Though an investigation of this sort was not feasible within the parameters of this work, the possible dividends of understanding that could be reaped from its analytical foundations are manifold. As a final example, the heated exchange mentioned above between Captain Lord Cochrane and the First Lord of the Admiralty in 1809 over Cochrane's refusal to join a vote of thanks to a fellow naval commander is particularly revealing.¹ Cochrane's intransigence and Lord Mulgrave's responses entwined concepts of parliamentary and professional obligation as well as courage, honour, duty and the place of both institutions in the national psyche. The First Lord's terse reply that "the public would not draw the distinction between [Cochrane's] professional and parliamentary conduct," is one of the very few instances in which a conflict between professional and parliamentary interest was explicitly articulated in the eighteenth century.² Such a comment would seem to indicate by its very rarity that, upon the whole, naval MPs felt few qualms about their dual role, which begs the question of why this was so?

Perhaps the answer is found in how both Parliament and Navy were thought of in similar ideological terms, with the protection of English liberties being vested in both institutions, though of course in different ways. Captain Lord Cochrane may have regretted the "public want of discrimination"³ when Lord Mulgrave said that the press and populace would not distinguish between remarks as a Member of Parliament distinct from a naval officer, perhaps because the uniquely naval character of his representation in

¹ Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. III, p. 463.

² Brian Vale, ed., *Admiral Lord Cochrane*, pp. 175-176.

³ Brian Vale, ed., *Admiral Lord Cochrane*, p. 176.

the Commons was widely considered to be indissoluble from and integral to his place in public life.

Even if the cultural capital generated by the Navy over the course of the century by its many victories had not caused it to loom large in the public imagination as a physical and ideological defence of English liberties, the sheer size of the Navy and its shore establishment dictated a substantial impact upon Great Britain at a seminal stage in the formation of a national identity. As the Navy was growing both physically as well as in the place it and its officers occupied in the press, public opinion and Parliament itself, so too was the House of Commons growing more important as an arena in which popular contentions, which as we have seen increasingly encompassed naval matters, were played out.⁴ How this expansion, of the Navy, of Parliament and of their public sphere was interrelated deserves more study, as does the place of the former two in the latter. The importance of the Navy in the eyes of press and public has been touched upon in the most salient examples of Admirals Vernon, Keppel and Cochrane by historians such as Kathleen Wilson and Nicholas Rogers; however, an examination of what impact the presence of a large group of naval officers at the legislative hub of the nation had upon the press and popular opinion has yet to be attempted.

If nothing more than an extension of the analysis undertaken in this thesis was conducted over a wider period of the History of Parliament Trust's volumes, we would enjoy a greater understanding of the effect that naval officers sitting in the Commons had on the

⁴ Charles Tilly, 'Parliamentarization of Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758-1834,' *Theory and Society*, 26, no. 2/3, Special Double Issue on New Directions in Formalization and Historical Analysis (April 1997), pp. 245-246.

Royal Navy, Parliament and the nation at large. How the trends revealed in this study, showcasing 182 naval officers over a century as a group of sometimes similar, sometimes heterogeneous characteristics, would alter from 1715 back to the Glorious Revolution of 1688⁵ or the reconstitution of a professional Navy under the Restoration, or forwards from 1815 to the Reform Act of 1832 and beyond is yet to be determined. Building upon the foundations laid by analyses such as this one, how far the patterns sifted from the History of Parliament Trust's raw data are reflected and given depth in contemporary correspondence and print media is the real question raised by this study, which by virtue of its limited scope can only touch upon a rich vein of largely untapped historical inquiry.

While the simultaneous expansion of the Navy and of a consumerist culture feeding upon memorabilia and print media lauding the exploits of the service have been examined in isolated periods,⁶ a comprehensive study of the links between the two would offer further insights into the creation of a uniquely British identity in the eighteenth century. The most salient examples of the interplay between press, Parliament and the Navy, the famous cases of Admirals Vernon and Keppel, have been extensively treated; what has not been attempted is to examine how the relationship between the profile created by the press for naval officers and Parliament changed over time. The prominent place that the Navy enjoyed as one of the prime mediators between Britain and the outside world ensured that it would also play a part in the strengthening conflation throughout the period of nationalism and identity in the creation of an "Island Race." It is therefore important to examine how this association coloured its representatives and representation

⁵ J Davies, 'The Navy, Parliament and Political Crisis in the Reign of Charles II,' *The Historical Journal*, 36, no.2 (June 1993), p. 272.

⁶ McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society*, p. 258.

in Parliament, with naval officers increasingly respected in popular culture as repositories of distinctly British liberties and virtues.⁷ With the Navy a muscular contributor in a very tangible sense to the imperialism and triumphalism (largely built on naval triumphs)⁸ that helped implant in domestic politics and culture a new sense of Britishness, its role in this process deserves greater treatment. Likewise, the impact of the connections formed between the Royal Navy's officers in Parliament upon Britain's expanding empire, which until significantly into the nineteenth century relied upon such informal networks, remains to be explored.⁹

As the Royal Navy provided the raw material of victories and glory upon which a sharpened sense of popular imperialism and patriotism was in large part founded,¹⁰ incorporating the findings of this study with more qualitative research would correct a deficiency currently found in otherwise vibrant scholarship of imperialism and popular culture in eighteenth century Britain. Such work would enrich these as well as more traditional fields of inquiry such as naval and parliamentary history. Further study of officers' correspondence, pamphlets, prints and all the paraphernalia of electioneering would doubtless explore the complexities of the hypotheses that could only be touched upon in a work of limited scope such as this. This field would benefit from attention to qualitative analysis that could not be properly explored through the largely quantitative research upon which this thesis is founded, for the broad outlines of officers' practices

⁷ Wilson, *The Island Race*, p. 55.

⁸ Jeremy Black, *The British Seaborne Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 179.

⁹ Zoe Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections*, pp. 13-16.

¹⁰ Kathleen Wilson, 'Empire, Trade and Popular Politics in Mid-Hanoverian Britain: The Case of Admiral Vernon,' *Past and Present*, no. 121 (November 1988), p. 75.

and presence in the House of Commons certainly suggest avenues of investigation that would richly reward further research.

David Cunningham, 17 657 words

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