

7-1931

Samuel Pepys, Able Accomptant

C. J. Hasson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jofa>



Part of the [Accounting Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hasson, C. J. (1931) "Samuel Pepys, Able Accomptant," *Journal of Accountancy*. Vol. 52 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jofa/vol52/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Archival Digital Accounting Collection at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Accountancy by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

Samuel Pepys, Able Accomptant

By C. J. HASSON

“ . . . when I consider that a regular accountant never ought to fear anything or have reason I then do cease to wonder.”—*Diary*.

Much has been written of Samuel Pepys as a great diarist and as an English office holder. This paper proposes to consider him as an accountant—a phase of little interest generally and thus far neglected.

Pepys was the son of a tailor in very modest circumstances; but he managed to receive a good education which included a degree at Cambridge. This was probably due to the efforts of a relative, Edward Montague, afterwards Lord Sandwich. We know that he liked Pepys and obtained one position after another for him until his ability was recognized and utilized to the full by the crown.

In 1642, when Pepys was nine years old, the great rebellion began. Cromwell emerged as a capable general and organized the famous Ironsides. Charles I was captured and put to death. This was in 1649. Cromwell died in 1658, and during the intervening years England was strictly puritan, with even the theatres closed. The commonwealth lasted until 1659. Then the son of Charles I was brought back to England as Charles II.

Pepys began his diary a few months before Charles II returned. For over nine years he was to record everything of interest to himself, from great catastrophes, like the plague and the London fire, to household matters. At times he wrote what was extremely personal and it was probably for this reason that he kept the diary in shorthand, partly of his own invention.

Magdalene College, Cambridge, acquired Pepys' library in 1724. The diary, in six volumes, was part of it. Four years later the manuscript attracted the attention of one Peter Leicester but nothing came of it. In 1818, John Evelyn's diary was published, and as Evelyn and Pepys had been close friends for forty years, Pepys was naturally mentioned often. Attention was again directed to the manuscript and an attempt made to decipher it. An expert provided a key, and John Smith, of St. John's College, was set to work translating it. He worked for three years, spending many hours daily.

The first edition, published in 1825, and edited by Lord Braybrooke, was much abridged and considerably expurgated. Successive editions were more complete, until that edited by Wheatley in 1902 contained all but about thirty pages of the diary and filled ten volumes.

Pepys was on the ship that brought back Charles II, serving in the official capacity of secretary to the generals of the fleet, actually confidential secretary to his benefactor, Edward Montague, who more than anyone else was responsible for the king's return. Pepys was presented to the king and to his brother, the Duke of York. He was proud to report that during the trip the Duke of York spoke to him, calling him by name. It was the beginning of a life-long friendship between the two. Twenty-eight years later, when William of Orange landed in England to dethrone the former Duke of York, then King James II, the king was sitting for a portrait for Pepys.

With Charles II as king, Montague was able to help Pepys more than ever, and among other things obtained for him the position of clerk of the acts. This was in June, 1660, when Pepys was twenty-seven.

The position was an important one. The clerk of the acts, the treasurer, the comptroller and the surveyor were known as the principal officers of the navy and, with two commissioners, composed the navy board. The board directed the affairs of the navy under the lord high admiral. That office was filled by the Duke of York.

The "old instructions", dated 1649, defined the position of clerk of the acts as follows: "The clarke of the Navye's duty depends principally upon rateing (by the board's approbation) of all bills and recording of them, and all orders, and commands from the Councill, Lord High Admirall, or Commissioners of the Admiralty, and he ought to be a very able accomptant, well versed in Navall affairs and all inferior officer's duties."

Pepys was only fairly fitted for the position by education or training; but he took to his work with the enthusiasm so characteristic of him, and what he did not know he resolved to learn.

In England at that time there were few teachers of bookkeeping and accounting. Robert Hartwell, who edited the celebrated *Grounde of Artes* in 1623, advertised himself as a teacher of "Accompts for Merchants, by Order of Debitor and Creditor."

Thomas Browne advertised as a teacher in "the most exact method of keeping Merchants-Accompts," and also as a professional accountant. This was in 1670, but he may have been teaching for some time. Richard Dafforne, who wrote *The Merchants' Mirrour; or, Directions for the Perfect ordering and keeping of his accounts by way of Debtor and Creditor, after the Italian manner . . .* taught bookkeeping from at least 1651 until 1684. Also he advertised that he "rectifieth Books of Accompts abroad or at home, whether in Proper factorage or Company."

John Collins, besides being a teacher and writer on bookkeeping, practised as a public accountant, and according to Foster, acquired wealth and fame. In 1674, a new edition of his book, *An Introduction to Merchants' Accompts* appeared. It had been suggested that this edition be revised and enlarged, for the first edition had been published some years before, and Collins had been very active in the interval. In the preface, however, he writes: "But I concur not, finding that my long experience hath not at all advanced my knowledge in a good method of accounts; though I confess I understand the nature and intrigues of bad ones much better than I did."

These men did not conduct regular schools but accepted pupils as they applied. Their influence as teachers probably was not great. Pepys does not mention studying under any teacher of bookkeeping. He probably obtained his knowledge from books and from fellow workers. Whatever the source, it is apparent that he soon surpassed his clerks.

Pepys refers in his diary to studying arithmetic with a Mr. Cooper, who was mate of the *Royal Charles*. Because they started with multiplication and Pepys found it difficult, practically everyone writing on Pepys has commented on the fact that when he was appointed clerk of the acts he was totally unfit for the office. The truth is that it would have been very unusual to find a man fitted for the office who did know the multiplication table up to ten times ten.

Pepys was a graduate of Cambridge, but Cambridge, when he was a student, barely touched on arithmetic or other mathematics. Cajori states that, "At the universities little was done in mathematics before the middle of the seventeenth century . . ." And he believes "that De Morgan was right in his statement that as late as the eighteenth century there could have been no such thing as a teacher of arithmetic in schools like Eton . . ."

Division and multiplication were both extremely difficult for the English mind of that time.

Pepys was always much interested in slide-rules and calculating machines. According to De Morgan the first description of a slide-rule appeared in *The Circles of Proportion and the Horizontal Instrument*, by William Oughtred, as published in 1633. Pepys obtained the first rule he mentions in his diary from Mr. Browne, a mathematician. At the same time he purchased a book of instructions, but he does not give its title.

The following month he purchased another ruler and writes, "I walked back again [from Deptford], all the way reading of my book of Timber measure, comparing it with my new Sliding Rule brought home this morning with great pleasure." Other quotations are interesting: "Up and spent most of the morning upon my measuring Ruler and with great pleasure. I have found out some things myself of great dispatch, more than my book teaches me, which pleases me mightily." "And then to Browne's for my measuring rule, which is made, and is certainly the best and the most commodious for carrying in one's pocket, and most useful that ever was made, and myself have the honor of being as it were the inventor of this form of it."

This ruler was so small that Browne could find no one who could do the necessary engraving on it. So Pepys got his friend, Edward Cocker, who wrote *The Tutor to Writing and Arithmetick*, to do the work. That Cocker could write such small characters was amazing to Pepys. He did all fine work by candlelight. Later when Pepys suffered from weakness of his eyes, Cocker advised concerning glasses and ways of shading candlelight. Pepys found him "a great admirer, and well read in, all our English poets, and undertakes to judge them all, and that not impertinently."

Sir Jonas Moore, one of the greatest mathematicians of his time, and one of the founders of the Royal Society, was a friend of Pepys. During one of his visits he told Pepys of "the mighty use of Napier's bones," and Pepys resolved to "have a pair presently." These "bones" or rods were used as a help in the performance of multiplication and division. The idea originated with John Napier, the discoverer of logarithms, and was first published in 1648 and again in 1667 by William Leybourn. The latter book is probably the one that Sir Jonas Moore read.

In June, 1663, Pepys learned, through a friend, of duodecimal arithmetic. ". . . and then comes Creed and he and I talked

about mathematiques, and he tells me of a way found out by Mr. Jonas Moore which he calls duodecimal arithmetique . . . which I have a mind to learn."

Pepys was acquainted with Sir Samuel Morland's calculating machine "which is very pretty, but not very useful." In 1672, Morland's book describing this machine was published and the title page reads, "A new and most useful instrument for addition and subtraction of pounds, shillings, pence, and farthings. Without charging the memory, disturbing the mind, or exposing the operator to any uncertainty; which no method heretofore published can pretend to do."

Installed in office, he immediately "began to take an inventory of the papers, and goods, and books of the office." And in the same month he was busy calculating the debts of the navy. Soon he was before "a committee of Parliament to give them an answer to an order of theirs, 'that we could not give them any account of the Accounts of the Navy in the years 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, as they desire.'"

Besides the work connected with his office, Pepys, in this first year was pleased to do special tasks for Lord Sandwich, such as auditing the accounts of his stewards. He considered this as an indication of his benefactor's trust in him.

Pepys became interested in the navy's stores accounting, for he was aware of the extent of loss to the king through petty graft and outright stealing. In July, 1662, he writes, "Then to Woolwich, and viewed well all the houses and stores there, . . . and then to Mr. Ackworth's and Sheldon's to view their books, which we found not to answer the King's service and security at all as to the stores." He did what he could, but changes naturally were effected slowly. Later we read, "To the office, where Mr. Norman came and showed me a design of his for the storekeeper's books, for the keeping of them regular in order to a balance, which I am mightily satisfied to see, and shall love the fellow the better, as he is in all things sober, so particularly for his endeavor to do something in this thing so much wanted."

But it was not until he had been in office eight years that real progress was made. Then Francis Hosier, a muster-master, acquainted him with a new system he had in mind. Pepys visited him. "And I did go with him to his lodging, . . . and do find him upon an extraordinary good work of designing a method of keeping our Storekeeper's Accounts, in the Navy." Two months

later he writes, “. . . and after dinner, I with Mr. Hosier to my closet, to discourse of the business of balancing Storekeeper’s Accounts, which he hath taken great pains in reducing to a method, to my great satisfaction; and I shall be glad both for the King’s sake and his, that the thing be put in practice, and will do my part to promote it.” Later, “. . . and I did shew him [the Duke of York] Hosier’s [method of balancing storekeepers’ accounts], which did please him mightily, and he will have it shewed the Council and King anon, to be put in practice.”

Finally it was presented to the king. “. . . and I attended with Lord Brouncker the King and Council, about the proposition of balancing Storekeeper’s Accounts: and there presented Hosier’s book, and it was mighty well resented [sic] and approved of.”

The following month a final entry closed the case as far as we are concerned. “So I away, without seeing the Duke of York; but Mr. Wren showed me the Order of Council about the balancing of Storekeeper’s accounts, passed the Council in the very terms I drew it, only I did put in my name as he that presented the book of Hosier’s preparing, and that is left out—I mean, my name—which is no great matter.”

A copy of this book is in the Pepysian library at Cambridge. It contains 101 pages, vellum, with the royal arms in gilt, and with gilt edges.

Pepys also introduced a new system revolving around a call-book, as he described it. It seems that this was a kind of pay-roll book which gave a distribution of labor, indicating some attempt at cost control. In a letter to the clerk of the cheque at Deptford he writes, “Mr. Coventry and I rode yesterday to Woolwich principally to advise with the master-shipwright and the clerk of the cheque about the putting in practice this new way of mine for the keeping your call-books; which we did, and doubt not its good and satisfactory success, the master-shipwright promising that himself or his foreman shall constantly attend to give notice of the removal of every man from the work he was last appointed to.” Later he tested the system and found it working correctly for he writes, “. . . I am very highly pleased with our new manner of call-books, being my invention.”

In the fall of 1662, Pepys began a thorough study of pursers’ accounts. “At my office all the morning, Mr. Lewes teaching me to understand the method of making up Purser’s accounts, which

is very needful for me and very hard." Later, "So to my office, and there till almost 12 at night with Mr. Lewes, learning to understand the manner of a purser's account, which is very hard and little understood by my fellow officers, and yet mighty necessary."

In a long letter to Sir Philip Warwick, secretary to the treasurer, he told of practices which resulted in much fraud. He had one man's accounts to recommend highly, his friend John Evelyn, who managed a hospital for sick and wounded seamen during the second Dutch war of 1665. ". . . for Mr. Evelyn . . . shewed me his account of Gravesend, where for every penny he demands allowance for, and for every sick man he hath had under his care, he shews you all you can wish for in columns, of which I have here for your satisfaction enclosed an example, which I dare say you will say with me he deserves great thanks for."

On another visit Evelyn gave him a ledger which was a hundred years old, having been kept by his great grandfather when he was treasurer of the navy. Pepys was very pleased with this gift and considered it "a great rarity." It is now in the British museum.

Writing to Mr. Coventry, a friend and commissioner on the navy board, Pepys shows with what thoroughness he attacked a problem and gathered material, much as is done today in modern research. "After much pains in my inquiries into the purser's trade, and therein collected a little volume of observation, I profess myself at a perfect loss what to advise, having not at present time to digest them so as to make any judgment, or inform you as I ought, that you might do it. But before many days are over I hope to compass it, and in the interim only say that I have no expectations that there will ever be found, in so many persons as we shall need, all the qualifications necessary to make the project of cheques and stewards advisable. Something I have in chase to offer, but am not yet master of it enough to call it my own, therefore will bestow some more thoughts on it before I adventure to make it yours."

In several cases of which we have record Pepys, to settle a dispute or obtain an idea for his own work, searched old account books. The Duke of York asked the comptroller and the surveyor concerning pay to commanders. Pepys thought they answered incorrectly and so a few days later he went to Deptford where King Henry VIII had established a royal naval dockyard, "and there among other things viewed old pay-books, and found that

the Commanders did never heretofore receive any pay for the rigging time, but only for seetime, contrary to what Sir J. Minnes and Sir W. Batten told the Duke the other day." In this instance in "about 100 pay-books we turned over we found not one commander paid otherwise than by the express number of days she entered into and ended sea victuals and wages (rigging time being as expressly denied them): . . . "

The following year he writes, "after dinner by coach with Sir G. Carteret and Sir J. Minnes by appointment to Auditor Beale's in Salisbury Court, and there we did with great content look over some old ledgers to see in what manner they were kept, and indeed it was in an extraordinary good method, and such as (at least out of design to keep them employed) I do persuade Sir J. Minnes to go upon, which will at least do as much good it may be to keep them for want of something to do from envying those that do something."

And again, ". . . to the Privy Seale at White Hall, where, with W. Hewer and Mr. Gibson, who met me at the Temple, I spent the afternoon till evening looking over the books there, and did find several things to my purpose, though few of those I designed to find, the books being there in no method at all."

There are many references in the diary to a certain Mr. Creed. Little is known of the man except that before the restoration he was in the service of Sir Edward Montague and that in 1662 he was made secretary of the commissioners for Tangier. He and Pepys liked the same things and were much together. But when Mr. Creed became secretary of the commissioners for Tangier it became Pepys' duty to audit his accounts. From the beginning there was trouble. "So we and Sir W. Batten to the office, and there did discourse of Mr. Creed's accounts, and I fear it will be a good while before we shall go through them, and many things we meet with, all of difficulty." Six months later it was apparent to Pepys that many of the difficulties had been purposely manufactured. ". . . but I find Creed a deadly cunning fellow and one that never do any thing openly, but has intrigues in all he do or says." And the next day, ". . . but I am pleased to see with what secret cunning and variety of artifice this Creed has carried on his business even unknown to me, which he is now forced by an accident to communicate to me."

A little later still, and Pepys was tired of the whole affair. He had tried to make Creed's accounts presentable to the Duke of

York and Sir G. Carteret. "I have of late spent so much time with Creed, being led to it by his business of his accounts, but I find him a fellow of those designs and tricks, that there is no degree of true friendship to be made with him, and therefore I must cast him off, though he be a very understanding man, and one that much may be learned of as to cunning and judging of other men." On July 4, 1663, the accounts were reviewed by the Duke of York. The treasurer, comptroller, surveyor and a commissioner attacked them. Creed was able to answer all successfully.

Three years later Pepys was again auditing Creed's accounts. ". . . After dinner he [Creed] and I to our accounts and very troublesome he is and with tricks which I found plainly and was vexed at . . ." Experience had made a better auditor of Pepys.

A letter written to one of the commissioners, William Coventry, in 1664, concerning accounting for expenditures made in foreign ports shows how Pepys went about his work. He explains in this letter that from time to time he had taken notes "upon the examination of foreign accounts," and he lists these. He suggests that they may be of value when changes are contemplated.

A few of the points raised by Pepys in this letter follow:

"Nothing is more familiar then to have boatswains, carpenters, and gunners come home and (as far as the Surveyor can or they will charge themselves) have their accounts passed and wages paid before any advice of their foreign supplies is given us." These men should "give a security as the pursers do" until verification of the expenditures is made.

An order by a boatswain or carpenter in a foreign port to purchase materials ought first be signed by the commander and master so that "the necessity of each demand" is determined before it is supplied.

Many orders are written in foreign languages "which the accountants have (upon demand) confessed themselves utterly ignorant in."

"Moneys are many times paid upon the demandant's bare assertion of so much disbursed, without any receipt produced under the hand of him to whom it was paid. From whence it may so happen that upon producing such a receipt a while after (when the particulars of a mixed account are out of our heads) a second allowance may be obtained by another person for the same service."

“Bills of exchange have been often drawn upon us from abroad by Deputy Treasurers to the value of certain sums sterling for pieces of 8 taken up by them, without mentioning the number or price at which they were so taken, whereby through the difference in exchange and our ignorance of the rate current at the time of drawing those bills, we are rendered unable (at the accountant’s coming home) to judge of the good or bad husbandry used by them in that particular, but, on the contrary, are forced to admit of what prices they please to put upon them.”

In May, 1669, Pepys petitioned the king for a leave of absence, for his eyes were troubling him a great deal. In the diary he constantly refers to the pain his eyes gave him, the first entry being six years earlier. Several articles have been written concerning the probable cause of this trouble. He tried paper tubes, green glasses, and glasses with “very young sights.” He was also bled, and he took pills. But his eyes grew steadily worse.

Pepys was granted a leave of absence, and before he left he made the last entry he was ever to make in his famous diary. “And thus ends all that I doubt I shall ever be able to do with my own eyes in the keeping of my Journal, I being not able to do it any longer, having done now so long as to undo my eyes almost every time that I take a pen in my hand; and, therefore, whatever comes of it, I must forbear . . .

“And so I betake myself to that course, which is almost as much as to see myself go into my grave, for which, and all the discomforts that will accompany my being blind, the good God prepare me!”

No comprehensive biography has been written for Pepys. Perhaps more is known of his life for the ten-year period covered by the diary than is known of any other man, but comparatively little is known of the years following. During his leave of absence he traveled in France and Holland and on his return resumed his duties as clerk of the acts. In 1673, the Duke of York resigned as lord high admiral because of the passing of the test act, and an admiralty commission was organized to take his place. The king was in charge of all meetings of the new commission, and Pepys was appointed secretary of the admiralty. According to Tanner, he immediately systemized the proceedings of the commission and the routine of his new office and became an expert advisor on all naval business.

The admiralty commission was dissolved in 1679. Pepys was not in sympathy with the new commission appointed to replace it and so resigned. He remained in retirement until 1684. During that period he was still on friendly terms with the king and with the Duke of York. The admiralty commission of 1679 was dissolved in 1684, and the king, until his death, filled the office of lord high admiral, helped by the Duke of York. At the same time a new office was created, that of "secretary for the affairs of the admiralty of England" and Pepys was chosen to fill it. Two years later a special commission "for the recovery of the navy" was organized at Pepys' suggestion. The commission of 1679 had done its work poorly, and the Duke of York, who became King James II following the death of Charles II in 1685, saw Pepys' point of view. The new commission completed its work in October, 1688, and was dissolved. It was replaced by a new board of commissioners, acting much as the old board of commissioners in office when Pepys first became clerk of the acts.

Pepys continued to fill the office of secretary until shortly after the abdication of James II, when he was asked to resign because of his friendship with the dethroned king. It marked the end of his public career.

The following year, 1690, he published his *Memoires Relating to the State of the Royal Navy of England for Ten Years, Determin'd December 1688*. It was a defense of the work of the special commission of 1686 and denounced the admiralty commission of 1679-84. The document is interesting from an accounting point of view because in it Pepys shows clearly his sense of the importance of accounts. His task as head of the special commission had been to rehabilitate the navy. He lists five qualifications which members of the new special commission should possess. The second qualification is: "A General Mastery in the business of Accounts, though more particularly those incident to the Affairs of Your Navy." The king granted the special commission an allowance not to exceed £400,000 per annum. Pepys observes that less than £310,000 yearly was spent "as the same stands verify'd by the Accounts thereof in the Registry of the Navy, and those Accounts (both as to Truth and Perspicuity) so digested, justify'd, and (after the Close of each year) presented to the King and his Treasurers, answering in every respect the Scope of the Proposition, by distinct Reckonings exhibited therein of every Species and parcel of Goods bought and spent, Artificer and Work-

man employ'd, Penny laid out, and Service perform'd (with the Difference or Agreement in the Charge of every such Service with its proper Estimate) as does not appear to have ever before been seen in the Navy of England, but (through the single Industry and peculiar Conduct of Mr. Hewer) is now remaining there, to shew Posterity, that there is nothing in the Nature, Bulk, or Diversity of Matters incident to the business of a Navy (even under the circumstance of this) to justify the so-long-admitted Pretence of a Irreducibleness of its Accounts, to a degree of Order and Self-Evidence equal to the most strict of any private Merchant."

The volume includes a large financial schedule as an insertion, which shows in account form the transactions of the navy with the exchequer during the life of the special commission. The statement is easily understandable, even to one not versed in accounts.

A. Edward Newton, in his *A Magnificent Farce and Other Diversions of a Book-Collector*, describes the book as follows:

"The 'Memoires Relating to the State of the Royal Navy of England' is a scarce book, with a fine portrait of Pepys after Kneller, and, to be correct, must have a large folded plate giving an account of the finances of the Navy with the Exchequer. This plate, as the catalogue says, is 'frequently lacking.'"

The New York public library, in its "rare book department," has a copy printed before publication, with Pepys' corrections in ink. The published edition contained these corrections.

The *Memoires* was part of a great history of the navy planned by Pepys. He gathered many notes during his two periods of retirement, but his work hardly got beyond that point. The very first note he made was by way of reminder to himself. It read: "Overlook the accounts of the Treasurers of the Navy that are to be found upon record." Another entry concerning accounts reads as follows: "Consult the Auditors' Offices for what old sea-accounts can be come at, as the surest and most extensive method of information to be used in our sea matters, and particularly as to our eminent leaders and commanders there."