

## THE CHAIRMAN'S DISPATCH

### Nelson, health and leadership

Charisma has always been impossible to define. You either have it or you don't. Many leadership qualities can be learnt – confidence, conviction, communication, resilience, strength, integrity – but not charisma. My Colin White Memorial lecture in 2011 focused on the nature of leadership and concluded that the range of different 'theories' of leadership fuels the debate on what constitutes leadership. Their emergence requires us to ask why leadership has been defined in different ways at different times and why different theories gain popularity at different times? This may say more about us and our changing social values. Leadership cannot be understood in isolation from the wider social and organisational circumstances. It is one part of a big organisational picture. Inevitably, the search for the Holy Grail of leadership will continue!



Meanwhile, the elusive charisma, like a secret and magical ingredient, remains the most common description given by people to describe leadership. The Holy Grail?

Undoubtedly Horatio Nelson had charisma. His allure was such that it furnished his style and quality of leadership with an immortal characteristic that continues to inspire subsequent generations far removed from the age of sail which shaped it. Throughout his career his leadership qualities overcame life's many personal and professional obstacles, not least his state of health. As he penned in June 1785 while on the West Indies Station, "... my constitution is but weak . . . my health is a loss, I must be content to suffer, my only consideration is, that I have lost it in the service of my country."

Nelson was habitually concerned about his health, a good example being his reference to it on 4 April 1801, two days after the Battle of Copenhagen: "My constitution is gone and it is only the Spirit of Duty to my Sovereign & Country that enables me to stand up all against all I have to encounter". Writing three years later in July 1804 he laments that, "A half man as I am, cannot expect to be a Hercules." And in November of the same year, "With my losses and infirmities, good health cannot be expected."

That good health cannot be expected has been brought home to me since writing my last Dispatch and allowed me to focus on how Nelson's perseverance against sickness, in spite of his many black dog moments allowed him to overcome the obstacles poor health presented. His physical resilience was quite amazing. As he remarked, "dame Nature never has failed curing me."

Good health is an important factor in any profession and it was vital during the age of sail as has been highlighted by Duffy and Mackay in their excellent *Hawke, Nelson and*

*British Naval Leadership, 1747–1805*. Therefore, it is surprising that Nelson, seldom experiencing good health, achieved so much.

Typically his health collapsed when he was in adverse climates and when he was suffering from disappointment or stress. He was susceptible to disease, especially the cocktail of tropical diseases, including malaria, waterborne typhus, tropical sprue and machineel poisoning, all of which could have 'done for' him.

At the end of 1776, aged eighteen, he fell dangerously ill with malaria and had to be invalided from India back to England. He had lost the use of his limbs, was emaciated and hovered between life and death and he was discharged from the service. Four years later at the height of a campaign against Spain in Central America he was stricken again. The ravages of life on the West Indies station were taking their toll and he was experiencing his 'old complaint in my breast', which was almost certainly continuing attacks of malaria. Worse was to come.

During the siege of Fort San Juan he languished in his tent for days until an order from Admiral Sir Peter Parker to take command of another ship arrived and almost certainly saved his life. Nevertheless, on reaching Port Royal, the emaciated Nelson was in no fit state to take command of anything and had to be invalided back to England.

His recovery in Bath was frustratingly slow and as had happened earlier he found that from time to time he lost the use of his left arm and left leg. On 15th February 1781, he wrote to William Locker, "My health, thank God, is very near perfectly restored, and I have the complete use of all my limbs, except my left arm. I can hardly tell what is the matter with it, from the shoulder to my fingers' ends, it feels as if half dead; but the surgeon and doctors give me hopes it will all go off . . . I must now wish you a good night, and drink your health in a draught of my physician's cordial, and a bolus."

The most likely modern diagnosis for this ailment is polyneuritis. Although different this has similarities with peripheral neuritis – inflammation of a peripheral nerve or nerves, usually causing pain and loss of function. This has been one of my recent experiences and it has opened a window onto Nelson's symptoms and travails, allowing me to not only empathise with his situation, but also to gain inspiration from it.

Conveniently, it also allows me talk briefly about the well-being of The 1805 Club, which your Council is currently examining in some depth to ensure that it can meet the future challenges posed by its charitable objectives. The review of the Club's key operational activities, ranging from its conservation policy to its financial structures, is well in hand and we can see that every part of our activity is linked and that adjustments will be inevitable. The issues we are addressing include the increasing costs of our excellent publications, which if left alone will gobble up the Club's main source of income – membership fees; the burden of maintenance associated with past, current and

future conservation projects; improvements to the website; the importance of our North American membership; the future for The Trafalgar Way; the development of the educational programmes, and the question of cash flow not least because the current cycle of the worthwhile Topman Scheme is drawing to a close. It is my wish that the Topman scheme will be invigorated and that those who can renew their pledge will do so and be joined by new Topmen.

We look forward to reporting on all of these issues in full at the AGM during the Members' Day on Saturday 14 May. This year we are in Portsmouth at HMS NELSON Wardroom and may I remind members that they are very welcome, nay encouraged, to bring guests in order to introduce them to the Club. The Cecil Isaacson Memorial Lecture is being given by James Davey, Curator of Naval History at the National Maritime Museum.

The United Wards' Club of the City of London, is holding its annual President's weekend at Portsmouth and working in close association with them we are delighted, thanks to our membership secretary Barry Scrutton (United Wards' President in 2016!) to offer members many optional additional attractions that give you the opportunity to maximise your visit to Portsmouth, including the Historic Dockyard, HMS NELSON Wardroom and Fort Nelson.

With all good wishes,

Yours aye,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Peter". The signature is written in dark ink on a light-colored background.

**Peter Warwick, Chairman**