

OBSERVATIONS FROM THE CHAIRMAN

In succeeding the late Peter Warwick as Chairman after some 15 years in office, I must first pay tribute to his commitment to the interests of the Club over those years, and indeed in other capacities before he became Chairman. Peter had a significant impact on the direction in which the Club progressed, and this in large measure has led to its increasing influence in the field of naval history



We must now build on Peter's legacy and lay plans reflecting current priorities that provide a solid foundation for the future of the Club. To this end, a Governance Committee has been set up under the Chairmanship of our Vice Chairman, Geraint Day. The Club was founded some thirty years ago, and there have been many changes in the legal provisions with which the Club, as a Registered Charity, now needs to comply. Geraint has therefore been trawling through the legislation, directing attention to points requiring action. The Committee aims to have recommendations in place for amendments to the Club Constitution at the Club AGM next year.

At the same time, the objectives of the Club embodied in our Constitution also require review to reflect current priorities. The Council will be considering possible revisions over the coming months and proposed changes will also be put before the AGM for approval

The primary focus of the Club since its foundation has, not surprisingly, been in the naval history of the Georgian period, since the period from the mid eighteenth century until the end of the wars with France includes some of the finest achievements of the sailing Royal Navy, especially those of Lord Nelson.

But the Royal Navy was not created on the accession of King George I or cease to exist in the mid-19th Century when power succeeded sail. The Service has had a record of extraordinary achievement for century after century since it was created as British "state" navy by King Henry VIII and later renamed the Royal Navy by King Charles II. Although Royal Navy of the Georgian period remains our primary focus, the Club must not allow itself to become trapped in a temporal straight jacket whereby events occurring outside that period are not taken account of when they have relevance within it.

Here I want to turn to a different point. We live at a time when general history has a low priority in the educational world. In schools, children learn little general history earlier than the start of the 20th Century, so they then possess little foundation for understanding the context in which more specialised strands of history proceed. Thus, the significance of the Battle of Trafalgar cannot properly be understood without a background understanding of the other events of the Napoleonic war period.

A nation's history can be regarded as being churned out as intertwined streams in the wake of the Ship of State. The competent historian may necessarily specialise in one stream but will take care to ensure that their study does not discount parallel developments along other streams.

The Club cannot of course do more than point out the need to treat history more comprehensively in the national curriculum. The foresight of Monarchs and Parliament since the

16th Century, combined with the enlightened evolution of English law and the foundations of modern science laid by Isaac Newton and his contemporaries, led to an extraordinary flowering of creativity in the country. Industry and exports burgeoned. The Royal Navy was the essential maritime institution that facilitated the evolution of both national and international trade, especially in the nineteenth century. The significance of the naval contribution can only be fully appreciated in the context of the other factors mentioned above. For a non-British view on this, see the book *To Rule the Waves* by the American author, Arthur Herman, subtitled *How the British Navy Shaped the Modern World* (ISBN: 0 340 73418 3).

The Royal Navy is undoubtedly the most significant maritime institution ever created in term of its impact on national and international history. It is essential that the educational system should cover the complex relationship between the Executive, law, science and the Royal Navy that led to such massive national achievement. To paraphrase the Roman lawyer Cicero, an understanding of the past is essential to planning for future success. And on a visit to the Britannia Royal Naval College Dartmouth early in the last war Mr Winston Churchill enquired of the Director of History about the scope of his teaching. He then made much the same point as Cicero, commenting:

"I am very glad you teach so much history – it is the one guide to the future".

The first mission statement of the Navy was embodied in the Naval Prayer of Archbishop Cranmer, still used in Church services the British fleet. It was probably written on the instigation of King Henry V!!! and in its original form, the twin exhortations read: "That we may be: a safeguard unto our Sovereign Lord King Henry, and his Dominions, and a security for such as pass upon the seas upon their lawful occasions"

The first of these exhortations relates essentially to ensuring the security of the state and is the function of the Navy of any state. But the second is unique to the Royal Navy, and it should be noted that it is not limited to British ships. This was probably because of the desire to encourage free trade. But the second exhortation commits of the Royal Navy to the succour of all mariners in distress, from whatever cause. The Navy's commitment over the centuries to this duty accounts in large measure for the extraordinary worldwide reputation of the Service.

This and the historical record points clearly to the need for continued protection of the merchant fleet by the Royal Navy, based on precedents reaching back over 400 years and through the Georgian period. The Navy was sufficiently resourced in proportion to the scale of our maritime trading activity to afford it effective protection. This has lessons for the country today, exemplified by the recent capture by Iranian elements of the British flagged tanker in the Persian Gulf and the inability of the Royal Navy to prevent it.

Finally, may I express my appreciation for the support I have had from the Club Council following the sad death of our late Chairman. We have had to deal with a number of issues that were being held over as a result of consequent uncertainties. And I would also like especially to thank those involved in progressing, the LIBOR projects, in particular Kathy Brown in respect of the Trafalgar Way, Peter Hore and Jo Birtwhistle in respect of the Databases and Club website, Gillian Knight concerning the naval history lectures and John Wills, with John Rodgaard, regarding the conservation of Lord Nelson's Marriage certificate.