

THE VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE

By Bill White
Chairman, The 1805 Club

This is a very poignant report for me to write, being the last "View" before I stand down as Chairman of The 1805 Club in May 2021.

The 2021 AGM and Members' Day will be taking place via a Zoom call on Saturday 8th May at 5pm, UK time, and I hope many of you will be able to join us for the meeting, which will be followed by a Members' Forum. This is a crucial meeting for us and the future of the Club as we will be seeking your approval to change our status from a standard charity to a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO).



As we enter our 31st year, we are constantly reviewing our objectives to keep them relevant and in step with current events.

One such issue is the continuing discussions played out primarily in the media about the removal of statues dedicated to specific historic figures, one of them being Admiral Lord Nelson, based on his alleged support for slavery. When this debate reignited last year, Alison Reijman, the Club's Press Officer, prepared a reactive statement to be issued in the event of the media contacting The Club to seek its views. In the statement, the following observations were offered to refute the allegations being made about Nelson and his role within the Royal Navy. The erroneous view is that he supported slavery, but Nelson was never a slaver nor a slave owner.

It is true that slavery was a practice which impacted directly on the activities of the Royal Navy during the times of the Napoleonic Wars. Leadership in the Royal Navy on slavery was shown by Charles Middleton, latterly Lord Barham, who was First Lord of the Admiralty and mastermind of the Battle of Trafalgar campaign. Middleton was also an abolitionist, his home at Barham Court in Teston, Kent, being the location for campaign meetings about the abolition of slavery. He had recognised that abolition could only be achieved by legislation and that for this political involvement was essential. He therefore invited William Wilberforce and other leading abolitionist politicians to the meetings to develop a Bill to be introduced into Parliament. The resulting Abolition of the Slave Trade Act was passed in Britain in 1807 at the height of the Napoleonic Wars. It placed a great additional burden of policing on the Royal Navy.

Nelson's Navy, the Georgian Navy and the Royal Navy have a proud record regarding the abolition of slavery. If Nelson had survived the Battle of Trafalgar, he would have been active in upholding this 1807 law. Also, any enslaved person who joined the Royal Navy was automatically made a free person. Such a person could rise through the ranks right up to the level of Captain, with Jack "Punch" Perkins, the Royal Navy's first black commissioned officer, being one of the best examples. The muster books of Nelson's ships did not record ethnicity, so it is likely that many of the Americans in the books were former slaves.

For Nelson's part, he did marry Fanny Nisbet (née Woolward), a young widow who was a member of a family that was among the colonial elite in Nevis. Through his connections with the Nisbet family and the planters, Nelson acknowledged the vital, contemporary economic and strategic importance of the sugar plantations in the West Indies to Britain.

Much of the evidence built against Nelson came through a letter he wrote to a planter friend, Simon Taylor, on 10th June 1805 and which Peter Warwick quoted in his Chairman's Dispatch (KA Issue 48 – Autumn 2017). In the letter, he said: "I have been and shall die a firm friend of our colonial system. I was bred, as you know, in the good old school, and taught to appreciate the value of our West India possessions; and neither in the field, nor in the senate, shall their just rights be infringed, whilst I have an arm to fight in their defence, or a tongue to launch my voice against the damnable and cursed doctrine of Wilberforce and his hypocritical allies."

However, this letter was written at the height of war with France when he was being accused of risking the safety of the British West Indies and needed to stress the importance he attached to their protection. At that time, Nelson was keeping a close watch on activities taking place in the Mediterranean, where French Commander Admiral Pierre Villeneuve had broken through the British blockade. Nelson and the British fleet then chased Villeneuve, who was commanding the French and Spanish squadrons, across the Atlantic Ocean to the Caribbean and back. This action proved to be the prelude to the Battle of Trafalgar.



Finally, it is important to point out that Nelson never used his seat in the House of Lords to speak in support of slavery. There is absolutely no evidence to suggest that he ever considered white people superior to black people. He treated everyone equally in keeping with his lifelong humanitarian views and strong Christian faith.

The 1805 Club has deliberately chosen to be circumspect on this subject, but we will continue to monitor the ongoing debate. We are aware that in Barbados, a statue of Nelson was removed from the main square in Bridgetown last year and relocated to the island's museum. This is in lieu of Barbados's plan to become a republic this year ahead of the 55th anniversary of the island's independence.

I must finish this last report by paying a personal tribute to my colleagues both on The 1805 Club's Council and to you, the members, for your unstinting support, especially over these difficult past two years since the sad loss of Peter Warwick in March 2019, and the pandemic with which we were faced from March 2020. Both events have presented us with enormous challenges especially in attempting to organise special events such as our 30th anniversary dinner at the House of Lords, which sadly had to be cancelled.

Despite these unprecedented circumstances, the work of The Club Council has continued unabated, and I offer my sincerest thanks and gratitude to my colleagues on the Council and you, the members, both for enabling us to continue our work despite the current restrictions and tentatively to consider future activities after the present restrictions have been eased.

The Duke of Edinburgh

As the printing of this *Kedge Anchor* was about to get under way, the death of the Duke of Edinburgh was announced.

His Royal Highness was a good friend of all the Armed Services and especially the Royal Navy, and was admired worldwide for his steadfastness and love of Queen, Country and Commonwealth – often said of others, but never so truly as on this occasion.

He was generously supportive of The 1805 Club and The Trafalgar Way.

We mourn his passing and will publish our collective tribute to him. Meanwhile, our thoughts are with Her Majesty and their family. (Please also refer to page 27 and the back cover)

Never forget that there is a whole treasure trove of interesting stuff on our facebook page

<https://www.facebook.com/The1805Club/>



facebook

EDITORIAL

I am somewhat startled to find myself still doing this job after two editions of *KA*. I seem to be getting away with it! As I have mentioned previously, it was a shove in the back from Peter Hore that resulted in me volunteering, and I am glad he did it.



The 1805 Club now has five publications, all of which are free to all members: *The Trafalgar Chronicle (TC)*; *The Kedge Anchor (KA)* and *The 1805 Dispatches (TD)*; *The 1805 Club website* and *The Trafalgar Way website*. The annual *TC* yearbook has scholarly works mostly contributed by members, amongst whom are numbered some of the world's most respected naval historians and it is also available for purchase by the public; the bi-annual *KA*, which until recently was our newsletter but which we now call our magazine, also has original work contributed by members, but is not necessarily as scholarly; *TD* is our digital newsletter published every two months, which is 'lighter' still and is available free to anyone interested, via our website. The two websites are a treasure trove of information and data. All of these are intended to make our field of interest in naval history easily available to everyone. My intention, whilst my legs are under the editorial desk, is for *KA* to be a publication that pleases people and for *TD* to attract the interest of non-members if possible, by showcasing what is available if you become a member. Editors get little feedback, but I am pleased, so far, to get less negative than positive feedback, so please let me know what you think, in order that *KA* and *TD* can be what you enjoy.

In this edition you will find articles about Sea Shanties, which are the new 'black', so we could not let that particular bandwagon pass without finding something that has dropped off it, together with a feature about the oft-neglected Admiral Duncan, a scoop about a newly discovered portrait of Josiah Nisbet, a description of the Battle of Genoa, some observations on Nelson in Shepperton – and lots more. Something for everyone, it is hoped.

Please note the next edition is due in October.

The deadline for copy will be

21 September 2021.

Please submit your ideas to the editor as soon as you can, and actual contributions at an earlier date if possible.

Cover Picture –

Geoffrey Huband RSMA,

Detail from '*Pirate Haven*', Oil, 36 x 26 cm

With thanks to Geoffrey Huband and
Mall Galleries/ Federation of British Artists
www.mallgalleries.com