

CHIPS FROM A PORTSMOUTH BASKET
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22. COMMISSIONERS AND SUPERINTENDENTS

As an introduction to the history of the Dockyard Resident Commissioners, and of their successors the Admiral Superintendents, it would perhaps be as well to mention the Port Admiral, or as now called the Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth. This is not so ancient an appointment as that of the Commissioner. The continuity of the separate C. in C.'s post dates only from 1763. Prior to that date the duties of C. in C. were carried out by the Commissioner unless there was a Flag Officer in his ship or with his squadron in the Port, when that officer carried out the duties. There were instances when a short temporary appointment as C. in C. was made especially to deal with a Court Martial or Court of Enquiry. There was another period of five to six years starting in 1707 when, under war conditions, a Captain Superintendent was appointed to the Port to carry out the duties of C. in C. with particular responsibility for speeding up the final preparation and getting to sea of ships fitted out in the Yard. In 1713 this appointment ceased and the Commissioner - a senior Captain, R.N. - was directed to assume the duties of C. in C. in regard to ships in full commission or "on sea pay" as well as the "*Ships in Ordinary*" except when a Flag Officer was present in the Port and flying his flag. The Commissioner's reply was to ask for the appointment of an extra clerk to his staff with some consideration for the expense of paper, wax, etc. such as Their Lordships thought proper to allow the late Captain Superintendent.

The Resident Commissioners found these dual duties extremely onerous as might be expected. Just before 1713 the Commissioner informed the Admiralty, in calling attention to this, that during the war amongst other things he attended almost daily at Spithead to witness the payment of wages by the Clerk of the Checque to the companies of ships arriving there and that these duties often occupied the whole day.

In those early days there were no naval depots, barracks, or hospitals. Men drafted to the Port had to be boarded out or accommodated in the Ships in Ordinary. Wounded men had similarly to be found accommodation mostly in private houses. All these duties fell on the Dockyard Officers, and particularly the Commissioner, in addition to the rush of work which went with a period of emergency and such other naval functions as commissioning, paying off, victualling, etc.

A ship on arrival at the Port had, by Admiralty orders to be ready within forty-eight hours for work to be commenced in the Yard. This usually meant hoisting out guns and ammunition, getting down yards and rigging and perhaps de-masting. On completion of Yard work the ship had to be made ready for sea within four days. All this meant a rush of work for Ship's and Yard Officers. Ship's Officers were inclined to ignore the orders of a Commissioner under such circumstances and deal direct with the Admiralty. A Flag Officer arriving in the Port could override the instructions given by the Commissioner.

The necessity for the appointment of a senior and permanent officer in command of all naval work in the Port became increasingly obvious and eventually such an appointment was made in 1763.

At first the C. in C. lived at 106, High Street. In 1795 a large house in the same street, at one time the residence of the

Lieutenant Governor, opposite the George Hotel, was purchased as his residence, not without adverse comment from the Navy as to his removal further away from the water front. In 1830 the C. in C. removed from High Street to the Dockyard, taking over the residence built for, and to that date occupied by, the Commissioner. The latter moved to No. 9, The Parade, which was altered and extended over a period of years to become the official residence, as we know it of subsequent Admiral Superintendents. One would infer from drawings of a few years later that the C. in C. very soon took over for his Secretary, and the Port Accountant, the building, later the Tactical School, which had been erected in 1817 as the School of Naval Architecture.

This move of the C, in C. to the Dockyard caused great consternation amongst Naval Officers and important citizens. We find a writer recording a few years later that:

"On removal of the Admiral's Office to the Dockyard these premises (i.e. the previous C. in C's house in High Street) were advertised for sale but on the urgent representations of many local men on the utter impropriety of the removal of the Admiral to the Dock, a place from which no view of Spithead and the fleet could be obtained, the sale was stopped and the house given over to the Barrack Department."

In passing, the same writer comments that:

"The Parade Coffee House and Hotel at the corner of Grand Parade' (leading from High Street to the Garrison Church) was formerly the house of the Captains of the Navy. In olden time before Lieutenants wore epaulets and Captains wore red breeches, three cornered hats, buckles and pigtails it was not uncommon to see Captains, R.N, sitting outside the house on forms smoking long pipes."

The Admiralty Regulations of 1825 lay down the functions of the C. in C. in regard to the Dockyard in somewhat similar terms to the present Regulations.

"No C. in C. or other Naval Officer is to assume authority or control over a Resident Commissioner at a Yard nor to interfere in management, the Commissioner's functions being distinct from those of the Military Branch of the Service."

The Regulation goes on to make the same exceptions as the present one. The Admiral Superintendent remains the Deputy to the C, in C., taking over his responsibilities when the C. in C. is away from the Port. In direct descent from the Commissioner he remains the independent local head of the Dockyard and the other civil industrial establishments which have been added at the Port.

I have been able to find little definite information about the charge of the Dockyard in its earliest days. We do know that a Clerk of the Ships was in being when Henry VIII came to the Throne and that there was a similar post 300 years earlier in the time of John. He probably had someone to represent his interests at Portsmouth but the first mention is of the appointment of one Thomas Jermyn in 1526 as Keeper of the Dock at Portsmouth with pay of 12d per day plus 6d a day for a clerk. One Goodwin held the

same post in 1634.

Henry VIII is sometimes regarded as a frivolous monarch. Actually he was a cultured and able man to whom this country and particularly the Navy owes a very great deal. Prior to his accession there were no established arsenals or docks and the Navy was almost entirely made up of Merchant vessels taken up when war was imminent or ships fitted out by private adventurers or hired from Dantzic, Genoa, etc. He continued and enlarged the good work of Henry VII and strengthened the foundations of a permanent Navy of reasonable size although in war time it still had to be augmented from other sources. Generally speaking, however, the requirements and armament of the warship and the merchant ship were beginning to diverge considerably.

When he had increased his Navy he turned to the matter of ship-building and repair, the permanence of his Dockyards and the administration of the Navy and the Yards. He it was who saw the necessity of a permanent force of skilled Shipwrights and started the system of granting annuities to Master Shipwrights.

At Headquarters he laid the foundations of the Admiralty and Navy Board and of Trinity House. He appointed the Principal Officers of the Navy to administer the business of the Fleet and Yards. They had to meet once a week in an office at Tower Hill and reported once a month to the Lord High Admiral."

To the Clerk of the Ships he added others. The Treasurer in 1514, Comptroller in 1524, Clerk of the Stores in 1542, Surveyor of Ships and Rigging in 1545, Master of Ordnance in 1546.

In 1609, following abuses, the Principal Officers were abolished and replaced by Commissioners who remained as such until 1628 when they were abolished and the Board of Principal Officers restored.

Under Charles I the Navy, however, languished and when the Commonwealth was formed there were only 14 Naval ships with two decks. The Commonwealth greatly increased the Navy and the efficiency and capacity of the Dockyards.

At the Restoration the Duke of York was appointed Lord High Admiral and at this time the Treasurer, Comptroller, Surveyor and Clerk of the Ships (or Acts) became established as the Principal Officers and Commissioners of the Navy or, as it was later called, the Navy Board. So they continued, being responsible to the Lord High Admiral and later the Commissioners appointed to execute the office of Lord High Admiral until this separate Board was abolished and absorbed in the Admiralty structure in 1832.

About this time Pepys prepared the instructions laying down the duties and responsibilities of the Navy Board and Yard Officers.

The Lord High Admiral was responsible for high policy and provision of funds, for movements of ships and fleets, provision of ships, officers and men, promotion, discipline and general welfare in the Navy. The Navy Board administered the Dockyards and were responsible for shipbuilding and repairs, storekeeping, victualling and the detailed financial management of the Navy.

Within the Navy Board there was a good deal of duplication of responsibilities. Having regard to the times, this was perhaps done with malice aforethought so that each might act as a check on the other.

The Treasurer was the Senior and best paid Commissioner and was responsible to the Lord High Admiral as well as being a member of the Navy Board, but after 1671 he was required to submit his accounts to the Navy Board.

The Comptroller was responsible for the complements of ships and dockyard, muster and pay books, etc, audited the Storekeeper's accounts and supervised payments to contractors and victuallers. Following the breakdown of the victualling arrangements in the Second Dutch War two Assistant Commissioners were made to assist him, one as Comptroller of Victualling Accounts and the other as Comptroller of Storekeeper Accounts. About 1691 a third was added as Comptroller of the Treasurer's Accounts.

The Surveyor of the Navy was responsible for the state of the Dockyards, Shipbuilding and Ship repairs, Docks, Wharves, Buildings, Dockyard Stores, supply and expenditure including Bosn's and Carpenter's Stores on board ships.

The Treasurer, Comptroller and Surveyor were represented at the Dockyards by the Clerk of the Checque, Storekeeper and Clerk of the Survey, and here again there was a good deal of duplication of responsibility and cross checking.

Pepys records on 22.11.1664 that the Duke of York, in compiling the drafts for the Commissions to be issued to the Yard Commissioners, wished to call them Sub Commissioners to represent restrained powers. Pepys thought that their authority was sufficiently circumscribed and, so as not to diminish unnecessarily their authority at the Yards, felt that they must be called Commissioners. Apparently his arguments prevailed. Under the same date, Pepys says he introduced Charge books and directed the Clerk of the Checque at Chatham to take a complete charge of the Shipwrights' work on the new ship and, in secret, he presented an account of over £5,500 as against an estimate of £2,200.

The Navy Board originally had additional offices at Woolwich and Deptford Yards which were conveniently near the Royal Palace at Greenwich. Elsewhere they were represented by Resident Commissioners who sometimes served as additional members of the Navy Board for short periods. Later with the Court and Lord High Admiral in Whitehall they were given an office in the City in Seething Lane. The Resident Commissioners in these early days looked upon themselves as colleagues of and of status equal with the Commissioners of the Navy Board. On one occasion the Commissioner at Portsmouth in a dispute with the Navy Board ends a report:

"I shall forbear saying anything more on this head but I desire you will be pleased to treat me for the future as a member of the Board and not as an inferior officer to be directed."

The Commissioners were almost all after the first few years Captains, R.N. and the title continued in use until June, 1832, when it was altered to Admiral Superintendent and still so remains.

From 1630 a Master Shipwright was in charge of Portsmouth Dockyard. The first recorded Commissioner was appointed in 1649 when war with the Dutch was impending, although the Burgess' Roll of Portsmouth includes one Edisbury, Commissioner, in 1633. The same Roll shows amongst the Burgesses one John Treaver, Surveyor of H.M.

Shippes and Navie Royale under date 1601 and John Button, Surveyor under date 1637.

In the early days of the Yard it would appear that there were few if any residences in the Yard, the Yard Officers finding their own accommodation in the town. At this stage some were resident but there was no suitable residence for the Commissioner and he lodged with the Mayor of Portsmouth at his house in the town. This was not a good solution as the Commissioner states in a personal letter of August 16£5 to the Secretary of the Admiralty:

"For my part to you as a friend I declare I intend not to make Portsmouth my habitation if I can avoid it. 'Tis true if the King command me to live underwater if it were possible I must and would do it but if I can anyway with the preservation of my reputation avoid it I shall not live here for the rent of Hampshire.

To tell you of the strait I have been put to since my coming to Portsmouth for my accommodation would be to small purpose and but that I have a body that can endure anything I had been dead. Where I am now we are forced to pack 9 people in a room to sleep in not above 16 feet one way and 12 feet the other. We are 26 in family in the Mayors house 9 of which are small children. What comfort can a man have in such a condition so being together."

Echo answers *"What"*. The Mayor at this time was the Dockyard Clerk of the Checque. He features in a letter I quote later.

The first Commissioner's residence was then under construction and was completed in 1666. This house and a large garden is stated to have been situated on the North Side of the Old Rope House. It is a little difficult to fix it accurately but it would appear to have been somewhere in the area between the present Works pound and the Surgery. On the North Side of it and lying between it and the present No. 2 Basin were a number of other residences for Yard Officers. The position chosen was not a good one as they occupied a valuable site which if allowed to remain would interfere with further development of the Yard. A new residence was provided by 1785, the present C. in C's residence, and the old one was pulled down. When in 1830 the C. in C. moved into the Yard and took over this residence the Admiral Superintendent moved to the end house on the Parade which was in due course enlarged to form the house we know today.

The pay of the early Commissioners was £500 a year plus £12 per annum paper and fire money, and he was allowed two clerks of his own choosing at £50 and £60 per annum respectively. In 1801 the salary was raised to £1000 p.a, and later of course increased in keeping with Navy pay and allowances.

The first Commissioners appointed by the Commonwealth are described as being able men who did much to improve the efficiency of the Yard. The first Commissioner is said to have reduced the excessive building costs from being 100% more than at other Yards until they were of the same order. He in fact boasted that by the end of his tenure of office Portsmouth could build 20% cheaper than other Yards despite the fact that skilled artisans were not available locally but had to be brought from elsewhere.

- These men may have been "pressed", which had been a common way of

obtaining extra labour and still was used as late as 1708. One reason for improvements was that the Admiralty paid lower wages than the private trade. We know that Shoreham supplied many Shipwrights at this period as did also Bristol. The Clerk of the Checque reports at this time:

"The prest men that some from Bristol all are entered on board the Mary in victuals and wages according to your orders. There hath appeared 93 of them but I mustered yesterday but 43 I believe some have gone to the Fleet."

They had their troubles and not least the failure of the Admiralty to provide them with money to pay wages and buy materials as I have recorded in another article. Commissioner Willoughby reports in 1652 to the Navy Board:

"The Shipwrights not having been paid do utterly refuse to work notwithstanding the great haste there is and I understanding that there is money in the Town to pay them I do earnestly desire that some course might be taken that they might be speedily paid off for I perceive nothing but that will do and indeed the pinching necessity of their sickly families is very considerable, The fleet is here still: I understand that divers ships are so shattered that they want great repairs and the stores are very empty."

He is stated to have saved a critical and ugly situation by undertaking to pay the men himself in a week's time if the Admiralty did not. A few years later a Commissioner saved a strike by advancing each workman 10/- out of his own pocket.

In 1685 the Commissioner reported that he found the men so unruly that he *"went about with a broad axe in one hand and a plane in the other to make all things smooth."*

The men were not his only trouble.

Early in 1664 the Commissioner reports to the Navy Board.

"I question not but you will hear from several the sad news that hath happened in the King's Yard this night and with all mercy which God hath bestowed on us that the mischief was no greater, Mr. X - Y' s (The Clerk of the Checque) wife being in her turn a debauched and drunked woman such a one as I can believe she hath not left behind her, rose from her husband in the night or rather towards day, goeth downstairs, lighteth a candle, and withal being exceeding drunk sat on a large wicker chair which was set on fire where she was burnt to ashes. The house escaped which had it taken fire would have burnt ships in dock, storehouses and what not. It happened at low water and no water in the Yard considerable to put out fire if it should happen."

As a result of this accident the Navy Board authorised the purchase of the Yard's first fire engine at a cost of £20.

In March 1666 he writes to Pepys:

"It is desired to find some honest Attorney to mind the King's business here concerning embezzled goods, This is a hard task beyond his capacity and would defy such a one were he to be found. Will provide the best to be met but cannot answer for his honesty if he profess himself an Attorney. "

A week later however he reports that he

"has found out an Attorney who is reported to know how to be both honest and knavish. I have no wish to bespatter the governor of such a thing as a Corporation although if the Portsmouth Corporation were as it ought to be the King would not suffer so much."

Another Commissioner's letter to Pepys at this time shows human nature has not changed:

"Large demands for cables by 15 ships lately come into Port. All the cordage in store will signify nothing for such a supply. I am at a loss to satisfy the humours of such unreasonable men but will let them know that though a young Commissioner I am an old sailor."

About this time the Plague broke out in Portsmouth. Sanitation arrangements were very bad and the Commissioner informs Pepys:

"The Plague does not spread. A physician newly arrived in the town declares that the air of Portsmouth is naturally so pernicious to man that the man whose body is liable to be supported in this air is plague free and that no contagious distemper is likely to seize on him."

About the same time he reports to the Navy Board that certain Sawyers discharged for going on strike have beseeched him to enter them as labourers and remarks:

"Sweet is any employment in the King's Dockyard at Portsmouth".

At the end of 1664 the Commissioner informs the Secretary of his requirements:

"Hearing that money is the general want and it is an old saying that a general calamity is the easiest to be borne I want not only money but men and besides men, halters. Money without halters signifies little and halters without money less but one with the other will do well. He that hath both may command the readiest army in the world but let either be wanting and it's a hard matter to command."

He also required:

"Money to stop the brawlings and impatience of these people especially of their wives whose tongues are as foul as the daughters of Billingsgate."

It is not clear whether the "halters" were actual or symbolical.

Methods of dealing with labour were not as today. Thus the Commissioner to Pepys in 1665:

"A mutiny arising in the Yard for want of money seized a good cudgel out of the hands of one of the men and took more pains in the use of it than any business these last twelve months: clapped 3 others in the stocks for some hours and from thence to prison where they s t i l l continue. "

Did I hear any sighs?

Those of you who have served at Chatham may have seen the following extract from a letter from Sir Edward Gregory, Commissioner at Chatham, to the Admiralty and dated 2nd December, 1694.

"The evening of Thursday last having proved wet and obscure, the Bell no sooner summon'd the Workmen to their call, The Masr. Shipwt, planted at the Gate with three or four trusty fellows about him to search every individual Man and Boy that passed. This transaction begot a horrid consternation among the Guilty, and every Rascall soon let drop his Purchase in the Crowd amongst which were found Spikes, Nails, Bolts, Lead, Rope, etc., which have all been punctually return'd into the Stores, but with all the care and caution that could be used, it was impossible to seize any more than four of these Offenders.

The Chief Rogue of wch. number is one Richd. Hind Junior a Shipwt. who has a Year's Pay due at Christmas and in my conscience is an inveterate offender. For we not only seized him overnight with the King's Goods actually about him, but found a quantity of Lead in his Chest the next morning, when I caused all the Receptacles pretend'd for tools to be searched throughout the whole Yard. I have not yet undertaken to punish the Villian, because I would leave him to the utmost severity that Law or Justice can inflict upon him, and I request you to resolve upon making him a Publick Example. The discontent which the discovery of these cursed practices have given me is greater than / can express to you. In a word I am weary of passing my time among such a pack of Villians and shall incessantly pray for a Deliverance. "

Two of the early Commissioners were previously Master Shipwrights and each became Surveyor of the Navy later. Sir John Tippetts was Commissioner from 1667 to 1672 and Sir Anthony Deane from 1673 to 1675.

King Charles came by sea to attend the launch of a ship at Portsmouth in 1675 but was delayed three days by contrary winds and missed the launch. The King however was so pleased with the ship that he knighted Deane and Tippetts the Surveyor on the spot.

In 1686 the King issued to the Commissioners at the Dockyards a patent which outlined their duties and responsibilities. It is a long document covering all possible contingencies then probable and still applies to a large extent.

It decrees that all orders are to pass through the Commissioner. He was to keep the Yard Officers to their duties and he only could give leave. He was to promote a proper system of keeping accounts and prevent embezzlement. No work was to be

undertaken except after proper estimates had been prepared and it had been duly authorised by the Board. He was not to absent himself from the vicinity of the Dockyard without "*License from Ourselves or Our Lord High Admiral or the written consent of the Commissioners*" He was to apply himself to the Board for advice.

The Commissioners as such, and, until 1906, the Superintendents, exercised full control over the Yard Departments in all important matters even of detail, dealing personally with such matters as entries, discharges, punishments, promotions, leave, etc. For about 30 years prior to 1906 they had on their staff at the larger Yards a Civil Technical Assistant, a Senior Chief Constructor, to assist them in technical matters but so far as I could see or ascertain later the C.A. was a 5th Wheel to the coach, exercised little power and had no real authority.

In 1906 the Chief Constructors at the larger Yards became Managers and the Civil Assistant posts disappeared. As Managers they assumed fuller control of their own Departments and the Superintendents lost to that extent the control of details of management they had previously exercised.