The Expansion of
British Naval Hydrographic Administration,
1808-1829

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Abstract

The period from 1808 to 1829, largely neglected by those historians who have looked at the Hydrographic Office, was the crucial formative period for expansion that laid the solid foundations which later Hydrographers could then exploit. The context, achievements and failures of the Admiralty’s hydrographic function, including surveying, chart production, supply, sales and its contribution to the Navy and the scientific world, as an all encompassing beast has been overlooked; the Admiralty placed the responsibility for those tasks on the shoulders of its Hydrographer. Subsequently he determined the success or failure of the office, using his initiative to expand and develop opportunities benefiting the Admiralty, as well as managing a valuable resource of geographical intelligence, fostering links with scientists and the international hydrographic community. The Hydrographer also found himself creating his own policies, serving as Secretary to the Board of Longitude, being a consultant on navigational matters, taking responsibility for the acquisition, supply and maintenance of chronometers for the Navy, as well as being a focal point for issues concerning pay, promotion and manning for surveying specialists.

The period from 1808 to 1829 saw many changes, which gave rise to numerous opportunities for expansion. The Admiralty Board and William, Duke of Clarence (as the last Lord High Admiral), both had a direct influence in the way the office expanded, which saw innovation and experimental work become part of the Hydrographer’s routine, especially after the Peace of 1815. But expansion required funding and at a time when internal economy appeared to the be the main objective within the Admiralty, Captain Thomas Hurd managed not only to establish a 100% increase in surveying capacity but laid the foundation for a distinct specialist and professional core of survey officers. His successor, Captain William Parry, despite his absences, overhauled working practices in the office, set standards for surveyors to follow and continued to expand the number of survey ships in commission. Subsequently Captain Francis Beaufort was left the most highly efficient hydrographic office since its foundation in 1795.

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1 The use of the term Hydrographer with a capital letter signifies the man who served as Hydrographer to the Admiralty, as opposed to all those other men involved in hydrography.
Acknowledgements

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<td>BL</td>
<td>British Library</td>
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<td>CTH</td>
<td>Corporation of Trinity House</td>
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<td>GL</td>
<td>Guildhall Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>HEIC</td>
<td>Honourable East India Company</td>
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<td>NMM</td>
<td>National Maritime Museum, Greenwich</td>
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<td>RGO</td>
<td>Records of the Royal Greenwich Observatory, Cambridge</td>
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<tr>
<td>TNA</td>
<td>The National Archives [of England and Wales, formerly the Public Record Office, Kew]</td>
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<td>UKHO</td>
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*GM* *Gentlemen’s Magazine*

*LB* Hydrographic Office ‘Out’ Letter Book

*MB* Hydrographic Office Minute Book

*MM* *The Mariner’s Mirror*


*OED* *Oxford English Dictionary*

*DE* Double Elephant paper size used for describing charts

*MLWS* Mean Low Water Springs

*LAT* Lowest Astronomical Tide