

The Expansion of  
British Naval Hydrographic Administration,  
1808-1829

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June 2010

Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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 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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<sup>1</sup> 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

Undertaking a PhD is exactly that, finding the motivation and inspiration to complete is another matter, but two individuals have inspired me to complete this thesis. Firstly, my late grandfather who served for nearly 30 years in the Royal Navy, saw service in two world wars and had a profound effect on his family, although by spending so much time at sea unfortunately saw little of his influence. Secondly, Admiral Steve Ritchie who devoted all of his adult life to hydrography, who at the age of 93 is still looking for answers to many questions in his field of study. This work was carried out with support from the Centre for Maritime Historical Studies in the History Department of the University of Exeter under Dr Maria Fusaro, to whom I am sincerely grateful. A bigger debt naturally goes to my supervisor Associate Professor Mike Duffy, whose vast experience of maritime and naval history opened up many avenues of inquiry and his considered wisdom steered me away from many dangers. Similarly Professor Nicholas Rodger, Dr Andrew Cook, Lt-Cdr Andrew David R.N., John Day, Professor Andrew Lambert, Dr Roger Morriss, Dr Richard Oliver, James Skeggs and Commander Bob Wilson R.N. gave me continual support and helpful advice which will always be remembered and appreciated. My biggest debt of gratitude goes to my family for their continued support throughout the three years of this study.

There are many archivists and librarians who have helped me in one way or another to a greater or lesser degree who are all too numerous to list. However, Jenny Wraight, the Admiralty Librarian, Gillian Hutchison and Brian Thynne both of the National Maritime Museum (Greenwich), Dr Edward Harris of the Bermuda Maritime Museum, Mary Robertson of the Huntingdon Library and Janet Bloom of the William L. Clements Library (Michigan), provided more assistance than I should have asked for and answered many questions relating to the collections in their care. Other institutions I wish to thank are the Map Library of the British Library, the National Archives (Kew) and well as the archive, conservation and research staff at the United Kingdom Hydrographic Office.

## Contents

Abstract	2
Acknowledgements	3
List of tables	8
List of illustrations	9
List of abbreviations	10
Introduction	13
Survey of the existing literature on the subject	14
Primary sources available for researching this period	18
Chapter 1. Governance	23
The First Lord of the Admiralty	24
The First Secretary to the Admiralty	27
The Second Secretary to the Admiralty	32
William, Duke of Clarence, Lord High Admiral	35
Other Admiralty Board members	42
Accounting	46
Conclusion	52
Chapter 2. Managing civilians and surveyors	54
Head of the Hydrographic Office	55
Deputising for Hydrographer	57
Development of the ‘hydrographic’ specialism	62
Experience of officers	67
Manning	70
Officers	72
Masters	74
Lower ranks	80
Civilian management	84
Pay	86
Promotion	89
Conclusion	92
Chapter 3. Data acquisition	95
Data accumulation	95
Data types	97
Planning	103
Reports on the coverage of charts and surveys	107
Scheming and instructions	111
Ships	114
Survey data acquisition	118
Local governance and accountability	120
Acquisition of data by purchase and gift	122
Domestic collaboration	128
Ordnance Survey	130
Data receipt and archiving	135
Conclusion	140

Chapter 4. Science and Technology	143
Scientific officers	145
Hydrography, the scientific world and the Royal Society	150
Experimentation, development and technology	156
Instruments	162
Natural History	165
Astronomy	170
Magnetism	177
Oceanography and meteorology	182
Anthropology	185
Charts	187
Conclusion	189
Chapter 5. International relations	192
France	195
Denmark	202
Spain	206
Portugal	209
Italy	210
Russia	212
Sweden	215
Netherlands	216
Other European nations	217
North America	218
South America	220
Lord High Admiral	222
Foreign and Colonial Offices	224
Conclusion	226
Chapter 6. Publications	228
Planning	230
Quality	233
Chart compilation and reproduction	236
Engraving	242
Paper	245
Copper plate and lithographic printing	249
Mounting and binding	258
Sailing directions	560
Translations	267
Notices to mariners	269
Conclusion	273
Chapter 7. Supply to the Fleet	275
Charts	275
The monthly and quarterly ‘returns’ of charts	285
Secret charts	290
Portsmouth: a case study	291
Instruments	295
Chronometers	300
Chronometer supply to Plymouth and Portsmouth: a case study	308

Stationery, sailing directions and books	310
Notices to mariners and chart corrections	312
Transportation	318
Conclusion	320
Chapter 8. Sales	322
Copyright	323
The road to commercialism	326
Chart agents	331
Changing the existing system	338
Advertising, newspapers and the catalogue of charts	343
Conclusion	350
Conclusion	354
Appendix 1 - Persons employed in the Hydrographic Office, 1808-1829	366
Appendix 2 - First Lords and Secretaries of the Admiralty Board, 1808-29	368
Appendix 3 - Minute for the regulation of the Hydrographic Office, 1825	369
Appendix 4 - Identification of the origin of a sample of key ideas relating to the governance of the Hydrographic Office, 1808-29	371
Appendix 5 - Minute for the regulation of the Hydrographic Office, 1819	372
Appendix 6 - Estimate and actual expenditure within the Hydrographic Office, 1811-29	374
Appendix 7 - Chart Committee's survey of commercial charting, 1807	375
Appendix 8 - Manning figures for surveying vessels, 1825-8	411
Appendix 9 - Surveying officers promoted to commander and captain, 1777-1824	413
Appendix 10 - Non-surveyor officers promoted to commander and captain, 1778-1826	415
Appendix 11 - Geographical arrangement of Hydrographic data in reports, 1802-26	416
Appendix 12 - Scientific instruments taken on Parry's 1821-3 voyage in search of a north-west passage	417
Appendix 13 - Chart sizes and dimensions	418
Appendix 14 - Lithographed charts published by the Hydrographic Office, 1808-29	419
Appendix 15 - Sailing Directions published, bought in, or issued by the Hydrographic Office, 1808-29	420
Appendix 16 - Multiple copies of charts ( <i>i.e.</i> more than five) held in the Hydrographic Office, <i>c.</i> 1802	424
Appendix 17 - Number of charts published, 1821-9	426
Appendix 18 - The designations of chart boxes in circulation, 1808-28	427
Appendix 19 - Sheringham's comparative costs of preparing chart boxes, <i>c.</i> 1828	428
Appendix 20 - Instruments supplied to hydrographic surveyors, 1716-1821	429
Appendix 21 - Instruments supplied by the Hydrographic Office to survey vessels, 1818-29	431
Appendix 22 - List of instruments examined by Captain Parry on return from Thomas Jones, 1828	432
Appendix 23 - Stationery supplied to survey vessels, 1824-9	436

Appendix 24 - Notices to mariners published in the <i>London Gazette</i> , 1808-29	437
Appendix 25 - Table of notices to mariners issued by the Admiralty or Hydrographic Office, 1808-29	439
Appendix 26 - R.B. Bate's suggested circular advertising his sole agency, 1829	440
Appendix 27 - Memorandum on the sale of Admiralty charts by John Wilson Croker Esquire, Admiralty Office, 30 June 1821	441
Bibliography - Manuscript sources	442
Bibliography - Primary printed sources	457
Bibliography - Secondary printed sources	466
Bibliography - Unpublished dissertations	492
Bibliography - Selected websites	493

## List of Tables

2.1	Period of absences and attendances of Captain Parry, 1823-9	62
3.1	Sample of Tonnage, wages paid and number of men connected with seven surveying voyages in 1829	116
6.1	Costs of engraving different size charts, 1828-9	245
6.2	Prices of mounting individual charts, 14 November 1828	259
6.3	Cost of mounting charts by Mr Brown, 1824-8	260



## List of Illustrations

1.1	The Admiralty Boardroom in the early nineteenth century	24
1.2	John Wilson Croker	28
1.3	The Duke of Clarence, Lord High Admiral	37
1.4	The proposed layout of moorings at Chatham	39
1.5	Sir George Cockburn	43
1.6	A design of Royal initials	46
2.1	Captain Thomas Hurd	56
2.2	Captain William Edward Parry	56
2.3	An extract from an Admiralty order of 1819	69
3.1	Dedication to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on a privately published chart	96
3.2	Title page of the remark book of the <i>Port Royal</i> for 1817-18	98
3.3	Admiralty order of 1812 concerning the return of remark books	102
3.4	Map of the World showing the principal British hydrographic surveys to 1829	106
3.5	Printed <i>Directions for ships navigating the Needle Channel</i> , May 1825	129
3.6	An example of the receipting of surveys and the hand stamp, 1819	137
4.1	Diagrams illustrative of the theory of tides by Captain Martin White R.N.	148
4.2	Plan of the port and ruins of Apollonia by Captain F.W. Beechey RN	151
4.3	Massey's Sounding Machine, c.1810	160
4.4	Burt's 'Nipper'	160
4.5	A tin of veal taken by Parry to the Arctic in 1824	161
4.6	Commader Martin White's drawing of a hygrometer, 1812	164
4.7	The title page of Commader Martin White's Remark Book of 1817	166
4.8	<i>Asterophyton Rackii</i>	168
4.9	Sea Leopards on the Island of Deception by Lieutenant Kendall, 1829	170
4.10	Flinders' diagram showing the magnetism in ships	179
4.11	Two Fuegian natives recoded by Captain Pringle Stokes R.N.	185
5.1	Title page of Copeland's <i>Practice of nautical surveying</i> , 1823	199
5.2	Poul Löwenörn (1751-1826) the Danish Hydrographer	204
5.3	A Hydrographic Office chart of the coast of Portugal	210
5.4	An extract from the Hydrographic Office chart of Corfu	212
5.5	Lieutenant Urey Lisiansky and Admiral Adam John de Krusenstern	214
5.6	The exiled Spanish Hydrographer, Felipe Bauzá	222
6.1	Captain White's chart of Dartmouth Harbour published in 1828	233
6.2	A section of Hurd's survey of Bermuda, 1797	240
6.3	Hurd's chart of Bermuda, 1828	241
6.4	A sheet of Whatman paper, 1827	246
6.5	A lithographic draughtsman's desk	252
6.6	An extract from a chart printed on the Admiralty's lithographic press, 1820	252
6.7	The title from Hewett's chart of Leman and Ower, 1826	254
6.8	A notice to mariners issued through the Admiralty circular system, 1814	270
6.9	A notice to mariners issued by Hurd in 1822	271
6.10	A note pasted on to an Admiralty chart, 1829	272
7.1	An order concerning the supply of sets of charts, 1809	278

7.2	A contents page of an atlas of charts supplied by the Hydrographic Office	282
7.3	The title page of an atlas of charts covering the English Channel, 1811	288
7.4	The form for recording the numbers of chart boxes in store and on issue	291
7.5	The movement of Anthony De Mayne's chronometer	307
7.6	A Trinity House notice, 1816	313
7.7	An Admiralty order based upon the observations of George Thomas, 1813	314
7.8	A block or section of a chart issued by Parry	315
7.9	Two notices to mariners issued by Horsburgh in 1825	316
8.1	A notice warning the copyright pirates, 1817	325
8.2	Examples of printed and hand pricing on Admiralty charts	329
8.3	Bywater and Company's advert in the <i>Liverpool Mercury</i> , 1823	332
8.4	The title page of a <i>Catalogue of charts . . .</i> annotated by Becher, 1827	336
8.5	The extract from the a pre-1825 catalogue	344
8.6	The Walker's advert in the <i>Liverpool Mercury</i> of Friday 10 January 1823	347
8.7	An advert showing the latest publications offered for sale, 1824	347
8.8	An advert in Bowditch's <i>The new American practical navigator</i> , 1821	348
8.9	A plan of the Admiralty, 1859	352
9.1	Cape Hurd on the east side of Lake Huron	358

## List of Figures

1.1	Estimate and actual expenditure within the Hydrographic Office, 1811-29	50
2.1	Hierarchy of Hydrographic Office Staff, 1808-23	54
2.2	Hierarchy of Hydrographic Office Staff, 1823-9	55
2.3	An analysis of the subject of Hydrographer's out-letters, 1815-29	57
2.4	Occurrence of subjects in Becher's journal, 30 March-1 November 1827	61
2.5	The ratio of commands of survey vessels, 1795-1829	79
2.6	Ratio of ton of surveying ship to men needed on survey vessels, 1825-35	83
2.7	Average number of years before promotion from lieutenant to commander	91
2.8	Average number of years before promotion from commander to captain	92
2.9	Average number of years from promotion from lieutenant, commander to captain	92
3.1	Chart showing the number of remark books received, 1813-29	103
3.2	Acquisition of Royal Navy hydrographic data	142
5.1	The occurrences of international matters in the Admiralty Digests, 1808-29	195
6.1	Costs of engraving, 1818-22, 1825-7	243
7.1	Number of incoming transactions of chart boxes at Portsmouth, 1809-29	292
7.2	Total number of chart boxes in store at Portsmouth, 1809-29	292
7.3	The number of chart boxes processed and in store at Portsmouth based on the end of quarter figures, 1809-29	293
7.4	The number of chart boxes issued from Portsmouth, 1809-29	294
7.5	The number of chart boxes issued particular ranks from Portsmouth, 1809-29	295
7.6	The number of chronometers issued by the Admiralty, 1816-29	304
8.1	The costs of printing the chart catalogue and addenda, 1821-9	345
8.2	Revenue from chart sales, 1823-8	349

## Abbreviations

AL	Admiralty Library, Portsmouth
BL	British Library
CTH	Corporation of Trinity House
GL	Guildhall Library
HEIC	Honourable East India Company
NMM	National Maritime Museum, Greenwich
RGO	Records of the Royal Greenwich Observatory, Cambridge
TNA	The National Archives [of England and Wales, formerly the Public Record Office, Kew]
UKHO	Hydrographic Office, Taunton
<i>GM</i>	<i>Gentlemen's Magazine</i>
LB	Hydrographic Office 'Out' Letter Book
MB	Hydrographic Office Minute Book
<i>MM</i>	<i>The Mariner's Mirror</i>
<i>ODNB</i>	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i> Oxford University Press; online edn, <a href="http://www.oxforddnb.com">http://www.oxforddnb.com</a>
<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
DE	Double Elephant paper size used for describing charts
MLWS	Mean Low Water Springs
LAT	Lowest Astronomical Tide