

NELSON AND THE CITY

Read by David Wootton 13 February 2006

I approach this subject with some diffidence, in part because it is something about which we all think we know and we all know something different. We have all attended freedom ceremonies in the Chamberlain's Court and heard the excellent Murray Craig draw the attention of the then youngest freeman to the freedom certificates on the wall granted to Nelson and Hardy and heard Murray recount the falling out between Nelson and the City born out of Nelson's feeling that he and his achievements were under-recognised by figures of influence within the Corporation. And then we believe the Nelson was a Draper, and then there was the funeral.

All of this is essentially true, but looks somewhat different in context and in detail, and there are some things that we do not know. I would like to acknowledge at the outset the help in my preparing this paper of Murray Craig himself, of Elizabeth Scudder of the London Metropolitan Archive, of Dr Peter Ross and John Fisher at the Guildhall Library and Penelope Fussell, archivist to the Drapers' Company.

The first point to recognise, in our own age of instant and concentrated gratification, is the matter of timescale. News of Trafalgar, for example, took 16 days to reach London. Nelson was born, in Norfolk, in 1758, the son of a country parson. He went to sea age 14, in 1771, as a midshipman, under the guidance of an uncle who was in the navy. He worked his way up the ranks and emerged in the early 1790s as a captain in the first minor skirmishes against the Revolutionary French forces. It was in one such skirmish, at Calvi in Corsica, in July 1794 that a cannon ball from the

enemy threw up stones that hit Nelson's right eye, in which he would never regain full vision.

There are four naval battles in which Nelson played a significant part: Cape St. Vincent, the Nile, Copenhagen and Trafalgar, the first against the Spanish, the second against the French, the third against the Danes and the fourth against both French and Spanish. The battle of Cape St. Vincent took place 209 years ago tomorrow, 14 February, and the Nile 18 months later, on 1 August 1798. Copenhagen followed almost 3 years later, on 2 April 1801 and, of course, Trafalgar 4½ years after that, on 21 October 1805. Although I say that there were four battles in which Nelson played a significant role, only 3 figure on the Nelson monument in the Great hall at Guildhall, perhaps because in the first, Cape St. Vincent, as a commodore but just one of 15 captains, he was not the officer commanding, which he was, in name or effect, in the other three. Incidentally, I think that the monument in Guildhall is unusual in that it is to a particular individual but does not include a statue or prominent bust of that individual – only Nelson's head is depicted on a portrait medallion held in the hand of a mournful Britannia - an artistic comment, rather than a historical or political one, but you never know....especially as the central panel depiction of Trafalgar is flanked by two ordinary seamen, an early example of inclusiveness.

In the intervals when he was on land, Nelson married Frances Nisbet in 1787 and in 1799 found himself on land in Naples where, of course, he met Emma, Lady Hamilton, a personage of apparently slightly dubious past, and in 1801 Nelson separated from his wife and moved with Sir William Hamilton, and Emma, to London, where they lived together as a threesome until Sir William's death in 1803.

Emma died destitute in 1815. In a codicil to his Will made on the morning of Trafalgar, now in the Guildhall Library, he wrote: "I leave Emma Lady Hamilton a Legacy to my King and Country, that they will give her an ample provision to maintain her rank in life. I also leave to the beneficence of my country my adopted daughter, Horatia Nelson Thomson; and I desire in future she will use the name of Nelson only. these are the only favours I ask of my King and Country at this moment when I am going to fight their battle". These wishes were unfulfilled. Not for Emma or Horatia, nor indeed Nelson himself, the material manifestations of a grateful nation of the like accorded to John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, in the form of Blenheim Palace or to Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, in the form of Apsley House and its magnificent collections of plate. Perhaps the historical lesson is that, in order to receive material prizes, the hero has to remain alive, although to be fair, after Trafalgar Parliament did vote money to Nelson's brother for the purchase of an estate.

But I digress from my narrative of events. In recognition of his role in the defeat of a numerically superior Spanish Fleet by a squadron of Royal Navy ships under the command of Admiral Sir John Jervis at Cape St. Vincent, Nelson was promoted to Rear Admiral of the Blue, knighted and awarded a pension of £1,000. On 10th March 1797, just over 3 weeks after the battle, the Court of Common Council resolved to award Nelson and others involved in the action, the Honorary Freedom of the City, together with a gold box, value a hundred guineas, and he was duly presented with these at a ceremony in the Chamberlain's Court at Guildhall on 28th November 1797, when the address on behalf of the Lord Mayor was given by the Chamberlain John Wilkes. A duplicate of the illuminated resolution presented to Nelson on this occasion is held amongst the Corporation's archives.

The Nile was a similar-sized affair but much more significant militarily because it resulted in the destruction of the transports carrying Napoleon's invasion force intended to seize control of Egypt and threaten Britain's position in India. A week after the victory, Nelson, obviously flattered by the City's previous attention, wrote to the Lord Mayor presenting the sword surrendered by the French Admiral who had commanded the French forces in the battle. This sword is now in the custody of the Museum of London. Nelson's letter was read at the meeting of the Court of Common Council on 16th October 1798, which passed a resolution of thanks to Nelson for his part in the battle and agreed to present him with a sword of honour. This second honour by Common Council is sometimes referred to as giving him the Freedom twice, which the Corporation obviously could not do in fact. A letter of 3rd May 1799 from Nelson concerning the inscription to be engraved on the sword was sent to the Lord Mayor from his flagship HMS Vanguard. Nelson was also given elsewhere the title Baron Nelson, and promoted to Rear Admiral of the Red, and an increased pension.

Two further things happened after the Battle of the Nile. The first was that the Committee of Lloyds raised the substantial sum of £38,000 to help the wounded and the bereaved, and also donated to Nelson a silver dinner service "as a small token of their gratitude". Today that token has returned to Lloyds, and is part of the Lloyds/Nelson collection, a unique collection of silver and memorabilia associated with him.

The sum raised after the Nile was one of the Patriotic Funds raised by Lloyds from as early as 1794 to provide for the wounded and dependants of those killed in major battles, a new Lloyd's Committee being set up after each successive battle. Nelson benefited directly from these funds and £500 from the Nile Patriotic Fund was

awarded to him to purchase this service of silver plate. The chairman of the Nile Patriotic Fund, and of a similar patriotic fund established after the Battle of Copenhagen was John Julius Angerstein, chairman of Lloyd's, whose name has been applied in more recent times to one of the Funds introducing corporate capital into the Lloyds market.

The second post-Nile event involves the Drapers Company. At a meeting of the Court of Assistants on 1st November 1798, it was resolved "that the Freedom of the Company be presented to Rear Admiral Lord Nelson as a mark of the high sense which this company entertains of his Meritorious services, particularly on the 1st, 2nd and 3rd of August last". It was ordered that the Master and Wardens should "prepare such freedom and have the same presented in such a way as they think fit". A letter was immediately despatched to Nelson requesting his acceptance of the franchise which would have been performed personally "but as the Command which your Lordship holds prevents their doing so in the mode they would have thought most respectful if circumstances had permitted it". The Admiral's permission was requested "to enrol your name amongst the Freemen of the very ancient guild of Drapers of London".

Nelson replied, from Sicily on 31st January 1799, which reply reached the Company on 18th April: "I have this day received your letter conveying to me the great honour conferred upon me by the worshipful company of Drapers of London by presenting me with the freedom of their Company. I beg you will, Sir, have the goodness to convey to the Worshipful Company how much I feel honoured by their kind notice of my services, and assure them that it shall be the study of my life to preserve their good opinion. Allow me also to thank you for the very flattering manner you have executed the Orders of the Company".

Nelson was never able to go to Drapers' Hall himself to take up his Freedom and sadly the original of Nelson's letter has not survived.

Why the Drapers, and not another company? It seems, from the Drapers' archives, that they had a tradition of honouring naval, rather than military, heroes, so that it was in their line, and other leading naval figures of the time, including Hardy and Collingwood, were also granted the Freedom and this possibly reflects the feeling that it was victories at sea which had greater importance to Britain than those on land.

Nelson was at the height of his popularity with the City at this time, with the sculptor, Mrs Anne Damer, executing a bust of Nelson in 1799 on behalf of the Corporation, which now forms part of the Guildhall Art Gallery collection, as does the portrait of Nelson by Sir William Beechey, which was presented to the Corporation by Alderman John Boydell in 1801. He appeared in the cavalcade at the Lord Mayor's Show of 1800. The crowd took the horses from the carriage and pulled him to Guildhall "amid repeated huzzas. All the way he passed along Cheapside he was greeted by the ladies from the windows with their handkerchiefs, and the loudest acclamation".

Following the Battle of Copenhagen on 2nd April 1801, being the battle in which Nelson turned a telescopic blind eye to the signal of his commanding officer Admiral Sir Hyde Parker, the Lloyds Copenhagen Committee awarded Nelson £500 to purchase silver plate. John Julius Angerstein was again the Chairman. The Court of Common Council voted a further £500 towards the relief of the wounded and for the

windows of those killed in the battle, but Nelson felt snubbed by the City's failure to make any acknowledgement of his part in the battle, despite being rewarded elsewhere by the title 1st Viscount Nelson.

The City marked shares down on news of the victory and Common Council did not pass a vote of thanks. The House of Commons did but in so doing gave a clue as to the problem. One MP said, "this was perhaps the only war in which this country had been engaged where the first information of it by the House was on a motion for a Vote of Thanks, in consequence of a brilliant and decisive victory, without any previous communication whatever upon the subject". The Government had not kept parliament or the newspapers informed of its plans and the press had a field day in criticising what was technically an armistice not a surrender by the enemy. The real problem was that the target in Copenhagen was not the French, nor Russia, the prime mover in the Armed Neutrality, but Denmark, a traditionally friendly power, and at a time when the accession of a new Tsar turned Russia into a friendly power. In other words, the City thought, what are we doing attacking Denmark, and the Government itself rather backed away.

Three months later Nelson wrote to a friend complaining that, if the victory was real, those who fought for and won it were from custom entitled to the thanks of the City of London. He therefore looked forward with confidence to a sword from the City of London and their thanks and the freedom in a gold box, not for himself (he already had them) but for his next in command. He continued:

"I remember, a few years back, on my noticing to a Lord Mayor, that if the City continued its generosity we should ruin them by their gifts, his Lordship put his hand

on my shoulder and said – aye the Lord Mayor of London said – do you find Victories and we will find rewards. I have since that time found two complete Victories. I have kept my word, and shall I have the power of saying that the City of London, which exists by Victories at Sea, has not kept its promise."

Later in 1801 the City passed a Vote of Thanks to the army and navy for their campaigns in Egypt. Nelson fired off a letter to the Lord Mayor. "From my own experience", he writes, "I have never seen that the smallest services rendered by either navy or army to the country have missed being always noticed by the great City of London, with one exception...". He meant Copenhagen. Not for himself he says he is writing but for those who fought with him. It might be thought unwise and naive to write to the Lord Mayor in such terms. The only reply he received was brief, from Sir John Eamer, Lord Mayor: "I have only to assure your Lordship that I shall give the subject a proper and early consideration."

Nelson never wavered in his attitude to the City about Copenhagen. The City's conduct he wrote that he found incomprehensible. Noting a newspaper report in June 1802 that the City was to vote him thanks for a different command, he wrote to the Lord Mayor asking him to use his influence that no vote of approval be given to him for any service since 2nd April.

In September 1802 he declined an invitation to dine with the Lord Mayor, issued perhaps as an attempt to climb on the Nelson bandwagon by then sweeping the country. "Whenever, my dear Sir John", he writes, "you cease to be Chief Magistrate of the City of London, name your day, and I will dine with you with satisfaction but never till the City of London think justly of the merits of my brave Companions of

the 2nd April can I, their Commander, receive any attention from the City of London", and took the same line with the Lord Mayor elect two months later. Although the City in fact continued to hold Nelson of the same high esteem as the rest of the country, its relationship with the Admiral never fully recovered from the slight he felt over Copenhagen. In March 1804, Common Council passed a resolution of thanks to Nelson for his part in the blockade of Toulon which prevented the French fleet from taking to sea and the possibility of invasion (for which he was promoted to vice-Admiral of the White), yet Nelson rejected this in a letter of 1st August on the grounds that two of his Rear-Admirals, who had also participated in the action, had been omitted. Despite the Corporation correcting this oversight, Nelson again saw fit to complain of further perceived omissions in a letter to the Lord Mayor of December of that year, 1804.

Nelson's funeral, on 9th January 1806, was one of the last full heraldic funerals staged in Britain. The Master and Wardens of the Drapers Company were invited by a Special Court of Aldermen held on Christmas Eve 1805 to attend in their barge the day before the funeral to accompany the Lord Mayor in the flotilla which escorted Nelson's body from Greenwich to Whitehall. The minute of the Court of Aldermen says that "many of the members of this Court and fifteen of the senior liverymen being as many as the barges could conveniently accommodate met at Drapers Hall in mourning at 8 o'clock in the morning and proceeded to the Tower, where they embarked on board the barge, proceeded to Greenwich and then returned with the procession to Whitehall where the corpse was landed and carried to the Admiralty. The dinner at the Hall after the expedition cost £28 and 5 shillings.

The following day the funeral procession formed up in Hyde Park and escorted the body from the Admiralty to St Paul's, being joined by the Lord Mayor, Aldermen,

Sheriffs and Common Councilmen as it entered the City at Temple Bar. The doors of St Paul's were opened at 7 o'clock in the morning of that day but the important guests in the procession did not arrive until 2.00, the coffin at 4.00 and the funeral itself did not finish until 6 o'clock in the evening. The culmination of the funeral was the lowering of Nelson's body into the crypt and below the magnificent sarcophagus originally made for Cardinal Wolsey in the 1520's and which had lain empty since, Wolsey himself being buried in Leicester Abbey.

Four points about the funeral. The first is capacity. The capacity of St Paul's that day was reported to be between 10,000 and 13,000, something which modern regulations would not permit, numbers now being limited to less than 3,000 even for events such as the Golden Jubilee of the present Queen. What about the facilities which modern crowds require?

The second is foresight: the ornate funeral car, designed to look like the Victory, someone realised as originally built was too tall to pass under Temple Bar, so the canopy was lowered by two feet a few days before the funeral.

The third is music: organised by the Cathedral organist, Thomas Attwood - Mozart's only English pupil, and whose own "Grand Dirge" was the only piece of original music played, with other music by Handel, Haydn, Purcell and Arne.

The fourth is positioning: As one would expect, the Lord Mayor, Sheriffs, City Officials, Aldermen and senior members of the Livery Companies obtained some of

the more important positions in the processions and occupied the prime seats under the dome in the cathedral, and therefore close to the coffin, during the funeral service.

In fact there was correspondence between the Lord Mayor, the Garter King of Arms and the Earl Marshal as to the position of the Lord Mayor in the procession, a battle you might say between precedence and precedent. The College of Arms, who were organising the funeral, resorted to precedent, which apparently decreed that, when the Monarch was present in a funeral procession in the City, then the Lord Mayor should be placed next to the King or Queen, bearing the City Sword. However, if the monarch was not present, as she had not been at the funeral of Sir Phillip Sidney in 1586, the precedent deployed, then the Lord Mayor had to go last of all, for the sake of preserving order. Common Council was horrified at this slight to the Lord Mayor and to the City and decided that such a position would be an insult to the Mayor and his office of Chief Magistrate. The Lord Mayor that year was Sir James Shaw, Alderman for the ward of Portsoken. The correspondence between the three officials in the days immediately before the funeral might be described as firm and culminated in the College of Arms backing down, as we would now describe it, and agreeing that the funeral procession should be made up as if the King had been present and on the day at Temple Bar the Lord Mayor inserted himself next to the Prince of Wales and before the Herald of Arms.

In the following year, 1806, the City honoured Nelson with a monument within Guildhall itself, to which I referred earlier, by the relatively unknown sculptor James Smith. His design was selected in competition in May 1806 – it is no doubt a coincidence that Smith's bid was the cheapest - but it was not until November 1810 that the monument was finally unveiled. "The Lord Mayor, Aldermen and Common Council of the City of London", the inscription says, in a text by the playwright

Sheridan, "have caused this monument to be erected, not in the presumptuous hope of aiding the departed hero's glory, but to manifest their estimation of the man and the admiration of his deeds. This testimony of their gratitude they trust will remain as long as their own renowned City shall exist. The period of Nelson's fame can only be the end of time".

There is a monument to Nelson in St Paul's, by John Flaxman, commissioned at a cost of £6,500 and whose design shows Nelson standing calmly by a coil of rope and an anchor stock, in uniform with all his decorations and with his chief victories listed around the pedestal and Britannia instructing two midshipmen to follow the hero's example.

The Drapers too commissioned a posthumous portrait of Nelson, by the same artist as the 1801 portrait in the Guildhall Art Gallery, Sir William Beechey, for a fee of 200 guineas. This full length picture of Nelson retains its place in Drapers Hall.

The specific events which make up the relationship between Nelson and the City have to be set against the effect Nelson had on the City, which effect there would have been had Nelson had no direct contact at all with anyone in the City. It was no doubt clear to him that the importance of Britain's naval position in the world was a matter of trade. There is no point in having an empire if you can't get to it and no point in buying goods from abroad if you can't get them safely home. Nelson's victories assured Britain of control over the seas and protection of the nation's trade routes, and thus contributed mightily to the fortunes of the City in the ensuing period. That phrase, the ensuing period, meant more than it does in common usage here. There was no significant challenge on the high seas to Britain's naval supremacy

after Trafalgar until the battle of Jutland in 1916, a remarkable fact and it is perhaps that which is the most distinguishing feature of Nelson and the City.

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