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### *Citation for published version (APA):*

Smith, J. W. E. (2016). Mariners Mirror: Topmasts . *Mariner's Mirror*, 37-40. <http://www.maritimehistory.org.uk/>

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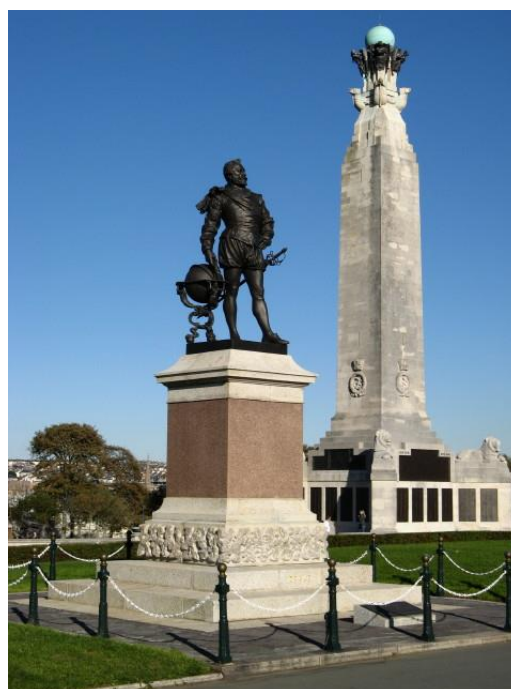
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British Commission for Maritime History,  
'New Researchers in Maritime History Conference' report  
Plymouth University, 15-16<sup>th</sup> April 2016  
By  
James W.E. Smith, Kings College London.  
15<sup>th</sup> May 2016.

Under the auspice of Sir Francis Drake's statue on Plymouth Hoe, on the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> 2016 the British Commission for Maritime History met for its annual 'New researchers conference'. Traditionally the conference is held in the spring of each year and moved around Britain being hosted by a variety of universities and museums. The host this year was Plymouth university's history department led by Dr H Bennett and Dr E Murphy. The University is located in not only one of the true homes of the Royal Navy but the wider UK south-west, with its deeply embedded links to maritime culture and the broader fabric of Britain's Naval heritage. Plymouth is at the core of the UK's maritime identity making it ideally suited to host the conference. Today the university boasts a heritage and link with many of the local Naval training establishments and has a growing, vibrant and



enthusiastic history department which is increasingly focused on offering a true home port to maritime history and Naval research. Plymouth has grown in confidence to promote its proud maritime heritage and the impact this has had on both national and international affairs while highlighting and indulging in playful rivalry with the other south coast Naval base, Portsmouth. Queen Elizabeth's 'sea dog' Sir Francis Drake and the tale of how Drake's drum would beat when England is in need proved the backdrop for this year's conference. A year that marks one hundred years since the battle of Jutland, where ship's companies at the battle are rumoured to have reported hearing Drake's drum beat as they charged across the North Sea to face the Imperial German Navy in the May of 1916.

Dr Bennett opened proceeding's by welcoming attendees to Plymouth and describing the city's unique place in local, national and global maritime events. The Keynote address was delivered by Dr J.D. Davies [<http://www.jddavies.com>] '*Sail away from the safe harbour': Myths, Audiences and Communication in Maritime History*'. The keynote focused on current issues with the discipline of maritime research and some of the techniques and methodologies on

challenging myths with particular emphasis on reaching out and engaging with new audiences. Conference attendees were then shuttled by the University to receive a tour of Devonport Naval



heritage centre which is located in the Naval bases south yard. The heritage centre boasts a vast collection of archives and materials primarily related to Devonport's Naval role that spans back at least four centuries. The centre is entirely volunteer run with

few resources to promote its work and collections, deepening a sporting style rivalry with Portsmouth which contains the National Museum of the Royal Navy. This was further highlighted when plans to preserve HMS Plymouth, a distinguished warship of the 1982 Falklands war, were thwarted in 2014 resulting in the scrapping of the ship. The premature withdrawal of Type 22 frigate HMS Cornwall in 2011, followed by the scrapping of HMS Plymouth removed icons of not just British national identity but predominately that of local pride and heritage.

The second day was arranged into a platform of four themes: Age of Sail, Maritime Technologies, Maritime Cultures and Modern Navies. The opening presentation was by Steve Garnett (Canterbury Christ Church University) '*An "illegal" war: the causes of the Anglo-Algerine War, 1677-1682*'. His research suggests that to understand England's transition from a minor maritime nation to global superpower, we must pursue the domestic and international context of relationships such as that between England and Algiers and uncover the forces and motivations which guided their interactions. Second in this theme was Charlotte Willis (Cranfield University) '*Archaeology of a Naval Burial Ground: A Case Study from Haslar Hospital*'. Archaeology and research into the now closed Naval hospital in Gosport was highlighted by television Channel 4's 2010 special 'Time Team' programme *Nelsons hospital*. Charlotte provided an update on the ongoing project to document the extensive archaeology of the grounds and burials of British sailors before the site is turned over for redevelopment. The findings of the research are expansive. The project is now approaching a decade in length and is challenging our understanding of healthcare during the age of sail. Charlotte specialises in burial archaeology and is currently working on projects dating to the 18th-19th centuries. Thirdly Rikard Drakenlordh (Bath Spa University) '*Diplomacy vs Trade: The Diplomatic Problem of the Free Port Marstrand During the American Revolution 1777*'. Rikard explored the complex diplomatic issues of the period demonstrating just one small area of his PhD research into "British-Swedish Relations in the Era of the American Revolutionary". Concluding the session was Tim Burns (Independent Scholar) '*Mutineers, Ministers and the Media: The Dynamics of the 1797 Mutinies*'. Tim firstly highlighted the significance of the date being 219 years since the beginning of two major mutinies by sailors of the Royal Navy. He then described his use of statistics to enhance his research methodology into public feeling and media reaction to the event during the period.

The second theme was started by Erika Jones (University College London) '*The Baillie Sounder: Following the Telegraph Cable Network Through the Challenger Expedition*'. Her AHRC funded project is filling a vital gap in historical study by focusing on the history of science by discovering how knowledge about the oceans was constructed during the voyage HMS Challenger from 1872-1976. Neil Bennett (University of Wales) '*The Social and Economic Impact of the Introduction of Steam Trawling and Seine net fishing on West and South Wales at the end of the Nineteenth Century and Through the Early Twentieth Century*'. Neil extensively explored trawling and fishing history in West and South Wales and the challenges the fishermen and boat owners faced. Concluding this session was Gareth Jones (Plymouth University) – '*The Royal Navy and the Development of the Nuclear Power*'. Gareth's research is detailing the development of nuclear power for the Royal Navy and how this fits into the wider development of UK-US nuclear technological progress. Gareth is focusing on engineering aspects of this topic, and gaining access for the first time to critical sources and information that are normally shrouded in Naval secrecy and government classified documentation. His research when completed is likely to shake up our understanding of the area but also inspire further study into the history of marine engineering.

The third theme, Derek Janes [Exeter University] presented his paper '*Fine Gottenburgh Teas: The North Sea Trade of Eyemouth c.1750-1780*'. Derek explored trade and smuggling of teas in North Sea trade and how business took place in British ports. Simon Smith (University of Portsmouth) '"*I name this ship*": Pageantry in the Royal Navy and the "*forgotten*" Participants, c.1890-1914'. Simon looked at the ideological foundations and events that took place at events such as the launch of a warship. Simon's PhD research aims to investigate the experience of sailors in the Royal Navy during the radical modernisation it underwent in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The objectives of his research aim to provide a socio-cultural investigation of sailors and their relationship with the navy and imperialism. He is also part of the Port Towns and Urban Cultures research hub. Colin Bargery concluded the session with a lively session '*You Landsmen All Come 'List to Me: How Popular Songs about Steamboats made landlubbers aware of the Sea*'. His paper details the songs that brought to attention the sea and sailors to the public. It included audience participant in a sing-a-long and discussions on sea shanties.

The final theme was led by Louis Halewood [Merton College, Oxford]. Louis holds the John Roberts MC3 [Great War] scholarship. His paper '*A Piece of Gross Impertinence?* Re-evaluating the Naval Battle of Paris' explored some of the lines of investigation he is pursuing and sources he is interrogating as part of his PhD. His research is due to re-examine the Anglo-American Naval partnership during the First World War and the Paris peace conference. His research is expanding our understanding of the co-operation and competition between Britain, France, Italy, and the United States as Naval powers between the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, and the Washington Naval Conference of 1921-22. Concluding the conference James W.E. Smith [Kings College London, Laughton Unit] delivered his paper '*The Admiralty's Final Champion of the Naval Message: Lewin of Greenwich*'. James summarised some aspects of his 2015 MRes thesis '*The End of Admiralty and its Impact on British Defence Policy 1955-1964*' that has led onto PhD study which focuses on the British Admiralty. His research has

filled a vital gap in knowledge by detailing the Naval perspective on all aspects of the final years of the Admiralty including the methodologies and debates that led to its abolishment and the creation of the Ministry of Defence. James argued that *'knowing the end of the story is as important as the beginning and middle. Every researchers study period here exists when the Admiralty was in command and control of the Royal Navy, understanding the Admiralty's abolishment is vital to understanding the Royal Navy'*.

The broad set of papers demonstrated the relative good health that all aspects of the maritime research field is in. The quality and depth of research identifies how the thread of the maritime narrative is richly and deeply embedded with the development of the British Isles and all facets of our lives, past present and future. The range of presenters further showed how research in a not so obvious field encounters the maritime world with regular frequency and opportunities for interdisciplinary development exists to improve the skills of all researchers. The future researchers conference eliminates criticism that future maritime research is in jeopardy, both the age range of presenters and breadth of research shows the field is in competent hands. The ethos of encouraging all researchers to reach out and engage with other fields and audiences to demonstrate how the maritime past has shaped the world we live in was an active topic of discussion. This was aptly reinforced in James's conclusion that the ability to reach out and engage furthered historians understanding and the wider public's ability to understand the world around them. He commented that Naval historians have a tendency of being 'inwards looking' when in reality their work is essential to ensure and enhancing the quality of national debate across a range of issues. In conclusion he remarked: *'Historians have a role in shaping and informing modern policy while facilitating debate, they should not shy away from this responsibility'*. The Naval service itself did not escape criticism; the lack of engagement by the Royal Navy with researchers was leading to *'a dangerous cocktail where it was dependent on a select few and it was abandoning an 'lessons learnt culture' that could potentially ensure it lagged behind other Navys when understanding its past to guide its future'*. He also presented the argument to the conference that Naval and maritime history does not end in 1945 as had become a common place attitude for some. The link between ceasing research and so called 'demise' of the maritime world was a poor excuse to avoid the events of the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century.