# The Richard Bolitho Newsletter

Issue XII

# *Contents*



Douglas Reeman / Alexander Kent
with SS *Great Britain*

# Part One
## *Alexander Kent*

I suppose that the days of fighting sail and independent seamen of the eighteenth/nineteenth century navy have always fascinated me, perhaps even from my childhood, when I walked around Nelson's *Victory* and tried to picture the fury of a sea-battle.

During the last war, in spite of my belonging to an army family, I joined the navy without hesitation. It seemed the right thing to do, as if it was expected of me. I served in the Battle of the Atlantic and in the campaigns in the Mediterranean and Normandy, but through it all I never lost my affection for those far-off days when only the 'wooden walls' stood between England and her enemies.

Ten years after becoming a professional author and novelist, I fell in love with Richard Bolitho and his own life and times. Now, as I research the material of his exploits with my Canadian wife Kim beside me, I feel we can share the memories of those fine, brutal ships, and the men who by choice or enforcement served and died with them.

# Part Two
## *Naval Customs*

Like gun salutes, piping the side as a mark of salute and respect finds its origins in the very

'Honour This Day!' by English marine artist Geoffrey Huband

early days of sail. The term 'pipe' actually refers to the shouted orders preceded by the shrill but not unpleasant whistle on a boatswain's 'call', nicknamed Spithead Nightingale. In the eighteenth/nineteenth century navy, where the stress and strain on sails and the miles of standing and running rigging were under constant threat from sea and wind, to say nothing of the hazards of battle, all orders passed from aft had to be executed without delay. The 'Call' could carry to most parts of the ship, and as many of the seamen were quite likely to be foreign, the language of each pipe was quickly understood. Its use as a mark of respect was born out of the various captains visiting other ships in foul or heavy weather. The visiting captain had to be swayed up from his boat in a 'boatswain's chair', the progress of which was

controlled by the 'Call' for hoisting and lowering to the deck.

It continued to be used for piping the side for visiting captains under all circumstances and remains in use even today.

### *Small Boat Etiquette*

When going ashore in one of the ship's boats the junior officer always enters the boat first, the senior last. This would certainly apply if the captain was using the same craft as his subordinates. It was often said that it was to preserve the clothing of the senior officer as upon coming into harbour, often only rarely, the ship's tall side would be given a fresh coat of tar. A senior officer would allow the others to wipe off most of the paint and tar from the stairs beneath the entry port before he descended. A more charitable explanation is that it was only courtesy to prevent the senior officer having to wait while the rest were coming down the side, and to have the same effect at the other end of the pull to the shore.

### *Manning Ship on Entering Harbour*

As mentioned in previous newsletters, it was customary for men-of-war to discharge their guns when entering a foreign port to show their friendly intentions by emptying all their main armament. This later was accepted as a form of salute, the number of guns fired requiring to be set the rank or status of the recipient. Likewise when a warship sailed into a foreign harbour, all the yards would be manned, the seamen standing on their precarious perches, usually holding hands, to prove that their visit was a peaceful one, that there were no spare sailors left to fire the guns other than in salute.

### *Boarding a King's Ship*

Distinguished visitors and senior officers were always greeted at the starboard side whenever possible. It was so called because of the original name steer-board from where ancient vessels were manoeuvred by a long bladed paddle, and where the captain would take his walk. The opposite side, port or larboard, was the one laid against a jetty or harbour wall to preserve the safety of the steering gear, and was usually cluttered with gangways and brows.

## Part Three
## *Naval Slang*

Much of the old slang has remained firmly placed in our history, while some has been constantly with us, although often misused to suit the changing times.

*Getting a checked shirt at the gangway* meant receiving a flogging. Parting brass rags described the breakup of a lower-deck friendship, as men often worked together with a single length of cloth to clean ship's fittings. To my knowledge it has no

place in daily language now. *Grog* is still used as a name for rum, even though there is no longer a spirit issue except for special occasions. Admiral Vernon introduced the rum ration to replace beer and other forms of alcohol. Vernon usually wore a pair of grogham breeches and was affectionately known as *Old Grog*.

*Fanny Adams*, used today as a coarse dismissal of somebody's intelligence, was born of a much more macabre rumour. It was said that a murdered child of that same name was cut up and distributed amongst the navy's rations, and so was given as the nickname for preserved meat!

*The Devil to Pay* or *Between the Devil and the Deep* originated from a nautical term in regular use. The ship's side had to be kept tight against the sea, and each seam had to be 'paid' with tar. The most difficult seam to pay was the one immediately above the waterline, so was called the Devil by the luckless sailors ordered to do it.

As I have said, many of the original terms like *third-rate*, the classification of a *ship-of-the-line*, have been changed altogether in today's language. But there they still remain.

How many sailors wonder why the Royal Navy is nicknamed *The Andrew*, although the expression is frequently used? Andrew Miller was a very successful officer of the notorious Portsmouth press gangs. It was suggested that as he pressed so many men into the service it should be called Andrew's navy. The name stuck.

Today's contemptuous dismissal of an idler as a *waster* comes too from a natural term, *waister*. In the days of the square-rigger, waisters were the untrained sailors or landsmen without the skills for working high above the deck. They were employed in the 'waist' of the ship.

## Part Four
### *Master Craftsmen*

It has often been said that a King's ship, especially one employed for many months, even years, away from home, produced more 'experts' and self-taught craftsmen than any other brotherhood before or since. Once out of sight of land each ship was entirely self-dependent. Masts, spars, riggings, pulling boats all had to be repaired, even rebuilt from the ship's own resources. The carpenters and shipwrights, as well as the ordinary seamen, had to learn every remedy to every problem as it arose. Jack of all trades was a pretty fair description; master of none was not. In the stories of Richard Bolitho the figureheads of his ships are usually mentioned. Today it is often called folk-art, as if it were of no importance, and yet the work was impressive, and in most cases outlived the ships and men it served.

In the navy's early years the decoration of ships was ornate to the point of grandeur. The carving around the stern was *gingerbread*, hence *gilt on the gingerbread* whenever a captain could afford real gold paint rather than dockyard yellow. The figureheads, often the first or the last thing an enemy saw before the broadsides began to thunder,

could inspire as well as strike terror.

The figureheads expanded from the simple lion style of the seventeenth century to the grander 'group' carvings, although those were discouraged in the times of shortages when the long wars with Revolutionary or Napoleonic France made other, harsher demands on the fleet.

Many of the old craftsmen carried their skills ashore with them as a direct result of this austerity. Today, in many old churches, especially those around seaports, although some men found their inland in search of employment, their work is very evident. Anchors, ships and sea-birds figure prominently in the fine carvings, while some church structures are fashioned from the ships timbers themselves. A remarkable heritage indeed.

## Part Five

### *Honour This Day*

A while ago I was asked to give the Waterloo Lecture in Brussels, an annual event, and I chose as my title for the talk, *Without Trafalgar there would have been no Waterloo*. I have been reminded of this while writing about Richard Bolitho's latest exploits, even though Trafalgar remains at a distance as it did for the nation at the time.

It overshadowed everything, and had the battle been lost, the invasion of Britain would have followed in a matter of weeks, not months. The victory was to enable British soldiers to land and advance in Europe when such hopes had previously seemed like dreams. That same victory was to give us a hundred years of peace, even though it cost us a hero whose memory is still revered by friend and old enemy alike. There were decisive battles fought at sea after Trafalgar, but to many lovers of those days of sail, it was the summit of all which had gone before.

Like most sailors Bolitho never met Nelson, and yet was deeply moved by his loss. A symbol perhaps, the true hero whose charisma was an inspiration to men too often dismissed as cannon-fodder. It would never occur to Bolitho, a man beset by his own family problems and one devoid of conceit, that he too may have these same qualities.

In 1804 Bolitho hoists his flag above the seventy-four gun ship *Hyperion*. He is eager to quit the land although it is less than three months since his return home. Plagued by both his troubled marriage and the eye injury he suffered in his last bloody battle with Contre-amiral Jobert, he sees the old *Hyperion*, a ship he once commanded as a young captain, as a form of escape.

But the ship is full of tormenting memories and lost faces, with little to sustain him until he arrives in Antigua, where he is roused by a flame of love and passion which can only bring damage to his reputation.

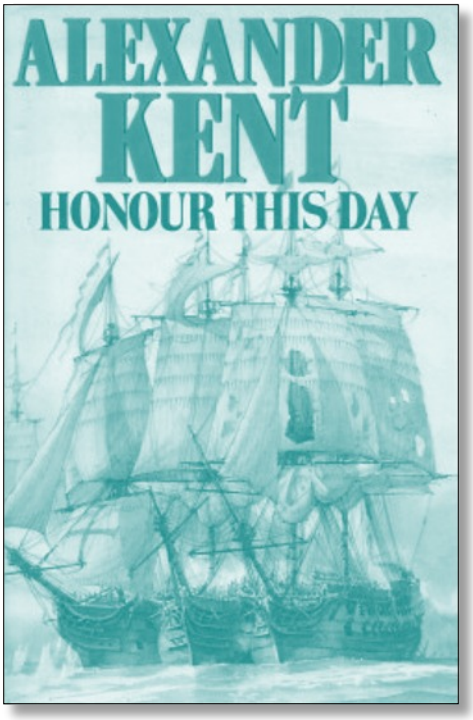
Then in the following year, 1805, one which is to mean so much to England and her hard-pressed fleet, Bolitho sails east for Gibraltar. It is a time all those who follow his flag will remember as

*Hyperion* clears the way for victory.

## Part Six

*Alexander Kent, 'Honour This Day'*

In *Honour This Day* our greatest living writer of historic naval fiction has written his most spellbinding novel to date. Full of colour, action, and the thrill of danger, it is a rousing adventure which will delight Richard Bolitho's many followers around the world.




It is September 1804. England stands alone against France and the fleets of Spain. Vice Admiral Richard Bolitho hoists his flag above the veteran 74-gun ship, *Hyperion*, and sets sail with a new squadron for the Caribbean. Ordered to plan and effect a daring raid on the Spanish Main, Bolitho spares himself nothing. But alongside the thrill and success of battle, a new excitement stirs Bolitho's heart leading him to defy convention and risk his reputation. His future full of uncertainty, he sails for Gibraltar and a rendezvous all who follow his flag will remember.

## Part Seven

*The Richard Bolitho Figurine*

Some of you will recall that in my last *Newsletter* I mentioned the exciting project on which my wife Kim and I have been working for some time, the creation of a Richard Bolitho Figurine. I can scarcely believe that the dream is now almost a reality. After so many discussions and planning sessions the first experimental model was made.

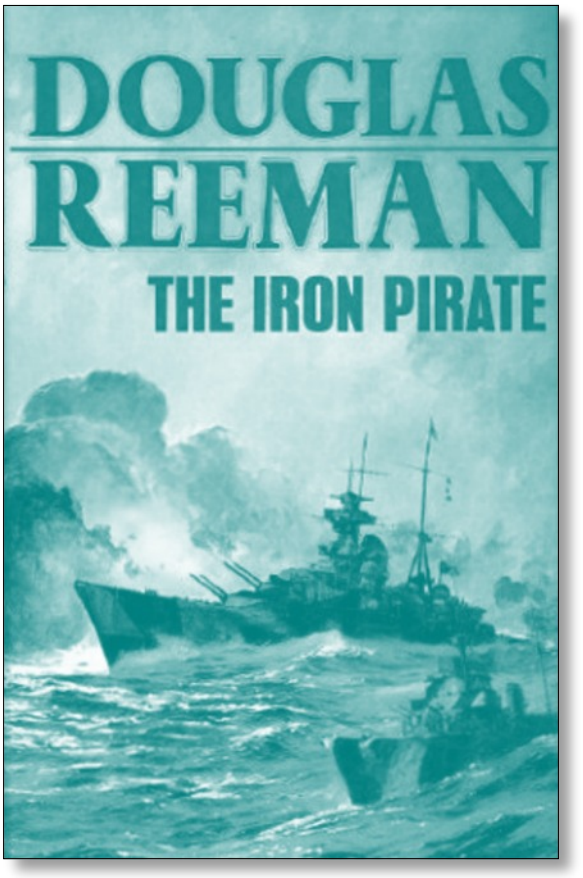
Over the next few months a small collection of figurines will be produced by the Albany Fine China Company in conjunction with Thomas Goode Limited of London.

Each figurine will be one of a numbered edition, bone china, hand crafted and decorated, and authentic in every detail. A remarkable recreation not only of a stirring period but of an individual.

For further details visit the Douglas Reeman website at www.douglasreeman.com.

## Part Eight

### *Douglas Reeman, 'The Iron Pirate'*




Heineman is proud to welcome Douglas Reeman, master of the modern sea story, whose naval adventures have earned him a vast international following. In *The Iron Pirate* he has written one of his most exciting, atmospheric novels, a certain bestseller.

It is the summer of 1944. On every front the war is going badly for Germany. In the Baltic, the navy is on the defensive as the Russians drive the once victorious divisions back into the sea.

One ship, the crack heavy cruiser *Prinz Luitpold*, whose luck and skill have become a legend to friend and enemy alike, is like a symbol. Her captain, Dieter Hechler, loves his ship like his country, but knows that no war can be won on the defensive.

When he is ordered to quit the Baltic and head out into the Western Ocean, he accepts it as an honour, and not as the trap it soon becomes.