Victualling the British Navy, 1793-1815

Roger Knight

‘Englishmen, and more especially seamen, love their bellies above anything else’, wrote the great naval administrator, Samuel Pepys, in the 1660s, ‘and therefore it must always be remembered, in the management of the victualling of the Navy, that to make any abatement from them in the quantity or agreeableness of the victuals, is to discourage and provoke them in the tenderest point, and will soon render them disgusted with the King’s Service than any other hardship that can be put upon them’. The continual financial crisis of the state under Charles II demonstrated how vital and also how fragile naval victualling was as part of an effective presence at sea, leading to fleets being delayed, weakened or forced to return to port before they had accomplished anything. Pepys established the first stuttering start of the combination of the state and private sector in 1665, and typically managed to get himself appointed as Surveyor-General of Victualling (at a £300 a year salary), overseeing Surveyors of Victualling at the Outports; and it is from this start that the eighteenth-century British victualling system developed.

One hundred and thirty years later, it was a different story. The ability to supply provisions faster and more efficiently than hostile powers was critical to British naval success in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. The two most eminent authorities on the eighteenth-century British navy have agreed on this. Professor Daniel A. Baugh noted in 2004: ‘the achievement of the Victualling Board in the eighteenth century has been obscured, but its contribution is demonstrable – a fact which should not be relegated to social or medical history, but positioned at the very centre of strategic history, since British naval strategy relied so heavily upon remaining on

---

1 J.R. Tanner (ed.) A Descriptive Catalogue of the Naval Manuscripts in the Pepysian Library (Navy Records Society, 1903) 152-3, Naval Minutes, no. 2866, p. 274
station. In the concluding paragraph of his recent authoritative survey, *The Command of the Ocean: a naval history of Britain, 1649-1815*, Professor Rodger notes that ‘the most crucial developments in the period covered by this volume were not naval but financial and administrative. It was the capacity of naval administration ashore, above all the Victualling Board, which transformed the operational capabilities of British fleets at sea’.  

Many British ships were in distant and large concentrations. It seems that only India was able to feed a large squadron from its own resources, and that the provision of food overseas in the West Indies and Canada, the Mediterranean and the Cape of Good Hope depended to an ever greater extent upon supply from the highly capitalised contractors based in London or through arrangements with their sub-contractors. There were large government food processing yards administered by the Victualling Board at Deptford in London, and at Portsmouth and Plymouth, and a host of small depots around British coasts to provide for frigates and smaller naval ships cruising or escorting convoys. The success of the combination of government and contractors played a large part in enabling Britain to execute a bold and decisive naval and imperial strategy. The 26 British colonies of 1792 grew to become 43 by 1816, and though some were small strategic islands, there were substantial acquisitions, including the Cape, Ceylon and the Dutch South American mainland colonies. By the end of the wars the existing overseas naval bases at Gibraltar, Jamaica, Barbados, Antigua and Halifax and Bombay were supplemented by St. Lucia, the Cape of Good Hope, Trincomalee, Malta and Corfu.  

Yet the British victualling effort at the climax of the Anglo-French wars has never been examined in detail. The Leverhulme Trust has now funded a three-year project which started at the Greenwich Maritime Institute, University of Greenwich, in May 2006, entitled ‘Sustaining the Empire: War, the Navy and the Contractor State, 1793-1815’. It is being undertaken in conjunction with the National Maritime Museum,

---

which has just announced the formation of its ‘Centre for Imperial and Maritime History’. The substantial Leverhulme grant has brought two researchers to the Institute and initial scoping and sampling of records has now begun. At this early stage in the project, therefore, it is not possible to announce any substantial conclusions; the purpose of this paper is therefore to pose questions about mobilising the resources of this part of the British state.

In recent years historians have noted the financial, administrative and technological advantages enjoyed by the British navy over its rivals by the end of the eighteenth century, and the investment in the navy and its infrastructure made by William Pitt’s government in the ten years of peace before 1793, when Europe was engaged in a peacetime arms race. The administrative and technological capacities of the sailing Navy have been examined in studies of shipbuilding, the royal dockyards, the ordnance and gun production, manning levels and overseas yards. Radical and effective improvements were made, for instance, to the provision of transports in 1794 by the establishment of the Transport Board to move food, stores, ordnance and troops to any part of the world.

However, only one book, by Christian Buchet, has looked at the cost-effectiveness and efficiency of British naval victualling, and that covers the earlier period of the Seven Years War. As important as this work is, it provides little context of the world outside the Navy. One unpublished paper has looked at government investment in the

---

5 The project is led by the present writer, with Professor Sarah Palmer, Director of the GMI, and Dr. Douglas Hamilton of the NMM, on the Advisory Committee, with Dr. Martin Wilcox as Research Fellow and James Davey as Research Assistant.
6 Summarised in Rodger, Command of the Ocean, 375-379
7 E.g. Roger Morriss, The Royal Dockyards in England during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (Leicester, 1983); Jan Glete, Navies and Nations: Warships, navies and state building, 1500-1800 (Stockholm, 1993) pp.271-294
operations of victualling at Portsmouth between 1793 and 1815. Between the Seven Years War and the French Revolutionary War the navy had expanded and warfare was on a truly global scale. For over twenty years of war, demands on the system increased yearly. In 1794, the first full year of the war, nearly 84,000 seamen were voted by Parliament and 73,835 were mustered and had to be fed; by 1801, the last year before the Peace of Amiens this had nearly doubled to 132,000, with 117,000 mustered; the peak was reached in 1812-13 when hostilities started with the United States with a further twenty per cent increase when 140,000 men were voted, with 138,000 mustered.

The lack of work done on the subject of victualling may be explained by the difficulty of tackling a large and complicated subject, only solvable with much labour and an efficient database. In the state records in the National Archives and the National Maritime Museum some 680 volumes and ledgers relating to victualling exist for the period of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, most of which have hardly been opened. There is a wealth of information from the departments of the Treasurer of the Navy and the Victualling Board. While little is yet known about the operation of the Victualling Board, even less is known about the merchants with whom the Board contracted for vast amounts of drink and provisions for the Navy. The India Office Library at the British Library contains a good deal of evidence of the large contractors in India, but the records of other contractors are scarce and the search has only sampled a few in record offices and county archives, but they provide the other side of the story. There was a wide range of these contractors, from the big London merchant-victuallers responsible for large and continuing contracts for overseas fleets, the Agent Victuallers, employed by government, to the many local contractors who were subcontractors to larger merchants or who supplied provisions directly to the victualling yards in Britain.

Analysis of these papers reveals the practical realities of administration: delays in providing contracted provisions, problems with the quality of provisions, the imposition of contract penalty clauses, demurrage, shipping shortages, convoy delays,

---

11 Rodger, Command of the Ocean, Appendix VI
business failures, relations between government departments, potential corruption and political influence. Did the Board of Admiralty get its predictions of demands for victualling right? Was there sufficient coordination between the Navy, Transport and Victualling Boards, and what was the role of the Treasurer of the navy, particularly at times of pressure during mobilisation or the period of fitting out of expeditions? Though the Victualling Board took over some responsibilities for army victualling, did the demands of the two services conflict at these times? Did the Victualling Board anticipate demand and select contractors who had the capacity to provide bulk provisions at short notice? Was the Victualling Board caught out by price rises? Did it lay in enough reserves, particularly since no beef or beer was barrelled in the summer months? One of the basic problems was that there seems always to have been a shortage of barrels and captains were ordered to husband the empty ones carefully, breaking them down into hoops and staves to bring them back after a commission: did this shortage ever become critical?12

It was important for the health of the seamen manning fleets and squadrons abroad to acquire fresh meat and vegetables, particularly greens and onions, as well as lemons, in addition to the protein contained in the preserved foods in barrels and bread bags sent out in transports from London. John Heatly, the Agent Victualler in Lisbon in the late 1790s, had to purchase an enormous amount of food for fleets on passage to and from the Mediterranean. But he neglected his accounts, for in 1801 the Victualling Commissioners discovered ‘to their astonishment and disappointment’ that Heatly had not submitted accounts and that, as they wrote to him, ‘imprests to the amount of Four hundred thousand pounds and upwards are standing out against you in this office’.13 He departed very quickly back to London to clear his accounts of this princely sum.

On the resumption of war in 1803, Nelson regretted that Heatly was not with him, writing to Earl St. Vincent in 1803, ‘there being no Agent-Victualler like Mr. Heatly, who would find the Fleet in everything, in all parts that we used to send to’.14 But Nelson was soon joined by a better Agent Victualler, Richard Ford, who stayed with

12 E.g. London Metropolitan Archives, B/BFY/046, Navy Board to Beaufoy & Co, vinegar distillers, 18, 24 September 1807
13 National Maritime Museum, ADM DP/21, Victualling Commissioners to Heatly, 13 March 1801
14 Sir Harris Nicolas, The Dispatches and Letters of Vice-Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson (London, 1846) V. 133, Nelson to Earl St. Vincent, 12 July 1803
Nelson’s fleet, a system which worked much better than being confined on shore.\textsuperscript{15} It was these distant procurement tasks which took so much time to clear through the accounts in the Victualling Office.

Even in the Channel there were problems with providing provisions and fresh food for large fleets, for a sudden and concentrated demand could play havoc with local prices and trade. By the 1790s the Western Squadron, commanded by the Commander-in-Chief of Channel Fleet, whose main task was to blockade the French fleet in Brest, was always manned by more than twenty thousand men. To get an idea of the sense of scale, there were only sixteen towns in England at that time with a population of over 20,000.\textsuperscript{16} If the squadron stayed for any time at Plymouth or Torbay, which it did first in the winter of 1795, the extra demand on the local economy was immediately felt. By March 1796 a quarter of wheat cost five shillings above the national average and by early April eight shillings. The result was a series of food riots in south Devon and up the Tamar valley, a situation that was repeated several times in the next few years when the fleet was in.\textsuperscript{17}

In spite of major achievements at home and abroad, the administration was far from perfect and there were major differences of opinion between government and contractors, some of which ended up in the courts. One such case which did not, though the law threatened, was the case of Basil Cochrane, the brother of the Earl of Dundonald, an erratic and irascible officer, characteristics which the agent apparently shared. Cochrane contracted to victual ships on the East Indies station, as indicated by the title page of his extensive 255 page broadside, \textit{A Narrative of the Transactions…} which he published in 1818. The subtitle indicated his relationship with the Victualling Board by the end of the wars: ‘The Whole intended to shew the total inattention and neglect with which Mr. Cochrane was treated by the Board while in India, and the arbitrary and oppressive conduct observed towards him in the examination and final settlement of his accounts’. The slow speed at which accounts were passed and payment was made was certainly a problem in the first half of the

\textsuperscript{15} MacDonald, 66-70
\textsuperscript{16} A point usefully made by Michael Duffy in ‘Devon and the Naval Strategy of the French Wars, 1689-1815’ in Duffy (et al. eds.) \textit{The New Maritime History of Devon} vol.1, p.187
wars: Cochrane reckoned that the total amount unpassed with 47 contractors with contracts world wide in 1806 was £4.9 million, with some accounts going back to 1788.  

The problem with looking at the victualling system through the evidence provided by cases of corruption and scandal is the difficulty of establishing the norm, with no means of judging how prevalent corruption was, or even defining what the word meant in the context of the time. Many contractors for a variety of provisions, such as flour, biscuit, oatmeal, fresh and salted beef, fresh and salted pork, pease, raisins, suet, butter, cheese, beer, wine and brandy, appear to have continued to provide the Navy throughout these years perfectly satisfactorily, overcoming supply and cost problems as they arose. Only by concentrated work using robust samples on a large database can we be confident of establishing such norms, or of working out the scale of the achievement. The project needs to establish the patterns of the cost and volume of victualling provision for the Navy, traced against commodity price movements, complicated as they were by years of dearth and the conditions of war, especially the impact of blockades which took place throughout the Napoleonic Wars. Against this we need to plot naval consumption by the geographical spread of British ships on stations, and of contracts let, with an accurate picture of how many men were on each station at a particular time. We need to measure the amount of provisions exported from England as a proportion of the cost of the whole naval victualling vote. From there we must determine how much the banks were involved, who made the highest profits in what commodities, and whether these contractors were also involved in contracting for the army. We need to assess the impact of naval victualling on the industrialised British economy, and also Ireland, for it seems that there was no part of the British Isles which did not contribute to the vegetable, cereal and meat products required by the Navy.

It seemed too that performance improved, particularly after the political storms which followed Earl St. Vincent’s period as First Lord of the Admiralty between 1801-4, out of which came the Commission of Naval Enquiry, which in turn led to the Commission of Naval Revision, in which victualling fleets abroad featured centrally.

---

18 Cochrane, *Narrative*, p.70
Accounting procedures were regularised and centralised by the Treasury. As in shipbuilding, the performance of the royal dockyards, army contracting, as well as technological progress in areas like munitions manufacture, it was the strength of the private sector which saw the British to success.

Vicualling was as much a political activity as an economic one. The acquisition and distribution of contracts, and the naval strategies which depended upon them, situated vicualling at the heart of the political process. Over twenty years ago, John Brewer advanced the notion of the ‘fiscal-military state’. The system of eighteenth-century vicualling was characterised by the disbursement of millions of pounds of government money by private and non-governmental actors, who acted as much in their own interest as the state’s. This conflict of interest had been a subject of much Parliamentary concern in the American Revolutionary War, a debate that lasted for much of the war, and ended in 1782 in an Act of Parliament preventing government contractors from sitting in Parliament. Yet a good proportion of the Vicualling Board were members of Parliament. How was influence and interest managed by government and contractor? This project seeks to build on Brewer’s formulation by advancing the idea of the ‘contractor state’ – that is the nexus of power and influence forged by intricate and symbiotic relations between public institutions and private entrepreneurs. How, too, did it work away from London and Parliament? Who was running the naval stations abroad or, as they might be called, imperial power centres – the contractors or government? By extension, it might be said that it was the contractors who were dominating decision making in running the Empire, particularly by the second half of the Napoleonic War.

Patrick O’Brien entitled his chapter in the *Oxford History of the British Empire* ‘Inseparable Connections’, and drew attention to the importance of private investment and organizational capacity in the maintenance of naval power: ‘It was fortunate for merchants that, for strategic as well as commercial reasons, aristocrats saw no good reason to separate naval support for global trade and the acquisition of a maritime

---

20 Morriss, *Naval Power and Culture*, p. 204
21 Morriss, *Naval Power and Culture*, p.127
Empire from Britain’s strategic interests as a European power. They profitably conflated the two objectives in a combined strategy. Public investment in royal dockyards, the construction of warships, and the recruitment of young sailors into the navy expanded between 1688 and 1815…’  

To this list one should add the investment in and maintenance of the business of naval victualling.

---
