

Sir John Hamilton

Dover Mariner and War Hero

By The Hon. Reg Hamilton and Neil Barnes

Sir John Hamilton (1765-1858) was a naval captain who became a war hero in the naval war against the Dutch (1797). He knew Lord Nelson, William Pitt (Prime Minister), members of the Royal houses of Europe, and many of the great naval figures of the time, including Lord Duncan. For his services he was made captain of the Dover to Ostend naval packet until his retirement in 1841.

Naval hero

The revolutionary French (1789-1799) had overrun Europe. They overturned the old order of aristocratic France, imprisoned and then executed the King and Queen, executed aristocrats, closed all the churches, set up a new religion of Reason, and even abolished the old calendar and set up a new one. The Great Terror began, a forerunner of the Stalinist horrors of the 20th century. The revolution threatened all of Europe.

Would the revolution spread to England? These were troubled times, with British seamen mutinying at Spithead, near Portsmouth in April 1797 because of their appalling conditions, and there were also revolutionary sympathies. There was a similar naval mutiny at the Nore in the Thames estuary in May that year. Several Jacobins, supporters of the revolutionary French, including John Gale Jones, toured naval towns in Kent and promoted revolution, including those in Admiral Duncan's fleet. They had some success, and it was not until June 1797 that the rebellion was ended with hanging and pardons.

The revolutionary French set up a Dutch

client state in 1795. Admiral Duncan, commander of the North Sea fleet, had been blockading the Dutch coast and ports since 1795, despite the difficulties posed by the mutinies, which at one time left him with only two ships. John Hamilton served with the British navy from 1792 to 1800, when Lord Duncan retired. It appears that he was not a regular commissioned officer, as he cannot be one of the four John Hamilton's listed in Syrett's list of Commissioned Officers with the Royal Navy between 1660 and 1815ⁱ.

Nevertheless, he was in command of several ships, including the *Active*, a cutter in the run up to and during the important battle of Camperdown in 1797. The *Active* was seventy-one feet long, armed with ten guns, and was listed by Lord Duncan as a support ship, hired for service with the Navyⁱⁱ.

Captain Hamilton was in command of the *Active* as part of the English blockade of the Dutch coast when he received information on 6 October 1797 that the Dutch were about to sail, and they did in fact sail the next morning.



Battle of camperdown 1797

Sometime before this the North Sea fleet, under Duncan, had returned to the English coast near Great Yarmouth. Hamilton, realising that the Active would be able to report the news of the Dutch fleet's movements direct to the Admiral sooner than any other ship, disobeyed his orders to go to the Admiralty in London first and sailed instead to report to Duncan.

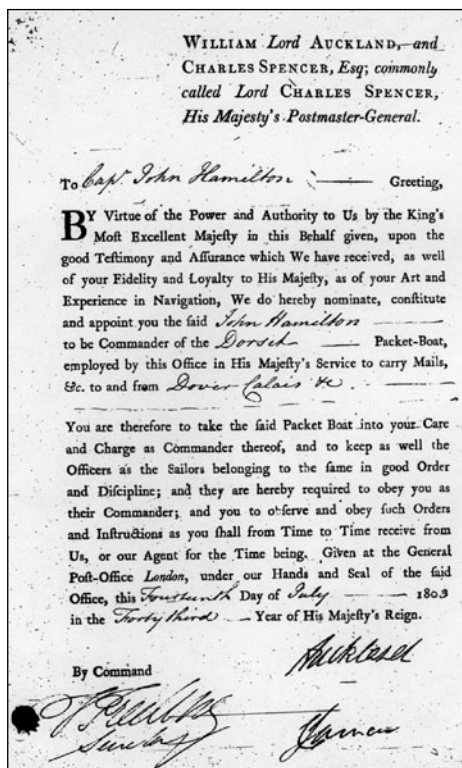
He was ordered to lead the fleet, and battle was joined with the Dutch on 11 October. This culminated in a one of the great British naval victories, the battle of Camperdown, in which the Dutch, client allies of the French, were defeated, although heroic. De Winter was the Dutch Admiral, and his ship was nearly blown to pieces. The Dutch lost 540 men dead and 620 wounded, while the English suffered 203 killed and 622 wounded. Captain Hamilton was brave, while others, such as Captain Williamson, who was later court martialled, were notⁱⁱⁱ. Hamilton was on the quarterdeck of the Venerable when the Dutch admiral, De Winter, resigned his sword and accompanied Lord Duncan to Walmer Castle. There he met Mr. Pitt^{iv}.



Hamilton standing to the left of Duncan receiving surrender at Camperdown

Appointment to the Post Office packet
Lord Duncan recommended that Mr. John Hamilton be appointed to the command of a Dover packet on 11 February 1800^v. He served in this capacity until his retirement in 1841, when he was made a Chevalier of the Order of Leopold, and received an annual pension of £700. He was knighted by the Queen in 1845^{vi}.

He was obviously trusted and loyal. He conveyed many important people of the time, including Prince Leopold on the occasion of his marriage to Princess Charlotte in 1816, the painter William Turner, and his Royal Highness Prince



Hamilton given command of the Dorset a Dover to Calais Packet

Albert across the channel to marry Victoria^{vii}. Prince Leopold became King of Belgium in 1831. His will includes a long list of silver valuables given to him by royals, as does the will of Sir Luke Smithett, his son in law, who married his daughter Jane.

In 1840 he was in command of the packet *Widgeon*, at 75 years old. On another voyage he was with Luke Smithett, who commanded the *Vivid*, and the 65 mile voyage from Dover to Ostend took four and a half hours, arriving at exactly 12 pm. The *Vivid* was a paddle-wheel boat, 150 feet long, breadth 22 feet, depth of hold 11 feet 4 inches, engines with 160 horse power, and average speed of about sixteen miles an hour^{viii}.

Life was hazardous in those days. The packet ships might miss high tide, and small boat operators were then used to convey passengers and freight. In 1821 five packet boats missed the tide and arrived at Dover, several small boats were used, and one capsized and a passenger drowned^{ix}.

Marriage and origins

His career before he joined the navy in 1792 is not known. He came from an obscure background. Little is known of his father and mother, James and Jane, except that James was a stay maker, whether for lady's dresses or naval stays, and Jane was illiterate, because she signed her marriage certificate with a cross^x. There is some speculation that the family came from Scotland, but nothing has been found to prove the claims correct.

He married Sarah Hedgecock on 16 August 1788 at St Mary the Virgin, Dover. They had several children, including Jane, who married Luke Smithett, also in the service of the post office. Portraits of Sir John and Lady Hamilton are still in the possession of

Neil Barnes, his descendant, together with his family bible. They variously lived at Snargate Street, Dover, during the 1820s, 7 Strond Street Dover during the 1830s, and retired to 17 Snargate Street, with a back that opened on the pent^{xi}. Sir John and his immediate family are apparently buried in what in the family bible is called the 'new cemetery'. This has not yet been located.

These were the days before the secret ballot, and everyone knew how everyone voted. John Hamilton voted for the Tory Huskisson and the independent Smith in 1802, while his brother Richard, voted independent (there were two Parliamentary seats at Dover). Later the family politics became Tory, and when they voted it was for the Tories, not the Whigs. Perhaps this was the result of reason and persuasion, perhaps there was bribery. Bribery was an important part of the early elections of Britain, the bribe being beer and food, and a party, or even money or a position^{xii}.

Dover was one of the third of seats which were regularly contested, and the election of 1802 was held in the church of St Mary's. It was a lively affair. John Spencer Smith was an independent candidate, and his brother, the Admiral Sir Sidney Smith, seized possession of the church with a boat's crew and blockaded the port. The Tories lost. One observer commented that the Tories 'have been f-cked' at Dover. The violence and foul language led to two failed attempts to move elections from the Church, until they were moved to the Town Hall in 1826^{xiii}.

Legacy

His memory lives on in the lives of his descendants, as well as the stories of British naval history. Described by one acquaintance as a 'noble specimen of a British seaman', and his naval career as

'glorious and important services to which Captain Hamilton had contributed'^{xiv}, he was a self-made man, who lived a long and apparently happy life. His nephew, Richard, was a freeman of Dover, a tailor and by rumour only, with no proof beyond a good story, possibly a smuggler. Richard took his family to the free colony of South Australia in 1837. A family of winemakers and others still live there today. There they farmed and set up the Ewell vineyard, possibly named after the village outside Dover. Hamilton's Ewell Moselle, made by Reg's grandfather, was for a while one of Australia's most popular wines. Reg is descended from Richard, and Neil from Sir John.

- i Douglas Wilkie, The Hamiltons 1762-1862, October 1997, self published, p.15*
- ii Wilkie, p.16, quoting The Times of 17 October 1797*
- iii Wilkie p.21*
- iv John Barrows, Tour of the Continent, Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans London 1853*
- v Barrows*
- vi Reg Hamilton, Colony: Strange Origins of one of the earliest modern democracies, Wakefield Press 2010, p.75*
- vii Barrows*
- viii Barrows*
- ix Wilkie p.23*
- x Reg Hamilton, p.74*
- xi Wilkie p.25*
- xii Reg Hamilton, p.83*
- xiii Reg Hamilton, p.81*
- xii Barrows*



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