

'These Peaceable Times are the Devil': Royal Navy Officers in the Post-War Slump, 1815-1825¹

Throughout the 'long eighteenth century,' one of the defining features of life in the Royal Navy was cyclical unemployment.² The navy expanded during each war, and at its end contracted to a peacetime establishment, rendering unemployed large numbers of former naval personnel. This affected both officers and common seamen, though the implications for each were rather different since, whilst seamen were simply released back into the maritime labour market, standing officers such as gunners and boatswains remained with their ships, at least in theory, and commissioned officers received half pay.³ Even so, successive wars throughout the century saw the navy grow to an ever-greater size, with a corresponding increase in the numbers released from naval service with the return of peace.⁴ This process reached its apogee after the Napoleonic Wars, when the navy grew to an unprecedented size, and then between 1813 and 1817 dispensed with the services of an also unprecedented 124,000 men.⁵ As Michael Lewis pointed out in 1965, most naval historians have noted the mass unemployment that resulted.⁶ However, with the exception of Lewis's own work and some comment by C.J. Bartlett,⁷ little has been written about the impact that this had upon naval officers. This paper is intended partially to fill that gap. Drawing upon the papers of navy agent Robert Brine⁸, a vast amount of whose correspondence from 1813 to 1822 survives in the Chancery papers at The National Archives, as well as the Admiralty archive, it aims to explore the experience of commissioned officers in the decade after the Treaty of Paris, and to

¹ The title of this paper is taken from National Archives (hereafter TNA), C 114/8, box 1, Captain William Hotham to Robert Brine, 14 October 1817. I am grateful to Roger Knight for his comments on a draft.

² See N.A.M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649-1815* (London, 2004), 380.

³ M. Lewis, *The Navy in Transition: A Social History 1814-1864* (London, 1965), 58-63.

⁴ Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, Appendix VI; see also David J. Starkey, "War and the Market for Seafarers in Britain, 1736-1792," in Lewis R. Fischer and Helge W. Nordvik (eds.), *Shipping and Trade, 1750-1950: Essays in International Maritime Economic History* (Pontefract, 1990), 25-42.

⁵ See Table 1.

⁶ Lewis, *Navy in Transition*, 48.

⁷ C.J. Bartlett, *Great Britain and Sea Power 1815-1853* (Oxford, 1963), 45.

⁸ A full exposition of the activities of navy agents can be found in M.H. Wilcox, "The 'Mystery and Business' of Navy Agents, c.1700-1820," *International Journal of Maritime History* XIII No.2 (2011), 41-68.

elucidate the options open to them and the ways in which they tried to get by in the difficult post-war years.

The Scale of the Problem

By the end of the Napoleonic War Britain had no serious naval rivals and more than twenty years of near-continuous military expenditure had driven the national debt to unprecedented heights, and deep cuts in naval spending were inevitable.⁹ In fact, the run-down in the Royal Navy's strength did not happen abruptly in 1815. The numbers of men employed in naval service peaked in 1813, declined a little the following year, and were then reduced rapidly from 1815 to a low point in 1817. Thereafter, as Table 1 shows, the number of men borne began to rise again and continued to do so until the mid-1820s, with the exception of a slight drop in 1822. As in the eighteenth century, the numbers of men voted for the navy annually by Parliament was largely an 'accounting fiction' and tended to lag behind the numbers actually borne.¹⁰

[Table 1]

On the strength of these figures, then, the navy released some 124,103 men between 1813 and 1817. The remainder were deployed on a fleet that shrank from a peak of 713 vessels in 1814 to 121 four years later.¹¹ Inevitably, the release of so many men into the maritime labour market would cause many of the same strains as did the return of thousands of demobilised soldiers ashore.¹² In both cases, the strain was amplified by the severe economic depression that followed the war's end, leading to a period 'scarred by distress and discontent.'¹³ After a brief upturn as trading links disrupted by the wars were re-established and pent-up demand satisfied, European trade shrank in 1816.¹⁴ A severe agricultural and commercial depression led to sharp

⁹ P. Mathias, *The First Industrial Nation: An Economic History of Britain 1700-1914* (London, 1969), Table 13.

¹⁰ Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, 636.

¹¹ Eric J. Grove, *The Royal Navy: A New Short History* (Basingstoke, 2005), 1.

¹² D. Hay, 'War, Dearth and Theft in the Eighteenth Century: The Record of the English Courts,' in *Past and Present* 95 (1982), 117-60; E.J. Evans, *The Forging of the Modern State: Early Industrial Britain 1783-1870* (London, 1983), 181.

¹³ Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad and Dangerous People? England 1783-1846* (Oxford, 2006), 251.

¹⁴ L. Craig and C. Garcia-Iglesias, 'Business Cycles,' in S. Broadberry and K.H. O'Rourke (eds), *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Europe, vol.1: 1700-1870* (Cambridge, 2010), 139;

drops in earnings and consumption, and high unemployment across the country.¹⁵ British overseas trade shrank and the shipping market was further depressed by the release of ships from the transport service.¹⁶ Consequently, the merchant marine to which many former naval personnel looked for employment shrank.¹⁷ Seamen became ever more prominent amid the destitute, especially in London, leading in 1818 to the formation of an association for their relief, the forerunner of the Seamen's Hospital Society.¹⁸

For commissioned officers the immediate financial implications were less desperate, for they at least had their half pay to fall back upon. This was a significant palliative, for as Table 2 shows, the experience for officers in the post-war years was one of mass unemployment.

[Table 2]

The unemployment of thousands of officers was inevitable in the post-war years, with the removal of the need for a navy of the size it had attained before 1815, coupled with severe economic distress and pressure on the government continually to cut the amount spent on the armed forces.¹⁹ Moreover, as Table 3 shows, the problem was exacerbated by the fact that the number of commanders and lieutenants increased in the post-war decade.

[Table 3]

¹⁵ BPP 1817 IV, Fourth report from the Select Committee on Finance: public income and expenditure, 122-5 and Appendix H; T.S. Davis, *Ricardo's Macroeconomics: Money, Trade Cycles, and Growth* (Oxford, 1999), 51-3; H-J. Voth, 'Living standards and the urban environment,' in R. Floud and P. Johnson (eds), *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain, vol. 1: Industrialisation 1700-1860* (Cambridge, 2004), 272-81; C. Emsley, *British Society and the French Wars 1793-1815* (London, 1979), 170.

¹⁶ BPP 1833 VI, Report of the Select Committee on Manufactures, Commerce and Shipping, Minutes of Evidence, q.6,904.

¹⁷ S.R. Palmer, *Politics, Shipping and the Repeal of the Navigation Laws* (Manchester, 1990), 1; R. Hope, *A New History of British Shipping* (London, 1990), 263-4.

¹⁸ G.C. Cook, *Disease in the Merchant Navy: A history of the Seamen's Hospital Society* (Oxford, 2007), 63-5.

¹⁹ Bartlett, *Great Britain and Sea Power*, 13-21; P. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London, 1976), 156; Andrew Lambert, 'Preparing for the Long Peace: The Reconstruction of the Royal Navy, 1815-1830,' in *Mariner's Mirror* 82 (1996), 43.

As Tables 2 and 3 illustrate, even at the height of the war there were significantly more officers available than there were ships, and even in 1813 not far short of half of all theoretically active officers were unemployed. Moreover, as Lewis argues, the Admiralty exacerbated the situation by dealing out promotions in increasing numbers in the last years of the war primarily out of charity; offering to men the chance of a more senior officer's status and half pay, even though there was scant likelihood of them ever serving again.²⁰ It was a little like the promotion of captains to the 'yellow squadron' in the eighteenth century, giving a man the status and half-pay of an admiral on the understanding that his sea career was over,²¹ but on a far larger scale. Although it offered some financial assistance to the recipient, it was no substitute for an organised system of retirement, the lack of which is illustrated in Tables 2 and 3 by the tiny numbers of superannuated officers, for the incompetent and aged, and it served to exacerbate the 'great block' of theoretically active officers that was not finally removed until the middle of the century.²²

Another factor that served to aggravate the situation was ongoing promotions after 1815. Although only nineteen lieutenants' commissions were issued in 1817, the number thereafter rose to a steady average of over 80 per year into the 1820s.²³ Eighty-five lieutenants' commissions were issued in 1822, along with 49 promotions of lieutenants to commanders and 34 commanders promoted to captain.²⁴ Radical MP Joseph Hume, in line with his commitment to retrenchment and frequent criticism of unwarranted government expenditure, attacked promotions in the House of Commons in June 1823, arguing that too many were made and largely on political grounds rather than for the good of the service, and that the result was excessive cost to the public purse.²⁵ Hume may have been right that some appointments were made for the wrong reasons, but the navy could not cease promotions altogether unless it wished to be faced with an ageing and decreasingly effective officer corps, so they continued. To

²⁰ Lewis, *Navy in Transition*, 67-8.

²¹ N.A.M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (London, 1987), 299.

²² Lewis, *Navy in Transition*, 70-1, 77; J. Beeler, "'Fit for Service Abroad:' Promotion, Retirement and Royal Navy Officers, 1830-1890,' in *Mariner's Mirror* 81 (1995), 300-3.

²³ Lewis, *Navy in Transition*, 70.

²⁴ BPP 1823 XIII, Promotions in the navy. Returns to orders of the Honourable House of Commons, dated 30th April 1823; for returns of the several promotions in the navy.

²⁵ Hansard, HC Deb 19 June 1823, vol 9, cc1,079-102.

some extent these new entrants deposed those who had remained in employment in the post-war years, adding to the already great number of the unemployed.

On the figures presented in Tables 2 and 3, the number of unemployed officers shrank from 5,200 in 1818 to 4,739 in September 1824, the decline in numbers mainly accounted for by a fall in the number of commissioned lieutenants. Even so, in the mid-1820s there were still thousands of officers, many of them with distinguished war service histories, subsisting on their half pay with scant prospect of ever being employed on active service again. The remainder of this essay assesses the financial and other effects this had upon them, the options open to them and the ways in which they adapted to ‘these peaceable times.’

The Financial Implications of Unemployment

The return of peace meant half pay for most officers, and the loss of any chance of prize money. How serious the implications of this were, in financial terms, depended upon a man’s rank, accumulated wealth and socio-economic background. Those of independent means, or of higher rank and therefore pay, struggled less desperately than those whose only income was a lieutenant’s half pay. Thus could Admiral Thomas Foley retire to his estate at Abermarlais, in Pembrokeshire, and live off the income from his lands, although even he had to borrow from his agent, Robert Brine, to cover the period before the harvest.²⁶ Navy agents’ prime functions were to collect officers’ pay and emoluments, and deal with the naval bureaucracy on their behalf when they were unavailable, but many offered a variety of financial and other services, especially to wealthy and illustrious officers, including acting as personal bankers. Many loaned money to their clients, leading some into financial difficulties in the post-war years as officers’ incomes declined, leaving them struggling to pay their debts.²⁷ On the other hand, Captain John Maples, who had distinguished himself commanding a brig, been made post in 1813 and a Companion of the Bath in 1815,²⁸ could write to his agent in 1817 that he had had a ‘fortunate’ year, and had been able to purchase his house. He also had money available to invest, and requested Brine that:

²⁶ TNA, C 114/6, box 1, Admiral Thomas Foley to Robert Brine, 1 Apr 1819.

²⁷ See Wilcox, ‘“Mystery and Business” of Navy Agents,’ 53-63, 67-8.

²⁸ John Marshall, *Royal Naval Biography*, Supplement, part III (London, 1829), 149-53.

seeing every prospect of the Funds getting higher I will therefore be much obliged by your purchasing for me a hundred pounds 3 pr Cent Consols, as I am sure they will keep.²⁹

Maples was evidently reasonably well off, as were captains such as Forbes Leith, who sent their agents baskets of game from shooting expeditions in the Scottish Highlands,³⁰ but other captains indicated in their correspondence that they were struggling. Captain John Williams, heavily in debt to his former agents, Broughton & Co, and in fear of legal action from them, was forced to borrow heavily from Brine throughout 1816, whilst trying to sell off the property of his deceased mother.³¹ The legal action from Broughton and Co he feared materialised in 1819, forcing him to borrow yet more from Brine, accompanied by a note of hand to pay off his £600 debt within three years.³² Williams' affairs were particularly complicated and the severity of his debts perhaps a result of his own improvidence, but more senior officers than he were feeling the pinch. Vice-Admiral Robert Murray complained of 'no promotion, no increase of pay, no decrease of Tax,' and feared that his income would be insufficient to match all of the demands placed upon it.³³

In the worst position of all, however, were the thousands of half-pay lieutenants, an increasing number of whom had families to support, for many officers married and had children when they came ashore, and thus made a small contribution to the spike in marriages and births that followed the end of the wars.³⁴ Again, some had independent wealth and were little affected by the loss of more than half of their incomes, such as the Earl of Huntingdon, who in 1820 took three months' leave of absence to sail the coast of France in his yacht.³⁵ The majority, however, had to subsist on their half pay, and their lot was, as Lewis notes, 'to remain proverbially

²⁹ TNA, C 114/6, box 1, Capt. John Maples to Robert Brine, 26 Sept 1817.

³⁰ TNA, C 114/8, box 3, Captain Forbes Leith to Robert Brine, 25 Jan and 14 Aug 1817.

³¹ TNA, C 114/89, Captain John Williams to Robert Brine, 21 Feb, 26 Apr, 1 Jul, 14 Aug, 7 Oct 1816.

³² TNA, C 114/89, Captain John Williams to Robert Brine, 13 Feb, 22 Feb 1819.

³³ TNA, C 114/105, box 2, Vice-Admiral Robert Murray to Robert Brine, 7 Mar 1816.

³⁴ N.L. Tranter, *Population and Society 1750-1940: Contrasts in Population Growth* (London, 1985), 51; M. Daunton, *Progress and Poverty: An Economic and Social History of Britain 1700-1850* (Oxford, 1995), 392.

³⁵ TNA, ADM 6/208, Admiralty Leave Book 1816-1825, Lieutenant the Earl of Huntingdon, 9 June 1820.

poor, and to eke out a rather shabby existence.’³⁶ Lieutenant Flowers Beckett had had a successful career and seen action at both Copenhagen and Trafalgar, but his progress came to a halt when he was paid off in 1815.³⁷ By 1820 he had been forced to sell off his stocks to clear a part of his debts, and wrote rather sadly to his agent:

I am obliged to you for your friendly hint respecting my Account with you. I wish I could look forward to its being no more at the years end. I do assure you that I strive all I can to keep within my means. In my family we indulge in no luxuries, we see no company and abstain from many things which those of humble habit would deem necessaries. Except doing without a servant there is nothing I can economize in or retrench.³⁸

Another illustration of the hardship comes from Lieutenant William Rees:

On receiving the amount [of a bill drawn upon Brine for £16] there were immediate demands on me and when I had paid six pounds in part payment for goods, five to the Doctor and nearly four pounds for house rent and taxes I found I had no more than three pounds ten shillings left to support us for three months to come; unless I can claim your further assistance I know not what I shall do therefore request permission to draw for ten pounds, I trust ere long will be in my power to discharge myself off your Books where I stand rather deep I fear.³⁹

Debt was a constant concern for many half-pay officers in the post-war decade. With it came the fear that those to whom they owed money, often their agents, would refuse to honour their bills or, worse, commence legal proceedings that could potentially land them in a debtor’s prison, although this latter was a step that navy agents seem generally to have been reluctant to take, probably in part because it was futile and would hardly help them recover their money any more quickly.⁴⁰ The psychological impact is hard to assess, for few of Brine’s clients remarked on it, beyond writing obsequious letters requesting that their bills be honoured. Clearly, though, many were frustrated by the enforced idleness and longed for ‘a life of greater activity and enterprise’ than half pay offered.⁴¹ Lieutenant John Foreman noted in 1818 that he

³⁶ M. Lewis, *A Social History of the Navy 1793-1815* (London, 1960; reprint, London, 2004), 314.

³⁷ William O’Byrne, *A Naval Biographical Dictionary comprising the Life and Service of Every Living Officer in Her Majesty’s Navy* (London, 1849), 64.

³⁸ TNA, C 114/163, box 1, Lieutenant Flowers Beckett to Robert Brine, 2 Oct 1816, 11 April 1820.

³⁹ TNA, C 114/8, box 2, Lieutenant W.S. Rees to Robert Brine, 2 Jan 1819.

⁴⁰ Wilcox, ‘“Mystery and Business” of Navy Agents,’ 66-7.

⁴¹ John Marshall, *Royal Naval Biography*, vol.IV, part 1 (London, 1833), 63.

thought it ‘not right to stay so long out of employ,’⁴² and he was evidently not alone in feeling that way for, as the next section explores, many sought every possible opportunity for employment at sea or ashore.

Options and Strategies

The foremost desire of most half-pay officers was to return to naval service. Despite the shrinkage of the navy, positions did become available on occasion, and many, especially younger, officers bent every effort to put their names in the frame. Some used their replies to the survey of officers’ services in 1817 to entreat consideration for further employment.⁴³ Others used their agents and other contacts. Lieutenant Francis Thomas urged Brine to cause ‘my name to be mentioned at the Admiralty’ when he heard in spring 1820 that a round of promotions was in the wind, and on hearing that his former patron Alexander Cochrane was to succeed Sir Edward Pellew – by then Lord Exmouth – as Commander in Chief at Plymouth wrote to offer his services. Only a few weeks previously Brine had informed him confidentially that Sir Charles Rowley was to take over the Jamaica Station, and after some indecision about ‘whether my Friends would wish me to go to a Foreign Station’ he wrote to Rowley soliciting a position.⁴⁴ Two days later he wrote to Brine:

I cannot allow a Post to escape without offering an apology to you for my inadvertency in mentioning to Sir Charles Rowley that you had informed me that he was to succeed Sir Home Popham. Beg to assure you that I wrote to him to that effect entirely through a misconstruction of the caution contained in your letter, as I thought that your meaning was that I was not to let the circumstances be known at Chatham, or, in fact, publicly, by any means; and presuming that I, in some measure, have obtained the confidence of Sir Charles, I did not, at the time, consider the impropriety of what I had written.⁴⁵

Despite his indiscretion, by November of that year Thomas had secured a position on HMS *Sybille*, in Rowley’s squadron.⁴⁶ He was among the fortunate ones, able to use

⁴² TNA, C 114/6, box 3, Lieutenant John Foreman to Robert Brine, 26 May 1818.

⁴³ TNA, ADM 9/7, Survey Returns of Officers’ Services, Lieutenant John Cowley; ADM 9/4, Survey Returns of Officers’ Services, Commander John Cramer.

⁴⁴ TNA, C 114/159, box 2, Lieutenant Francis Thomas to Robert Brine, 7,13, 27 Apr, 14 Jun, 2 Aug 1820.

⁴⁵ TNA, C 114/159, box 2, Lieutenant Francis Thomas to Robert Brine, 4 Aug 1820.

⁴⁶ TNA, C 114/159, box 2, Lieutenant Francis Thomas to Robert Brine, 7 Nov 1820. This corrects a small error in my previous article, ‘The “Mystery and Business” of Navy Agents,’ where I suggested that Thomas did not secure an appointment.

the networks of patronage and ‘interest’ to his advantage, with evident assistance from his well-connected agent. Yet interest worked directly against some other officers. Lieutenant Joseph Troughton wrote from the West Indies in August 1817 that his ‘dear friend’ Captain Edward Rowley had died of a fever and noted fretfully that:

such is the difficulty of communication between this Island and Jamaica that I have not been able to inform Adml Douglas as yet, therefore I am in hopes of a Capt Quarterly Bill, before I am superceded, which I most certainly shall be, as I am a perfect stranger to Admiral Douglas.⁴⁷

Sure enough, within six weeks he had been replaced, and was among those anxiously seeking another appointment.⁴⁸ Competition was fierce, and many officers applied repeatedly for positions without success. Among them was Commander Septimius Arabin, a scion of an old French family who had seen extensive service in the Mediterranean and been present at Sir John Duckworth’s expedition to the Dardanelles in 1806, after which he had been mentioned in Duckworth’s public despatch for his gallantry in attacking a Turkish gun battery. He made ‘several unsuccessful applications for an appointment on the peace establishment,’ before he ‘resolved to travel on the continent, with the view of gaining such local knowledge and information as would further qualify him for his country’s service, in the event of another war.’ Even so, despite acquiring fluency in French and Italian on his travels, he saw no further employment until 1821, when he was appointed to the *Argus*, on the Halifax station. He was made post two years later.⁴⁹ Arabin, whose period of half-pay thus lasted only about five years, was one of the fortunate ones. Any ship fitting out at the time could expect to be inundated with applications from prospective lieutenants, which is why the expeditions to the Arctic mounted by Sir John Barrow were never short of volunteers.⁵⁰ Regardless of the hardships and dangers, such voyages offered a period of full pay at least, and the faint chance of fame and wealth.

⁴⁷ TNA, C 114/6, box 1, Lieutenant Joseph Troughton to Robert Brine, 10 Aug 1817.

⁴⁸ TNA, C 114/6, box 1, Lieutenant Joseph Troughton to Robert Brine, 27 Sept 1817.

⁴⁹ John Marshall, *Royal Naval Biography*, vol.III, part I (London, 1831), 71-2; O’Byrne, *Naval Biographical Dictionary*, 19.

⁵⁰ See Glyn Williams, *Arctic Labyrinth: The Quest for the Northwest Passage* (London, 2009), 170-1.

Another palliative, and one partly responsible for the slight decrease in unemployment of lieutenants after 1818, was the Coast Guard and its immediate predecessor, the Preventive Boat Service. Responsibility for policing smuggling, and with it the Preventive Boat Service, were placed under Admiralty control in 1816, and although it was handed back to the Board of Customs in 1822, under the name of the Coast Guard, many of its personnel remained naval. The service was ‘a more or less complete backwater’ in career terms.⁵¹ Nevertheless, it was better than half pay, and by 1819 the Preventive Boat Service had taken in two captains, five commanders and seven lieutenants, mostly as Inspecting Commanders. Doubtless competition for these few places was fierce and patronage seems to have played a part in the choice of appointments, given that most of the officers were recommended by the Comptroller General, Captain John Hanchett.⁵² The extension of the service to Ireland in the 1820s allowed for the employment of more officers, such as James Dombain, Comptroller General in Ireland and formerly a Lieutenant in the navy.⁵³ Some seem to have been appointed to the Coast Guard after long periods of unemployment, such as Commander Edward Delafosse, who had been on half pay for twelve years by the time of his appointment in 1828.⁵⁴ The navy itself also continued to mount anti-smuggling operations, employing 1,276 officers and men in 1820.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the numbers employed in smuggling prevention barely scratched the surface of the ‘great block.’ The majority waited well into the 1820s before they saw service aboard a warship again, and there were many who never did, although some did find non-seagoing positions elsewhere in the naval establishment. Lieutenant Flowers Beckett’s straitened circumstances probably eased when he was appointed to the Ordinary at Sheerness, about which he had enquired as early as 1816 and to which he was appointed in 1821-4 and then again in 1834-7, before being appointed to command of Putney semaphore station in 1839.⁵⁶ Similarly, Lieutenant George Decoeurdoux, who had been paid off in 1814, saw his long period of unemployment come to an end in 1831, when he was appointed to the Ordinary at Portsmouth.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Lewis, *Navy in Transition*, 88-90.

⁵² BPP 1819 XVII, Return of Officers and Men of the Preventive Boat Service, 1816-19.

⁵³ BPP 1824 XI, Tenth Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Collection and Management of Revenue in Ireland and Great Britain. See Appendix 53.

⁵⁴ O’Byrne, *Naval Biographical Dictionary*, 277.

⁵⁵ BPP 1821 XXI, Papers relating to Prevention of Smuggling, by Navy, Customs and Excise, 1819-20.

⁵⁶ O’Byrne, *Naval Biographical Dictionary*, 64; TNA, C 114/109, Lieutenant Flowers Beckett to Robert Brine, 1 Jan 1816.

⁵⁷ O’Byrne, *Naval Biographical Dictionary*, 275.

Again, however, those who found positions in the Ordinary, signal stations and elsewhere were in a small and fortunate minority.

The obvious alternative to naval service was merchant shipping. Naval officers, some of whom had started their seagoing careers in the merchant service, had long resorted to merchant vessels to eke out their half pay during peacetime unemployment.⁵⁸ The Admiralty was generally willing to grant leave of absence for them to do so, albeit with a few conditions attached, namely that they did not 'enter into the Service of any Foreign Prince or State,' did not wear their naval uniform, and were expected to keep the Admiralty informed of their whereabouts and return to England within six months of any directions to do so being published in the *London Gazette*.⁵⁹ As Table 5 shows, naval officers quickly began moving into merchant shipping as they were paid off from the navy, such as the 48 during the Peace of Amiens in 1802, and the increasing number who did so in 1814-5, as unemployment among officers began to rise.

[Table 5]

The figures in Table 5 are likely to be an underestimate, since it is apparent from the Admiralty leave books from which the data was extracted that officers' service in merchant vessels was not always recorded. Lieutenant William Farquharson, paid off in 1816 after twelve years' service, is noted as commanding the 327-ton *Neva*, bound for Jamaica, in 1818 and 1819, 1821 and 1822, but in 1817 and 1820 is only recorded as being granted leave to travel there.⁶⁰ It is possible that he did not command the *Neva* in those years, but surely much more probable that he did but was not recorded as having done so, and therefore appears among the hundreds of officers who sought leave of absence to travel abroad for other, mainly unrecorded, reasons. Moreover, the Admiralty had long tended to look with disfavour upon captains who demeaned themselves by commanding humble merchant ships or lieutenants who served as

⁵⁸ See for example Lieutenant William Bowers; O'Byrne, *Naval Biographical Dictionary*, 106.

⁵⁹ See TNA, ADM 6/208, Admiralty Leave book, 1816-25.

⁶⁰ TNA, ADM 6/208, Admiralty Leave Book, 1816-25. Lieutenant William Farquharson, 14 Oct 1817, 24 Nov 1818, 25 Oct 1819, 5 Oct 1820, 1 Oct 1821, 5 Sept 1822; O'Byrne, *Naval Biographical Dictionary*, 348.

mates in vessels less prestigious than East Indiamen.⁶¹ Accordingly, virtually all officers who took leave of absence to serve in merchant ships were lieutenants and they were invariably recorded as commanding them, but one has to wonder how many took employment in lesser capacities on the not unreasonable assumption that the Admiralty was unlikely to find out.

Those who did move into merchant shipping engaged in a wide variety of trades and voyaged to many parts of the world. Several lieutenants did indeed ship as mates of East Indiamen, such as D. Lawless, who joined the *Regent* as mate in 1815, taking two years' leave to do so.⁶² Others, such as George Dacre, whose career had been interrupted by six years of imprisonment in France, went into private ships trading to the East Indies after the removal of the East India Company's monopoly there.⁶³ Such long voyages entailed a risk of not being able to comply with directions to return to England in six months, and consequently loss of half pay, but in the immediate post-war years this was presumably a risk worth taking. Others still moved into the country trade in the Indian Ocean, or into colonial shipping elsewhere in the world. Among the latter was Lieutenant John Kingdon, a veteran of Trafalgar who had travelled home with Collingwood's despatches in the *Pickle*, and subsequently been imprisoned in France after the *Inveterate* was wrecked on the French coast. He was commissioned lieutenant after his release in 1814 but never served again, and in 1820 travelled to Sierra Leone to take up command of a vessel there.⁶⁴ The majority traded from Britain, however, and their intended destinations appear to reflect quite closely the general regional deployment of British shipping at that time.⁶⁵ A great many commanded ships in trade with British North America and the Caribbean, among them David Briggs, who in 1821 took command of a ship trading to Jamaica. He had prior experience of the Caribbean from his service there during the preceding war.⁶⁶ Some also seem to have benefited from burgeoning British trading links with South

⁶¹ Rodger, *Wooden World*, 264-9.

⁶² TNA, ADM 6/207, Admiralty Leave Book, 1783-1815. Lieutenant D. Lawless, 14 Oct 1815.

⁶³ TNA, ADM 6/207, Admiralty Leave Book, 1783-1815. Lieutenant G.H. Dacre, 25 Nov 1815; O'Byrne, *Naval Biographical Dictionary*, 256.

⁶⁴ TNA, ADM 6/208, Admiralty Leave Book, 1816-25. Lieutenant John Kingdom, 12 Oct 1820; O'Byrne, *Naval Biographical Dictionary*, 616.

⁶⁵ See Palmer, *Politics, Shipping and the Repeal of the Navigation Laws*, 7.

⁶⁶ TNA, ADM 6/208, Admiralty Leave Book, 1816-25. Lieutenant David Briggs, 1 Jan 1821; O'Byrne, *Naval Biographical Dictionary*, 123-4.

America, such as John James Moore, who commanded a ship trading to Valparaiso.⁶⁷ Such extended voyages required lengthy periods of leave, which the Admiralty was willing to grant. Moore's existing leave of absence was extended by a further two years to cover his activities in South America, whilst Rowland Morgan had his extended by a year in 1819, whilst he commanded the brig *Alexander* to the West Indies.⁶⁸ A great many others took usually shorter periods of leave to command ships in European trade, such as Lewis Jones, who during 1819 augmented his half pay by commanding a merchant ship in the Baltic, all the while hoping for promotion, or Robert Parker Jones, unemployed after a career that had included action at Camperdown and service in India and the West Indies, who took a year off to command the *Frederick* in trade with Gibraltar and Leghorn.⁶⁹ A few others went into the Post Office packet service.⁷⁰ This was taken over by the Admiralty in 1823, and by 1828 was employing 27 commanders who were also commissioned officers.⁷¹ How men came by these opportunities and how they were able to establish positions even in the tight maritime labour market of the post-war depression is largely lost. In some cases, prior naval service probably conferred upon an individual a certain prestige and an assumption of competence that could not necessarily be made of men without it, in an age when intemperance and incompetence among masters was much remarked upon.⁷² This may well have been particularly significant in higher-status trades, such as to the East and West Indies.⁷³ Elsewhere, family connections in the shipping industry enabled men to secure employment, such as Lieutenant Samuel Walters, who apparently spent many of his half-pay years commanding a merchant ship owned by a relative.⁷⁴ In much the same way, half a century previously, the

⁶⁷ TNA, ADM 6/208, Admiralty Leave Book, 1816-25. Lieutenant John James Moore, 25 Sept 1821.

⁶⁸ TNA, ADM 6/208, Admiralty Leave Book, 1816-25. Lieutenant Rowland Morgan, 9 Dec 1819.

⁶⁹ TNA, C 114/6, box 2, Lieutenant Lewis Jones to Robert Brine, 11 Nov 1819. TNA, ADM 6/208, Admiralty Leave Book, 1816-25. Lieutenant R.P. Jones, 17 Oct 1815; O'Byrne, *Naval Biographical Dictionary*, 594.

⁷⁰ For example, Lieutenant Peter Procter. See John Marshall, *Royal Naval Biography*, vol.III, part 2 (London, 1832), 400. TNA, ADM 6/208, Admiralty Leave Book, 1816-25. Lieutenant John Little, 30 Jan 1821.

⁷¹ *Navy List*, 1828.

⁷² See M. Davies, *Belief in the Sea: State Encouragement of British Merchant Shipping and Shipbuilding* (London, 1992), 56-7.

⁷³ A.G. Course, *The Merchant Navy: A Social History* (London, 1963), 196.

⁷⁴ C. Northcote Parkinson (ed), *Samuel Walters, Lieutenant RN: The Memoirs of an Officer in Nelson's Navy* (Liverpool, 1949; reprint Liverpool, 2005), 117.

future Admiral Peter Rainier had spent his half-pay period after the Seven Years' War commanding a ship owned by a member of his family.⁷⁵

Some who went into merchant shipping went on to illustrious careers, such as Christopher Claxton, who had been commissioned Lieutenant in 1812 and remained so twenty years later, when he published the *Naval Monitor*, a conduct guide for young men entering the profession, in which he remarked on the 'mass of interest that has been necessary to obtain promotion' and regretted his own lack of success in that direction.⁷⁶ Paid off on returning from America in 1815, he commanded a revenue cutter at Great Yarmouth between 1816 and 1819, and was eventually promoted commander in 1842.⁷⁷ By then, however, he had already become Harbour Master at Bristol and become involved with the embryonic Great Western Steamship Company. By 1838 he was its Managing Director and commanded the pioneering transatlantic liner *Great Western*. He was subsequently the first captain of SS *Great Britain*.⁷⁸ Claxton was perhaps the most prominent officer to become involved with steam vessels, but he was far from the only one. James Hosken, who had escaped a long period of unemployment and served in the West Indies, home waters and the revenue cutters throughout the 1820s, followed Claxton in becoming involved with the Great Western Steamship Company, and succeeded him in command of the *Great Western* and subsequently *Great Britain*.⁷⁹ Elsewhere, Edward Chappell became secretary of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company,⁸⁰ and well before this, George Dodd, who commanded the 'steam yacht' *Thames* from Glasgow to London and published a *Dissertation on Steam Engines and Steam-Packets* as early as 1818, had been an officer in the navy.⁸¹

⁷⁵ Peter A. Ward, *British Naval Power in the East 1794-1815: The Command of Admiral Peter Rainier* (Woodbridge, 2013), 18.

⁷⁶ *Navy List*, 1814; C. Claxton, *The Naval Monitor; Containing Many Useful Hints for Both the Public and Private Conduct of the Young Gentlemen, In, or Entering, That Profession*, 2nd edn (London, 1833), ix.

⁷⁷ O'Byrne, *Naval Biographical Dictionary*, 198.

⁷⁸ S. Fox, *The Ocean Railway: Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Samuel Cunard and the Revolutionary World of the Great Atlantic Steamships* (London, 2003), 70; B. Greenhill, 'Steam before the Screw,' in R. Gardiner (ed), *The Advent of Steam: The Merchant Steamship before 1900* (London, 1993), 24-5; Lewis, *Navy in Transition*, 83.

⁷⁹ O'Byrne, *Naval Biographical Dictionary*, 544.

⁸⁰ Lewis, *Navy in Transition*, 83.

⁸¹ G. Dodd, *A Dissertation on Steam Engines and Steam-Packets* (London, 1818).

Dodd was evidently among those with an interest in technology and engineering, and several officers' careers after 1815 took them in this direction. In the post-war decades the Navy Board was 'bombarded with suggestions for steam vessels,'⁸² and a proportion of these came from erstwhile sea officers with a scientific interest in the subject. Among them were Commander George Scobell, whose new 'dissecting paddle wheel' was fitted to two vessels which sailed with Edward Parry's expedition to the North Pole in 1824,⁸³ and Commander John Pearse, who spent the post-war decades 'scientifically examining' aspects of ship design and construction, and published a treatise on naval architecture in 1836.⁸⁴ Many others experimented with innovations that had a direct naval, or at least maritime, relevance, such as Commander John Weeks. Whilst employed on active service he had already experimented with a substitute for vulnerable lifting gun-port covers, and then presented to the Society of Arts a new form of night telegraph. This met with a 'favourable reception,' although the Admiralty decided its introduction in peacetime was not necessary, and whatever momentum Weeks may have managed to build up behind the project faded after his death in 1824.⁸⁵ Lieutenant Thomas Cook was awarded a Royal Humane Society medal and later became a Fellow of the Royal Society for his innovations in the field of lifesaving equipment.⁸⁶

Others still turned their attention in less obviously nautical directions. Commander John Jekyll had experimented with improvements to ships' pumps whilst at sea, showing 'much ingenuity' in adapting the common hand pump to serve as a fire engine, but whilst unemployed after the war he started experimenting with steam baths, and his improved version was by the 1830s reputedly in use in several London hospitals. He also experimented with improved equipment for shoeing draught oxen.⁸⁷ Much more illustrious was Commander Samuel Brown, who as early as 1808 had registered a patent for the use of iron in ships' standing rigging and, more successfully, begun experimenting with iron anchor chains. He established his own

⁸² B. Greenhill and A. Giffard, *Steam, Politics and Patronage: The Transformation of the Royal Navy 1815-54* (London, 1994), 30.

⁸³ O'Byrne, *Naval Biographical Dictionary*, 1038.

⁸⁴ J. Pearse, *Reflections on the Present State of the Theory of Naval Architecture* (Plymouth, 1836); O'Byrne, *Naval Biographical Dictionary*, 882.

⁸⁵ Marshall, *Royal Naval Biography*, vol.IV, part 1, 71.

⁸⁶ O'Byrne, *Naval Biographical Dictionary*, 225.

⁸⁷ Marshall, *Royal Naval Biography*, vol.IV, part 1, 65-6.

firm on the Isle of Dogs in 1812, and the following year built a prototype suspension bridge. He patented this innovation in 1817, and the first suspension bridge to his design, the Union Bridge over the River Tweed, was completed in 1820. He went on to build a series of pioneering bridges around the British Isles, was knighted in 1838 and died in London, a wealthy and influential man, in 1852.⁸⁸

Those who went on to such illustrious careers were very much in the minority, though, and the preponderance of unemployed officers augmented their half pay with whatever work they could. 'I should be glad to get hold of any employment that would add to my income,' remarked Flowers Beckett in 1816.⁸⁹ This implied that he was willing to take on virtually any job that came his way. And yet, although many must have found paid work ashore, there is little hint of it in either Marshall or O'Byrne's compilations of naval biographies. Perhaps it sat ill with some men's pride to admit that they had been forced to take on perhaps humble employment to make ends meet. On the other hand, some sailed as supercargoes, such as C.W. Payne, on a voyage to Jamaica in 1820,⁹⁰ which may well imply that they had found reasonably prestigious employment in the commercial sector. Some also went into business on their own account, such as Lieutenant Thomas Stares, who by 1818 had a contract to supply unspecified goods to the Dockyard at Portsmouth and used his agent to solicit payment of his bills.⁹¹

For those disabled or too old to work, one more opportunity opened up, in the form of Greenwich Hospital. Since the early eighteenth century this had provided accommodation for former seamen, mainly but not exclusively those who had served in the navy, and was a more attractive prospect than dependence on charity or the Poor Law, which was the lot of many who had left other trades. By 1815 there were 2,700 in-pensioners living at Greenwich. Moreover, out-pensions had been introduced in 1763, and 30,000 officers and men were drawing them by 1820.⁹²

⁸⁸ A.W. Skempton, *A Biographical Dictionary of Civil Engineers in Great Britain and Ireland: 1500-1830*, Vol. 1 (London, 2002), 85-7; O'Byrne, *Naval Biographical Dictionary*, 133.

⁸⁹ TNA, C 114/109, Lieutenant Flowers Beckett to Robert Brine, 1 Jan 1816.

⁹⁰ TNA, ADM 6/208, Admiralty Leave Book, 1816-25. Lieutenant C.W. Payne, 10 Jun 1820.

⁹¹ TNA, C 114/160, Lieutenant Thomas Stares to Robert Brine, 11 Jan, 28 Apr, 12 Jul, 11, 18, 21 Oct 1818.

⁹² See P. Newell, *Greenwich Hospital: A Royal Foundation 1692-1983* (London, 1984), 84, 123-4; M.H. Wilcox, 'The "Poor Decayed Seamen" of Greenwich Hospital, 1705-1763,' in *International Journal of Maritime History* XXV No.1 (2013).

Several of the older generation of officers ended up as Greenwich pensioners once the Napoleonic War had drawn to a close, such as Edward Killwick, who had first received his commission in 1782 and was admitted to the out-pension in 1814,⁹³ or John Edwards, promoted Commander in 1795 and admitted in 1822.⁹⁴ For those who had received their commissions in the 1780s and 1790s, and by the war's end were too elderly to expect further employment, Greenwich Hospital was a natural place to turn for support.

One final option was to join the thousands who emigrated from the British Isles each year. No less than 14,966 people left the British Isles for the colonies in 1821, 13,772 the following year and 10,771 in 1823, with the overwhelming majority heading to the North American colonies.⁹⁵ Migration was regarded as a 'safety valve,' reducing the numbers of the unemployed and potentially restive, a problem especially acute in the years after the war as demobilised servicemen flooded an already depressed labour market.⁹⁶ Commissioned officers were hardly members of what were regarded as the 'dangerous classes,' but it was as natural for them as for those thrown out of the declining handloom weaving industry to seek opportunities overseas. As early as 1816 Flowers Beckett was pondering the possibility of obtaining leave from the Admiralty to go to India, and using a contact in the East India Company to secure a position there, although evidently he decided against it and remained in England.⁹⁷ No doubt some of the hundreds of officers who sought leave to travel overseas each year between 1815 and 1825 found opportunities open to them and never returned. Others were seeking to explore what assistance might be available for those wishing to emigrate to British North America.⁹⁸ Captain Fife asked his agent in October 1818:

Having seen a Statement in one of the country papers that lands are to be granted to Officers &c in the Navy and Army in certain Proportions in

⁹³ John Marshall, *Royal Naval Biography*, vol.III, part 2 (London, 1832), 258.

⁹⁴ Marshall, *Royal Naval Biography*, vol.III, part 2, 252.

⁹⁵ BPP 1830 XXIX, Return of Number of Persons who have emigrated from United Kingdom to Colonies, 1821-29. Emigration to British North America totalled 12,470 (83%) in 1821, 11,282 (82%) in 1822 and 8,133 (75%) in 1823.

⁹⁶ See M. Harper, 'British Migration and the Peopling of the Empire,' in A. Porter (ed), *The Oxford History of the British Empire, vol. III: The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1999), 76.

⁹⁷ TNA, C 114/109, Lieutenant Flowers Beckett to Robert Brine, 11 Oct 1816.

⁹⁸ See BPP 1827 V, Third report from the Select Committee on Emigration from the United Kingdom, Appendix 1.

Canada, will be obliged if you can give me any correct information on that head, by the Statement I saw application must be made at the Secretary of State's Office for the Colonial Department. And as the Peace is likely to continue should be glad to know if Lands are granted to Persons in my situation, in what proportion and on what Terms.⁹⁹

Nothing came of this, and in general assistance for migrants to Canada was limited and infrequent. More assistance was available for those seeking to go to Van Diemen's Land and New South Wales, where in the 1820s convicts outnumbered free settlers three to one.¹⁰⁰ By 1827 the Colonial Department had instituted a scheme, via the Admiralty, for encouraging half-pay army and navy officers with more than seven years' service to settle in these places through grants of land. They were aided by remission from the usual quit rent paid by emigrants, perpetually in the case of those of more than twenty years' service, and down through a sliding scale to ten years' remission for those of seven to ten years' service. Despite this incentive, they were still required to pay for their own outbound passage.¹⁰¹

Going abroad, of course, raised the possibility of service in other navies, especially those of newly independent states seeking to establish navies of their own, which were frequently short of experienced officers and sometimes facing naval threats that required them to establish credible maritime defences as a matter of urgency. Thomas Cochrane, who was recruited to command the nascent Chilean navy shortly after his release from prison for his part in the 1814 stock exchange fraud (for which he was also dismissed from the Royal Navy), and who went on to an illustrious naval career in Chile, Brazil and Greece before returning to Britain in 1830, is the classic example.¹⁰² He was far from the only one at least to consider service overseas, however. Commander Walter Forman seriously considered joining the Greek navy during the Greek war of independence from the Ottoman Empire, although eventually his lack of command of the language dissuaded him.¹⁰³ Frank Abney Hastings, who had been dismissed the Royal Navy as a Lieutenant for challenging a senior to a duel, had no such difficulties, and joined the Greeks in 1822. Five years later he

⁹⁹ TNA, C 114/6, box 3, Captain Thomas Fife to Robert Brine, 16 October 1818.

¹⁰⁰ Harper, 'British Migration,' 78-9.

¹⁰¹ *Navy List* 1828, 154-6.

¹⁰² See D. Cordingly, *Cochrane the Dauntless: The Life and Adventures of Thomas Cochrane* (London, 2007), 264-331.

¹⁰³ Marshall, *Royal Naval Biography*, vol.III, part 2, 425.

commanded the first steamship to fight in a naval action, destroying seven Turkish ships in the Gulf of Corinth and forcing the Ottoman fleet into what became the Battle of Navarino.¹⁰⁴

The big disincentive to service with a foreign navy, though, was that it entailed having to resign one's Royal Navy commission. This was a step few were prepared to take. Life on a lieutenant's half pay entailed constant economy, debt and no doubt outright poverty for many whose dependents made calls on what little money they had, but at least it was a secure income, which was a luxury relatively few enjoyed in the difficult decade that followed the end of the Napoleonic Wars. This, fundamentally, is why, although many of the thousands of redundant officers had little hope of seeing active service again, and pursued a variety of alternative careers on land and at sea, relatively few of them took the step of cutting their ties with the navy altogether.

Conclusion

'For the future sea officer,' remarks Nicholas Rodger, 'the most important means of ensuring a successful career was to be born at the right moment.'¹⁰⁵ The blighted careers of officers detailed here, and their sometimes desperate efforts to find alternative employment, attest to the cruel irony of having been born twenty years too late. Mass redundancies among naval officers were inevitable once peace returned in 1815. No doubt many of those who received their commissions late in the wars must have realised that their chances of future employment would be slim as the end of hostilities neared, for as we have seen, cyclical unemployment had been a defining feature of naval service for well over a century, and most officers would have been aware that the unprecedented size of the navy to which the navy had grown would be followed by an unprecedented shrinkage once the need for such a formidable force had passed. None could have foreseen, however, the severity of the recession that followed the war, or the longevity of the peace. We can only speculate on how the hopes of many for further employment and distinction at sea ebbed away as the years passed, and doubtless observations such as 'these peaceable times are the devil' reflect growing frustration and unhappiness at the situation in which many found

¹⁰⁴ *Concise Dictionary of National Biography: From Earliest Times to 1985*, vol.II (Oxford, 1992), 1,347.

¹⁰⁵ Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, 381.

themselves. Nevertheless, as we have seen, although some found themselves unable to find another income and dependent on their half pay, many others reacted to the situation energetically and sought to make the best of it. Few gave up the security that half pay offered, but the Admiralty generally took a relaxed attitude to its unemployed officers seeking alternative roles, and many took advantage of this freedom to forge a wide variety of careers on land and at sea. Nevertheless, the 'great block' remained a personal disappointment for those whose promising careers ground to a halt in 1815 and never resumed, and a sometimes-resented expense for an increasingly *laissez-faire* minded state, until death thinned out the ranks of the unemployed in the middle of the nineteenth century.