HISTORY OF MEDICINE

Committee for the Relief of Distressed Seamen: correspondence from the Admiralty in 1818–19

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The Seamen's Hospital Society, which was to become a great Victorian charity, with the object of caring for both the physical and spiritual health of seafarers (most merchant seamen) in the Port of London, was founded at a meeting on 8 March 1821. However, it is not widely known that it had a *temporary* predecessor—*The Committee for the Relief of Distressed (Destitute) Seamen*. Ready cooperation was received from the Admiralty in most of its affairs, but “disposal” of many of these “redundant” mariners proved to be a somewhat difficult matter.

Although at the end of the Napoleonic wars (1792–1815) sailors in the Royal Navy were overall relatively well cared for (Haslar Hospital at Gosport was, for example, “in full swing”), this was by no means the case in the merchant service. In 1821, the Seamen's Hospital Society was formed as a *permanent* institution to care for them, but it is not widely recognised that this was preceded by a *temporary* organisation—the Committee for the Relief of Distressed (Destitute) Seamen—which had been founded in early 1818.

On 6 January 1818, *The Times* drew attention to a meeting held the previous day, at the City of London Tavern, chaired by William Wilberforce MP (1759–1833) (fig 1), to take “into consideration the means of relieving the Distresses of the wretched Seamen now exposed to want and misery in the streets of the metropolis”.¹ It had only very recently been appreciated that “Of the many objects who are now standing in the streets [of London], the greater part are in what have once been sailors' jackets”.² There can be no doubt that public sympathy for these sailors who had served the nation in the Napoleonic wars had, during the winter of 1817–18, been rapidly building up.³ It was resolved at the meeting on 5 January that “James Edward Gordon, Esq, Lieutenant in His Majesty's Navy, be requested to accept the Office of Honorary Secretary” of a committee to alleviate the problems faced by these mendicants (that is, “seamen in distress”). Details of this meeting were also recorded in the *Gentleman's Magazine*.⁴ This institution, *The Committee for the Relief of Distressed (or Destitute) Seamen* (CRDS) has received very little recognition, and should not be confused with “The Refuge for the Destitute”, which was founded in 1807⁵ and did *not* focus on seafarers, but on London's destitute in general.

By 8 January, *The Times* was able to report that the “Committee of the Association for the relief of

destitute Seamen” had met the previous day at the King's Head Tavern, Poultry, in order to decide on an effective strategy. About 110 of the mendicants had already been examined by a subcommittee and they were “sent over the water to a house [owned by Mrs Hayes] hired for their reception at Newington [where ‘arrangements (had already) been made for feeding and lodging between two and three hundred, at the moderate expense of 1 s. per day’], until receiving vessels [could] be got ready”. It was intimated to the committee by Captain Wake, harbour master at Deptford, that “Lord Melville (see note 1) ° [First Lord of the Admiralty] had given orders to place at their disposal three sloops of war ... to be stationed in such parts of the river as the Committee might think fit”. The anonymous article continued: “It is understood that one [of the ships] will be stationed off the Tower, and another off the entrance to the London Docks. The other ... will be fitted up as an hospital ship”.⁷ Meanwhile, John William Buckle had accepted the chairmanship of the CRDS. A few days later, “near 250 seamen [had] been housed in [the] temporary lodging”, and the newly formed charity soon had numerous supporters.⁸

By the end of January, a further meeting was held, again at the King's Head, in order to discuss the ultimate “disposal of these destitutes”. By then, six receiving and one hospital ship, capable of receiving 1400 men, were in operation, and 1041 (including 59 foreigners and 48 “men of colour”) had already been received. One hundred and ninety seven had been “disposed of effectually, some in merchants' service and others in the navy”. Fewer than 500 were fit for service.⁹

The last day of “application for relief” (except in exceptional cases) was fixed for 14 February (that is, after only 5 weeks of the charity's existence). Just before that *The Times* had summarised the state of the charity at that time; the committee members, by then numbering 70, had been divided into three: *Examining*, *Shipping*, and *Finance*. Almost all applicants had served at sea, many on “ships of war”. Up to that time (that is, mid-February), 1230 men had been received on board the seven ships, and of these, 349 had already been “disposed of”, in either the navy or the merchant service; 162 were on board the *Dromedary*—the hospital ship (61 of whom were seriously ill), three had been sent on shore for misconduct, five had died, and 711 (besides the sick) remained on board

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Figure 1 William Wilberforce MP (1759–1833) Engraving published in *The Illustrated London News* (Reproduced with permission, the Wellcome Library, London).

one of the receiving ships. The cost of victualling was about 5p per man per day.¹⁰

This *temporary* organisation had preceded the formation of the *permanent* institution, the *Seamen's Hospital Society* (SHS), which was not founded until 8 March 1821.^{11–13}

CORRESPONDENCE FROM THE ADMIRALTY

The Secretary and Second Secretary to the Admiralty, who signed most of these letters, in 1818, were¹⁴: John Wilson Croker (note 2)¹⁵ (fig 2) and John Barrow (note 3)¹⁶ (fig 3), respectively.

All letters addressed to the CRDS, are unpublished, in the SHS archive, and consecutive unless otherwise stated, and they were written from the *Admiralty Office*.

Loan of the ships

The first letter, addressed to Buckle, was dated 8 January 1818, and signed by Croker; this set the scene for the Admiralty's sympathetic and prompt support for the new venture:

"Having laid before my Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty your letter" of the 7th Instant communicating the request of the Committee assembled for the purpose of relieving distressed seamen, that three sloops of war fitted in ordinary, with their warrant officers may be furnished to the Committee & placed in such a situation of the River as shall be agreed upon with the Harbour Masters, for the reception of Seamen requiring temporary relief, I have it in command to acquaint you that my Lords having understood from a

Figure 2 John Wilson Croker MP (1780–1857). Secretary of the Admiralty. (Reproduced with permission, National Portrait Gallery, London.)

conversation with Captain Brenton & Captain Wake [see above] yesterday evening that the above application might be expected this morning, I received their Lordships Commands, in order that no time should be lost, to anticipate the request, and the Navy Board were in consequence yesterday evening put into communication with Captain Wake, and directed to furnish the required assistance.¹⁷

The next letter headed *immediate*, also addressed to Buckle, and dated 12 January, is equally helpful. Gordon had written on 9 January requesting "three additional sloops" in case they should be required:

... I am to acquaint you that my Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty at the sitting of the Board this morning gave orders to the Navy Board to have three additional ships ready to be brought forward in succession if necessary. My Lords further command me to request that the Committee will communicate with the Navy Board when they are likely to want these ships.¹⁸

A further letter of the same date is a reply to a further request from Gordon for "a ship at each of the principal Out Ports".¹⁹ This matter, Croker wrote, had been "referred ... for Lord Sidmouth's consideration" (note 4).²⁰ The definitive reply came a few days later. This letter was again headed *immediate* and directed to Buckle:

... Lord Melville has had a verbal communication with Lord Sidmouth [on the matter of a Ship at each of the principal Out Ports] & as it is not the intention of His Majesty's Government to take any measures towards forming Establishments at the Out Ports of the nature described ... more especially if the system were to be attended with any expence to the Public, & as the fitting out and navigating to the several Ports any of His Majesty's Ships would be attended with a very considerable expence, My Lords do not feel themselves at liberty to comply with the Committee's request.

Figure 3 (Sir) John Barrow (1764–1848) Second Secretary to the Admiralty. (Reproduced with permission, the Wellcome Library, London.)

Their Lordships also think it right to remind the Committee that in all probability Ships perfectly fit for the purpose might be obtained at the different Ports at much less expense & more expeditiously than by fitting out vessels, and navigating them from His Majesty's Dockyards".²¹

On 17 January, Croker again wrote to Buckle in reply to a further request from Gordon for use of the *Dromedary* as "an Hospital Ship" – "in addition to the Vessels already placed at [the disposal of the Committee]". This request too was granted by "my Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty".²²

The next letter from Croker was on a rather different tack. In reply to a letter requesting permission for the entry of "Seamen in distress" on board His Majesty's Ships the *Spartan* and *Drake* from Gordon (dated three days previously), he wrote: "that two officers of the above ships have been directed to attend for the purpose of ascertaining whether there are any men fit for the service, and, if there be, to enter them accordingly."²³

The following letter, dated 4 February, was signed not by Croker, but by Barrow: "The Navy Board has been directed to furnish the supply of Junk requested [in a letter dated the previous day]".²⁴

A letter, a month later, was short and to the point: "... directions have been given to the Navy Board to cause the *Nautilus* to be received into charge".²⁵ Later in March, Barrow again wrote to Buckle [in reply to a letter from Gordon, dated 28 March]: the Navy Board had been "directed ... to receive the *Dasher* into charge on the 31st Instant".²⁶ A similar letter, dated

13 April, in reply to one two days before from Gordon merely stated that the Navy Board had also been directed "to receive the *Sapphire* into Charge".²⁷ And one of 23 April in reply to Gordon's letter of 24 (sic) April indicated that "directions [had] been given to the Navy Board to receive the *Plover* and *Perseus* into their charge".²⁸ In reply to a request from Gordon (on 26 May) Barrow wrote that the Navy Board had received "the necessary orders for receiving into charge HM Ship *Abundance* ...".²⁹

By now, therefore, seven ships had been put, by the Admiralty, at the disposal of the CRDS; Table 1 gives details of these vessels. It is unclear why there was such a long delay in formalising the loan of these ships, but excessive bureaucracy seems likely; *The Times* had informed its readership by mid-February that seven vessels were already at the disposal of the CRDS (see above). The rapidity with which the Admiralty acted and the promptness of their replies to requests is by any standard most impressive.

Disposal of the destitute sailors

The next letter in the SHS archive (dated 9 July) is one from Barrow. In a letter in reply to one from Gordon of the previous day, Barrow referred to three "Men of Colour", who, the Committee of the CRDS had felt should be returned to Africa. "I am commanded [he wrote] to acquaint you [that the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty] are desirous of being informed the Names of the Ships in which these men respectively served before a Passage be ordered for them".³⁰ This was followed by a further communication on 13 July (this time from Croker).³¹

My Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty having been pleased this day to direct Rear Admiral Sir John Gore [note 5]³² at Chatham to order a passage for the Men of Colour ... on board His Majesty's Ship "*Tartan*"; I am commanded to acquaint you there with, in answer to your letter of the 10th Inst, that these Men should be directed to apply at the Admirals' Office at Chatham.

This was followed by another request, this time considerably more controversial and involving "an Insane Ceylonese Negro", "together with several other men who are desirous of returning to their respective homes". In a letter dated 5 August, Barrow informed Gordon that "Admiral Sir George Campbell at Portsmouth is directed to provide Passages in His Majesty's Ship *Salisbury* for all the West Indians [with one exception 'who appears to have been six years out of the Service'], and that the Navy Board are directed to provide Passages, in the Weymouth storeship, for the two Men Natives of Gibraltar and Venice".³³ In a further letter, later that month, Barrow indicated that although the Committee considered that the Ceylonese man was "an object for the provision of the Naval

Table 1 Details of the seven ships/hulks put by the Admiralty at the disposal of the Committee for the Relief of Destitute Seamen (CRDS)

Name of HM ship	Date built	Description	Tonnage	Site of mooring
<i>Dromedary</i> *	1799	Storeship	1048	Deptford
<i>Nautilus</i>	1816	Sloop (brig.)	185	?
<i>Dasher</i>	1797	Sloop (flush decked)	401	Deptford
<i>Sapphire</i>	1806	Sloop (with quarter-deck fore-castle)	426	Deptford
<i>Plover</i>	1796	Sloop (with quarter-deck fore-castle)	422	Deptford
<i>Perseus</i>	1812	Sixth-rate (22 guns)	522	Tower
<i>Abundance</i>	1799	Storeship	674	Deptford

*Used by the CRDS as a hospital ship.

Lunatic Asylum ... this person has not any claim on the Naval Service".³⁴

The next letter to the Committee of the CRDS from the Admiralty Office was received in early 1819 (that is, when the fledgling establishment was one year old). Barrow wrote (on 12 January) in reply to a further letter from Gordon stating that "there are generally from thirty to fifty Seamen on board the Dromedary whom the Committee conceive may be employed with advantage to Government in His Majesty's Dock Yard at Deptford, whose services they offer gratuitously"! The thrust of his letter was that "the Navy Board [had] been directed to avail themselves of this offer if they see no objection thereto".³⁵

Arranging conveyance of some of these destitute sailors to their country of origin, clearly now became a major activity of the CRDS Committee. Barrow wrote to Gordon on 11 March 1819 in respect of a further six seamen who the committee wanted to repatriate to their respective countries. Their Lordships had duly ordered a passage for one of them—in His Majesty's Ship Newcastle, then at Chatham. However, they did not feel able to "give Passages to the other [five] seamen".³⁶ A letter, dated 4 November 1819, was from Barrow, but this time to John Winnard; it concerned a man who confessed himself to be a deserter from the *Phaeton*, who "their Lordships [had] no intention of claiming ...".³⁷

Pensions: a contentious issue for the CRDS

In January 1819, two letters signed by a senior clerk (John Dyer) in the Admiralty Office, were received by the committee. Both were addressed to Winnard and concerned a pension for a "Black Seaman". He had served at sea for 20 years and six months and he was thus "allowed a Pension of one shilling a day, or £18.4.0 per annum".³⁸ However, the Paymaster of Pensions at The Royal Hospital, Greenwich reported that in 1816, this man had been "allowed a Pension of £15.4.0", and since he claimed that he was about to return to his native Country, he had been "allowed to commute his Pension for £30.8.0, which he has since spent". The second letter continued: "... as he has only served 3 Months since the first Pension was granted, he cannot be allowed any further relief". Furthermore, it stated, he was "liable to prosecution for the Fraud he has attempted".³⁹ Another seamen who was apparently known to Sir George Cockburn (note 6)⁴⁰ "had not served 14 years when paid off from the Navy and consequently he [too was] not entitled to a pension".⁴¹ A further sailor too was discovered not to be entitled to a pension.⁴² Yet another was "allowed £6 in full satisfaction" soon after he was discharged from the Navy, and therefore "it [was] improbable to afford him any further relief".^{42 43}

EPILOGUE

When the *permanent* Society (SHS) was formed, the residuum of the funds collected by the CRDS was transferred to this organisation. An entry in an SHS minute book for 12 October 1821 states:

The Sum of £474:16:2 was this day transferred to the Credit of this Institution [by two members of the CRDS Finance Committee], being the Balance of the Funds remaining in the Treasurer's hands. Resolved Unanimously: That the thanks of the Committee be offered [to the two gentlemen] for their kind attention to the Interest of this Establishment.^{44 45}

NOTES

1. **The Second Viscount Melville (Robert Saunders Dundas)** MP KT (1771–1851) was First Lord of the Admiralty for 15 years (1812–27). He was a prominent

politician and statesman who had been President of the Board of Control (1807 and 1809), Irish Secretary (1809), and Chancellor of St Andrews University (1814). He had a great interest in Arctic exploration.

2. **John Wilson Croker**, MP, LLD, FRS (1780–1857) was a lawyer, who became a prominent politician and essayist. He was appointed to the post of Secretary to the Admiralty in 1809 and resigned in 1830. In 1830, he apparently introduced the term "conservatives". Croker also apparently became well known for his highly critical assessment of John Keats' *Endymion*.

3. **John Barrow**, Bt, FRS, FLS (1764–1848) was second secretary (1804–6 and 1807–45) (and later Secretary) of the Admiralty. During this correspondence he held the former post. Barrow received a baronetcy in 1835. He was a prolific writer and an authority on the history of the Cape; he also founded The Royal Geographical Society.

4. **The first Viscount Sidmouth (Henry Addington)** MP (1757–1844) was at the time of this correspondence, Home Secretary. He had been speaker of the House of Commons (1789–1801), first Lord of the Treasury, Chancellor of the Exchequer (1801), and Prime Minister (1801–4). He was president of the Council and Home Secretary (1812–22). He had been "much occupied with the proceedings against Warren Hastings".

5. **Admiral Sir John Gore**, KCB (1772–1836) had had a distinguished naval career, especially at Corsica and Toulon in 1794–5 and 1799, and in the capture of Spanish ships off Cadiz in 1804. From 1818 to 1821, he was commander-in-chief at the Nore.

6. **Admiral Sir George Cockburn**, Bt. MP, FRS, GCB (1772–1853) had seen service in the Mediterranean (1793–1802), West Indies (1808), and the French and Spanish coasts (1810–11). He had conveyed Napoleon to St Helena in 1815, and became Governor of this Island from 1815 to 1816.

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