

BY AN OLD HYDROGRAPHER

What's in a Name? Part 1 'Owen'

In the summer of 1953 two British surveying ships were lying in No 2 basin in Chatham Dockyard. Owen had recently returned (with me as a watch-keeper) after a busy two-year commission working in the Mediterranean, Red Sea and Persian Gulf. The brand new Vidal was completing her fitting-out prior to acceptance trials, having being constructed in the dockyard. Both were named to commemorate notable hydrographic surveyors of the nineteenth century who, we were informed (see Oxford Companion to Ships & the Sea), "were best remembered for their work on the African coast."

As a young surveying officer I 'shifted my bag and hammock' from *Owen* to *Vidal* (no hanging around in those days!) and was suitably impressed by the improvements in equipment and comforts installed in my new ship; but first of all, who was 'Owen'?

One of four World War II Loch/Bay class frigates to be completed to very generous specifications as survey ships, HMS *Owen* was first commissioned in 1948 and named for Vice Admiral William Fitzwilliam Owen. I had learned a great deal about my profession and enjoyed my time while serving in her, appreciating her wooden decks, air-conditioned chartroom and comparative comfort in the tropics. I knew almost nothing of Admiral Owen and so recently, with time on my hands and having entered his rank and full name, I pressed the button on my favourite search engine, found a wide choice of websites, many in Canada, and began browsing.

The Owen story begins with the Admiral's extraordinary father, also William Owen (1737-1778). The impoverished fourth son of a Monmouthshire land-owning family, he sought fame and fortune in the Royal Navy and was clearly an adventurous character who distinguished himself in India during the Seven Years' War but unfortunately lost an arm at Pondicherry. Discontented with subsequent life in England as an unemployed Lieutenant existing on a small pension, he actively sought other chances of improving his lot and was taken into the employment of Lord William Campbell. Promoted to the rank of Commander, his new job was to act as Governor's secretary in a 'colony not far from Britain'. New Brunswick proved to be the destination: Governor Campbell and his staff arrived in Halifax in 1766 and a year later Owen, by now promoted to Captain, was granted lands comprising an island in the Bay of Fundy.

In 1767 Owen left his appointment under Lord Campbell, returned to Europe and, having managed to lose an eye in a brawl on the Continent, set about raising funds to develop his land in Nova Scotia into a self-sufficient, and hopefully profitable, venture. He returned to his island with a shipload of indentured workers recruited in Manchester and Liverpool to establish a fiefdom, which he now named Campobello. Progress was good and he seems to have got along particularly well with his housekeeper, Sarah Haslem, who eventually bore him two sons: Edward and William. However, before the latter was born, Captain Owen felt the need for more lucrative adventures; in 1771 he abandoned his struggling colonisers and returned to England accompanied by Sarah and his eldest son Edward to take another appointment in the Navy. His second son was born in 1774. Alas, Captain Owen died while on active service in India in 1778 and ownership of the island of Campobello passed to a nephew, David Owen; his two young sons were not named as his heirs but were nevertheless adequately provided for and brought up by their mother.

In due course the boys followed their father into the Navy, prospering rather better than their restless, tempestuous father. The elder, Edward William Campbell Rich Owen, became one of Nelson's most dashing frigate captains and reached the rank of full Admiral in 1846; his younger brother William Fitzwilliam Owen turned to hydrography and surveying. As a young man he was present at the 'Glorious 1st of June' battle in 1794. Promoted Lieutenant in 1797, in 1803 he was given command of the brig *Seaflower*, in which he undertook surveys in the West Indies. In 1806 he explored the Maldiv Islands and discovered the Seaflower Channel off the coast of Sumatra. He fought against the Dutch in the East Indies and was captured and held by the French, being incarcerated from 1808 to 1810 with Matthew Flinders in Isle de France. It was during this time in captivity that he contracted malaria, perhaps compensated for by his close association with that fine explorer and surveyor.

In 1814, having achieved the rank of Captain, William Owen was serving in Canada under his elder brother, Commodore Sir Edward Owen, Commander-in-Chief of the Naval Forces in the Great Lakes. The little remembered war of 1812 to 1815 between the United States of America and Great Britain had defined the Great Lakes boundary between Canada and America and the C-in-C was directed to instigate a comprehensive survey of the waterways. He assigned this task to his younger brother William, assisted by Lieutenants Alexander Vidal and Henry Bayfield among others; a great deal of work was accomplished by this remarkable team (see 'As it Was', Hydro international Vols. 1-6, page 63).

In 1821 Captain William Owen was appointed to command a survey expedition to chart the coast of Africa, an immense undertaking which lasted until 1826. The squadron, comprising a 20-gun, 6th-rate ship and her smaller tender, was beset by malaria and cholera which decimated the crews; replacements came from Britain or were 'acquired' by persuading members of the crews of the packet boats carrying dispatches to and from the Cape to transfer their allegiances. After six years surveying, and incidentally suppressing slave traders, the

ships finally returned to Britain with material for 83 charts covering thirty thousand miles of coastline. Owen's deputy throughout this adventure was his former assistant in the Great Lakes, now Commander Alexander Vidal. It is a mark of the respect in which Owen was held that he was presented with a truly magnificent silver punchbowl to mark the end of this long and hazardous enterprise. It is inscribed "Presented by the Officers of His Majesty's Ships *Leven* and *Barracouta* ... as a tribute of his esteem and grateful acknowledgement for his unrelenting kindness and attention to their welfare and likewise in token of the very high sense they entertain of his eminent abilities." His great-grandson Rear-Admiral E. O. Cochrane presented the punchbowl to the ship as "one of the finest trophies any HM Ship ever received."

In 1827 the British Government was persuaded that the island of Fernando Po in the Bight of Benin would be a healthier place for a colony than the mainland Niger delta. Owen was appointed to command HMS *Eden* to establish it and act as Governor; however, the dreaded malaria proved to be just as lethal there as it was on the mainland and the project was soon abandoned. Owen continued to be involved in hydrographic surveying and exploration but he was not successful in becoming Hydrographer of the Navy, this post being filled by Francis Beaufort in 1829, at which point Captain Owen graciously wrote to Beaufort congratulating him on his appointment. He then took time out to complete his massive two-volume treatise 'A Narrative of Voyages to Explore the Shores of Africa, Arabia and Madagascar in HM Ships *Leven* and *Barracouta*' - a first-edition copy is currently being advertised for £1,800 - before looking elsewhere. By now aged sixty, he set off for Canada with his wife and two daughters in 1834 to seek new horizons, acquiring Campobello Island from his relatives in 1835 and making a permanent home there.

In his second career, Owen was elected to the New Brunswick Assembly and actively assisted programmes of charting and tidal surveys in the Bay of Fundy on behalf of his old assistant Captain Henry Bayfield. To quote a local New Brunswick historian, Owen was "an exotic figure" who "looms larger than life in the island's oral tradition". He was a stickler for accuracy and meticulous in refining his surveys until he was satisfied that they were the best possible and fully satisfied the interests of mariners. It is charmingly reported that "unlike most of his peers, he was addicted to women rather than alcohol"! His portrait, in full uniform as a Vice-Admiral, shows a stern-faced man with a high forehead who looks as if any wrongdoer should keep very clear of him. The house built by Owen in 1835 is preserved in excellent order today and has been developed as an attractive hotel. There he stayed, exercising almost feudal control over his estates and still maintaining an active interest in Bayfield's work, until in 1858 he died at the age of 83.

HM Surveying Ship *Owen* proved a sturdy workhorse, spending much of her working life in waters off the East African coast, or in the Persian Gulf. She also undertook oceanographic cruises in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean, where her work in the Indian Ocean Expedition of 1956-58 led to the naming of 'The Owen Fracture Zone' on appropriate GEBCO charts. She even voyaged as far afield as the Antarctic before finally being paid off in 1965 - remembered by all whom knew her as a credit to the name of Admiral Owen. I personally enjoyed a few glasses of punch from the Owen punchbowl when once it was charged upon completing a major survey.

Geoffrey Haskins

Further Reading

Phillips, M - Ships of the Old Navy www.cronab.demon.co.uk/Intro.HTM

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I have to thank the New Brunswick Genealogical Society website for providing me with many details about the history of the Owen family.