

Past Practitioners

Despite bitter experiences in earlier conflicts, it was not until the French Revolutionary War was in full swing that Britain established a very small “Hydrographical Office” to organise the provision of charts and publications to the Royal Navy. As more ships continued to be lost through navigational error than in action with the enemy, urgent measures were needed to update and improve the information available to them.

‘I have engaged Mr Serres, the marine painter ... to go out in one of the ships from Plymouth for the purpose of taking views of Brest and the environs and to continue at sea during your present cruise.’ The Secretary to the Admiralty Board was writing to the Commander-in-Chief in the Channel in September 1799. A search through all the public offices in London had failed to provide any images of the coasts where the Royal Navy was not only called to blockade the French and Spanish fleets, but also to seek openings for amphibious operations to support local insurgents with no love for the revolutionary regime in Paris. Even the Board’s Hydrographer, Alexander Dalrymple, had only been able to turn up one sketch. After 4 years, he and his one assistant were still struggling to organise and assess the bundles of documents rendered from the fleet and stowed in the Admiralty attics.

The absence of a staff to receive and respond to incoming hydrographic information had not encouraged an interest in data collection in the Royal Navy. Moreover, navigation and pilotage on-board British warships were the responsibility of the Master, a specialist warrant officer, who was expected to purchase the charts that he needed from the commercial publishers in London. If he was lucky, his stock might be supplemented by an interested and, one might say, prudent captain. In European waters, there was great respect for the official productions of France and Spain, which were much admired and envied by British commanders. Only very slowly, as a handful of captains and masters conducted their own inshore surveys, were the shortcomings of available publications becoming apparent.

John Thomas Serres held the honorific post of Marine Painter to King George III. He had been granted the title in succession to his father, Dominic Serres, a mariner of Gascon descent, who had settled in England after being made a prisoner of war and had established a reputation by producing paintings commemorating victories over his former homeland! Unlike the painters Claude-Joseph Vernet and Jean-Francois Hue in France, neither father Serres nor son had received official commissions from the Admiralty until this war-time task that took John to the Channel Fleet. Here he was to be placed with two frigate captains who quickly grasped the contribution the artist could make. They were determined that his efforts should not just benefit the deliberations of the Admiralty Board. His productions must match the specific requirements of the navigational view.

Serres was to conduct the majority of his work in the immediate environs of Brest onboard the frigate *La Nymphe*, commanded by Captain Percy Fraser. This vessel was part of the inshore squadron that was required to watch for any attempt by the enemy fleet to leave harbour and also to intercept any supply convoys inbound to Brest. To achieve this, the frigates and smaller vessels, supported by a force of 74 gun-ships of the line that anchored in a perilous station off the rocks and skerries fringing the Breton coast, were required to penetrate into *le Goulet*, the narrow passage leading to Brest roads. Serres soon found himself recording the inevitable actions with enemy ships and batteries as well as the mass of navigational detail pointed out by the ship’s master. Percy Fraser was himself a talented artist, and the two men collaborated in the production of annotated views, which would eventually be engraved and incorporated in official British admiralty charts.

Serres clearly learned much from Fraser, including the charming custom of labelling conspicuous objects with flying seagulls. However, his time in his second ship, the *Clyde*, was arguably even more important. Here, he found himself working with an alert navigational team who had armed themselves with a sound outfit of publications. Charles Cunningham, the captain, was a veteran of inshore operations. John Nott, the Master, though junior in service in the Royal Navy, had a gift for observation and description that is clear in his book of remarks from this voyage, which is preserved in the UK Hydrographic Office. In it, he records their work as the *Clyde* sailed round the coasts of the Bay of Biscay enabling Serres to meet the Admiralty’s requirements by recording all the blockading stations and key rendezvous landfalls, right round to Cape Finisterre. Soon, he had filled up his sketch-book and moved to a larger format, resulting in some magnificent panoramas, several of which stretch to two separate panels.

Less than a year after Serres’ return to England, a handsome large folio book was published in London entitled *The Little Sea Torch, or the Guide for Coasting Pilots*. It was a translation by him of an old French work that Cunningham had urged him to illustrate and publish for the benefit of the fleet. It was purchased by an impressive list of naval subscribers, including Lord Nelson. However, there is very little evidence of naval influence on Serres’ editing. Indeed, Cunningham for one was on active duty off the French coast throughout this time. Furthermore, though it is often said that the work resulted from the artist’s time in the fleet, very few of the images that he had recorded appear in the book. The true benefits of his cruises in the fleet would only emerge in slower time as the naval officer Thomas Hurd took post as Hydrographer and began to prioritise and speed up the production of charts for the main operating theatres of the Royal Navy. His new chart of the Bay of Brest incorporated views made by Serres, whilst others were used in charts of the Spanish coast, which were not superseded for almost 80 years. The artist had played his part in shaping the standards that earned the British Admiralty chart its reputation in the century ahead.

