

BY AN OLD HYDROGRAPHER

What's in a Name? Part 2 - Vidal

Part 1 dealt with HMS Owen and the redoubtable nineteenth century hydrographer and explorer after whom she had been named. That Summer of 1953 the second of the two British surveying ships lying in No 2 basin in Chatham Dockyard was brand new HMS *Vidal*, completing her fitting out prior to acceptance trials after being constructed in the dockyard.

Owen had been my home and work-place for nearly two years and I unexpectedly found myself appointed to *Vidal*; I jumped at the chance to serve in her. We had watched her being built over the years and now there she lay, having the finishing touches applied before undergoing acceptance trials. Like *Owen*, and many other ships of the surveying fleet, the name chosen was to honour another much respected nineteenth century hydrographic surveyor, Vice Admiral Alexander Thomas Emeric Vidal, who had also been involved in the long-drawn series of survey programmes of Africa's coastline from 1823 to 1845.

Before the 20th century the term "hydrographer" was generally applied to those who compiled and published nautical charts and sailing directions and there is evidence of a family interest in this respect among previous generations of Vidals in England and continental Europe. The name can be traced back to Spain and France whence, after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, a part of the family migrated to England to escape religious persecution, eventually settling there in 1683. By the end of the 18th Century Emeric Vidal, Royal Navy (1751-1811) was married to Jane Essex; they were resident in Bracknell, Berkshire, and had three sons: Richard Emeric Vidal (1784 - 1865), Emeric Essex Vidal (1791-1861) and Alexander (1792-1863). Emeric Vidal Senior was a Purser and Admiral's Secretary, he evidently also had skills in navigation and draughtsmanship; an ink and wash fair chart in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich (ref DUF:6/17) showing depths and tidal stream information of Gibraltar bay dated 1780 is signed E Vidal del. He was clearly well respected and with influence because his three boys managed to enter the Royal Navy and prospered thereafter in similar ways - all of them, like their Father, pursuing careers involving hydrography.

After the Napoleonic wars, employment, let alone promotion, opportunities for officers of the Fleet were sparse, thus surveying or exploration expeditions presented an attractive option with a chance of fame and glory. Alexander's eldest brother, Richard, served as Acting Master under Lieutenant W F Owen in HMS *Seaflower* surveying East Indies waters during 1803-1808. Later, in the rank Commander, he accompanied Captain Owen to Fernando Po in 1827. Eventually Richard was awarded a grant of land in Canada in return for his meritorious service when he finally retired from the Navy in 1834. Commander Richard Vidal is then recorded as settling on 200 acres in the town of Sarnia in Ontario where his family's names can be seen on many of the city streets today. The middle brother, Emeric, a talented artist whose name appears on numerous Admiralty fair charts and views, followed his father and also became a Purser and Admiral's Secretary; he used his spare time during naval service to draw and paint watercolours in the countries he visited; leaving a legacy of fine pictures. His achievements are much respected in South America where a collection of his work depicting scenes of early nineteenth century Buenos Aires and Montevideo, published in 1820 by Rudolf Akerman of London, is regarded as "the most valuable piece of Argentinean iconography".

Alexander, having been "nominally" entered into the Service on the books of Illustrious, 74-gun First Rate, (Captain William Shield) in 1803 as a First Class Volunteer, went on to attend the RN College, Portsmouth for two years before serving from 1809-1812 as a Midshipman in *Lavinia*, a very active 38-gun frigate. By 1815 he was in Canada, stationed in the Great Lakes in *Niobe*, a 38-gun frigate converted to a hospital and troop ship; there he was promoted to Lieutenant and became one of Captain William Fitzwilliam Owen's team of hydrographic surveyors charting the waterways, which also employed his artistic elder brother Emeric as draughtsman (see Part 1 and "As it Was" Vols. 1-6, p. 63). This encounter with Owen was the start of a close professional relationship that was to last many years.

In 1821, when Owen was appointed to command *Leven* a 20-gun Frigate, and charged by Thomas Hurd "the father of the Hydrographic Service" with the great expedition to explore and survey the African coastline; he selected Lieutenant Alexander Vidal as an Assistant Surveyor for his team. Vidal then remained with Owen for the entire six-year period, surviving the ravages of malaria and cholera that continually swept through the little squadron. After three months on the coast, the Commander of the tender *Barracouta*, William Cutfield, succumbed "after working 14 days along the coast in an open boat" and Vidal was promoted Commander in his place. A chart of Table Bay shows Vidal as the surveyor in charge of the survey and his name also appears on most of the work produced during that time under Owen's direction. On returning to England in 1825 Vidal was promoted to Post Captain and continued serving with distinction in command of surveying ships in home waters and in the Mediterranean. From 1835 - 1838 he was back on the West African coast in *Aetna* a former 6-gun "Bomb", a class of ship very popular in those days for surveying work due to the strength of construction. During this time he met the daughter of the Consul in Madeira, Sarah Antoinette Veitch of Wood, Canada.

Vidal delayed embracing domesticity until he was 47 when he married Sarah in October 1839, the couple eventually settling in Lambton County, Ontario. They had two sons, and so admiring was Vidal of his mentors that one was named Owen and the other Beaufort (after Sir

Francis Beaufort, then Hydrographer of the Navy)). He was, however, still an active naval officer and undertook his most noteworthy and ambitious major survey expedition from 1841 to 1845: a comprehensive hydrographic survey of the Azores while in command of Styx a 180 ft. 1057 ton steam paddle sloop, resulting in six Admiralty charts being published. It is inferred that he retired from the Navy, having reached the rank of Vice Admiral, and his wife having tragically died in 1843, he eventually settled near his brother in Ontario in 1846. Both Richard and Alexander established a strong family line in Canada and the United States, one connecting link being Alexander, Richard's son, a bank manager in Sarnia, who is listed as elected to the Canadian Senate in 1873 ten years after the death of his uncle.

Neither of these dedicated explorers and surveyors, William Owen nor Alexander Vidal, became Hydrographer of the Navy. That post was firmly held by Rear Admiral Sir Francis Beaufort from the time he took over from Captain E W Parry in 1829 until he relinquished it to Captain John Washington in 1855. No-one else "got a look-in". In any case, life and estates in the New World were probably more than adequate compensation for the old surveyor-explorers.

This little study, and the two articles it has engendered, were fired by incidental information arising on a "chat-line" indicating that Sarnia, today a thriving Canadian industrial city on the St Lawrence Seaway, was founded by a group of British naval officers who settled there, including one named Vidal. Since I had served as a young surveying officer in both HMS Owen (1952-53) and HMS Vidal (1953-55) a closer look at things was tempting; a wet afternoon "surfing the net" to follow a rather haphazard line of research revealed surprising results about the sons and forebears of Mr Emeric Vidal, Royal Navy, of Berkshire and the extraordinary world of surveying coastal waters and harbours under sail and oars.

Finally, HMS Vidal, a very fine looking ship, rendered good service on hydrographic and oceanographic surveys in many parts of the world until she was paid off in 1971. Her prototype construction, engines, gear-boxes, auxiliary machinery and fittings led the way to improvements in future ship design. One notable task was when Admiral Sir Edmund Irving, the UK Hydrographer, sailed in Vidal to Leningrad in September 1964 for discussions with Admiral Anatoliy Rassokho, the USSR Hydrographer.

Geoffrey Haskins

Further Reading

Phillips, M "Ships of the Old Navy"; www.cronab.demon.co.uk/intro.htm

Acknowledgement

I have to thank James Vidal of Los Angeles for much information. He has assiduously researched his ancestry and reports that Beaufort and Owen are still common first names in his family.

Also thanks are due to the Lambton County Branch of Ontario Genealogical Society.

<https://www.hydro-international.com/content/article/what-s-in-a-name-part-2-vidal>
