

Manuscript of the Month December 2011

Subscription account for Sufferers in the North Seas, 1812-14

The image shows a handwritten manuscript page titled "Subscriptions for the Sufferers". The page is a ledger with columns for dates, amounts, and descriptions. The entries are as follows:

Date	Amount	Description
1812		Brot Over
May 28	£2000	Ex Bills dat. 25 Sep at Pa
June 2	To	Reeve + Vaughan
15	To	do
23	To	do
July 6	To	do
	To	do
28	To 1000	Ex Bill de this Day for Bill
Aug 17	To	Reeve + Vaughan
	To	J Ferguson
	To	Reeve + Vaughan

In February 1812, a subscription account was opened at Hoare's 'for the Sufferers in the North Seas'. Over the next two years the account raised £35,440-3-2½ (£1.2M today). But just why was such a subscription needed? The answer lies in one of Britain's biggest naval tragedies that unfolded exactly 200 years ago, in December 1811.

Britain by 1811 was in the grip of the Napoleonic Wars, a conflict which saw her Royal Navy quintuple in size to 160,000 men. But keeping such an enormous force afloat was a major

challenge, particularly as the French sought to destabilize the British economy by vigorously enforcing a trade embargo. As time went on, Britain had to look further northwards, to Sweden and Russia, for critical supplies of timber, hemp, tar and grain. The Baltic and North Sea routes, though, were fraught with danger. Danish privateers stalked the seas and the capricious weather meant that storms flared up with little warning. To mitigate these risks, all merchant shipping was instructed to travel in convoys, with Royal Navy warships acting as escorts.

Thus it came about that on 9 November 1811 a convoy of about 150 heavily-laden merchant ships set out from Hanø Bay, Sweden, escorted by three ships of the line – *St George* (98 guns), *Defence* (74 guns) and *Cressy* (74 guns) – under the command of Admiral Robert Reynolds. Reynolds had received orders to sail no later than 1 November, to avoid the onset of winter, but storms forced the convoy to turn back three times before it finally managed to get underway.

Six days later, the fleet sailed into a mighty storm that wrecked about thirty merchant ships and left *St George* rudderless. The crippled vessel was towed to Gothenburg and there the convoy waited while repairs were carried out. On 17 December the fleet ventured forth once more, bolstered by four additional warships – *Hero* (74 guns), *Grasshopper* (18 guns), *Egeria* (26 guns) and *Prince William* (64 guns). But after just two days at sea it encountered another violent storm. Soon afterwards, a decision was made to split the convoy. *Egeria* and *Prince William* would steer part of the fleet to Scotland or the Humber, while the remaining ships returned to Gothenburg. The gales did not abate, however, and the latter group made little headway. On 23 December, *Cressy's* captain, fearing they were too near the shore, ordered his ship further out to sea. Later he explained that he had waited as long as he dared for an order from *St George* before concluding that Admiral Reynolds had seen no need to change course. In truth, though, the ailing *St George*, which by this time had also suffered damage to her masts, was powerless to act, despite the frantic efforts of her crew. Shortly after midnight on Christmas Eve, *Defence* and *St George* ran aground off Jutland, Denmark. *Defence* took just half an hour to break up, with the loss of all but six of her 560 men. *Grasshopper* and *Hero* managed to stay afloat, but neither made it home. *Hero* was wrecked off the

coast of Holland, with the loss of nearly 550 men, while *Grasshopper* was seized by the Dutch navy and her crew marched 400 miles to Verdun, where they were imprisoned until 1814.

As Christmas Day dawned, several hundred men could be seen clinging to a large piece of the wrecked *St George*. But the weather was so ferocious it was impossible to reach them and after a few agonising hours they disappeared beneath the waves. Only twelve of the 850 men on board survived. Admiral Reynolds, recognizing the hopelessness of the situation, was said to have thrown himself into the sea in despair. In all, nearly 2,000 lives were lost from *St George*, *Hero* and *Defence*. Despite the poor relations then existing between Denmark and Britain, the former's King, Frederick VI, gave orders for any bodies washed ashore to be buried with full military honours. The survivors, meanwhile, were taken in by local families. One later recalled: *The Danes treated us well, gave us food and drink, dry clothes and put us to bed.*

When news of the tragedy reached London, it was greeted with horror. An armed cutter was dispatched under a flag of truce to establish the exact truth and both the ships' seaworthiness and their orders were queried in the House of Commons. In the end, however, Parliament concluded: *it was clear that there was no blame attachable anywhere, and that the unhappy result arose from causes over which human wisdom or efforts had no control.*

Attention then turned to the families of those who had perished. The Patriotic Fund, set up in 1803 partly to provide for bereft widows and children, found itself unable to assist since the men on board *St George*, *Defence* and *Hero* had not died in combat. On 6 February 1812, therefore, a meeting was held at Lloyd's Coffee House during which it was resolved that: *deeply impressed with the magnitude of the calamity, which has been attended with a loss of lives much exceeding the number lost in either of the great battles of the Nile, Copenhagen or Trafalgar, [we] do recommend that a subscription be now opened for raising a sum of money for the relief of widows and families of the deceased.* A fortnight later it was agreed to extend the subscription to include the families of those on board the *Suldanha* frigate, which had gone down in a storm off Co Donegal on 4 December 1811 with the loss of about 300 lives. Donations could be made via Lloyd's Coffee House or any London bank and a committee of twenty-one men, including William Henry Hoare, was appointed to promote the cause and manage the funds.

Despite these good intentions, donations were initially slow to come in, perhaps because there were so many causes competing for the public's attention. The Battle of Badajoz in April 1812, for example, one of the bloodiest encounters of the period, had left several thousand dead and prompted a flood of donations to the Patriotic Fund. In a letter to the *Royal Cornwall Gazette* (March 1812), someone calling themselves 'A True Friend of the Navy' made an impassioned plea on behalf of the naval subscription: *...with respect to the subscription now raising at Lloyd's, for the families of the unfortunate sufferers on board the St George, Defence and Hero...if we open our arms to rescue from poverty and disgrace, the wives and children of those who have sunk into a watery grave, or whose valour has consigned them to a grave of honour; we may then hope that we have fulfilled the injunction of the dying Hero [Nelson], and humbly trust that "we have done our duty".*

Heading the list of donors at Hoare's was Admiral Lord Gambier (£21), one of the subscription's prime instigators. He was followed by a wide variety of others including Plymouth Dockyard (£506-7-3); the Archbishop of Dublin's widow (£5); a Family of Young Folks (Kensington) (£1-1-0); the crews of *Onyx* (£10-12-0) and *Furieuse* (£35-16-7). By the time the subscription closed in March 1814, over £35K (£1.2M today) had been collected by Hoare's Bank alone. The final entry shows that the remaining balance of £481-5-6 was passed to the Naval Charitable Trust, known nowadays as the Royal Naval Benevolent Society.