

## Another Peep into Pepys

Dipping into the Diaries at almost any point tends to confirm a common-place perception about the nature of time and especially man's role in it, - what has happened once, will most likely happen again. History repeats itself.

On the 30th of September 1661 Pepys wrote in his diary: ***“the want of money... puts the navy out of order, and yet I do not see that the King (Charles II) takes care to bring in any money.”*** Pepys took his duties and responsibilities at the Admiralty very seriously. He knew that the prestige of the country depended on an effective naval force. Under Cromwell and the Commonwealth a powerful naval of some 157 ships had been built up and the funds provided to support such a force. After the Restoration the King did not seem so interested. He spent his great wealth elsewhere, not least on a debauched life style. Throughout the diaries Pepys constantly returns to this lack of money for navy ships and shipbuilding.

In recent days there has been a constant flow of letters in the broadsheets, especially the ***Daily Telegraph***, from naval officers, both serving and retired, reiterating what Pepys said on that September day 356 years ago. Thanks to “the cuts” the Royal Navy as a potent military force which can exert influence where it is needed is rapidly disappearing. Ships are being scrapped and not replaced, manpower is being reduced. Even the Swiss, it is bitterly joked, have a better navy. How long before we must escort a Russian fleet through the English Channel with a couple of sailors in a rowing boat. Might we even be forced, one day soon, to relaunch Nelson's flagship ***HMS Victory*** to once again defend our threatened shores? (Don't laugh! ***HMS Victory*** is still a commissioned ship in the Royal Navy fleet with a captain and crew and is the flagship of the current First Lord of the Admiralty. Perhaps we should start manufacturing cannon balls again, just in case.)

Another “then-and-now” scenario which gets a frequent airing in the Diaries concerns corruption in high office, but here Pepys is much more coy and ambiguous in his statements, inevitably so perhaps. In a powerful position and with large sums of money to disperse in support of the navy it is inevitable that attempts would be made to bribe him. But Pepys would vehemently deny that he would accept any bribes whilst in the service of the King. But it all depends on what you call a bribe. In an entry on December 29th 1663 he wrote: ***“...after dinner Luellin took me up to my chamber to give me £50 for the service I did him...But I told him that I would not sell my liberty to any man. If he would give me any thing by another's hand I would endeavour to deserve it, but I will never give him thanks for it, and not acknowledging the receiving of any, which he told me was reasonable...”***

A classic example of Pepys double standards! You can't bribe me directly, but you can pass me the dosh though a third party anonymously! However before we judge his financial juggling too harshly it has to be accepted that this was the normal business and commercial practice of the day. “Kick-backs” and “sweeteners” were seen as an acceptable way of supplementing a salary, in Pepys case from the many men involved in all aspects of the ship building and supply industry. William Warren for example was a timber merchant on the Thames who sent Pepys a pair of black gloves inside of which there just happened to be 40 pieces of gold. And the sweetener was not always in cash. William Bagwell, a ship's carpenter from Deptford, secured a lucrative order from Pepys by persuading (forcing?) his wife to have sex with him. Pepys admits that he enjoyed this sexual thrill, but later reproached himself for his “folly”. What is perhaps astonishing is that

Pepys was prepared to be so frank about his weaknesses and “follies” in his diary. But then it was in code and not expected to be widely read.

In our own time there is now much debate, argument and controversy about the way orders for military equipment are acquired, especially, say, from a country like Saudi Arabia. It seems almost obligatory to pay middle men millions of pounds in bribes to secure these orders. And in countries like Nigeria bribery seems to be built into every layer of society. (One British businessman complained that you had to pay a bribe just to get your suitcase off the aircraft at Lagos airport.) **The Guardian** might huff and puff, but business men will only retort, like Pepys, that they must live and work in the world as it is, where thousands of British jobs depend on lucrative orders from corrupt governments. Principles are fine and dandy, but they don't put carpets on the floor or oysters on the table, as Pepys might have said.

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HMS Victory Portsmouth 1900

