

# The Navy, prize money and Hampshire

Sheila Carey-Thomas

RESEARCHER WITH HGT

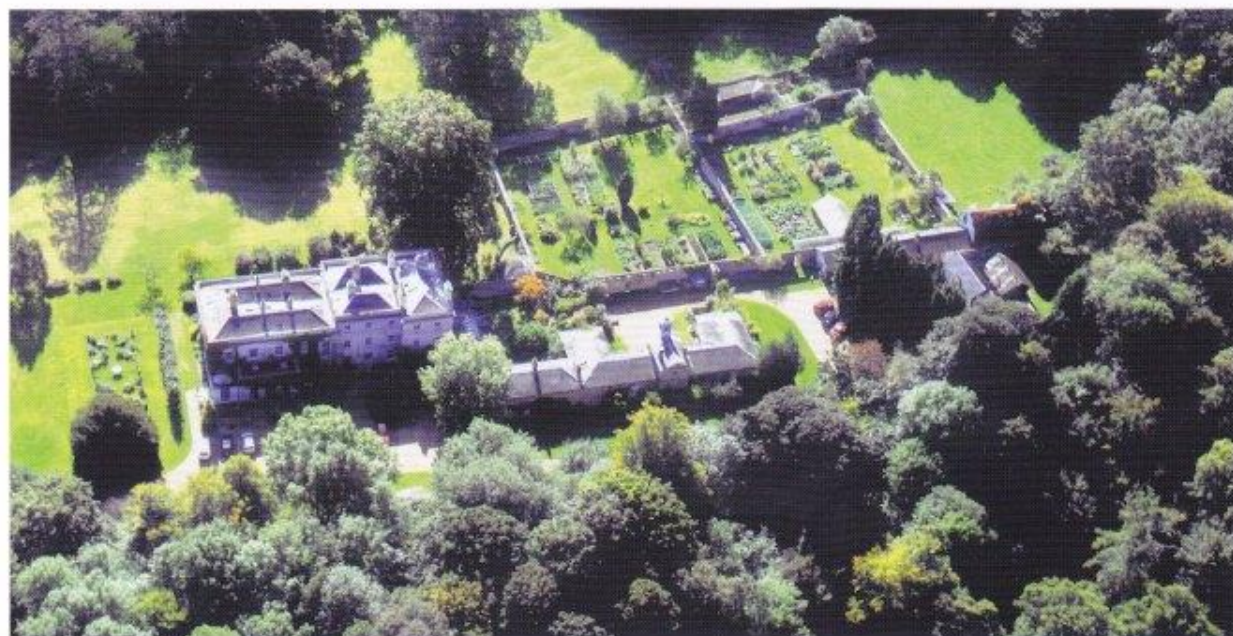
There are times when the private life of a house can be made to bear witness to some of the transforming moments of social change, national events and attitudes reflected in personal details. At the end of the 18th century the number of commissioned naval officers who owned residential property in Hampshire was growing. Close proximity to both the naval base at

Portsmouth and the Admiralty offices in London made it an obvious choice of location. Sales particulars directly targeted them. In 1808 the *Hampshire Telegraph* carried on its front page an advertisement for 'A Capital Manor Farm ... situated on a commanding eminence, affording a most

The present landscape of Hampshire owes much to the fortunes made at sea.

*Thedden Grange, previously Phoenix Lodge*

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*delightful and picturesque spot for a Gentleman's Residence, in the centre of fine sporting country ...* The estate of 369 acres was bought at auction in the Swan Hotel, Alton, by a Captain Laurence Halsted, as a home for his young wife and growing family.

Halsted was the son of a naval captain of moderate means. He had entered the navy at the age of 12 and yet in his own right was able to buy a large estate, and spend a great deal of money incorporating the existing manor into a new, much larger property, creating pleasure grounds and walled kitchen gardens, building a splendid coach house, home farm and laying out a parkland of over 50 acres. He had married Emma, the eldest daughter of Sir Edward Pellew, Viscount Exmouth, who at the time wrote to a friend, *'I have to give away my Darling Emma ... I do it with some reluctance altho' I approve of the Man - except in age, 35 - Emma, 19; it is her own free choice, his name is L.W.Halsted, a bro' Officer with 40,000 in his pocket, ...'* The money to which Pellew refers, worth £8 million today, was prize money earned by his prowess in his cherished *Phoenix*, a 36-gun frigate with a crew of 271 men. The estate he bought was Thedden Manor, the name of which he immediately changed to Phoenix Lodge.

It is difficult to do justice to the enormous subject of prize money in a short article, but basically a prize was a captured ship that had valuable assets; the hull, the crew, equipment, stores and cargo. Until 1708 any captured ship belonged to the Crown, but in 1708 the Convoys and Cruizers Act was passed stating that the captors were entitled to all the proceeds of a condemned prize, if in court the prize could be proved to have been lawfully captured. A court was set up in Greenwich and agents appointed by naval personnel to look after their interests, but it was highly complex and there were a large number of grey areas. When the prize money was awarded, it was strictly portioned out on a scale favouring seniority. The *Naval Chronicle* in 1803 reported *'The water ... is quite a wood of prizes and detained battalions ... value cannot be less than a million and a half sterling'*. As well as merchant vessels, captured warships were a tremendously important addition to naval strength, with 450 added to the Navy's fleet between 1793 and 1815, many still bearing their original French name.

It was a time like no other when naval officers were the heroes of the day and fêted wherever they went. Fortunes could be made and social mobility became a real possibility. Reports of naval battles and adventures were followed avidly in the press, and ships returning to port were met by crowds of cheering people. Lady



*Before the Battle of Trafalgar, a deck hand prays 'that the enemy's shot be distributed in the same proportion as prize money, the greater part among the officers'.*

PHOTO: BY KIND PERMISSION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE ROYAL NAVY 1984/4885



*William Beechey's portrait of Admiral Sir Harry Burrard-Neale embodies all the glamour of a naval captain.*

PHOTO: BY KIND PERMISSION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE ROYAL NAVY 1981/77





Detail of the grotto at Walhampton thought to have been made by Harry Burrard-Neale's boatswain.

PHOTO: NICK CAREY-THOMAS

Spencer, wife of the First Naval Lord of the Admiralty, was quoted as saying, 'no Captain ever returned without being asked to dinner by us.'

In Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, Anne Elliott's father, Sir Walter, forbade her to marry the socially inferior Captain Wentworth and was much perturbed at having to let Kellynch Hall to Admiral Croft. His strong objection to the navy he voiced 'as being the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of ...' Yet in a letter, Jane Austen enthusiastically describes adopting patriotic dress after the Battle of the Nile in 1798 as 'a mamalouc cap modelled on the Egyptian fez and decorated with Nelson's rose feather emblem, all the fashion now, worn at the opera and by Lady Mildmays at Hackwood Balls.'

Six months after Halsted bought Thedden, Jane Austen moved with her mother and sister into Chawton, 3 miles away. She was known to the Halsted family. Fanny, the daughter of Jane's brother Edward Knight who inherited Chawton House, wrote in her diary, 'Papa Drove me to call on Mrs Halsted.' and two other brothers were fellow naval officers. Not all who sailed became wealthy. Francis Austen began well, capturing or destroying over 40 enemy vessels, but was later involved in blockades and missed out on Trafalgar. He did manage to buy Portsdown Lodge, overlooking

Portsmouth harbour, with the money he made, but his brother Charles was less lucky, finding it necessary to accommodate his family on board the *Namur*, a ship that previously Halsted had captained. Charles was also given command of Halsted's beloved *Phoenix* which was wrecked whilst being driven to shore under a pilot. Charles was brought to court but acquitted.

During the wars with France that lasted for much of the 18th century, Britain was filled with renewed patriotism and began to reject many of the French-ideals it once espoused. The formality of French and Dutch-influenced gardens gave way to a more romantic and natural style, where judicious planting and the use of the ha-ha could create the illusion that everything the eye beheld belonged to the

estate. This was a distinctive period of change in garden and landscape design, and the wealth accrued through prize money meant that those who already had property could carry out improvements and buy more land, and those newly come to wealth could establish themselves with a country gentleman's seat.

Halsted built his modern home, laid out his estate and park (now 1000 acres), advanced to Rear then Vice-Admiral, becoming Admiral of the Blue in 1830, and was later knighted. In later years, however, his fortune seems to have failed. The wars with France were over, and he had 11 children to support. At various times he advertised unsuccessfully to let or sell Phoenix Lodge, eventually being loaned money by his father-in-law. One of these advertisements describes '... A very eligible freehold estate ... placed on a beautiful Lawn, and commanding rich views ... with shrubberies, plantations, and dry gravelled walks with a noble avenue of trees, comprising a most desirable Residence, brick-built and stuccoed, erected within a few years, and finished in a complete manner, adapted for the accommodation of a Family of Distinction.' (Interestingly, the same page of the *Telegraph* announces the departure of the *Phoenix* to New York, carrying 72 emigrants.)

In contrast, Sir Harry Burrard-Neale inherited his title and estate at Walhampton from his uncle in 1791 whilst he was a successful frigate captain. Prize money enabled him to enlarge the house and move the Lymington-Beaulieu road north, away from the front face. He completed work begun by his uncle, changing the grounds to a more naturalistic English landscape





Richard Woods 1764 plan for Old Alresford House

PHOTO: BY KIND PERMISSION OF MIKE HALL, OLD ALRESFORD HOUSE

style, removing avenues and the banjo pond and deformatising the canal, the lime walk and planting in front of the house. Tradition says that his boatswain made the shell-work grotto at the north end of the western walk. Lady Burrard-Neale was a notable plantswoman and filled the gardens with rare and exotic plants.

No writing about prize money in Hampshire would be complete without the mention of Admiral George Bridges Rodney. At the age of six he went to live with his godfather at Avington Park, his parents having lost all their money in the South Sea Bubble. He joined the navy when he was 13 and success at sea enabled him in 1750 to build Old Alresford House on land left to him by his godfather. He also bought Alresford pond and in 1764 employed Richard Woods to draw up plans for improving the park. Though he was financially ruined in 1768 by General Election bribery and gambling debts, and fled to France owing £32,000, he returned a hero in 1782 with an annual pension of £2,000.

There are many other examples of 'prize money' being used to build or improve houses in Hampshire. At Westbury House, West Meon, Admiral Philip Cavendish had the influential landscape gardener Charles Bridgeman design his grounds, including an ice house and ha-ha. Captain Thomas Dumaresq bought land in Newton Valence and built a new mansion in 1782 named Pelham Place, enlarging it the following year. Admiral Sir Charles Napier bought Qualletts Grove in Horndean in 1836, rebuilding and renaming it Merchistoun Hall after the place he was

born. Merchistoun Hall showed architectural similarities to Cadlington House, built seven years earlier by Admiral Sir Michael Seymour, who together with his brother-in-law created a communal family parkland around it containing Old Blendworth House and Blendworth Lodge. Also in Horndean, Admiral Samuel Hood built Catherington House, where he entertained lavishly; his guests included Nelson, Mrs Kean, the wife of the actor Edmund Kean, and Pitt the Younger.

At the end of the 18th century the lure of the navy was huge, offering scope for adventure and rewarding enterprise in a way the army could not. Younger sons of families of limited means might be ordained into the Church at the age of 23, but at the age of 12, for the price of a uniform, the navy was a profession in which honour, independence and a life-long career could be found. The present landscape of Hampshire owes much to those fortunes made at sea. \*

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