

CAPTAIN TOBIAS FURNEAUX, R.N., OF SWILLY

LECTURE BY MR. F. S. BLIGHT

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THE accession in 1760 of the young and ambitious King George III marked the beginning of a new era in the work of the Royal Navy—that of the exploration and survey of the then undiscovered lands of the globe and the charting of unknown waters by ships specially equipped for the purpose. The far-sighted policy thus inaugurated has been continued to the present day, and the latest addition to the fleet of H.M. Survey Ships will embody the experience of the past two centuries by the provision of a flight-deck for a helicopter and air-conditioning plant to facilitate work in all climates from the Equator to the poles.

The King, through his keen interest in natural science, was well informed concerning the state of geographical knowledge at this time: theories of the existence of a Great Southern Continent had been discussed for centuries; the North-West Passage had yet to be found; little was known of the Pacific Ocean, or of the southern parts of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. The decade of peace between the conclusion of the Seven Years' War in 1763 and the War of American Independence gave the opportunity for the voyages of Byron, Wallis and Cook, and interest in their scientific results was world-wide; indeed, during the last of Cook's voyages governments of countries then at war with Britain issued orders that the ships of the expedition were not to be molested.

In this great period of British history Tobias Furneaux occupies a unique place, for within the compass of his short naval career of only twenty-five years he fought in the two wars already mentioned and in two voyages of exploration was the first to circumnavigate the globe in both directions. References to this distinguished West Country pioneer are to be found in many publications, but these are, in the main, scanty and incomplete and fail to do him full justice. A connected record of his career has therefore been undertaken from logs and journals of his voyages and from family papers, with a view to making a fresh assessment of the part he took in the notable events of his time.

THE FURNEAUX FAMILY, ELEVENTH TO FIFTEENTH CENTURY

Space does not permit more than a very brief reference to the widespread and gifted Furneaux family, and to the position of Tobias in the Swilly (Stoke Damerel) branch of it.

There is no doubt that the family were among those who came from Normandy with the Conqueror, and that from the original grants of land in Yorkshire, Norfolk, Somerset and Devon they spread into other counties by the latter part of the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. By this time, however, many branches had ended in female heiresses and the estates passed into other names, so that further records as landowners are not traceable.

No one of the name appears to have gained prominence in any great historical event, but there are many records of service in various counties: in Somerset and Devon there were Sheriffs of the Counties (Edward I and II); a Somerset member, Sir Matthew, a Knight of the Shire in two Parliaments, served against the Scots in Edward III's time, and was possibly at the Battle of Neville's Cross in 1346.

In the Devon branch there were Sheriffs of Devon and Cornwall, and one distinguished member, Alan Furnellis, was Sheriff of Devon in 1199, and afterwards one of Henry II's justiciars; one was a donor to a Carmelite House at Plymouth.

Our chief concern, however, is with the branch which settled at Swilly, in Stoke Damerel, in the middle of the seventeenth century. Captain Tobias Furneaux was descended from Rev. Christopher Furneaux, and his wife Sybil Dolbeare (m. 1625). Rev. Christopher Furneaux was curate at Buckfastleigh, in Devon; Sybil Dolbeare was the daughter of the Rector there, and heiress to considerable wealth. The marriage of his eldest son, John, to Emma Kempe, of St. Budeaux, in 1652, marks the first stage in the acquisition of Swilly, and a still more important one in the change of status of the family from leaseholders to freeholders. Emma Kempe owned one-eighth of Swilly and a leasehold interest in three-quarters of it; John completed his ownership by purchasing the latter in 1663 for £210, and the remaining one-eighth in 1662 from the Rowses for £120, thus establishing the position of the family there.

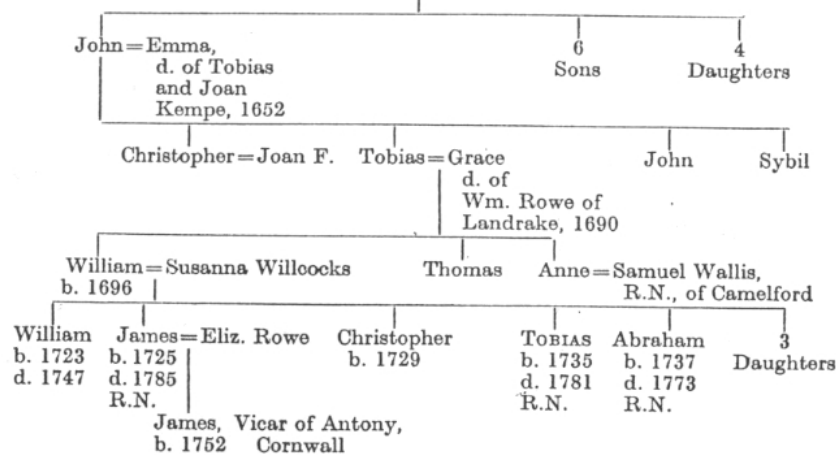
The chief fact that appears in this early period is that the family as a whole was better educated than was usual among people of their means and position. Tobias's father, great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather had all been sent to Oxford; this record of scholarship was continued in later years. Tobias and two of his brothers were in the Royal Navy, as also was his cousin, Samuel Wallis, an indication of the family interest in the naval activity of the period.



CAPT. TOBIAS FURNEAUX, R.N.
by J. Northcote, R.A.
By courtesy of the Countess of Birkenhead

SWILLY BRANCH OF THE FURNEAUX FAMILY

Rev. Christopher Furneaux = Sybil Dolbeare, 1625



In the modern representatives of the family the diversity of gifts in the members is seen even more clearly: among them are a judge, a major-general, a vice-admiral, two rectors, a Headmaster of Repton and Dean of Winchester, a lieutenant-colonel, three vicars of churches in Cornwall (two of St. Germans and the other of Antony). Lady Eleanor Smith, daughter of the late Earl of Birkenhead and the present Dowager Countess of Birkenhead (Miss Margaret Eleanor Furneaux), was an eminent writer who, unhappily, died in 1945.

Mr. Rupert Furneaux, whose assistance has already been acknowledged, is a cousin of Lady Eleanor Smith.

SWILLY HOUSE AND ESTATE

Swilly House, now completely demolished, stood about three hundred yards down the Old Saltash Road from Milehouse, close to the present Furneaux Road, and doubtless there are many older residents in this part of Devonport who, like the writer, saw the old place when it was in the occupation of the Furneaux family. An old guide-book states it was "agreeably situated in a sheltered lawn". Before it flowed the little stream which once passed down the Ford Valley, and it was set amidst well-kept gardens and pleasant sylvan surroundings. At first it was a farmhouse with two parlours and a kitchen in the front, five bedrooms and an attic above, and a barn, courtyard and well in front. It was later improved to form a residence more in keeping with family requirements—a "country house".

The land forming the Swilly Estate consisted of little more than fifty acres, but the West Down Estate of thirty acres in the adjoining parish of Pennycross, separated from it by Bladderley Lane, went with it for more than three centuries. It is now built over to form the Swilly, and part of the Beacon Park, Housing Estates. (There seems to be no explanation of the name Swilly but, as it also occurs in Ireland, it may possibly derive from Celtic times.)

EARLY NAVAL CAREER OF TOBIAS FURNEAUX

There is only one portrait of Tobias—that painted by James Northcote during the short period when the artist worked in Plymouth (1775-77). This was probably when Tobias was in Plymouth following his return in the *Adventure*. As he was promoted to Captain in 1775, he is shown in the uniform of one.

There is no definite information as to the early boyhood of Tobias, but we are at least sure of one fact which has been ascertained from the registers of Stoke Damerel Church—"Tobias, son of Mr. and Mrs. Susannah Furneaux", born 21st August, 1735. Doubtless his father, an Oxford M.A. and Fellow and Lecturer there, would in due course have made suitable provision for his son's early education, and this must have continued until the boy was at least fifteen, when the choice of the Royal Navy as a profession was probably made. (His father had died when Tobias was thirteen.)

The mid eighteenth century witnessed a great revival of naval activity in England, and there were two official ways by which sons of gentlemen might enter the Navy: one through the Naval Academy at Portsmouth, at the minimum age of twelve, and the other as "Captain's Servant", a kind of apprentice, but not a menial, at the earlier age of ten. The former was probably the way chosen for Tobias, a boy of fifteen to sixteen years. After the two-years' course of study at the Academy, followed by the regulation two years' service at sea, he entered the Royal Navy as a midshipman at the age of twenty in 1755.

"Young gentlemen", as midshipmen were called, entered the Navy with the intention of reaching commissioned rank more or less quickly, according to influence or favouritism. But soon after his joining we find Tobias serving as a "Master's Mate" on the Jamaica station, in a sloop commanded by a lieutenant, and operating against French privateers. The "Master" of a naval ship in those days was a relic of the time when the captain was a military person whose duty was to fight the ship, while that of the master was to sail her, to navigate, take soundings, inspect stores and provisions, sign vouchers and accounts, etc.—in other words, he was the chief executive officer. Sometimes the position led to commissioned rank, but masters were usually practical sailors as tough and rough as ordinary seamen.

Furneaux the midshipman saw the importance of qualifying himself in the art of navigation and general administration—a decision which was later to be amply justified. Promotion, however, came sooner than he could have anticipated, for in an action with two more heavily-armed French sloops the lieutenant in command of his ship was killed and Furneaux, the Master's Mate, took command, and continued the action with such gallantry that he was promoted to Lieutenant. Later events in his career also illustrate his ability to deal effectively with an emergency.

He must have been involved in many naval actions during the course of the Seven Years' War. First information is preserved in a letter concerning £126, due to him for six prizes (merchant brigs) taken 11th June, 1760, by H.M.S. *Edinburgh*; service in H.M.S. *Mars* and *Oxford* also brought prize money.