

**Speaker: Dr Tony Barrow**

Dr Tony Barrow, local Maritime and Naval Historian, delivered a fascinating lecture on Rear Admiral Robert Roddam of Roddam Hall, a few miles from Wooler, no less. Tony is a founder member and now trustee of the Collingwood Society, and it was a pleasure for GLHS to welcome several members of the Collingwood Society to the lecture.

It is fair to state that the audience were expecting a talk on Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood who led the 'Royal Sovereign' into battle at Trafalgar, beating Nelson's Victory to the proverbial 'punch' given that the 'Sovereign' had a clean copper-bottomed hull and was therefore faster than most of the fleet. That Collingwood led the British fleet after Nelson's demise is well known in the North but less so in the South, of course. There were many heroes that day, not least Collingwood.

The Roddams could trace their ancestry back to Saxon times, and King Athelstan granted Pole Roddam land in Northumberland in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. That a Saxon thegn or possibly an ealdorman managed to retain his land after the Norman Conquest and their rule says something about the family's political nous although it was some years before the Normans secured Northumberland which was excluded from the Domesday book.

Tony emphasised the inter-connections between the landed families of Northumberland: the Blacketts, Ogles, Lilburns, Calders, Collingwoods and, of course, the Roddams. The latter name is spelt without the 'h', unlike Hilary Clinton, nee Rodham (*see below*), and Tony suggested that this may mean she is descended from a Durham branch of the family.

Of course, the British Empire was at its peak in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and many families' younger sons were despatched to the service of the Crown. A second son, Robert Roddam joined the Royal Navy as midshipman in 1735 and rose steadily through the ranks. By 1741 he was a 3<sup>rd</sup> Lieutenant on HMS Superb under the command of William Hervey, a bullying Captain. Hervey was later court martialled and it was Roddam's evidence which proved critical in the resulting guilty verdict. Court Martials were serious affairs and held under the auspices of an admiral. That the evidence of a junior officer was decisive indicates that Roddam was noticed by the senior ranks. In 1746, as Master & Commander of the sloop 'Viper', Roddam sailed from Portsmouth to Plymouth against heavy winds, carrying an order to the Plymouth fleet not to sail until Admiral George Anson arrived. He displayed first rate seamanship when more senior officers had baulked at the challenge. Roddam went on to captain ever larger ships and to engage in battles of the Austrian War of Succession, becoming a post-Captain (a Captain in 'post' on a ship, as opposed to one 'on the beach' – on half pay without a command).

In 1750, when stationed at New York, he married a Clinton {*as Hilary Rodham was to do*}. His wife, Lucy, was the daughter of the Governor, Admiral Sir George Clinton. At the time there were the first stirrings of the movement for independence. It seems that when Roddam was ashore a private yacht failed to dip its flag to Roddam's ship and the 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant required a shot to be put across the yacht's bows which, unfortunately, killed a maidservant on the yacht. There was then a judicial stand-off between the Chief Justice, James de Lancy, who was trying to reduce the power of Governor Clinton and thus of the Government in London which was only resolved with the promise that the Lieutenant would face trial in England.

During the Seven Years' War between the UK and France, Roddam was in command of the 50-gun HMS Greenwich. During a reconnaissance in July 1757, his ship was attacked by a superior French squadron consisting of one ship of 64 guns, another of 74 guns and a frigate, so he felt obliged to strike his colours in

order to save life. He was paroled after three months and in October there was an inevitable Court Martial. Given the odds he had faced, he was cleared of all charges and then took command of another 50-gun vessel, HMS Colchester.

Robert returned to life at Roddam. He had obtained substantial prize money as a lieutenant with the capture of Spanish merchantmen in 1743 and 1759, plus several privateers in 1746. He was already rich, and more so when in 1776 he inherited from his brother the Roddam estate, including the farms at Calder, Roddam Rigg and Mount Athelstan; some 1,200 acres which together generated rents of £1,000 a year (say, about £125k now, but without taxation). Lucy died, and he married Alithea Calder, sister of Admiral Sir John Calder; another local family. Roddam served as Deputy Lord Lieutenant and as a JP in Northumberland before returning to sea. Brothers Wilfrid and Cuthbert Collingwood Roddam were to serve under him on the 74-gun HMS Lennox from 1770 to 1773.

Roddam stoutly defended Admiral Calder, who did not engage the enemy on the second day of the Battle of Finisterre and was subsequently severely reprimanded, Roddam argued that Calder could scarcely be expected to attack against difficult odds in difficult conditions and that his actions on the first day had mauled the French fleet sufficiently that Villeneuve had sailed his fleet to Cadiz and not to the Channel where it was to support the crossing of Napoleon's '*Armee d'Angleterre*' for the invasion of England. (Napoleon was severely critical of Villeneuve's lassitude as the French army would have easily overcome the untrained militias in England}. Moreover, had Villeneuve's fleet not sailed to Cadiz, the battle of Trafalgar would never have happened, at least not at Trafalgar!) Nevertheless, Calder did not go to sea again.

Roddam served as Commander in Chief on the fleet's flag vessel 'Royal William' at Portsmouth, and the town asked him to become its Member of Parliament, an offer which he declined. After the death of his second wife, Alithea in 1792, Roddam resigned from the service and returned to Northumberland. He married Ann Harrison, who was co-heiress of the Colpitts estate based largely in Killingworth, but even Ann, who was much younger than Robert, pre-deceased him. He had no heirs, died in 1808, and was interred in the Roddam Mausoleum at Ilderton which is there to this day; although in need of restoration which is being supported by the Collingwood Society.

Of course standards were different in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and Tony drew our attention to a list of expenses which show that Roddam bought slaves while serving in the Caribbean. He was evidently not a slave trader or plantation owner, it seems; but it is galling to see that this was nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing good can be said of the practice. Roddam appointed Dr Thomas Trotter (1760–1802) as ship physician on the 74-Gun HMS Berwick. Trotter had been on the Brookes, a slave trader in 1783-4 and drew the now widely known picture showing how slaves were kept in the hold which he and others used to campaign against the vile practice. Trotter was a prolific author of tracts on subjects such as scurvy and, after his experience on the Brookes he was a fervent abolitionist and supported Wilberforce. Trotter served as physician in Wooler in the 1780s before becoming physician to the Channel Fleet from 1784 to 1789. Tony also drew our attention to the matter-of-fact references made by Roddam to the executions of servicemen. Different times, different standards....

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Many of Roddam's papers are available for inspection at the Northumberland Record Office and at the National Maritime Museum.