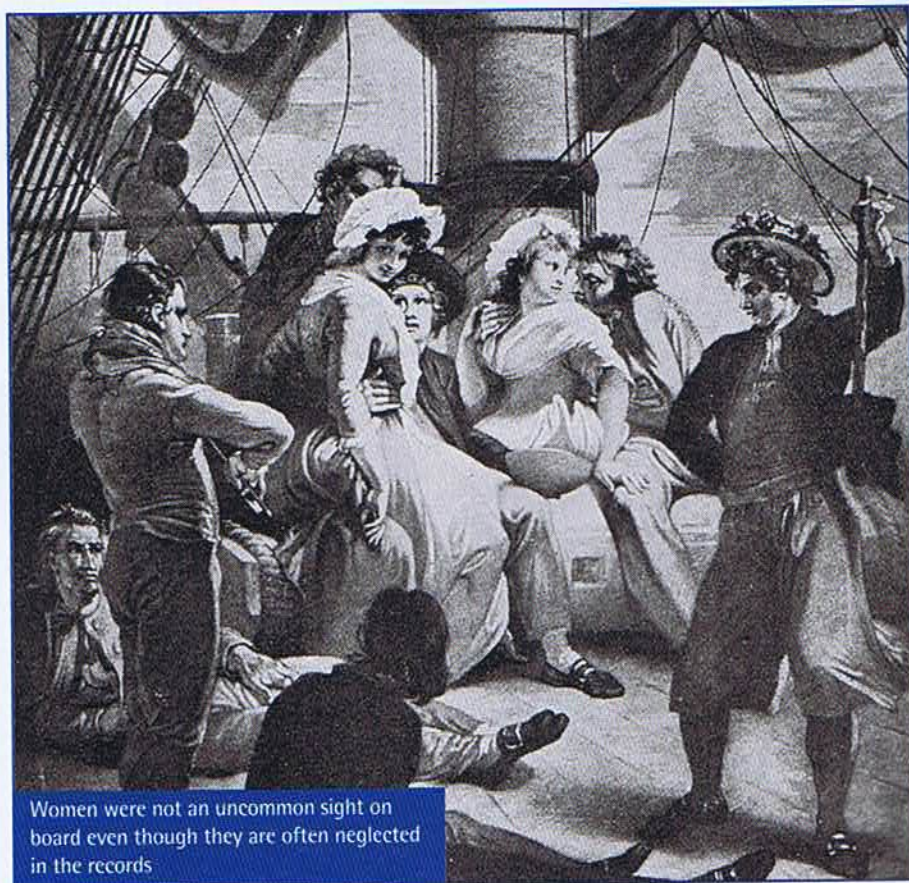


Warship Women

Researching naval ancestors is generally quite straightforward. However, less well documented are the lives of the wives and mistresses who went with them. Roy and Lesley Adkins find out more



Women were not an uncommon sight on board even though they are often neglected in the records

It was June 1812 and Britain had been at war with France since 1793, except for a year or so of false peace in 1802-3. On the 16th, off the Mediterranean coast of France between Nice and Toulon, the Royal Navy sloop *Swallow* was fighting with two heavily armed French ships. The story of 26-year-old Joseph Phelan affected one unnamed officer so much that he wrote to the *Annual Register*.

'In the gallant and sanguinary action', he said, 'there was a seaman named Phelan, who had his wife on board; she was stationed (as is usual when women are on board in time of battle) to assist the surgeon in the care of the wounded. From the close manner in which the *Swallow* engaged the enemy, yard-arm and yard-arm, the wounded, as may be expected, were

brought below very fast; amongst the rest a messmate of her husband's who had received a musket ball through the side.'

While caring for this badly injured man, Mrs Phelan learned that her husband had been wounded. 'She rushed instantly on deck,' the officer wrote, 'and received the wounded tar in her arms; he faintly raised his head to kiss her - she burst into a flood of tears, and told him to take courage, "all would yet be well," but had scarcely pronounced the last syllable, when an ill-directed shot took her head off. The poor tar, who was closely wrapt in her arms, opened his eyes once more - then shut them for ever.'

Once HMS *Swallow* was clear of the French, the dead couple were sewn up in a single hammock and thrown overboard. But the tragedy went deeper than that,

because Joseph Phelan's wife had given birth to a baby boy, Tommy, only three weeks earlier. The officer explained that the seamen were deeply worried he would die:

'They all agreed he should have a hundred fathers, but what could be the substitute of a nurse and a mother! However, the mind of humanity soon discovered there was a Maltese goat on board, belonging to the officers, which gave an abundance of milk; and as there was no better expedient, she was resorted to, for the purpose of suckling the child, who, singular to say, is thriving and getting one of the finest little fellows in the world.'

We wonder if Tommy Phelan is one of your ancestors and if this story is well documented in your family? By looking at the records of HMS *Swallow* in The National Archives at Kew, we discovered that the seaman's first name was Joseph and that he was from Waterford in Ireland. But there was no mention anywhere of his wife or their baby son. The ship's log merely recorded: 'Found the killed to be as follows - Mr William Jackson (clerk), Joseph Phelan (S), John Beckford (S), Nicholas Defons (S), Richard Millington (S) and Thomas Millard (marine) and 17 wounded'. As far as the navy was concerned, Phelan's wife and baby did not exist. Their story highlights the difficulty of finding out about the women and children on board warships and of gaining a truly accurate picture of life at sea.

Breaking the rules

When in port, hundreds of prostitutes flocked to the ships, but it was against regulations in Nelson's time and beyond for women to sail with any warship, unless they were carried as passengers by invitation of the captain, or were part of the small quota of soldiers' wives officially permitted to accompany them aboard troopships. Because of this, any mention of women and children in the official naval records is extremely rare.

The Battle of Camperdown in 1799 was a British naval victory, but were there women "below decks"? This would have been against regulations in the time of Nelson (*inset*)



These regulations were frequently ignored. Some captains and officers had their wives or even their mistresses with them, and one or two were reprimanded for doing so. A few ordinary seamen also had girlfriends on board, but many of the women and children who went to sea were the families of the specialist warrant officers, such as the carpenter and gunner. These men were not usually paid off at the end of a voyage, like the

been on board the warships, but recent research has revealed an increasing amount of evidence, such as mentions in personal letters, journals, court-martial records and newspaper accounts of shipwrecks.

Wives accompanying their husbands were very much the exception rather than the rule, but many women were surprisingly anxious to go to sea, despite all the hardships and dangers, since this was preferable to being

ship returned to a port in Britain. Even then, families were not notified of a ship's homecoming. Although, by 1795 the men could choose to have part of their wages deducted at source and paid to their wife, mother or children at a pre-arranged location, frequently the nearest custom-house.

The women of South Shields were notorious for their violent opposition to the press-gangs, but eventually Dolly Peel's husband was taken. She accompanied him to sea, and is known to have helped the surgeon during battles. She died in 1857, at the age of 75, and is now a celebrated local figure. A statue of her was erected in 1987 overlooking the River Tyne. Even though her family has done much detective work, we still lack the details of her husband's service, such as dates and particular ships.

When Gunner William Richardson was about to sail to Martinique in the West Indies in 1800, he found that his wife wanted to join him. Since the West Indies were notorious for fevers that could rapidly wipe out a ship's crew, he thought she was mad:

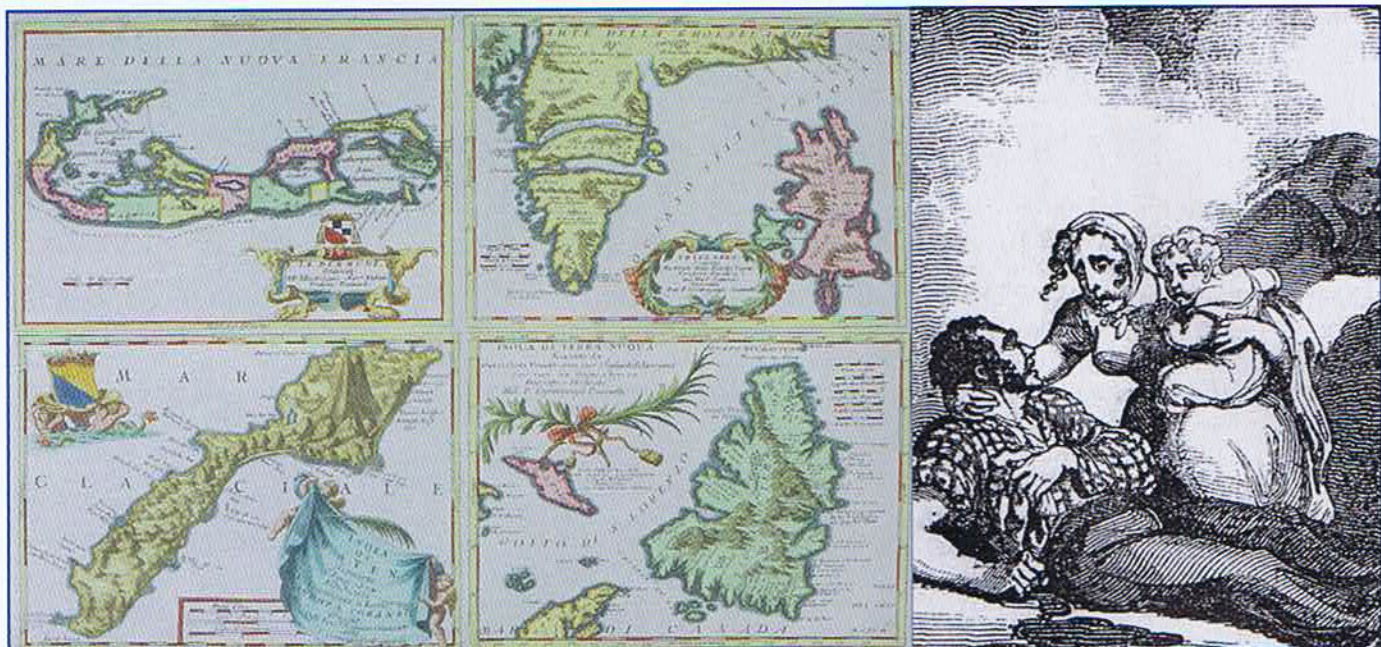
'I went to bid my wife and family

"Eager to make Nelson and his navy a shining example, the Victorians refused to admit the presence of these women"

majority of the crew, but stayed with the ship, including periods in port.

Eager to make Nelson and his navy a shining example, the Victorians refused to admit the presence of these women, and naval historians have been slow to investigate this aspect of the war. For many years only a handful of women were acknowledged to have

separated for years on end. In Britain, families were weary of the war, especially as their menfolk were in danger of being seized by the press-gangs and forced into the Royal Navy. Many were left destitute, because the seamen were paid irregularly, months in arrears (nominally to deter desertion) and generally only when the



As exotic as the West Indies may have sounded, in reality, travelling there was to prove fatal for many sailors and their wives (above left); even if their husbands were killed during the battle, any wives and children left behind would remain on the ship until it returned home (above right)

adieu [at Portsmouth],’ he explained, ‘but found she had fixed her mind to go with me as there was some hopes that the ship would return to England after delivering her stores, so after some entreaties I consented, especially because the Captain’s, the Master’s and Purser’s wives were going, the Armourer, the Boatswain, the Serjeant of Marines and six other men’s wives likewise got leave to go; one would have thought they were all insane in wanting 12 of them to go to such a sickly country.’ Richardson and his wife were lucky enough to survive, although many on board their ship died of fever.

Life on board

The living conditions for wives of warrant officers were not as bad as

those suffered by wives of ordinary seamen, because each warrant officer had a small canvas-sided cabin about eight feet square, although being on a gun deck, this was shared with a cannon. Seamen below this rank were only entitled to a space 14 inches wide in which to sling their hammock, and the hammock had to be shared with their wife. In reality, hammocks were not always so cramped because at least one third, more usually one half, of the crew was on duty at any one time. The hammocks were arranged so that alternate spaces were allotted to the different shifts (known as watches). By careful arrangement, most seamen managed to have a space about 28 inches wide for their hammock.

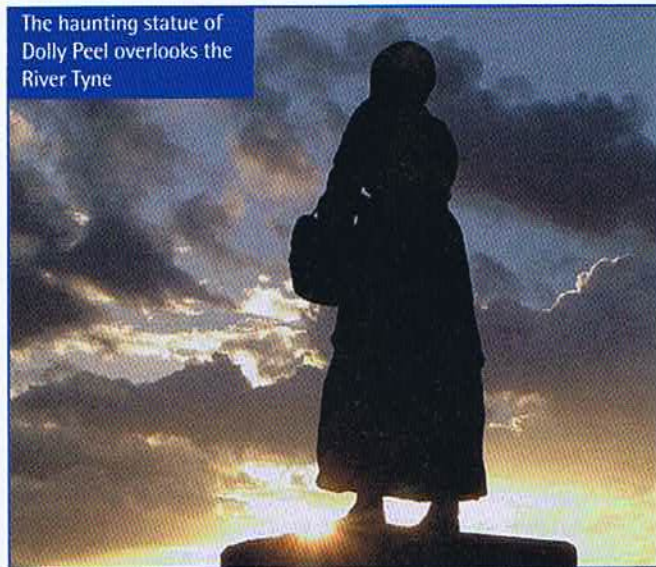
There were enough women sharing their husband’s hammocks to give rise to the saying ‘show a leg’. When the petty officers roused up the next watch from their hammocks, they were sometimes unsure of the occupant and demanded that they show a leg. If it was a female leg, they would be left alone, but a seaman trying

to get some extra sleep was likely to have his hammock cut down and be dropped on the deck.

In spite of their unofficial status, women on board warships were expected to obey navy regulations. They generally kept out of sight, below decks as much as possible. Occasionally specific commands were given concerning their conduct that have survived in the official records. One such instruction appears in Captain John Fyffe’s orders for HMS *Indefatigable* in 1812: ‘The women belonging to the ship are to be permitted to go on shore twice a week on market days. Should they go on any other day, or in any respect contrary to the regulations of the ship, they are not to be suffered to come on board again.’

The women had to share everything with their husbands, including food, with very few ways of earning money for themselves. Their main income came from washing and mending clothes, although as most seamen made their own clothes, they were more than capable of mending them. They were only allowed sea water for washing clothes, which failed to clean the clothes properly and left salt in the fabric that attracted damp and chafed the skin. Often the women would appropriate some of the precious drinking water for washing, much to the annoyance of the officers. Rear Admiral Sir John Jervis is on record more than once trying to curb such use of fresh water by the women

The haunting statue of Dolly Peel overlooks the River Tyne





Nancy Perriam (above) appears under two different names in official naval records

on board ships of his fleet, and in June 1797 he issued a threat:

'Observing, as I do with the deepest concern, the great deficiency of water in several ships of the squadron, which cannot have happened without waste by collusion, and the service of our King and Country requiring that the blockade of Cadiz, on which depends a speedy and honourable peace, should be continued, an event impracticable without the strictest economy in the expenditure of water, it will become my indispensable duty to land all the women in the squadron at Gibraltar, unless this alarming evil is immediately corrected.'

Nelson, who was serving in the fleet under Jervis, responded: 'My dear Sir, The history of women was brought forward I remember in the Channel Fleet last war. I know not if your ship was an exception, but I will venture to say, not an Honourable [captain] but had plenty of them, and they always will do as they please. Orders are not for them – at least, I never yet knew one who obeyed.'

A surprising discovery

Family history research can so often add critical details to the wider picture and should never be underestimated. One instance is that of Ann Hopping and Nancy Perriam. Their story, or rather *her* story, is a salutary lesson in the importance of family history for mainstream history. Nancy Perriam was known to have lived in Exmouth on the south

Devon coast, and volunteer researchers at Exmouth museum began to trace her family history for a display. They found that she was born in 1769 and her maiden name was Ann Letton. She was from a seafaring family, the daughter of Captain William Letton, and in 1788 at the age of 19 Ann married the seaman Edward Hopping.

By 1793 Edward was serving as a gunner in HMS *Crescent* whose captain was Sir James Saumarez, and Ann was given permission by him to accompany Edward to sea. She earned money by being Sir James's seamstress, embroidering his shirts and breeches. During battles she served as a powder monkey, carrying cartridges from the magazine to the cannons, or helping the surgeon tend the wounded. She was on board HMS *Orion* during Nelson's famous victory at the Battle of the Nile in 1798.

When the *Orion* returned to England the ship was paid off and Edward returned to civilian life at Exmouth, but was drowned in a shipwreck in 1802. Three years later Ann married a local pilot, John Perriam, and began using the name Nancy (a common variant of 'Ann'). John died in 1812 and Nancy was left to fend for herself, selling fish in the streets of Exmouth until she was 80 years old. She died in 1865 at the age of 96.

Because she applied for help from the navy as Nancy Perriam, citing her time on board a warship, she appears in the official records as both Ann Hopping and Nancy Perriam, and no naval historian made the connection. Both forms of her name appear together as examples of women who sailed in Nelson's fleet. It took a local researcher, tracing Nancy's family history, to tease out the fascinating story of Nancy/Ann. Nancy is now a local heroine at Exmouth. The house where she lived is distinguished by a blue plaque, and a pub, *The Powder Monkey*, was named after her in 2003.

Finding women in the records

Despite the odds against finding a useful lead, it is always worthwhile checking the naval records if you are trying to trace a female ancestor who is thought to have sailed in a man-of-war in Nelson's time. You may be able to establish the presence of her husband from a ship's muster books. Logbooks and surgeon's records may contain

some tiny reference that will establish the presence of his wife as well. There are also records of the arrangements seamen made to have part of their pay diverted to dependants, and these can be used to establish that a woman was on shore and not on board at any particular time.

Diaries, journals and letters written by seamen and officers serving in the ship can also provide information, but generally references to specific women are few and far between in all the surviving naval records and may be enigmatic when they do occur. For example, for Thursday 12th July 1798 Aaron Thomas jotted in his journal: 'A girl called Peg Robinson who lives with Woodcock, a gunner's mate, had a premature birth this day', while two months later in the Mediterranean Robert Bailey noted in his journal that '4th Sept: The wife of W^m White a midshipman was delivered of a girl at 4 o'clock in the morning.' These are sparse but tantalising details.

Where diaries and memoirs have been published, it is worth checking any surviving original manuscripts, because all too often the published versions have been heavily edited and tidied up. Most official naval papers are held by The National Archives, but others are held by the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich and the Royal Naval Museum archives at Portsmouth, while isolated records, especially diaries and letters, are dispersed in local record offices or remain in private hands.

If there is some hint, perhaps from a birth certificate or census entry, that a female ancestor spent time on board of a warship, it is definitely worth following up. You may not only add to your family history – you might add to the history of war at sea. ■

READER OFFER!

Jack Tar: The extraordinary lives of ordinary seamen in Nelson's navy, written by Roy and Lesley Adkins, has just been published

in paperback by Little Brown. Readers of *FHM* can buy the book for the special price of £9.99 (RRP £10.99) plus FREE P&P. Just call 01832 737525 and quote the reference number LB 094.

