

St Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, London EC2

The Annual Admiral Arthur Phillip Commemoration

27th January 2014 at 11.30am

Sir Michael Savory, Chairman of the Admiral Arthur Phillip Memorial Trust

In the last few years much has been written about Arthur Phillip's time in Australia, where for five years he was Founder and First Governor of New South Wales. Headlines and titles describe him as "Founding Father - Neglected Hero" and "Arthur Phillip Sailor Mercenary Governor Spy". While these are descriptions of a man of remarkable intellect and humanity, posterity will recognise him as a hero when a memorial to him is unveiled in Westminster Abbey later this year to mark the bicentenary of his death. Heroes are best remembered when they have a glorious death and fame often comes from notoriety. Phillip achieved neither of these distinctions but nonetheless deserves our admiration because of his determination and fortitude against all the odds.

My observations are now to show how Phillip's life and experiences prepared him for his Australian achievements. I leave it to others on another occasion to tell of these later years. Born, just yards from here, on 11th October 1738 he was the second child of Jacob and Elizabeth Phillip. His father was a language teacher from Frankfurt and his mother, a Londoner, the widow of a seaman John Herbert RN who had died in Jamaica. The Phillips were related by marriage to the Everetts, of whom Michael Everett, an influential naval Captain was to take young Phillip into service. His father, who died when he was young, had taught him Latin and to speak German, French and Portuguese. But it was his mother's influence with her family's naval connections that set him on the path of recognition.

It began when he first went to sea at the age of nine as a cabin boy before beginning formal education at the School of the Royal Hospital for Seaman in Greenwich. Here he was taught mathematics, navigation and nautical astronomy. He was a diligent student noted by the headmaster for "his diplomacy and mildness" adding "he was nervously active, unassuming, reasonable, business-like and to the smallest degree in everything he undertakes, always seeking perfection". These attributes are hardly those of a hero but they exemplified the characteristics needed to eventually take eleven ships with over a thousand soles half way round the world to establish the colony of New South Wales.

In 1753 Phillip left Greenwich for two years apprenticeship on an Arctic whaling ship. This was a tough and demanding experience but on returning to England he was soon training as a midshipman at the age of sixteen before transferring to the Royal Navy under the command of his mother's cousin Captain Everitt. His service began when the Seven Years War was raging across Europe involving, amongst other issues, England and France disputing control of colonial trade. After visiting ports in Holland, Portugal, Spain, Italy and Malta, he participated in the 1756 sea battle for the relief of the Island of Minorca which was eventually lost to the French. This defeat led to the trial and controversial execution for neglect, of Admiral Byng for whom Phillip later stated that he had had no respect. But the battle gave him firsthand experience of conflict and death and the importance of strong naval discipline. It must have been a testing time and it prepared him for further action in the West Indies. Here, three years later, he participated in a series of victories over the French including the capture of a frigate which led to his promotion from midshipman to Fourth Lieutenant.

Whilst in the West Indies he experienced the loss of life by sailors from scurvy, mosquitoes, and smallpox. On the plantations he observed that the slaves were healthy and strong. They had been given limes and lemons each day, their food included vegetables of different varieties, their living quarters were thoroughly cleaned each week and every slave had to have a bath. Phillip decided if this diet and cleanliness worked for the slaves so it should for the sailors. These ideas were introduced and his ship was thoroughly scrubbed and fruit and vegetables were taken on board. Death and illness notably diminished. Later ships under Phillip's command were always known as clean ships and years later not one death from scurvy was logged on the long voyage to Australia.

Heath apart, the slave trade had also horrified Phillip and he became an ardent anti-slaver for the rest of his life. In the West Indies following the capture of Martinique his attention switched in 1762 to the successful taking of Havana, from the Spanish. The Treaty of Paris was signed the next year which finally brought the Seven Years War to an end. As was usual during times of peace Phillip left active naval service on half pay. So at the age of 24 he settled into domestic life with his first wife Charlott, aged 41, the widow of a wealthy London merchant: first living in Hampton Court and later farming in Hampshire. It was an unhappy marriage for within six years they separated. As was common at the time Phillip had entered into a prenuptial agreement whereby he had to pay back all money used by him during the marriage. This he honoured right up until Charlott's death thirty years later. Such honesty was rare in those days.

While farming Phillip attained knowledge of crops and their rotation, animal husbandry, the vagaries of climate, and of soil protection. Here the perfectionist came into his own and later in Australia, as an early environmentalist, he banned the cutting down of trees on either side of rivers, the life blood of the Colony.

By the early 1770s he was back in full time naval service as the threat of war with France loomed again, although interrupted by the American Revolution. This time his linguistic skill and sallow appearance led him to Europe where he travelled extensively. The purpose although not recorded involved some business activities and his training as a military engineer. Before the creation, one hundred and forty years later, of the Secret Intelligence Service, MI6 the British Government had obtained information on enemy activity by arranging for trustworthy informants to report directly to the Admiralty or to the Home Office.

Phillip's contact with those in Government in England had developed and his European tours undoubtedly involved espionage. He reported back on the French naval build-up in their dockyards based upon his knowledge of ships, artillery and defences. His intelligence work then took another turn.

In 1775 Portugal was contesting Spain for control of territory in South America. Britain had long been an ally of Portugal so it was likely that she would be drawn into the dispute. Phillip was therefore encouraged to join the Portuguese Navy so that he could use his navigational training to draw reliable maps of the coast, harbours and fortifications. He joined the Portuguese Navy with the rank of Post Captain and over a period of two years patrolled the coast of Brazil down to the River Plate making secret drawings. The Portuguese Navy was heavily outnumbered by the Spanish so conflict was generally avoided despite Phillip's keenness for action. However under his command of a modest frigate he captured a Spanish

battleship. This brought him much honour and credit from the Portuguese who described him as “brave, honest, obedient and self-sacrificing”.

During his time with the Portuguese Phillip had been involved in transporting slaves and doing what he could to ameliorate their terrible treatment. He was later to enact the first law of Australia stating “There will never be any slavery in this land, where there are no slaves there will be no slavery”.

By 1778 he had returned to the British Navy with initially the rank of First Lieutenant before being raised to Post Captain. He commanded ships that went to northern Germany, South America again, and across to South Africa and India. This gave him navigational experience that would prove invaluable for his eventual command of the First Fleet to Australia almost ten years later. The threat of war with France was growing so by the mid 1780s Phillip was again sent back to Europe to resume his espionage activities. The great naval shipyards at Toulon were of special interest and while it is known that Phillip sent a number of reports back to the British government he must have taken great risk of discovery. Death would have been the inevitable consequence.

England was in turmoil when he returned. France and Holland were cooperating to thwart British trade, there was a significant budget deficit, law and order was of public concern with goals over crowded, and war was threatened on many fronts.

In 1766 James Cook, a British naval captain, had been commissioned by the Royal Society to travel to the Pacific Ocean to observe and record the transit of Venus across the Sun. Travelling west from South America he eventually reached Australia. On the 19th April 1770 his expedition became the first recorded Europeans to have encountered its eastern coastline. By the late 1770's the French and Dutch were threatening British interests in India as well as having aspirations to dominate the East Indies. Britain also had commercial need for natural resources so a decision was quickly taken to establish a presence on the east coast of Australia from which trade routes could be protected. It was also considered an ideal penal settlement although this was never Phillip's own objective. His was the creation of a new nation.

The decision to appoint Phillip to command the First Fleet is shrouded in uncertainty. I have long contended that with war against France imminent most British naval captains would have wished to remain in European waters to gain the prestige ultimately secured by Nelson. There could have been little enthusiasm to venture into the unknown with 760 convicts, 240 marines and a group of civil officers on eleven small merchant ships.

There is no evidence that Phillip was disliked by his fellow captains but the First Lord of the Admiralty wrote “I cannot say the little knowledge I have of Captain Phillip would have led me to select him for the service of this complicated nature”. What is fact is that Phillip had direct contact with the Government due to his espionage activities and that the selection and payment for the office of governor lay with the Home Office not the Admiralty.

On the 12th October 1786 Phillip received his commission as Governor of New South Wales. He promptly set about the task of selecting the ships, fitting them out and planning for provisions ranging from medicine to building materials. He knew that fresh fruit and animals would be added when he stopped in Brazil.

Nonetheless, he was so demanding that the Admiralty renounced any further interest and left it to the Navy Board to fulfil his requirements. These included the latest chronometer to accurately calculate longitude, once again evidencing his navigational training.

Parliament had approved authority for Phillip to govern alone without a council. He had wide ranging powers including the death penalty and unlimited capacity to grant land to convicts who had completed their sentence. Initially he had failed to take a record of their conviction so used his benevolence and common sense to decide. The fleet took eight months to get ready with unimaginable numbers of meetings, letters and discussions. Phillip's fortitude tested his character and leadership for it has to be appreciated that he had no support in preparing for a voyage of fifteen thousand and sixty three nautical miles into the unknown.

Phillip's humanity is no better illustrated than by the statistics of the First Fleet which suffered the loss of just 4.5% of its number. This compared with 25% lost on the Second Fleet and 10% on the Third Fleet. His demands for fresh fruit and vegetables coupled with cleanliness were just the start. In the book *The Fatal Shore*, an epic story of the founding of Australia, by Robert Hughes, he called it "one of the great sea voyages in English history".

As I said at the beginning of this Address I leave it to others to recount Phillip's remarkable achievements in Australia. Perhaps though, they are best summarised by Captain John Fortescue who said in 1789 "I do think God Almighty made Phillip on purpose for this Place; for never did man better know what to do, or with more determination to see it done; and yet, if they'll let him, he will make them all very happy". I conclude with this observation. "Admiral Arthur Phillip was a Founding Father and is a Memorable Hero".