

## CORNWALLIS AND HAMPSHIRE

By BARRY JOLLY

### ABSTRACT

*Admiral the Hon. Sir William Cornwallis is the most distinguished person to have lived in Milford (now Milford-on-Sea), Hampshire. This article traces his career before he settled in Milford in 1800 at the age of 56, reviews his relationship with Captain John Whitby and his widow, and examines the impact that he and the beneficiaries of his estate had on that village over the ensuing century.*

### INTRODUCTION

The following notice appeared in two national newspapers on 10th July 1819:

On the 5th inst. died, at his seat at Newlands, in the county of Southampton, the Hon. Sir William Cornwallis, G.C.B. Vice-Admiral of England &c. The naval annals of this country are graced with the names of few individuals who stand so pre-eminent as that of the late Sir William Cornwallis. Silence on occasions of this nature (as to any panegyric of the deceased), may be deemed eloquence: in the present instance, the deep and unaffected regret of numerous friends for private worth – the gratitude of his country, for many and very distinguished public services, will add more to the posthumous splendour of such a character, than the sculptured urn or marble monument can, even with sufficient truth, hand down to succeeding generations (MP 10.7.1806; MC 10.7.1806).

The words reflect the end of an era, and indeed this is so: Cornwallis was the third most senior admiral in the Royal Navy after the seemingly indestructible St Vincent and the long since inactive Benjamin Caldwell. What the words themselves do not reveal is their authorship.

Almost certainly – there are no other realistic possibilities – the obituary was written by Mrs Theresa Whitby, the widow of Cornwallis' long-term protégé and frequent flag captain, John Whitby. Mrs Whitby was to be Cornwallis' principal beneficiary. The words therefore reflect also the beginning of another era: the ownership and development of the village of Milford, for good or ill, by the Whitby/Cornwallis-West family.

The significance of that family to Milford arises from Cornwallis having been a god-father to the daughter of Captain John Whitby. Her full name was Theresa John Cornwallis Whitby, and she in turn named her youngest son Cornwallis. He then hyphenated his Christian and surnames by deed poll in 1895, and it was his son George who wrote a biography of Admiral Cornwallis in 1927 (Cornwallis-West 1927). The impact on Milford of all these people was considerable.

This article provides a brief review of Cornwallis' naval exploits before setting out how the Cornwallis-Whitby nexus led to his last days being spent in Hampshire far from his native Suffolk, and the implications for Milford of the provisions of his will.

### EARLY NAVAL CAREER

William Cornwallis was born into a world of privilege. The Cornwallis family had re-emerged at the restoration in 1660 as a leading family in Suffolk, owning Broome Hall and being in a position to send one, and often both, of the members of parliament representing the borough of Eye (Henning 1983). William was one of these, for a total of 25 years with



Fig. 1 Newlands, The Seat of Mrs Whitby from Grove's Views of Lymington courtesy of Christopher Hobby

another six representing Portsmouth, although his heart does not appear to have been in it. There are no records of his ever having spoken, and he voted only rarely (Namier & Brooke 1964; Thorne 1986). Broadly speaking, he was a Pittite, in line with his elder brother, and this was to have a later impact on his career.

The family background was very influential, and his mother attempted to use that influence to further his career. William resisted, preferring to make his way on his own merits (Cornwallis-West 1927, 23–33). Nonetheless, being the son of a Privy Councillor – who was rewarded with an earldom in 1753 – as well as being the nephew of the Archbishop of Canterbury, was not without its advantages. The same applied to his brother Charles, 2nd Earl Cornwallis, whose capitulation at Yorktown during the War of American Independence in 1781 was calamitous, but whose career was largely unaffected: he was to serve later as Master General of the Ordnance, Viceroy of Ireland and twice as Governor-General of India (technically he was Commander-in-Chief of British India and Governor of the Presidency of Fort William). When Charles went out to India in 1786, William followed two years later

as Commander-in-Chief of the naval squadron, flying a commodore's broad pennant (MM 28.10.4788; SR 15.11.1788). His flag captain was James Cornwallis (HJ 15.10.1788), a fourth cousin, and another significant member of the party was a young Midshipman, John Whitby, recommended by another Cornwallis brother, James, the Bishop of Lichfield.

By this time, William had established himself as a successful naval captain. From his first service as a student at the Royal Naval Academy in 1756, he was only briefly without a ship. In the forty years from 1755 to 1795 – a period including the interludes of peace between the conflicts of the Seven Years War, the War of American Independence and the French Revolutionary Wars – he spent in total only two years on half pay. Promotion was rapid: Lieutenant at 17, Commander at 18, Captain at 21; all at a time when one principal criterion for promotion to Lieutenant was the attainment of the age of 21 (Donnithorne).

During the Seven Years War, he was present at the Reduction of Louisberg in 1758, the Battle of Quiberon Bay in 1759, and the capture of the French sixty four gun *Achille* in July 1761 shortly after his promotion to Lieutenant; his

ship, *Thunderer*, suffered severe casualties. The war was followed by, the more mundane work of convoy escort and operations on the West Coast of Africa, during which time he displayed an independence of mind, writing a number of strongly worded letters to the Admiralty.

It was during the next major conflict – with the American colonies – that William's reputation extended beyond purely naval circles. Congratulations flew after the Battle of Grenada in 1779: in particular, Charles Middleton, the Comptroller of the Navy, visited William's brother James – later Bishop of Lichfield – and Vice-Admiral Barrington, second in command at the battle, and called on his mother, Countess Cornwallis. More followed when, in March 1780, in command of a small squadron, he encountered a superior force of French ships under Toussaint-Guillaume Picquet de la Motte which he out-sailed until reaching safety.

Cornwallis also played a significant role in the important Battle of the Saintes in 1782 by which Rodney's fleet restored British control of the seas. He was highly critical of Rodney, however, even penning some (rather rough) lines of verse about the latter's lack of enterprise (Cornwallis-West 1927, 23–33).

## A FAMOUS RETREAT

His own energy and enterprise were not in doubt when he encountered another French fleet far superior in numbers in 1795. The event became famous rapidly as Cornwallis' Retreat.

Running into a vastly superior French fleet off Belle-Isle on 16th June, comprising no fewer than twelve French ships of the line and eighteen smaller vessels, Cornwallis, with a squadron of only five ships of the line and two frigates, organised a brilliant withdrawal. At the height of the action, and in a classic *ruse de guerre*, Cornwallis detached one of his frigates, *Phaeton* (Captain Robert Stopford), which then sent signals to non-existent support over the horizon, and the French accordingly withdrew (James 1837). The whole action had lasted some thirty hours, with a running battle extending over 11 of these. Only 14 British sailors were injured, all in the slow sailing *Mars*.

A vote of thanks, usually reserved for victories at sea, was carried in the Commons, the secretary of State for war, Henry Dundas, stating:

Yet though no actual victory was obtained in the present case, the gallant behaviour of Vice-Admiral Cornwallis was not the less conspicuous in offering battle to such a superior force of the enemy, and afterwards making such a safe retreat HC 14.11.1795).

Cornwallis himself was no less stinting in his praise for his men:

Vice-Admiral Cornwallis returns his sincere thanks to the Captains, Officers, Seamen, and Marines, of the Fleet under his orders, for their steady and gallant conduct in the presence of the French Fleet yesterday, which firmness, he has no doubt, deterred the enemy from making more attack. It would give the Vice-Admiral pleasure to put the whole of their exertions in effect, by meeting a more equal force, when the country would receive advantage, as it now does honour, from the spirit so truly manifested by those brave men GJ 29.6.1795).

Writing in 1823, Captain Edward Pelham Brenton (who had served as a Midshipman under Cornwallis in India) asserted that Cornwallis' Retreat was 'justly considered one of the finest displays of united courage and coolness to be found in our naval history'. A review in 1850 (of *Naval Tactics* by George Biddlecombe) coupled Cornwallis' Retreat and Howe's victory in 1793 (the Glorious First of June) as admirable specimens of naval tactics, rating these above Trafalgar and far and away superior to any other actions in the French wars (Brenton 1823, 374).

## THE BLOCKADE OF BREST

However much this event contributed to the fame which Cornwallis bore with singular modesty, and however much the sentiments he expressed about those who served under him typified that modesty still further, his principal claim to greatness lies in his conduct of the blockade of Brest in 1801–2 and, more especially, from 1803 to 1806.

Close blockade of Brest had been a principal

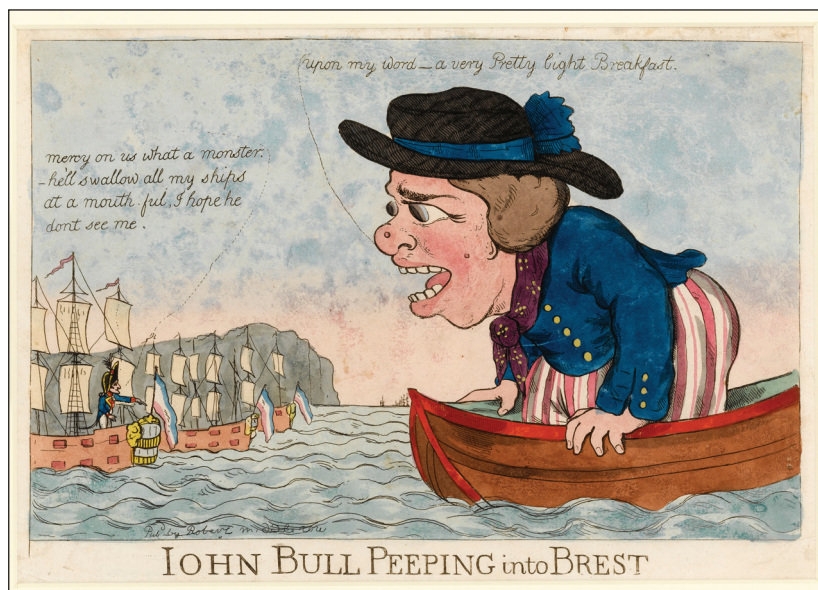


Fig. 2 John Bull peeping into Brest

element of British naval strategy in wars against France from the Seven Years War of 1756–63. Offering the French Mediterranean fleet based in Toulon the chance to join battle carried the attendant risk that it might escape into the open seas. If it did so, there was sufficient time to alert the authorities at home of the danger of a landing on the coasts of the United Kingdom. Alternatively, it could be tracked down as Horatio Nelson did so successfully in August 1798 at Aboukir Bay and in October 1805 at Trafalgar (Lewis 1956, 151).

Brest, however, was too close to home for such a luxury, and close watch needed to be maintained at all times. Nelson, an admirer of Cornwallis whose care and attention (Nelson wrote more than once) had saved his life in the West Indies in 1780, might well wish to see Cornwallis (as he wrote in a letter to Cornwallis dated 30 December 1804) 'with the Brest fleet well clear of the land, and from my heart hope this will happen' (Cornwallis-West 1927, 130). Such a prospect was, as both well knew, unlikely. Cornwallis was limited to a brief action off Camaret on 22 August 1805. The French admiral, Honoré Joseph Antoine Ganteaume, was bound for Ireland

with some 13,000 troops in yet another attempt (following those in 1796 and 1798) to take advantage of Irish discontent. Unwilling to risk the loss of the troop transports, and in spite of a numerical superiority in ships, he returned to port with minimal casualties on either side (TNA WO 1/924).

Nonetheless, the significance of the blockade of Brest lies more in saving England from invasion than Ireland, important though this was. It was during the later period of Cornwallis' command of the Channel Fleet, after the Peace of Amiens, that Napoleon Bonaparte planned, and came close to executing, an invasion of England. Invasion barges were placed in readiness at Boulogne and other Channel ports and an army of some 40,000 men assembled. Had Ganteaume been able to evade Cornwallis and sweep the Channel, the invasion fleet would have sailed. It was the courage, perseverance, determination and leadership displayed by Cornwallis throughout two winters of the most dreadful sailing conditions that prevented this outcome.

The newspapers, for example in January 1804, carried daily reports on the threat of invasion and the endeavours of Cornwallis to

maintain his station during the most extreme of winters at sea.

There is not, in the whole course of our history an instance of equal perseverance in contending against every obstacle of wind and weather as that exhibited by that incomparable officer, Admiral Cornwallis, and the gallant officers and seamen under his command (GJ 2.1.1804).

(with some peculiarities of punctuation): The Exeter Flying Post waxed lyrical:

The patience and perseverance of the gallant Admiral Cornwallis are become more than ever the theme of universal praise and admiration. It is said that immediately after the recess, a motion will be made in both Houses of Parliament, returning thanks to the gallant Admiral; his officers and men, for the spirit and vigilance which they have displayed in a tedious and perilous blockade. To combat not human force, but the elements, in the most tempestuous season of the year, and to vanquish storms for eight months, requires more constancy, and puts the courage of men more to the test, than the most brilliant and hard fought victory. The motion is, we believe, unprecedented, but so is the case that calls for it.- No honours, no distinctions, no rewards, can be too great for such fortitude, gallantry, and perseverance. When Admiral Cornwallis embarked, in May last, in order to commence the blockade of Brest, had the question been put to any seamen, as to the possibility of that gallant officer maintaining his station until Christmas, the reply would undoubtedly have been, 'tis utterly impossible. What then does not England owe to that great Commander!-and the more especially when we come to reflect, that this is the third war in which he has displayed no less powers in naval tactics than in personal courage, and how numerous are the occasions that can speak to this. 'Tis true, indeed, that courage seems to be the very birth-right of British seamen, but, when added to such science as above alluded to, it renders the naval character complete (EFP 5.1.1804).

Tributes such as these were justified. The achievement of maintaining an effective blockade of Brest and thereby preventing this major invasion stands alongside the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and the Battle of Britain in 1940 in the annals of this country.

## A PARALLEL CAREER

Thus far, there has been little mention of Hampshire. Being a Member of Parliament for Portsmouth from 1784 to 1790, touched on earlier, did not amount to a love of, or commitment to, the county. Cornwallis maintained an interest in public affairs, but was not inclined to political activity or debate. As with many of his contemporaries, election to Westminster was a duty – subservient to other priorities – or even an obligation. Traditionally, dockyard constituencies returned members supporting the government of the day in order to ensure a continuing flow of naval contracts. Cornwallis stood for the dockyard seat of Portsmouth as a favour for Earl Howe, the First Lord of the Admiralty, because of an anxiety that the government could lose control.

The election was the first general election contested by William Pitt the Younger as Prime Minister, having struggled since appointment the previous year to command a majority in the House of Commons. The members for Portsmouth, elected with the support of an earlier administration, were by no means to be relied upon, and the Corporation was in some disarray. Reliable supporters were imperative, and William Cornwallis' decision to stand placed him firmly, then and later, in the Pittite camp.

He remained as the Member for Portsmouth whilst commanding the royal yacht, *Royal Charlotte*, from 1783 to 1787, and then sailed for India in *Crown* in October 1788. He did not return home until 29th April 1794. With little opportunity to attend Parliament, Cornwallis expressed doubts about his suitability as a candidate for Portsmouth at the next election in June 1790. In the event, the government candidate was defeated, but, although still in India, Cornwallis was offered the family seat of Eye again which he was relieved to accept. He was returned there in 1796, 1802 and 1806.

Even on his return, he was obliged to write to the bailiffs of Eye, thanking them for the honour conferred on him but explaining that he could not come to Eye because there was a ship ready for sea on which he must hoist his flag. This letter reveals his address at the time as Cavendish Square (EE2/K/5/1 SRO). Two years later, in 1796, he was living at 76 Lower

Wimpole Street (LMA MS 11936/407/660285). By this time, and until 1801, he was on half pay having fallen out spectacularly with the First Lord of the Admiralty, Earl Spencer. It was during this period that he moved to Milford in Hampshire.

## MILFORD AND THE NEWLANDS ESTATE

The trigger for this move is unclear. Indeed, the only certainty is that an old friend, Admiral Robert Man, had moved to Pennington House, then in the parish of Milford, in 1789 (Austin & Jolly 2018; Austin & Jolly 2019; Jolly 2018a). Man had served under Cornwallis in the 28 gun *Guadeloupe* from 1768 to 1769 and it must be supposed that the friendship emanated from there. George Cornwallis-West described him as an old friend, and he was an active member of Milford society (MoSHRS; Jolly 2016a; Cornwallis-West 1927, 396). The move proved to be fateful for Milford.

Remaining out of favour whilst Spencer was still at the Admiralty, Cornwallis leased an estate, Newlands in Milford, Hampshire from Sir John D'Oyly (HRO 11M56/130), whose finances were beginning to come under strain, and purchased the estate outright two years later. Milford was to be Cornwallis' home until his death 19 years later.

The condition and size of Newlands at this time requires clarification. A fire at Newlands was reported by George Cornwallis-West (Cornwallis-West 1927, 344 & 382–3). Given the family relationships detailed earlier, the only way in which George could have been aware of the fire is through a now lost memoir of Cornwallis by Mrs West who would have learnt of it herself on Cornwallis' knee. There are strong suggestions of embellishment at each stage of the telling.

Cornwallis-West stated, under a page heading of 1799, that Cornwallis moved to Newlands 'then a small farm', 'in the summer of this year'. However, the lease on Newlands (from Sir John D'Oyly) is dated 5th September 1800. Cornwallis-West also made reference to Rear Admiral Berkeley and the Acts of Union with Ireland, and these confirm the autumn of 1800. 'He lived in a two-roomed wooden hut

... while the farmhouse was being put ready for his accommodation.' The 'thatched farmhouse' burnt down 'in the winter of this year' (page heading 1801, although, given Cornwallis' movements with the Channel Fleet, it could only have been 1802–3).

There is clear evidence that Newlands was more than a mere farmhouse. The rates paid on the house at Newlands of £3-5s-0d are higher than the £2-10s-0d Admiral Man paid for Pennington House and in total is more than another retired naval officer, Rear Admiral John Peyton, paid for nearby Priestlands (Braid & Jolly 2019). In all, the rates Cornwallis paid were four times the average for Milford.

More evidence comes from the sale particulars (see panel) in 1800. Furthermore, a map of Milford of 1797 shows the well-established house, lake and walled garden clearly (centre left). This was already a modern and desirable gentleman's residence.

The fire itself remains a mystery. Cornwallis-West states that Cornwallis lost a valuable library and treasures brought back from India, but there are no press reports of any such fire to be found. If there was a fire, then it may have been in an outhouse in which Cornwallis' possessions were stored or a small area of Newlands itself, but by no means the entire property.

## CAPTAIN JOHN WHITBY

A Pittite to the end, Cornwallis' naval career was brought to a close by Pitt's death in January 1806. A month later he was instructed by the incoming First Lord of the Admiralty, Viscount Howick (the future Prime Minister, Earl Grey of the Reform Bill), to strike his flag, which he did for the last time on 23rd February (TNA ADM 51/1567). At the same time, he gave up his seat in parliament. In Lambert's words, 'He spent his remaining years at home, with his horses and parrots, latterly in the company of Whitby's widow.' Another naval historian rephrased this to say that he 'spent his remaining years with the widow of his flag captain, John Whitby – and perhaps more improbably – his parrots.' (Lambert 2008; Davey 2015)

The question of the parrot is the lesser point here, but it is less improbable than

*Hampshire Chronicle*  
*Monday 19 May 1800*

The valuable VILLA and PREMISIES called *Newlands* ... containing Breakfast Rooms, Dining and Drawing Rooms, Library, Dressing Room and Bed Rooms .... Furnished in a Style of the most elegant Taste. The Offices ...are of every description: Gardens and Conservatory in high Condition, and with the Pleasure Grounds, and several Closes of Land, comprise about Twenty-five acres. The whole forming (for beauty of Situation, Prospects, and Convenience) a Residence most select and desirable.

Fig. 3 Advertisement in Hampshire Chronicle Monday 19 May 1800



Fig. 4 Map of Milford in 1797; note Everton then called Evelton. Courtesy of the British Library, OSD 75 pt.1; Item number: 15. Surveyed 1797, published 1810

may be supposed. A letter from Cornwallis to Mrs Whitby in 1813 establishes its existence (Morrow 2018, 251). Indeed, it specifically asks her to tell her daughter that the parrot is well. The daughter, the future Mrs West, herself left her 'parrots and other birds' to her youngest daughter (or, should she not want them, to her maid, 'Louisa Oakford [who] will treat them kindly' (Will West).

What does need disentangling is the relationship with Captain John Whitby and his widow (Jolly 2011, *passim*). Indeed, the relationship went back a long way. Whitby was the son of a Staffordshire vicar in the Diocese of Lichfield where, as mentioned earlier, the Bishop was James Cornwallis, brother of the Admiral. Whitby's father, the Rev Thomas Whitby, certainly used influence – in the terminology of the day – to further his son's career. The earliest record of service – at the age of seven, but almost certainly fictitious – is at the Battle of the Saintes in 1782 under Sir Alan Gardner, another Staffordshire man. His first actual service commenced on 18th April 1787 under Phillippe D'Auvergne, who spent much of the French wars operating intelligence services in Brittany for the various commanders of the Channel Fleet, including Cornwallis (Ashelford 2008, *passim*).

In November 1788, Whitby sailed to India in *Crown*, under the command of Captain James Cornwallis himself under the broad pennant of Commodore William Cornwallis, to serve in India at the behest of the Governor General Earl Cornwallis. These extensive family connections were no accident, and, although documentary evidence of a recommendation from the Bishop is lacking, it is most likely that it was he who found a Midshipman's berth for the young Whitby. On Whitby's death, his family turned against his widow, but the Bishop supported her. It is reasonable to infer not only that he followed Whitby's career with interest, but actually initiated it.

There were a number of future senior naval officers in the flotilla in India: Admiral Thomas le Marchant Gosselin, Vice-Admiral Sir Richard King Bt KCB, Rear Admiral Thomas Wentworth Holland and Captain Edward Pelham Brenton CB. Most notable from a Hampshire perspective was the future Admiral of the Fleet Sir Francis

Austen GCB, born in Steventon and buried at St Peter and St Paul, Wymering, who was the brother of one of the county's most famous women, Jane Austen the novelist.

The one who stood out for Cornwallis, however, was Whitby. Advancement was rapid enough – Lieutenant at 17, Commander at 18 and Post Captain at 18 – but he was also given command of a sloop, purchased by the East India Company, when still a 16 year old Midshipman. When *Despatch* was later taken on to the books of the Admiralty on 28 December 1792, Whitby was promoted to Commander with Francis Austen as his Senior Lieutenant (Jolly 2011, 15–18). The period of service in India lasted until 12 January 1794, by which time (actually October 1793) Cornwallis had made a will with Whitby as his principal beneficiary. Without children of his own, Cornwallis treated Whitby as his own son (Cryer 2006, *passim*).

This quasi-paternal relationship was to have profound consequences. Already on the return from India, Cornwallis had to act to compensate for Whitby's inexperience. The incident was described by one of the crew, William Richardson. Shortly before leaving India, *Minerva* came across what was thought to be a French frigate (although it was found to be Portuguese). Whitby beat to quarters, but omitted to turn the ship round to give chase until Cornwallis appeared on deck in his nightdress with the necessary instruction. Another incident, from the same source, was an edict of Whitby's making swearing punishable by flogging, an instance of the vicar's son failing to recognise the realities of shipboard life in the age of sail. Following a demonstration by the crew, Cornwallis ordered Whitby to withdraw the edict (Rodger 2005, 444; Richardson 1908, 102ff).

These relatively minor incidents were preludes to another. Marquis Cornwallis wrote many years later, in August 1804, to his old friend (and former ADC) Ross about the folly of his brother putting into port himself when *Ville de Paris* needed repairs in the following terms:

The first great faux pas that he made in '96 and this second mistake which might have proved fatal for the future repose and comfort of his

life, have both been occasioned by his attachment to Whitby, and his earnest desire to have him as Captain of his ship. What trifles direct the fortune of men whom nature has qualified to be great! (Ross 1859, 515).

The second mistake to which Marquis was alluding to his brother having taken three weeks leave whilst *Ville de Paris* was refitting, instead of shifting his flag to another ship, the suggestion being that he was really waiting for Whitby, who had reached England on 11 June 1804 to rejoin him. In fact, the Marquis was himself under political and family strain and may have been overstating the case, his concern here being that the French might come out of Brest with the Admiral still in England (Ross 1859, 513–4). It was actually the first faux pas, as the Marquis put it, that did indeed prove fatal to the Admiral's repose for some years.

In 1795, within months of the great triumph of his famous Retreat, an inter-service quarrel had blown up over the question of military command aboard Royal Navy ships, with the Duke of York (as Commander-in-Chief of the army) issuing orders which undermined the authority of ships' commanding officers over army personnel at sea. Cornwallis took a significant part in this, which cannot have endeared him to Spencer at the Admiralty.

Nonetheless, he was then appointed to escort troops bound for the West Indies. There had already been two attempts at this under Rear Admiral Hugh Christian, with the flotilla being forced back by severe weather each time. Cornwallis prevaricated, still seeking assurances on the question of military command, raising difficulties about ships, captains and supplies, and even asking to be relieved of his command. When he did eventually make sail, his flagship, *Royal Sovereign* commanded by John Whitby, succeeded only in colliding with a troop transport, *Belisarius*, in more severe weather a few days later.

There was an opportunity of transferring to another ship whilst *Royal Sovereign* returned to port for repairs, but Cornwallis decided against this. Unable to identify a suitable shipyard within reasonable reach, he returned home, thereby incurring the wrath of his superiors. When he reached Spithead, he was instructed

to go out immediately in the frigate, *Astrea*, which he declined to do on the grounds of its unsuitability given the state of his health.

There was, and remains, a general view that in this instance Cornwallis would not sail without Whitby, and Whitby could not go because, as Captain of *Royal Sovereign*, he was obliged to supervise repairs in the dockyard. Although Cornwallis had written after the Retreat that he was 'much indebted to Captain Whitby for his Activity and unremitted Diligence on Board the Royal Sovereign ...' (LG 23.6.1795), Whitby was still only twenty one, but was captain of a first rate ship of the line of 100 guns. Throughout his career to date, he had been protected by the presence of his kindly superior. If Cornwallis had obeyed orders in March 1796 and sailed in a frigate leaving Whitby alone in command of *Royal Sovereign*, the latter's inexperience might well have been exposed, and with it the decision by Cornwallis to promote him at so young an age.

The upshot of the affair was that Cornwallis was court-martialled. The Admiralty had not conducted itself too well, and Cornwallis' choice of Hon Thomas Erskine – a future Lord Chancellor – to represent him proved to be a masterstroke. Erskine both wrote and delivered Cornwallis' defence statement, Cornwallis judiciously being too unwell to present it himself, and Erskine's eloquence stole the show.

The result, almost inevitably, was a fudge. The court found that misconduct was imputable to Cornwallis in not moving his flag to another ship, but that he was acquitted of any disobedience of orders (SJC 7.4.1796). The contradictions in the verdict were seized upon in an open letter to Lord Hood published in the *Morning Post* (MP 16.4.1796; TB 22.4.1796; STAR 12.5.1796), and members of both houses of parliament used the case to lambast the government. The crew of *Royal Sovereign* cheered the result, whilst Lord Spencer wrote somewhat disingenuously to Lord Cornwallis to say that he was relieved by the outcome, a gesture that later events soon belied (Cornwallis-West 1927, 340). Spencer remained as First Lord of the Admiralty for another five years, and Cornwallis spent all those years on half pay (Jolly 2011, 21–4; Cornwallis-West 1927, 291–342; Corbett 1913,

209–229). Ironically, in the middle of all this kerfuffle, he was awarded the valuable sinecure of Rear Admiral of Great Britain.

### THE MISTRESS OF NEWLANDS

Retirement to Milford loomed, but, the following year (1801), Pitt resigned over the question of Catholic emancipation, and St Vincent replaced Spencer at the Admiralty in March. St Vincent's elevation created a vacancy in the command of the Channel Fleet, and Cornwallis took up the mantle eagerly. This appointment lasted effectively for just six months, as hostilities were wound down in October 1801 in anticipation of the Treaty of Amiens which formalised peace the following March. Cornwallis retired again to Milford, and Whitby found a new ship, *Belleisle*, which he took to Devonport for refitting.

It was there that Whitby met Mary Anne Theresa Symonds, the sister of one of his officers, Lieutenant (later Admiral) Thomas Edward Symonds, and daughter of an old shipmate of Cornwallis, Captain Thomas Symonds. Whitby wrote to her as 'My dear Moll', but in all her letters to him and to and from Cornwallis she was Theresa. In her middle years, she changed her name to the less plebeian Mary Anna Theresa, but to the world at large she was always Mrs M A T Whitby. Within six months, on 13th October 1802, they had married at St. George's Church, East Stonehouse (PRO). The exact circumstances are unclear, but Whitby and his bride were invited to join Cornwallis at Newlands, with Whitby shortly returning to duty and joining the Mediterranean Fleet under Nelson, leaving his wife in the care of their host. On the resumption of hostilities in October 1803, Cornwallis too returned to sea, again in command of the Channel Fleet.

Mrs Whitby was left in charge of Newlands and, very much according to local legend, of the building of a new and much larger house. It has already been established that the house Cornwallis bought from Sir John D'Oyly was very much more substantial than allowed for by George Cornwallis-West. Mrs Whitby's letters to the admiral are full of comments on farming and of the servants, but not of any building

works. Furthermore, Cornwallis' bank account with Hoare's Bank does not show any evidence of high levels of expenditure at this juncture, and the same is true of the accounts of both John and Theresa Whitby (HB).

Nonetheless, the legend of Mrs Whitby taking control of Newlands, supervising the building and managing the estate has become part of Milford folklore (Cornwallis-West 1927, *passim*; Coldicott 1979, 23–7; Trehearne 1982; Macdonald 2004). Her business acumen following her marriage at the age of 18 has been lauded. However, recently discovered letters to Mrs Whitby from her brother-in-law, Sir Nicholas Tindal Chief Justice of the Common Pleas, cast doubt on this. There are clear indications that she found difficulty in finding suitable tenants, and by the 1830s was obliged to spend three and a half years in Italy to reduce her out-goings. She was accompanied by her daughter, and her fortune hunting son-in-law, Frederick Richard West, who lacked independent means (BL).

### THE RETURN TO BLOCKADE

When Cornwallis returned to sea in 1803, he asked once again for Whitby to serve as his Flag Captain. It was a role to which the latter was well accustomed. Since promotion to Captain in 1793, he had served in that capacity in *Minerva* (1793–4), *Excellent* (1794), *Caesar* (1794), *Royal Sovereign* (1795–6) and *Ville de Paris* (1801). His only independent command had been *Severn* from 1799–1801 when Cornwallis was out of favour. The difficulty was that Whitby was in the Mediterranean with Nelson and the Admiralty could not see a way to accommodating Cornwallis' request. Nonetheless, it was achieved within a few months, courtesy of Nelson being ever willing to assist his hero, Cornwallis, and Whitby returned to *Ville de Paris* on 10 September 1804.

Cornwallis had already experienced one winter of severe storms, and now faced two more in 1804–5 and 1805–6. The intensity of the blockade of Brest with high seas, foul weather and indifferent food were borne heavily by both men. Whitby's letters to his wife became filled with complaints about his

patron, feeling under-valued and his authority undermined. For his part, Cornwallis was feeling the effects of the political situation at home with intrigues mounting against him. As a Member of Parliament himself, he even accused Whitby of being 'of the opposite party' (Keele).

In this charged situation, and whatever her merits as a business woman and manager, Mrs Whitby came to the fore. She first challenged Cornwallis' comments about her husband, and then suggested to Cornwallis that Whitby should exchange ships with a more junior Captain. Cornwallis accepted the suggestion with alacrity, and Whitby went to *Gibraltar* with Captain George Aldham taking his place (TNA ADM 51/1567). Cornwallis said that she had a wise head on young shoulders; Whitby told her, 'It takes a clever woman to solve a difficulty and you have done so.' In reply to Cornwallis, in whose house she was living, Mrs. Whitby asked him not to quarrel with her husband again (Cornwallis-West 1927 503; Jolly 2011, 42–6)!

## THE FINAL YEARS

Their friendship repaired, the two men fell victim to political intrigue and weather respectively. Cornwallis left *Ville de Paris* on 23rd February 1806, and Whitby was forced to return on 27th March. He lasted only a few more days before passing away at Newlands on 7th April (MP 14.4.1806). Propriety dictated that Mrs Whitby was obliged to leave Newlands, but she was persuaded after a respectable period of time to return, chaperoned by her sister Juliana.

The evidence for the ensuing years until Cornwallis died on 5th July 1819 rests partly on a memoir written by the Whitby's daughter, Mrs Theresa West. The memoir was used by George Cornwallis-West in his work on the Admiral, but is now lost, and Cornwallis-West's brief interpretation has long remained the only source. What has emerged is a father and daughter relationship, much, indeed, as described by Mrs Whitby herself in her letters to Cornwallis, and Cornwallis himself wrote quite specifically in July 1806 (Jolly 2011, 47–8). There was mutual advantage, with Mrs Whitby

'making an old man happy', as he put it, in his declining years. Cornwallis wrote to

The situation was not without its problems, however. There appear to have been rumours about the relationship being improper, and the Whitby family were reported to have turned against Mrs Whitby. Captain Whitby's father, Rev Thomas Whitby, sought to block Mrs Whitby from being the administrator of her husband's will, the point of contention being several loans made by John Whitby to members of his family which they were none too keen to repay. Admiral Cornwallis wrote to Rev Whitby on 31 July 1806 in what appears to have been a successful attempt to resolve the impasse. (The letter is reproduced in full in Jolly 2011, 47–8.) As previously mentioned, James Cornwallis, the Bishop of Lichfield, maintained his support for Mrs Whitby (Cornwallis-West 1927, 505–21). In later years, Theresa West expressed her views in verse:

Banished from hence be foul Detraction's tongue,  
Who lighting Error, is to Virtue blind!  
Yet let us lash the Vices! On them fall  
The unsparing force of honest Censure's sword!  
(West 1855, 8).

More recent research has identified Whitby's brother William as a central figure in the family feud. A minor beneficiary of his father's will, he declined to repay a loan from John, with correspondence continuing into the 1820s (HB). Cornwallis did his best to placate Mrs Whitby:

Heartless kinsmen stung  
My blood to venom. Thou alone couldst steep  
The vow of vengeance, from just anger wrung  
(West 1855, 4).

His patience may have been tested by both Mrs Whitby and by her daughter, but was never lacking:

Thine ears are open to the widow's prayer;  
The orphans' [*sic*] cries are never raised in vain;

He was to Mrs Whitby:

.... her refuge; and thy goodness gave  
A happy home – a kind protector's care.



Fig. 5 Etching, drawn and printed by Mrs M A T Whitby, in 1829 showing a view from Newlands of the white rocks of The Needles and the ag'd tower of All Saints Church, Milford described in Mrs West's poem, 'Peace'. Courtesy of Christopher Hobby

Theresa West was only 14 when Cornwallis died, but she always remembered him fondly, and not only for the parrots. She had not reached her first birthday when her father died, and Cornwallis, her godfather, became a surrogate father and more:

My more than father! benefactor! friend! (West 1855, 5; Jolly 2018b).

Over the course of the last decade and a half of his life, Cornwallis transferred his quasi-paternal affection for John Whitby to Mrs Whitby and her daughter, so much so that they became the principal beneficiaries of his estate. Nonetheless Cornwallis was never one to neglect those who worked for him, and his servants were all treated well. In a gesture of

the utmost generosity, he left to all household servants who had been with him 'for two years or more, the whole of their wages to be paid to them over again for the whole time they have been in my service and at the highest rate'. Similarly, past friends were not forgotten: £1,000 each to his former secretary and another named person, and £300 to the sister of an old friend in Jamaica and also to a local farmer and bailiff. Taken together, these bequests amounted to £2,600.

This was significantly less than the total left just to Mrs Whitby's brothers and sisters: £1,000 to each of Thomas Edward, William, Sophia and Merelina, £500 to John Charles, and £3,000 to Juliana which tends to confirm her part in looking after Cornwallis alongside Mrs. Whitby.

Theresa received £10,000 on her twenty-first birthday and the rest of the estate went to Mrs Whitby, some £50,000 in cash and stock plus all his land and property.

In all of this, Cornwallis' own family were all but disregarded. A sum of £30,000 was left to the children of his nephew Charles, the second Marquis, subject to his bearing a son. When he died in 1823 still without a son, Mrs Whitby benefited further by receiving the full amount of £30,000 (Cornwallis Will).

Charles Cornwallis' family do not appear to have taken the outcome well, and indeed the arrangement seems a little unfair on his daughters. Their reactions reflected their disappointment: according to Cornwallis-West, 'it was only after Cornwallis made Mrs. Whitby his sole heiress [not quite accurate] that any of his family turned against her and became spiteful; but to his dying day the Bishop remained her friend.' (Cornwallis-West 512).

#### NEWLANDS AFTER CORNWALLIS

Mrs Whitby put her inheritance to good use, building up a portfolio of property in Milford, amounting ultimately to about a third of the land area of the village. Whether this made economic sense is unclear, especially as in the short term she ran into financial difficulties. Nonetheless, her daughter, Mrs West, seems to have been quite comfortable even after her husband died and his property (mostly in North Wales) passed to their remaining son. Over the years, she assembled a collection of artefacts associated with Italy, the country she so much loved.

Mrs Whitby's aversion to her fortune hunting son-in-law led to her leaving only a life interest to her daughter with the estate then passing to her younger grandson, Cornwallis West. By entailing the estate to and through Cornwallis, she not only conformed with the traditional practice of passing the mother's portion to the second son, but also ensured that it would not be united with Frederick Richard West's own estates in North Wales and elsewhere which were expected to go to Frederick and Theresa's oldest surviving son, Frederick Myddelton West. In this way, her own property would not become a minor part of a



Fig. 6 Spy cartoon of Cornwallis Cornwallis-West

large inheritance based on Ruthin Castle, and subject to being broken up by future generations of Wests. Mrs Whitby had built up her properties, firstly on behalf of Admiral Cornwallis and latterly, after he bequeathed them to her, for herself; she did not wish to see them dissipated by a family she found inimical.

This plan foundered when Frederick Myddelton West died unmarried on 13 August 1868. Ultimately, the two estates would be combined and the possibility of Cornwallis West making Denbighshire his base became a reality.

Worse still was the propensity to dissipate fortunes which was prevalent in the West and Myddelton families (Jolly 2016b). Mrs West may already have feared this would extend to her younger son (the older was already in severe debt) when she wrote in 1855:

Child! Who that dear and honour'd name doth bear,  
See that thou keep it spotless, void of stain,  
Striving the deathless bay to win and wear.  
Or in thy country's cause renown to gain!



Fig. 7 Memorial in All Saints Church, Milford to Admiral Cornwallis, Captain John Whitby and Mrs M A T Whitby erected by Mrs West in 1852. The addition below is dedicated to Mrs West

Thy mother's prayers, my boy, shall not be vain!  
Think of the brave who lies beneath the sod,  
When young ambition wins his trumpet-strain!  
Follow the path his hallowed steps have trod –  
Faithful till death to Honour, Country, King and  
God (West 1855, 7)!

By 1855, Cornwallis West had removed to Denbighshire and his London home, with Mrs

West at Newlands. Thereafter the pair met but seldom. Marriage to Mary Fitzpatrick, a favourite and perhaps more of the Prince of Wales, whose later indiscretions scandalised society and came close to unseating the government of H H Asquith, was not what Mrs West had in mind when she exhorted her son to keep his name spotless and to be faithful to his king.

Cornwallis followed in the West tradition of extravagant spending, entertaining the Prince of Wales and friends at Newlands after Cowes Week each year and laying out a seaside resort to be known as Milford-on-Sea on the neighbouring cliffs at Hordle. By the time of his death in 1917 he was close to bankruptcy. His son, George, had already achieved this status the year before through marriages to high profile fortune hunting widows – Lady Randolph Churchill (mother of Sir Winston) and Mrs Patrick Campbell the actress – and uncosted investments in London theatrical productions.

## EPILOGUE

Although George was discharged from bankruptcy quite quickly, it was at the expense of selling the whole of the estates assembled by Mrs Whitby with her inheritance from Admiral Cornwallis, Mrs West's collection of Italian artefacts, the family papers, and nearly all the family jewellery – including the enamelled locket Cornwallis had made of John Whitby for Mrs Whitby in 1806, and which is now in the Gilbert Collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum (Jolly 2011).

Cornwallis West's seaside resort of Milford-on-Sea amalgamated with the parish of Milford in 1905 and the whole is now known as Milford-on-Sea. The Victoria Hotel and all but one of the gentlemen's residences that once adorned the seafront cliffs no longer exist, and the pier was never built. All that remains are the roads: Cornwallis Road, Whitby Road, West Road, Pless Road and Westminster Road (named in honour of Cornwallis West's two daughters, the Princess of Pless and the Duchess of Westminster, neither of whose marriages lasted), and De La Warr Road (named after Frederick Richard West's grandfather, the second Earl de la Warr).

The village that we know today, 200 years after Admiral Cornwallis died, would not have been created without his wealth, however much it may differ from the village of his time or even from that of a century later. Reminders of the Admiral himself are few, but there still stands in the Church of All Saints a grand marble memorial to Sir William Cornwallis, to John Whitby and to Mrs M A T Whitby which was erected by Mrs West in 1852. In the words of Mrs West once again, displayed on the memorial, 'Practising every virtue, he was remarkable for truth, integrity, courage, benevolence, and unostentatious hospitality.'

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*Author:* Barry Jolly, Milford-on-Sea Historical Record Society, c/o 1a Avenue Road, New Milton BH25 5JP