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## SANDWICH, MIDDLETON AND DOCKYARD APPOINTMENTS

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THE controversy between Lord Sandwich and Charles Middleton over dockyard appointments in January and February 1781 was for long one of the main props of the traditional and unsympathetic view of Sandwich's administration. The First Lord, it was argued, filled the yards with political nominees; the consequence was the ruinous condition of the fleet and defeat in the American War of Independence. Since the publication of the Sandwich Papers in the 1930s the reputation of the First Lord as an administrator has been salvaged.<sup>1</sup> That this revision was so long in coming was due in part to his political unpopularity and isolation; by building up a following in the Navy of men of ability who were 'political nonentities by eighteenth century standards' he improved the administrative capacity of an overworked navy, but in doing so he alienated the influential and aristocratic officers, and split the service into opposing factions.<sup>2</sup> Middleton conformed to this pattern; he was similar to men like Palliser, Mulgrave and Suckling, all protégés of the First Lord. He was, however, a difficult colleague, and Sandwich found himself faced with a formidable opponent when there were grounds for disagreement. Yet this controversy was the only major cause of friction in the vital relationship between the two men as First Lord and Comptroller of the Navy Board. A strong Comptroller could obstruct an Admiralty Board which was ignorant of the civil affairs of the Navy, and any controversy between the two boards was a test of strength, the result of which could determine subsequent relations to a marked degree. The ill-feeling between Middleton and Howe, then at the Admiralty, after the American war demonstrated how far things could go wrong. Sandwich, however, was more than informed on the affairs of the civil administration, for he could draw on experience from as far back as the 1740s. His handling of this affair was firm and tactful, and he outmanœuvred the threats and pressures of his Comptroller.

The issues at stake were complicated, not least by the fact that the

<sup>1</sup> *The Private Papers of John, Earl of Sandwich*, ed. G. R. Barnes and J. K. Owen (N.R.S. 1932-8). The controversy is printed in vol. iv, pp. 374-80, 381-3, but more fully in the *Letters and Papers of Charles, Lord Barham*, ed. J. K. Laughton (N.R.S. 1907-11) II, pp. 11-30 (cited below as *Barham Papers*).

<sup>2</sup> J. H. Broomfield, 'Lord Sandwich at the Admiralty Board; Politics and the Navy 1771-8; *Mariner's Mirror*, LI (1965), p. 9.

dockyard organization was, for the age, an immense size; it was also a highly technical service, for which there were virtually no standards by which an officer's worth could be evaluated. Middleton was trying, by a system of disinterested recommendations, to introduce meritocracy in governing the promotions of yard officers, which he intended to be administered by the Navy Board. Sandwich, while admitting that improvements could be made, preferred to take recommendations from any source—including the Navy Board—when he felt he needed them, but did not wish to be governed entirely by recommendations from the professional board, which, in any case, he distrusted on principle. The affair can be seen at three levels. It was a clash of different social and administrative principles. Middleton, the complete professional, saw the controversy in terms of the efficiency of the nineteenth century; Sandwich, the informed amateur, represented the administration of government by the gentlemen of the eighteenth century. At the same time, the controversy represented a stage in the long history of friction and mutual distrust between the senior and junior boards. Finally, it can be seen as a personal conflict. Middleton, hot-headed and idealistic, attempted to bring perfection to a system where there was none to be had. Sandwich, adroit and calm, content with the way of things, cooled the temper of the Comptroller so that a complete breakdown was avoided.

The system of appointment and promotion in the dockyard service was haphazard. The most significant factor was the relative lack of influence of the Navy Board, which was responsible for administering the yards. The Admiralty controlled all promotions of yard officers and officers of the Ordinary, while the appointment of workmen was in the hands of the Principal Officers of the yards.<sup>1</sup> The only control that the Board was able to exert was through the Resident Commissioners of the Outports (members of the Board), who were empowered to approve all appointments.<sup>2</sup> The Committee of Enquiry of 1804 noted this as a weakness:

Though the Resident Commissioner has authority over all persons employed in the yard, he has no power to reward, promote or even cause a man to be entered into the service; and from this circumstance, although the Principal, he appears to have less influence over the workmen than any other officer; this seems to us to be a defect in the system. . . .<sup>3</sup>

A year later the Commission of Naval Revision modified this view; since the Commissioner had the power of approval of all appointments and

<sup>1</sup> 'No shipwright or labourer . . . is to be entered without the warrant from two or more of the Chief Officers [of the Dockyards].' (*The Oeconomy of His Majesty's Naval Office* (London, 1717), p. 110). The *Oeconomy* was a reprint of the Duke of York's 1662 Instructions, by which the civil administration was still governed.

<sup>2</sup> P.R.O., IND 10665 (36c), Standing Order of 31 Mar. 1705.

<sup>3</sup> Parl. Pap., *The Report of the Commissioners of Naval Enquiry*, 1803-4, sixth report, pp. 3-4.

entries, 'and at all times the power of reporting meritorious service to the Board', he had quite enough authority.<sup>1</sup> It is clear, however, that in view of the lack of influence of the Board itself, the power of the Resident Commissioners was too weak.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, there was no guarantee that the Commissioner resident at the yard would be in sympathy with his colleagues in London. In fact, the only control that the Navy Board had was over the numbers employed.<sup>3</sup>

The Board did, however, control the promotion of men below the rank of 'master'. Dockyard foremen, quartermen and 'sub' and 'pro' quartermen were appointed by Navy Board warrant.<sup>4</sup> In cases of prolonged absence, even the appointment of a substitute had to be confirmed by the Board.<sup>5</sup> The clerks in the yard offices were also the concern of the Board; they were recommended by the officers (in return for a substantial premium), and the appointment was confirmed by warrant.<sup>6</sup> The last two categories for which the Board were responsible were the shipwrights assigned to oversee the building of ships in merchant yards and the cooks on the ships in ordinary. Cooks were usually old or maimed seamen, and since the Board was in charge of the administration of the Chatham Chest, it appointed these men.<sup>7</sup> Unimportant in itself, it demonstrates the patchwork structure of the appointments system.

In addition, the Board possessed some unofficial influence, as it acted as a form of appeal court over the yard authorities. The first six months of 1775 provides an illustration of how this influence worked, for this was a period when entry into the yards was difficult for shipwrights.<sup>8</sup> During

<sup>1</sup> Parl. Pap., *The Report of the Commissioners for Revising and Digesting the Civil Affairs of His Majesty's Navy*, 1805-6, first report, p. 18. This opinion is clearly Middleton's; he was never in favour of giving the Resident Commissioners more influence.

<sup>2</sup> See D. Baugh, *British Naval Administration in the Age of Walpole* (Princeton, 1965), p. 292 n, for a different opinion.

<sup>3</sup> Between 1774 and 1779 there were 125 adjustments to the labour force of the yards. Admiralty approval had to be given before any major increase was instituted, but small increases and decreases were administered by the Board (P.R.O., ADM 95/95-6).

<sup>4</sup> Each yard had a Master Shipwright with two Assistants (except Sheerness, which had only one) who controlled most of the work-force. Under these officers were one or two foremen, who provided the link with the quarterman who led the gangs of shipwrights. 'Pro' quartermen were established to take the place of any absent quartermen. Minor trades, such as joiners and smiths, had their masters and foremen, but they, as well as the boatswain of the yard in charge of the unskilled labourers, were under the direction of the Master Shipwright.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. P.R.O., ADM 95/95, 28 Dec. 1774, 28 Oct. 1777.

<sup>6</sup> The Resident Commissioner would examine and approve of the clerk (e.g. P.R.O., ADM 106/2592, 27 Jan. 1775).

<sup>7</sup> E.g. *ibid.* 19 May, 30 June 1775.

<sup>8</sup> A Standing Order of 5 May 1775 ordered the yard officers to take no more shipwrights at all, but by the end of June the regulations began to be relaxed (P.R.O., ADM 106/2508, no. 677; ADM 95/95, 29 June 1775).

this time there were 40 petitions to the Board from artificers who required either entry, discharge or removal from one yard to another.<sup>1</sup> Although the Resident Commissioners, as representatives of the Board, controlled the yard officers in questions of entry and discharge, petitions from workmen both in and out of the service reached the Board in London. It had no established power to order the entry of artificers, but the yard officers were unlikely to refuse a request from the Commissioners in London. In return, the central administration generally backed up the decisions of the yard officers in matters of this sort. Not all the petitions came from the artificers themselves. In one case Sandwich himself enquired on behalf of John Henniker, one of the largest contractors to the Navy, who wished to have one of his men entered at Chatham; but the Board, in this and other instances, did not give way to any pressure.<sup>2</sup> Pressure on the Board or yards for entry was, however, short-lived. Once the war had started in earnest, the shortage of shipwrights made all applications for entry welcome. By 1778 the yard officers were ordered 'not to be too scrupulous in entering... good workmen at this time when they are scarce'.<sup>3</sup> The question of promotion was, by contrast, a constant problem.

The particular point at issue between the First Lord and the Comptroller was the promotion of the shipwright officers, for they posed a particular difficulty. While the dockyard clerical posts needed little prior expertise,<sup>4</sup> and the skill of the other technical officer, the Master Attendant, could be attested by sea officers, there was no one who could judge the technical competence of one shipwright over another.<sup>5</sup> Highly developed as an art rather than as a science, shipbuilding was a trade for which few standards could be set. A senior officer told the Commission on Fees that his apprentices learnt from him 'the art and mystery of a shipwright'.<sup>6</sup> There was no shipwright officer class as in France. Nor was there any formal education; every officer had to work his way up from the 'floor' of the yards. In an organization the size of the dockyards, with a large number of

1 P.R.O., ADM 106/2592, Jan.-June 1775.

2 *Ibid.* 17 Jan., 21 Apr. 1775.

3 P.R.O., ADM 106/2597, 12 Jan. 1778. By this time petitions to the Board were automatically referred to the yard officers with the order to enter the workmen, 'if they have no objection'.

4 The lack of prior knowledge was criticized later. See Parl. Pap., *Reports of the Commissioners appointed... to enquire into the Fees, Gratuities, Perquisites, and Emoluments... received into the several Public Offices* (cited below as *Commission on Fees*), 1786-8, 1806, sixth report, p. 308.

5 The skill of individual shipwrights was a subject studiously avoided, especially by other members of the trade. There are few direct references to individuals, but see Hood's opinion of George White, Master Shipwright at Portsmouth, in *Correspondence of George III*, ed. J. Fortescue, iv (London, 1927), p. 347.

6 *Commission on Fees*, sixth report, p. 414.

men in relation to officers, there had to be a selection process; it was this which was the core of the problem.<sup>1</sup>

The system came under widespread criticism. The effect of having shipwrights rising to the top of the service as craftsmen rather than as theoreticians was seen as disastrous by the more forward-thinking of the officers. Kempenfelt wrote to Middleton in 1780:

The want of a good foundation laid of mathematical knowledge prevents our builders from rising to eminence; for want of this light, they are often obliged to grope in the dark, they guess, because they have not the mathematics to calculate certainty; when they give their bottom any particular form, they guess at the effect.<sup>2</sup>

The weakness of the system was that the Master Shipwrights 'were at once social inferiors and experts'. The result was that little advance was made in ship design, and that 'the most important lessons were learnt from the designers of the enemy'.<sup>3</sup> The technical side of the service therefore laboured under twin disadvantages. The system was not egalitarian enough to allow ability to emerge from the mass of ordinary shipwrights; only the favoured shipwrights who were apprenticed to officers rose to the rank of officer. Yet this élite was not given a superior training.

All the Master Shipwrights in the last quarter of the eighteenth century had been apprenticed to former Master Shipwrights. It was impossible for an apprentice of an ordinary shipwright to become an officer. There was, therefore, a *de facto* officer class. For this advantage, a Master Shipwright charged 20 guineas as an initial apprentice fee, while their Assistants charged about fifteen.<sup>4</sup> The more junior officers gave no evidence to the Commission on Fees on this matter, but it is obvious that even foremen had their price.<sup>5</sup> The initial charge was increased in some cases to include board and lodging, for the more senior an officer, the less likely he would be to make any allowances to an apprentice. Thus the father of one Richard Parnell paid 100 guineas to George White, at that time Master Shipwright

1 See Baugh, *op. cit.* pp. 306-7.

2 *Barham Papers*, I, p. 325, 9 Apr. 1780. See also severe criticism by Malachy Postlethwayt in his *Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce* (London, 1774), s.v. Architecture. For a defence of the system see J. Charnock, *History of Marine Architecture*, III (London, 1802), pp. 138-9, 383-7.

3 Baugh, *op. cit.* pp. 252-3; see also R. G. Albion, *Forests and Sea Power* (Cambridge, Mass., 1926), pp. 79-80.

4 *Commission on Fees*, sixth report, pp. 344, 414, 453. The Master Shipwright at Plymouth charged 50 guineas, but justified this high figure by saying that 'it was peculiar to this yard' (p. 452).

5 Three junior officers at Plymouth stated that they had paid £10 to a foreman, yet one officer had paid £52 to a foreman at Deptford. There was no standard rate; it depended on the standing and connections of the Master (*Commission on Fees*, sixth report, p. 330).

at Sheerness, in lieu of board.<sup>1</sup> Apprenticeship to an influential officer was not something that everyone could afford.

The reason for the care with which the officers took on and kept their apprentices was that the wages, paid straight to the Master, was a most important supplement to the yard officer's salary. These had not been changed since the previous century.<sup>2</sup> In most cases the wages of the apprentices formed half the total income of the officers. The whole situation was criticized by the Commission on Fees, which recommended that no officer on a yearly salary should have any apprentices at all. The system was, 'expensive, discouraging to able and deserving artificers, detrimental to the public service, and subject to many inconveniences not necessary, and perhaps not proper to mention here, but what every professional man acquainted with the Dockyards must feel'.<sup>3</sup> All apprentices should go to the most deserving of the workmen, to be decided by the Resident Commissioner. The Commission went on to recommend that the indenture of an apprentice should not be the property of the master, but should be handed over to the successor to the post. The effect of this proposal would have been to have stopped the wholesale movement of personnel from yard to yard, and to have prevented the binding together of master and servant throughout their careers.<sup>4</sup>

When a senior shipwright officer moved to another yard, he took his apprentices with him. This was a tradition that the Navy Board encouraged, but there were still cases of apprentices being in different yards from their masters—a practice which, of course, nullified the whole principle of instruction.<sup>5</sup> Yet it is obvious that the training of the apprentice by the master, in the case of the officers, had fallen away. White complained to the Navy Board that he could not find a suitable apprentice at Sheerness, and his request that one be entered for him at Plymouth was granted.<sup>6</sup> This transfer of personnel could extend further than apprentices; in March 1775 Israel Pownoll asked the Board if he could take one Joseph Foot and his servant with him when he was promoted from Plymouth to Chatham. The Board granted his request, but made it clear that it was an indulgence.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Commission on Fees*, sixth report, p. 419.

<sup>2</sup> See J. Ehrman, *The Navy in the War of William III, 1689-1697* (Cambridge, 1953), p. 599. Adjustments had been made to individual yards, but in general the levels were the same (e.g. P.R.O., ADM 106/2508, no. 1128, 4 Jan. 1782).

<sup>3</sup> *Commission on Fees*, sixth report, p. 307.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 308.

<sup>5</sup> The Board ordered in 1775 that it was not to be bothered with requests for the transfer of apprentices and that in future the officers were to take their servants with them automatically (P.R.O., ADM 106/2592, 3 Mar. 1775).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 10 Jan. 1775.

<sup>7</sup> P.R.O., ADM 106/2592, 7 Mar. 1775. The Board warned Pownoll that Foot was not to get automatic promotion at the new yard.

An example of the progress of a Master Shipwright is provided by Martin Ware, who occupied the position at Deptford at the time of the Commission on Fees. Apprenticed in 1731 to Joseph Allen, Master Shipwright at Portsmouth, he paid £30 as a fee, 'his friends finding him in cloths and tools during the whole time'. Three years after his apprenticeship had ended he was promoted to quartermen in the same yard, 'principally employed in the mould loft'. In 1742 his master went to Deptford, and Ware, with the Board's permission, went with him. Here he was a working shipwright for only five weeks before he was again promoted to quartermen and 'delineating...the drafts of ships...on the mould loft floor'. Four years later Allen was promoted to the post of Surveyor of the Navy, and Ware again accompanied him. At this point, however, his progress was slowed, for Allen died in 1749. Without his influence, Ware stayed at the minor post of Master Mast Maker at Portsmouth for eighteen years, but in 1773 he was made second Assistant to the Master Shipwright at Plymouth, and five years later rose to the first Assistantship. After an unsuccessful application to Sandwich in 1779 for the vacant first Assistantship at Deptford, he was made Master Shipwright at Sheerness in 1784 at the age of sixty-seven. After this he made the customary progress to Woolwich and then to Deptford.<sup>1</sup> Ware was older than the average when he reached the senior posts, but this can be directly attributed to the fact that his promising career was delayed by his master's death; after this, Ware had to rely upon seniority. His career, however, illustrates how much the eventual success of the apprentice was almost wholly dependent on the success of the master.

Nevertheless, a Master Shipwright could not hope to provide handsomely for all his apprentices, for he was allowed five, and his Assistants three. The solution was to provide, by recommendation to the Navy Board, those who were less favoured with minor posts in the yard. These posts might not be influential, but they would provide a living superior to that enjoyed by the ordinary shipwrights, and would represent a return on the investment of the apprentice fee. William Drew, the Painters' Measurer to the Clerk of the Cheque at Portsmouth at the time of the Commission on Fees, was one example. Apprenticed to Edward Hunt twenty years before, 'to whom his friends had paid twenty guineas and seven years board, the value of which he estimates at two hundred and fifty guineas', he had been looked after by his master. Only three years out of his apprenticeship he was 'appointed to his present post by Mr Snell, the Clerk of the Cheque,

<sup>1</sup> The details of Ware's career come from the *Commission on Fees*, pp. 324-5, together with information from Lists compiled from P.R.O., ADM 6 and 11 (Commission and Warrant Books) at the National Maritime Museum (cited below as N.M.M. Lists).



being recommended to him by Mr Hunt, then Master Shipwright, who in consideration thereof appointed a quarterman'.<sup>1</sup> Those who were able to afford to be apprenticed to an important officer could expect to reach some post, however modest. It would be unlikely, in this case, if a higher position would be gained.

Above the class of Master Shipwrights there was another élite. Every Surveyor of the Navy had been apprenticed to a former Surveyor, and it must be surmised that this exclusiveness would have blocked the way of ability from lower sources. It is obvious from their rate of progress that the occupants of this post, and their two Assistants at the Navy Office, were privileged from the start of their careers as apprentices in the yards. John Binmer, promoted to Second Assistant to the Surveyor by Sir John Williams in 1771 at the age of thirty, had been Williams's apprentice; by this promotion he by-passed the whole elaborate structure of rank and yard, for he was appointed without ever having served his time in the yards. Williams circumvented the regulations in this respect by appointing Binmer a foreman, and then an Assistant to a Master Shipwright, while still an apprentice.<sup>2</sup> He was an exceptional case, since such a blatant disregard of experience in promotion was rare. It is significant that Binmer rose no farther, for after Hunt had been promoted over his head to be Joint Surveyor, he applied to Sandwich for the post of Master Shipwright 'at any yard'.<sup>3</sup> He was unsuccessful, but Henslow, Surveyor in 1784, had to take the same course, going to Plymouth as Master Shipwright for nine years after his time as Surveyor's Assistant in London.

Samuel Bentham, whose avowed wish when still an apprentice was to become Surveyor of the Navy, had no patience with the need for seniority and influence in the civil administration. Irrked by the traditional ideas with which he had to work in the yards, he pointed out that even the favoured shipwrights were given no training in design, merely being required to transcribe ship's draughts in the yard mould loft.<sup>4</sup> Forced to work with his hands when he wished to be at a drawing board, and frustrated at every point by the conservatism of the Navy Board, he was unwilling to remain working

1 *Commission on Fees*, sixth report, p. 426. Edward Hunt was Master Shipwright at Sheerness from July 1767 to Oct. 1772 and it was during this time that Drew was apprenticed. Hunt took Drew with him to Portsmouth when he was appointed there. On 1 Jan. 1778 Hunt was appointed Joint Surveyor.

2 *Ibid.* fifth report, p. 202.

3 N.M.M. SAN 5, Sandwich's Appointment Books (SAN 1-3, 5-6).

4 No process could be better designed to force traditional thinking on an apprentice. Israel Pownoll, Master Shipwright at Chatham, under whom Bentham worked when his first Master, William Grey, had died, also believed that manual labour was necessary to the understanding of theory, which certainly did not accord with Bentham's views. See *The Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. T. L. S. Sprigge, 1 (London, 1968), no. 131, pp. 228-30, 10-11 Apr. 1775.

in the yards. It was certain that 'there was impossibility of rising in the place of Surveyor without passing through every inferior gradation... there is no possibility of being appointed to any of the offices concerned with the building part without having served a regular apprenticeship...'.<sup>1</sup> Samuel was an exception; but nevertheless, prevailing attitudes towards shipbuilding, together with the training of those who did reach the top of the civil administration, meant that there was a conservatism in ideas and methods at every level in the shipwright branch.<sup>2</sup>

Experience was therefore at a premium in qualifying for a post; originality and talent were not particularly sought after because they were not required. Thus the average age of those who attained the rank of Master Shipwright in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, when first appointed to the rank of 'Master', was thirty-five; those who failed to reach the top position received their first Admiralty post at forty-five.<sup>3</sup> The average age on gaining the first Master Shipwright post was fifty-four, while that at the last posting was sixty. Some were well above this; Martin Ware was appointed to Deptford at seventy, and did not retire until seven years later. In what was supposed to be an active supervisory role, these ages were an undoubted hindrance to efficiency. It is significant that Middleton issued a Standing Order after the war to the effect that no foreman over fifty, and no quartermaster over forty-five was to be recommended for promotion.<sup>4</sup>

A further factor telling against efficiency was the unnecessary movement of shipwright officers from yard to yard—a situation which was heavily criticized by the Commission on Fees, which recommended the standardization of income through the abolition of fees in the six yards to discourage this frequent movement.<sup>5</sup> The other trades, with the exception of the Master Attendants, would usually stay in one yard all their lives. There were, for instance, only two Master House Carpenters at Sheerness between 1743 and 1811.<sup>6</sup> More often than not, Master Sailmakers, Joiners, Smiths and Bricklayers, after long service in the position, died while still at their posts. The shipwright officers, however, not only rose through the service rank, but also by yard; there was an unwritten

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> Samuel was very much the exception in wanting, as a gentleman, to go into the dockyard service. His father reminded him that 'you are nothing more than a Volunteer and in that respect circumstanced, as no one ever was before you, in a Dockyard, nor probably ever will again' (B.M. Add MSS 33537, fo. 341, 13 May 1775).

<sup>3</sup> The ages of the shipwright officers have been calculated from the evidence of the Commission on Fees by assuming entry at the minimum age of fourteen. In almost every case, a shipwright rising through the service would be appointed 'Master' of a particular trade within the shipwright branch. Thus 'Master Mast Maker' or 'Master Caulker' was a relatively junior post.

<sup>4</sup> P.R.O., ADM 106/2509, no. 140, 3 July 1783.

<sup>5</sup> *Commission on Fees*, sixth report, p. 315.

<sup>6</sup> N.M.M. Lists.

hierarchy. This ranking varied from post to post, but the objective of most officers in the civil line was to be appointed to Deptford or Portsmouth. In some cases Plymouth was beginning to be seen as more important, and therefore as more desirable, than the smaller yard in the Thames. Chatham had fallen from the high position that it had enjoyed earlier in the century. The descending order of yards at the time of the American War was Portsmouth, Deptford, Chatham and Plymouth; Woolwich and Sheerness were considered as the most junior, and appointment to these yards was seen as no more than a first step. Sometimes a shipwright would solicit for a lower post at a higher yard, and there is no doubt that this additional ranking increased the movement of officers from yard to yard. This yard seniority was primarily influenced by income, for although there was no official difference in the salaries in the six yards (with one exception of Sheerness, which was lower), the amount of fees and emoluments varied considerably. As an example, the income of the Master Shipwright at Chatham in 1784 was £508, while his counterpart at Sheerness received only £341.<sup>1</sup>

These factors affected the length of tenure of yard posts. Master Shipwrights stayed at the larger yards for an average of eight years, three or four times longer than the occupants of the posts at Sheerness or Woolwich. There were nine Master Shipwrights at Sheerness between 1772 and 1786. At the positions of Master Shipwright's Assistant, Master Boat Builder or Master Mast Maker, there was a considerable jostling for position. It was not infrequent for an officer to be appointed to three Assistantships in three yards before he was made full Master Shipwright, and in many cases the stay lasted for no longer than a few months. In the American War period no shipwright officer stayed at Woolwich for more than a little over two years, and the average stay was considerably less. Although an exceptional case, the post of Master Caulker at Chatham was filled by no less than six different officers in 1755.<sup>2</sup> Over this inefficient system the Navy Board had little control, and Middleton, once established in office, soon began to make his views known.

Whatever precipitated the controversy in 1781, there is no doubt that the Comptroller's frustration was genuine. Piers Mackesy, using M. J. Williams's analysis of Sandwich's Appointment Books, states that: 'Middleton's complaints of political appointments in the dockyards do not stand up to scrutiny', but provides no motive for the Comptroller's outburst to his

<sup>1</sup> *Commission on Fees*, sixth report, pp. 391, 407.

<sup>2</sup> See N.M.M. Lists. Each Master Shipwright had served in four or five yards, while Thomas Pollard had served in all six, and had been Master Shipwright in four. The average number of Admiralty appointments for the Master Shipwrights was six. The actual time of moving, especially from the Western to the River yards, could take up to two months.

patron, with whom relations had, to this time, been remarkably good.<sup>1</sup> Selfish motives have been attributed to him, by pointing out that Middleton was not above using patronage himself; but it is hardly justifiable to infer from this, as Williams does, that the Comptroller was trying to gain more power in the civil administration purely for himself.<sup>2</sup> He was far more concerned with the efficiency of the yards, of which he never had a good opinion, than with the morality of patronage.<sup>3</sup>

Sandwich might have been warned of the coming onslaught early in the previous year, when Middleton put his case briefly: 'It will be much more agreeable to me and much less troublesome to your Lordship if the abilities of the officers and men serving under the Navy Board come officially from themselves, when your Lordship may rely on my not suffering you to be deceived by improper representations.'<sup>4</sup> In the Comptroller's view the yards were inefficient and corrupt, and his board, which was responsible for their administration, could do little about one of the chief weaknesses—that of the low calibre of the yard officers. If the Admiralty was going to promote the officers without any reference to the Navy Board, then the junior board could not ensure that the right men came up for promotion. Furthermore, he argued, it was beneath the dignity of the Admiralty to have to inquire into the characters and merits of those in competition for posts.

A further weakness in the Navy Board's position, he maintained, was that it was difficult to discipline the yards; '... we dare not contest a single point of duty with either the shipwrights, caulkers, or ropemakers at this time', he wrote to Sandwich.<sup>5</sup> This was a most definite weakness, for the principle was that only the appointive board could dismiss or even

1 Piers Mackesy, *The War for America* (London, 1964), p. 11. Mackesy also refers to 'remarkable figures in defence of the disinterestedness of Sandwich's practice', from M. J. Williams, *The Naval Administration of the Fourth Earl of Sandwich* (unpublished thesis, Oxford, 1962). Williams, however, allows too much significance to Sandwich's Appointment Books, which were only rough notes, and were not kept up accurately; his statistics and arguments are therefore suspect.

2 Williams, *op. cit.* pp. 277–9. Middleton tried unsuccessfully to obtain a post for his brother in 1778 and a Colonelcy of Marines for himself in 1781 (see N.M.M. SAN/T/8, undated, 1778, 15 Aug. 1778, 29 Oct. 1781).

3 References to Middleton's unfavourable opinions of yard officers are too numerous to specify individually. An example of 1782 can be considered typical, when he referred to them as 'low men, easily to be corrupted' (Shelburne Papers, William L. Clements Library, vol. 151, item 40, 9 Sept. 1782).

4 N.M.M. SAN/T/7, 3 Feb. 1780. Although Middleton had obviously been aware of the problem for some time, the immediate cause of the controversy in 1781 was probably Middleton's failure to obtain promotion for John Cleversal, Master Joiner at Sheerness, who had given the Comptroller private information on yard affairs. See R. G. Usher, *The Civil Administration of the British Navy during the American Revolution* (unpublished thesis, Michigan, 1942), p. 464; also *Barham Papers*, II, p. 24, 3 Feb. 1781, Middleton to Sandwich.

5 *Barham Papers*, II, p. 29, Feb. 1781?

reprimand the officers concerned. While the Board used such words as 'disapproval' or 'displeasure' in their dealings with yard officers, any official measures required the authority of the Admiralty. The case of neglect in the subsidence of the Great Basin at Portsmouth in late 1774 provides an illustration. The Navy Board, in charge of the investigation, was only able to deal with the foreman involved; further reprimands and punishments had to be given by the Admiralty to the Master Shipwright and his Assistants and to the Master House Carpenter.<sup>1</sup> Middleton's claim that the senior officers of the yards were 'as independent of us as if we were unconnected with them', although subject to the exaggeration to which he was prone, was, in general terms, accurate.<sup>2</sup>

The controversy centred around the best method of selecting suitable candidates for promotion. Unfortunately, there were contradictory claims of precedent to confuse the issue. The yearly Admiralty Patent gave Sandwich absolute appointive powers over the whole Navy. Against this, Middleton could claim that the 1662 Instructions laid down that the Navy Board was 'to search out who is diligent and who is not', and to recommend to the Lord High Admiral who was worthy of promotion.<sup>3</sup> Without this claim, the Comptroller's case was weak, for the junior board's interest in yard appointments had lapsed for a long time.<sup>4</sup> Middleton, however, wanted more than this; he was 'clearly after bigger things than the right to present recommendations; it is abundantly clear that he wished the recommendations to be binding on the Admiralty'.<sup>5</sup> In a letter to Lord Shelburne after the controversy, the Comptroller made it clear that he wanted the system changed, although he disguised the force of his proposals by saying that he was not attacking the location of power. If the First Lord was an exceptional man, 'of independent principles, of First Rate abilities, impartial in his promotions, and of that liberal turn of mind, that makes him open to all informations that has the improvement of the service in view. . .', the system would work fairly and efficiently. However, he continued, this was never the case;

the equipment and Application of our Naval Force in time of war, is in a manner wholly submitted to his judgement, and that in the promotion of officers he has no check, but his own sense of what the King's service requires, and which but too often has availed little against his desire of strengthening himself by yielding to private solicitations. . .<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> N.M.M., ADM B/189, 13 Dec. 1774; P.R.O., ADM 95/95, 13, 28 Dec. 1774; ADM 3/80, 24 Dec. 1774.

<sup>2</sup> *Barham Papers*, II, p. 25, 3 Feb. 1781, Middleton to Sandwich.

<sup>3</sup> *The Oeconomy* . . . 1717, *op. cit.* p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, in 1775 the Board recorded in its minutes for a petition from a Foreman House Carpenter who wished to be recommended to the Admiralty that 'the Navy Board does not make recommendations to the Admiralty' (P.R.O., ADM 106/2592, 10 Jan. 1775).

<sup>5</sup> Usher, *op. cit.* p. 87.

<sup>6</sup> Shelburne Papers, *op. cit.* 9 Sept. 1782, Middleton to Shelburne.

In spite of this complaint of unbridled powers, it is clear that Sandwich did take professional advice on the promotion of technical officers.<sup>1</sup> This information was taken and given on a personal and informal level, and he went to the Surveyor for it rather than the Comptroller or the whole Navy Board. Sandwich wished to be free to take advice, but he was not going to be bound by any precedent, nor confined to taking recommendations from any one source. In making promotions, the Admiralty Board did not think that it was 'for the good of the service to confine ourselves to decide in consequence of the particular representations of any other office'.<sup>2</sup> The First Lord took his stand in the controversy by saying that he would listen to the recommendations of the Navy Board together with the representations from every other source. His only concession, therefore, was to instruct the junior board to make regular reports of those in competition for vacancies.<sup>3</sup>

Middleton's complaints of bad appointments may well have been justified on the grounds of efficiency, but his reference to Sandwich's 'political system of management' do not appear to be wholly justified.<sup>4</sup> The clerical posts may have been more susceptible to political pressures. Peter Butt, appointed as Clerk of the Survey at Deptford within two months of an application backed by the Duke of Cumberland, was one example. Even so, Butt was more than qualified for the post. He had been in the Navy for thirty-three years, a Purser on board the *Superb* since 1755, and Clerk of the Survey at Sheerness for one and a half years before his appointment to the more senior yard. Furthermore, he did not get the post for which he asked; in spite of the weight of the name of the Duke, the most lucrative clerical post in the civil administration, the Clerkship of the Cheque at Portsmouth, went elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> On the technical side of the civil administration, the situation was not so clear-cut; because of the factors already examined, political patronage was not the most significant factor governing a shipwright's career.

Out of the 300 or so applications for dockyard posts recorded in Sandwich's Appointment Books, political usefulness was used only 13 times as a relevant qualification. It is notable that only four of these were successful.<sup>6</sup>

1 E.g. N.M.M., ADM B/193, 26 May 1776, Williams to Sandwich.

2 *Barham Papers*, II, p. 14, 9 Jan. 1781, Admiralty to the Navy Board.

3 *Ibid.* p. 15.

4 *Ibid.* p. 18, 21 Jan. 1781, Middleton to Sandwich.

5 N.M.M. SAN 1, 29 May 1771. Butt was appointed on 14 Aug. 1771.

6 N.M.M. SAN 1-3, 5-6, Sandwich's Appointment Books. Volume 4 is missing; this would have covered (approximately) the year 1778, when only seven Admiralty appointments were made to the yards. These books are difficult to use, since only the first volume is dated. They were used only as rough notebooks, and were not kept up accurately. There is much repetition. Out of the 150-160 appointments made by Sandwich from 1771-82, just under 90 were the

Nevertheless, it was presumed that Sandwich's political machinations governed the yards as much as in the rest of his political life.<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Bentham complained that his brother was not able to get the position he desired in the yards, even when he had applied personally to the First Lord: 'Lord Sandwich's answer was... that the places did not lie in the Department of the Admiralty. What everybody is agreed about is that the place would have been within the Department of the Admiralty if Sam had been a freeholder of Huntingdon.'<sup>2</sup> It must be pointed out in Sandwich's defence that Bentham was applying for a relatively senior post, and one under the control of the Navy Board, straight from his apprenticeship; if his request had been granted, he would have defied more than a century of precedent. Against this evidence can be placed the applicants in the Appointment Books who mention that they are freeholders of Huntingdon; none of them are successful. Likewise Samuel Hogsflesh, foreman of the Smiths at Sheerness, applied unsuccessfully for the post of Master Smith, in spite of the fact that 'his father [was] a freeman of Rochester, and [there were] four votes in the family'.<sup>3</sup>

The most constant factor that emerges from an analysis of Sandwich's appointments to the yards is the attention paid to seniority in the shipwright branch. The careers of the Master Shipwright officers continued on virtually parallel courses once the initial selection had been made. Moreover, the Master Shipwrights who had a political patron rose no faster than those who had none.<sup>4</sup> By far the most frequent qualification put forward by applicants for posts was their seniority; virtually every applicant included the number of years that they had been in the service. For instance, George White, when appointed from the first Assistantship at Deptford to full Master Shipwright at Sheerness was noted in the Appointment Book as being 'the most senior assistant in the service'.<sup>5</sup> This regard for seniority

result of petitions recorded in the books. There are 180 completely unsuccessful petitions; 50-60 did not request positions in the home yards. It must be presumed that posts filled without any record of petitions, numbering about 70, were decided by informal consultation, either with the Navy Board or with non-professional sources.

<sup>1</sup> Outside the civil administration of the Navy, Sandwich's life had been dominated by political patronage and influence (see *Nathaniel Wraxall, Memoirs*, ed. H. B. Wheatley, 1 (London, 1884), pp. 398-404; also Namier and Brooke, *History of Parliament, The Commons, 1754-90* (London, 1964), p. 144).

<sup>2</sup> *Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, II, p. 108, no. 248, Apr./May 1778. Sandwich controlled the Parliamentary seats in Huntingdon.

<sup>3</sup> N.M.M. SAN 2.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Thomas Pollard, Master Boat Builder at Portsmouth, applied for an assistantship on 16 Jan. 1771. His name was put forward by the Earl of Rochford and Mr Fuller; but he was not appointed until 17 Feb. 1775, and then only to Woolwich (N.M.M. Lists and SAN 1; see also Ehrman, *op. cit.* p. 106).

<sup>5</sup> N.M.M. SAN 3.

irked Middleton, and was the particular factor in the issue which precipitated the whole controversy. The post of Master Joiner at Woolwich was vacant, and John Smart, who eventually got the post, was aged sixty-three; Middleton's candidate was 'at the active age of thirty-four'.<sup>1</sup> Far from promoting inexperienced and unqualified officers, Sandwich respected the conventions of the yards in making his choices; Middleton, on the other hand, wished to introduce a selective process to get younger and more energetic supervision in the yards.

By 1781 the Comptroller had in fact attempted to introduce some system of meritocracy into the promotion of the lower ranks of the yard officers appointed by the Navy Board. It is clear that until Middleton came to the Board there had been little effort to keep a check on the calibre of those men appointed by Navy Board warrant. The confirmation of the recommendations of the yard officers was automatic, although the Resident Commissioner was considered to have been a check. There is no evidence, however, from the Commissioners' letters that the Board concerned itself with this problem.

The only safeguard that governed the promotion of quartermen was that each yard was to transmit a quarterly list to the Board of those who were acting quartermen, and that it was understood that these men were to have precedence in promotion to full quartermen.<sup>2</sup> Even these regular accounts had lapsed until the outbreak of hostilities. The only principle to have been established was that quartermen were to rise by seniority unless the yard officers had 'any objection to their Diligence, Ability or Behaviour'.<sup>3</sup> Middleton's first Standing Order on the subject indicated the existence of interest; it laid down that no one was to be recommended as an acting quartermen unless he had been out of his apprenticeship for more than four years.<sup>4</sup> A year later four more comprehensive orders were issued, aimed at bringing accurate information on the qualities of those recommended. Quarterly lists were to be submitted by the yard officers collectively, with information on time lost in the last four years, performance and character.<sup>5</sup> After the war the systematization continued, and seven more regulations were issued. In September 1782 a printed form was sent to the yards demanding more information, not only of those who wished

<sup>1</sup> *Barham Papers*, II, p. 24, 3 Feb. 1781, Middleton to Sandwich.

<sup>2</sup> P.R.O., ADM 106/2508, no. 559, 4 Oct. 1770. Orders regulating the transmission of lists were comparatively recent (P.R.O., IND 9315, s.v. Quartermen, 27 Feb. 1758). The lapses can be traced through the Board's minutes (P.R.O., ADM 106/2592-7, especially 1-15 Jan., 17, 19, 23 June 1778).

<sup>3</sup> P.R.O., ADM 106/2508, no. 593, 31 Dec. 1771.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* no. 768, 17 Nov. 1778.

<sup>5</sup> P.R.O., ADM 106/2508, no. 893, 1 Sept.; no. 894, 6 Sept.; no. 918½, 6 Nov.; no. 920, 8 Nov. 1779.



for promotion, but of those already promoted. Five months later, the form was revised. The Navy Board, it stated, was 'determined as far as is in our power to give a preference to such petty officers and Artificers whose Abilities and Conduct appear deserving of it and to discountenance upon every occasion those who appear undeserving...'.<sup>1</sup> For the first time the Board concerned itself with the calibre of the men it appointed, while at the same time it sought to instil some order and authority into the promotion of the lower ranks of officers.

This regulation of promotion procedure was Middleton's solution to the problem of curbing the power of the yard officers in making the initial selection of the men who would eventually rise to the top of the civil administration. In the controversy with Sandwich he acknowledged the existence of this patronage at a junior level, and used it to exonerate himself from charges of directly attacking the power of the First Lord:

As Comptroller of the Navy, I cannot designedly encroach upon a foreign patronage, while the patronage already with us—I mean that which includes the inferior officers—is, in effect, transferred to us by the superior officers, whose recommendations we receive exactly in the degree in which we wish ours to be received by the admiralty; not so implicitly as to deprive ourselves of the right of judging recommendations...yet...so generally as to render such recommendations an object strong enough to rouse the exertion of such as wish for advancement.<sup>2</sup>

Yet it was just this patronage 'already with us' that Sandwich suspected, rather than Middleton's motives. He feared the civil administration as a whole, and in particular the self-perpetuating élite in the yards. He considered that a disinterested appointee (as he considered himself) was more likely to make a just appointment if the recommendations did not come from a professional source. He countered Middleton's argument that the recommendations of the Navy Board were more accurate than others because confirmed by the principal officers of each yard collectively and individually, by pointing out the relative ignorance of the junior board:<sup>3</sup> 'Everything you point at in your letter may be attained by other means than the collective testimony of the whole navy board, many of whom have very few opportunities of knowing the particular characters of the persons serving in the dockyards, otherwise than by representations from persons prejudiced or interested.'<sup>4</sup>

It is clear, therefore, that the factor which affected promotions in the shipwright branch was not so much Admiralty patronage as initial selec-

<sup>1</sup> P.R.O., ADM 106/2509, no. 30, 6 Feb. 1783. See also ADM 106/2508, no. 1112, 19 Jan. 1782; nos. 1188-90, 5 Sept. 1782.

<sup>2</sup> *Barham Papers*, II, p. 26, 3 Feb. 1781, Middleton to Sandwich.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 27, 3 Feb. 1781, Sandwich to Middleton.

tion by yard officers. Almost all of this process is unrecorded. Personal likes and dislikes, family and other connexions, governed the enclosed world of the royal yards; the extent and effect of allegiances in national politics similarly remain a mystery. It was an inbred society, apart even from shipwrights in merchant yards; sons were apprenticed to fathers and uncles.<sup>1</sup> The Master Caulker at Chatham wished it to be recorded in his evidence to the Commission on Fees that his family had been shipwrights in the royal yards for 200 years.<sup>2</sup> What is certain is that it was a highly stratified society, which excluded ordinary shipwrights, however skilful or energetic, from rising through the service.<sup>3</sup> In spite of a theoretical equality, whereby all officers and men had to start their careers as apprentices, it was this same apprenticeship system which perpetuated the exclusiveness. To this extent, both Sandwich and Middleton were prisoners of the organization which they governed.

The controversy was therefore primarily a disagreement about means rather than ends. Both men wished to deal with 'persons prejudiced and interested'. The First Lord thought that the existing system of using non-professional recommendations would neutralize yard interest. Middleton, however, was prepared to fight it, and at the time of the controversy was confident that he would be able to regularize the recommendations and institute a 'more equitable system'.<sup>4</sup> Yet while there were many faults in the yards only too apparent to the Comptroller, and while his proposals seem more akin to modern ideas, they contained basic flaws which Sandwich recognized. The size of the organization prevented the administering board from controlling appointments in detail, and the system thus depended on the yard officers. Middleton's proposed system of recommendation through the Navy Board, while attempting to strengthen the hand of the civil administration, merely gave more weight to the recommendations of the yard officers, who were the very men whose influence the Comptroller wished to curtail. The interests and pressures at yard level were to prove too much for even Middleton's administrative talents. This he appeared to recognize before too long, for before the end of 1781 he wrote to George White, complaining of an appointment which the ex-Master

<sup>1</sup> This the Navy Board encouraged (P.R.O., ADM 95/95, 21 Aug. 1778). See also Ehrman, *op. cit.* p. 97; also Baugh, *op. cit.* pp. 304, 318-19.

<sup>2</sup> *Commission on Fees*, sixth report, p. 374.

<sup>3</sup> An examination of the wills of the Master Shipwrights shows them to have been men of some substance—far apart from the ordinary workman. William Grey, for instance, left £6000 and Israel Pownoll several pieces of property. Much of this must have come from legacy or marriage, for even with the fees that they took with their salary, they could not have amassed this independently (P.R.O., PROB 11/1006, fo. 95; 11/1053, fo. 214).

<sup>4</sup> *Barham Papers*, II, p. 18, 21 Jan. 1781, Middleton to Sandwich.

Shipwright of Woolwich yard had caused to be made more than a year before:

I now perceive that all my endeavours must end in nothing; for if you, to whom I have said so much on this subject, will put men into places of trust who are incapable of performing the duties of them, and thereby act unjustly by those who are, to the prejudice of the King's service, what am I to expect from others who have not fallen so immediately under my notice?<sup>1</sup>

The problems raised by the controversy could have no easy answer until the whole basis of eighteenth-century social and administrative attitudes were changed. Middleton was unable to effect any change, and if anyone could be described as losing the argument, it must be the Comptroller. Both men had very good reasons for acting as they did. If Sandwich had given way to the Comptroller's demands, the senior board would have gone a long way to losing the primacy that was necessary to the Navy as a whole; he feared an abuse of power if the Admiralty's choice was narrowed. Besides, the proposals went against everything that had governed the First Lord's political life.<sup>2</sup> Middleton saw the system, as it was, as an abuse by his professional standards; but they were, in that sense, ahead of his time. Appointment by merit, without prejudice, interest or money, was impossible to introduce into the yards by the stroke of a pen. He wrote five years later:

I find politics have got too great a hold on this branch of the navy for me to withstand it. . . I shall contend no more for the public, having raised a nest of hornets already by so doing. I trust those who follow me will have more weight than I have had, and influence ministers to correct these evils.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.* II, p. 31, 24 Dec. 1781.

<sup>2</sup> See J. M. Haas, 'The pursuit of political success in eighteenth-century England; Sandwich 1740-1771; *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, XLIII, no. 107 (May 1970), pp. 56-77.

<sup>3</sup> *Barham Papers*, II, p. 30. An endorsement, dated January 1786, of a letter never sent to Sandwich, although obviously written during the controversy.