



Donhead St. Andrew Captain John Cooke Biography 1763 ~ 1805

John Cooke was born in 1763 and joined the Navy at the age of 11. After serving in a number of small ships and studying at The Naval Academy at Greenwich, he joined the Eagle as Midshipman aged 13 on the North America station. He then served as a Lieutenant in various ships in the East Indies, the West Indies and the Atlantic, and was involved in a number of actions against the French and the Americans.

In 1790 he married a Miss Hardy, fourth daughter of the British Consul in Cadiz. However soon afterwards the Navy was reduced in size due to the diminishing threat of war, and Cooke returned to his cottage in Essex to relax. Some 15 months later the threat of the French Revolution caused a reactivation of the Fleet. Cooke was recalled in 1794 promoted to Commander in command of a Fire Ship. Only three weeks later the captain of The Monarch fell ill and Cooke was immediately promoted Captain to take his place. He served in the Monarch in Newfoundland for a year, but on returning home in 1795 had to resign his command being too young for such a post in home waters, He was then appointed in command of La Nymphe in the Channel Fleet in 1796 during which time he successfully captured two frigates off the Welsh coast. In 1797 La Nymphe was involved in the mutiny off Spithead during which Captain Cooke was ordered off his ship by the mutineers. In 1799 he was appointed in command of the Amethyst in which he served until the peace in 1802, when he resigned, partly due to ill health. It was at this stage that he fulfilled a long term wish to buy 'a settled home in a desirable sporting county'. This was Donhead Lodge in Donhead St. Andrew. The Naval Chronicle Vol.17 of 1807 describes it thus: "An estate left to him by an Uncle added to some success in his profession, enabled him to make a purchase in the south of Wiltshire agreeable to his utmost wishes'. Here, in a county particularly romantic and beautiful he was agreeably employed in the laying out of the land around him; an amusement particularly suited to his taste and inclinations. Captain Cooke lived in this happy retreat the most enviable of human beings; esteemed and respected by a new neighbourhood; the acknowledged friend of those around him, and enjoying a perfect state of domestic happiness.'



However this state of bliss was to end some 16 months later when Captain Cooke was offered the command of the flagship of C in C Plymouth. He subsequently sought and obtained a more operational command, The Bellerophon and thus fulfilled a lifetime ambition to serve under Admiral Lord Nelson, who in turn selected Cooke as a particular confidant.

At the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 Bellerophon was the fifth ship of the lee line and played a key roll in breaking the enemy lines. As they bore down on the enemy however, two events occurred that sealed Captain Cooke's fate. A midshipman

tripped over a rope which fired one of the guns prematurely; and which the French took to be a signal from the Flagship. They thus concentrated much of their attention on the Belerophon. Surrounded by four enemy ships fierce close quarters fighting ensued, during which his First Lieutenant noticed that Captain Cooke was still wearing his epaulettes which marked him out as a prime target to men in the enemy ships. Too late to take them off, Captain Cooke was reloading his pistols just after he had shot dead a French officer on Bellerophon's quarterdeck, he was struck in the chest by two musket balls.

His last words were "Let me live quietly one minute. Tell Lieutenant Cumby never yo strike". Thus he died at the age of 43 a much admired and respected man, of deep religious conviction.

SACRED to the Memory of
JOHN COOKE, Esq; late Captain of
His Majestys ship BELLEROPHON,
Who, in the Battle
Of TRAFALGAR,
On the 21st of Oct: 1805.
Having evinced the most consummate skill,
And Bravery,
In the conflict of that eventful day,
Fell,
In a moment, glorious indeed to his COUNTRY,
But marked by the individual tears
Of all who knew him.
His inconsolable widow,
Places this tablet to record
His virtues and His Fate,
Near the spot which he had chosen
As his favourite retirement,
And to which,
Having left it at the call of his Country,
He returned no more.
Periit Anno Ætatis 43.
Be merciful to her O God who bends,
And mourns the best of Husbands Fathers, Friends,
Oh "when she wakes at midnight" but to shed,
Fresh tears of anguish on her lonely bed,
"Thinking on Him who IS NOT;" then restrain
Her bitter thoughts and her sad heart sustain.
FATHER of MERCYS she remembers still
Thy chast'ning hand, and to thy Sov'reign will
Bows silent, but not HOPELESS whilst her eye,
She raises to a bright FUTURITY,
And trusts in better worlds thou wilt restore,
The Happiness she here can meet no more.
LOUISA, Relict of the above
Departed this life at Cheltenham Feb: 5th 1853.
Aged 96 Years.

Source: St. Andrew's Church, author not given.