

**Naval Dockyards Society Conference: 31 October 2020**  
**Where Empires Collide:**  
**Dockyards and Naval Bases in and around the Indian Ocean**  
**Abstracts and Biographies**

**1. Dr Thean D. Potgieter: Commanding ‘The passage to and from India’: The Royal Navy at the Cape of Good Hope, 1795–1803**

Due to its location at the southern tip of Africa, literally halfway to the East and vital for maritime communications with the East, the Cape of Good Hope gained strategic value to the European maritime empires during the late eighteenth century. As British interests in India grew, Britain was concerned about the safety of its maritime communications after the outbreak of the French Revolutionary War. When the Netherlands became an ally of France, Britain feared that the Cape might become a base for French privateers and resolved to take control of the Cape. An expeditionary force under the command of Admiral Elphinstone (later Lord Keith) was sent to the Cape early in 1795. After protracted negotiations with the Dutch authorities and operations both at sea and ashore, the Cape was forced to capitulate on 16 September 1795.

Gaining a foothold ashore at Simon’s Town was crucial for supporting further British operations associated with the conquest of the Cape of Good Hope. By protecting the Cape with a strong garrison and warships, Britain ensured that a Dutch attempt to retake it in 1796 failed, as a Dutch squadron under the command of Admiral Lucas ignominiously surrendered to Elphinstone in Saldanha Bay.

Operating from its base at Simon’s Town, the Royal Navy was responsible for the defence of the Cape, supported British power in the East Indies, protected trade, and secured British interest in the southern oceans. The British feared that the islands of Mauritius and Bourbon (Reunion) might serve as a base for a French expedition to India and that the discontent on the East Coast of the Cape Colony could also draw French attention. In addition, much effort went into checking French privateers in the Indian Ocean, which resulted in quite a number of engagements between British and French ships.

This paper will focus on the strategic aspects related to the conquest and defence of the Cape of Good Hope as well as on the role of Simon’s Town in supporting the British strategic posture and operations in the Indian Ocean. The discussion will highlight the activities and operations of the Royal Navy in Cape waters, the protection and support to British trade, as well as sustained British naval operations into the Indian Ocean.

**Dr Thean D. Potgieter** is an Associate with Stellenbosch University and the Wits School of Governance, Witwatersrand University. He is a Chief Director Research at the South African National School of Government. Previous experience includes Director Centre for Military Studies and Chair Military History (Stellenbosch University) and service in the South African Navy. His DPhil (Stellenbosch University) focused on defence against maritime power projection. He has much international teaching, research and publishing experience. Recent publications include an edited volume (*Reflections on War – preparedness and consequences*), three chapters in a volume on African Military Geosciences, and articles on the Indian Ocean, blue economy, and security.

**2. David Erickson: The Contribution of Simon’s Town to Diplomatic & Naval Affairs, 1795–1957**

1795 marked the start of a British takeover from the failing Dutch East India Company, in what was to become the Cape Colony. The first British construction activity, a replica Martello Tower, was built at South Point in Simon’s Town in 1795. Apart from a brief interlude between 1803 and 1806, Great Britain had control of Simon’s Town, with the development of dockyard and shoreside support services for the Royal Navy continuing from

1813 until 1957, when the facilities were handed over to the South African Navy in accordance with the “Simonstown Agreement”.

This presentation and accompanying paper sets out key issues that characterised the 162 years that saw considerable interactions between the Simon’s Town RN Command with the Admiralty, the Governor-General of the Cape Colony, the local Simon’s Town Municipality (after its formation in 1883), and with the numerous distinguished visitors at Admiralty House, Simon’s Town.

Concurrent with these interactions was the development of dockyard facilities, initially in the West Yard when ships were careened for hull maintenance, and then from the late 1890s with the massive expansion of the East Dockyard with its graving dock. The impact of these changes is examined in terms of driving technological and efficiency improvements for RN vessels and crews, and their ability to project power to the outside world.

The shoreside support facilities are also considered: The abandonment of the 1765 Dutch East India Company Hospital; the problematic 1814 RN Hospital in South Simon’s Town and its replacement by the 1904 RN Cable Hill Hospital, with its associated Aerial Ropeway transportation system, carrying patients, staff and goods between the West Yard, the Cable Hill Hospital and the remote Sanatorium at the top of the cliff.

In conclusion, these issues are reviewed against the conference criteria:

Were bases built to defend colonies, control colonies, or to attack the enemy? Were they to suppress local forces, engage companies threatening the British East India Company or as adjuncts to European struggles? How useful were they to their founding countries in the 17th–20th centuries? How has their heritage developed?

Relevant publications:

*Historical Simon’s Town*, Edited by B.B. Brock and B.G. Brock with the collaboration of H.C. Willis: *Vignettes, reminiscences and illustrations of the harbour and community from the days of the VOC and the Royal Navy with notes on administrators, personalities, old buildings, navigation and shipwrecks*. Published for the Simon’s Town Historical Society by A.A. Balkema, Cape Town, 1976. ISBN 0 86961 055 4

**David Erickson** ‘retired’ to Simon’s Town, South Africa, after a career in the international oil and gas industry. He had gained a deep interest in history at Huntingdon Grammar School – whose earlier pupils included Samuel Pepys and Oliver Cromwell. Maritime interests developed, following a move to Harwich and a period of service with the Corporation of Trinity House. This background led to an invitation to join the Simon’s Town Historical Society Committee, subsequently becoming Chairman.

Local research and at the National Archives at Kew, provided input for a series of Presentations:

- “*Alexander Gordon and James De Ville – Enigmatic designers of the Roman Rock Lighthouse*”
- “*The Simon’s Town Aerial Ropeway – Its design, construction, operation and demise*”
- “*The 1816 Dockyard Clock*”
- “*The Harbour Breakwater Lighthouse*”
- “*The Victorian Steam Laundry at the 1904 Royal Naval Hospital, Simon’s Town*”
- “*Timekeepers of Simon’s Town*”
- “*The Simon’s Town Historical Society’s Rôle as a Conservation Body*”

David’s current activities include participation in the Simon’s Town Architectural Advisory Committee (part of the Council’s Planning process), motivating for the development of Almshouses on unused State property in the Heritage Area and maintaining the Dockyard Clock.

### **3. Dr Robert Ivermee: The Hooghly River and the limits of colonial power: European dockyards and naval bases in Bengal**

The Hooghly River, a distributary of the Ganges, winds its way into the Bay of Bengal through the present-day Indian state of West Bengal. This paper considers the presence of successive European powers on the river, beginning with the arrival of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century and progressing to the installation of the Dutch, French and English East India companies. It traces the development of European dockyards and naval bases on the river and suggests that, alongside the opening of factories for trade and the growth of institutions of government, this infrastructure was essential to the assertion and consolidation of European power.

By the nineteenth century, the ascendancy of the English company among the rival European powers on the river was assured. Calcutta, on the Hooghly's banks, grew into one of the world's busiest ports, its thriving commercial activity in the era of imperial free trade protected by Her Majesty's Naval Service.

Even during this imperial heyday, however, the power of the English on the river was not absolute, not least because of the failure of colonial authorities to successfully control the Hooghly. Despite advances in navigation and engineering, reaching Calcutta from the Bay of Bengal remained a perilous exercise for commercial and naval ships right up to the Second World War, when the port would become vital to the British imperial war effort to stop Japanese advances through Southeast Asia. Once celebrated as a triumph of civilisation in the East, Calcutta would in the twentieth century become more associated in British minds with colonial vulnerability in the face of hostile natural forces, political opposition and rival imperial designs.

Relevant publications:

Robert Ivermee [\*Hooghly: The Global History of a River\*](#) (Hurst: 2020).

**Dr Robert Ivermee** is a global and imperial historian focused on British and European colonialism in South Asia. He works in higher education management at SOAS University of London and teaches at the Catholic University of Paris.

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### **4. Patricia O'Sullivan: Out of the Shadows - the Police Force of Hong Kong's Royal Naval Dockyard**

Two huge towers, half a mile in from the present shoreline and typical of Hong Kong, now stand on the site of the former Royal Naval Dockyard. History sinks fast here and although its continued status as an international port ensures that commercial nautical history is celebrated, there is little that recalls the Royal Navy's dockyard and virtually nothing on the police force of these yards. This paper explores that force in the context of the development of the dockyard itself.

Soon after the arrival of the British in 1841, the yard was established in a prime position, bisecting the emerging town, but ensuring unfettered access to one of the best natural harbours in the region. Behind the high wall that separated it from the town a hidden world grew: a multiethnic world of Chinese, Portuguese, Indians and British. One of the few ways in which the general population heard of the work of the dockyard was through the appearance of its police in the courts, bringing charges against miscreants among the workforce. The Naval Dockyard Police Force itself was an anomaly - emerging, rather than being founded and unlike forces in other yards, without any connection to the Metropolitan (London) Police or, for the most part, the local colonial police. At times its very legitimacy as a force was questioned. Originally an entirely European force, the six-fold expansion of

the yard at the beginning of the twentieth century prompted the Admiralty to recruit Indians from the local garrison to its ranks.

During the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong in December 1941 both the Dockyard Defence Corps and the Naval Dockyard Police - about 300 men in all - fought tenaciously but sustained heavy casualties. The post-war decision to close the dockyard, announced in November 1957, inevitably brought to an end the force that had policed it for one hundred years.

**Patricia O'Sullivan** has been writing about Hong Kong's vibrant history since 2010, initially uncovering long-forgotten family stories. The result, *Policing Hong Kong - an Irish History*, was published in Hong Kong in April 2017. Along the way she has written for *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, HK Branch*; *Journal of the Police History Society*; *Roots Ireland*; *Irish Lives Remembered*; *Royal Hong Kong Police Association* and the *South China Morning Post*. Many avenues of exploration were opened up by her first book, including the stories contained in *Women, Crime and the Courts: Hong Kong 1841-1941* (pub. Sept 2020). Currently she is co-authoring a book on the Hong Kong Policemen who served in the First World War. Her website is [www.socialhistoryhk.com](http://www.socialhistoryhk.com)

##### **5. Dr Erik Odegard: Dutch, French and British planners and Trincomalee naval dockyard**

Over the course of the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, four European powers used the anchorage at Trincomalee in support of naval operations in the Bay of Bengal and beyond. Portuguese, Dutch, French and British forces in turn regarded possession of Trincomalee as a strategic advantage of the highest order. The Dutch East India Company would seize the Portuguese fort in 1638 and start remodelling the defences of the anchorage from the 1670s onwards. During the wars between Britain and France in the eighteenth century the Dutch company remained neutral, officially at least. In practice, EIC and Royal Navy vessels were permitted to shelter and repair at Trincomalee during the monsoon months. This practice underlined its value as a shelter for ships during the monsoon months. If Trincomalee was unavailable, British ships would need to take shelter on India's West Coast, repairing at Bombay, while French ships returned to Mauritius.

Dutch plans for the Bay of Trincomalee focused first and foremost on its defences, with at least six series of plans presented to better defend the anchorage in the 1770s and 1780s. A careening yard and support facilities were mooted, but never realized. The French were more ambitious. French engineers would develop plans for an entire new city, with defences and dockyard, which could serve as a new capital for the Dutch - or indeed French - colonies in Asia. After the capture of Dutch Ceylon in 1795, the Royal Navy developed plans for Trincomalee as a full-fledged dockyard, in order to reduce the navy's dependence on the EIC facilities at Bombay.

What all plans had in common was that none was realised as planned. This paper will answer the question why not. It will argue that while Trincomalee was of the greatest strategic importance and while it did have some of the characteristics of a good naval base and dockyard, it was severely lacking in other regards. Though the engineers and planners often overlooked these disadvantages, they meant that ultimately, none of the major proposals for the Trincomalee as a dockyard would be realized.

**Erik Odegard** studied history at Leiden University in the Netherlands, graduating in 2012 with a thesis on Dutch East India Company fortification design in India and Sri Lanka. A reworked version of his thesis, now including research in British as well as French and Dutch archives will appear later this year with Leiden University Press. Erik defended his PhD thesis on the careers of Dutch colonial governors in the seventeenth century in 2018. Currently, Erik works as a lecturer in economic history at Leiden University and is head of

the research project “Revisiting Johan Maurits and Dutch Brazil” at the Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis in The Hague.

## **6. Richard Holme: Trincomalee in the twentieth century: The use of floating docks in the Indian Ocean**

My attention was drawn to Trincomalee by the astonishing accident there in August 1944 when the battleship HMS *Valiant* was badly damaged as she entered Admiralty Floating Dock 23. Why was such a heavy unit as *Valiant* based at the hitherto sleepy harbour of Trincomalee? Why were the services of a floating dock required to dock her?

Although one of the largest natural harbours in the world, a 1901 Admiralty inspection confirmed Trincomalee to be just a small naval base offering basic repair and coaling facilities to the East Indies Squadron. Indeed, in 1905, with the Royal Navy’s focus being on German aggression in the North Sea, the base closed and would not reopen until 1924.

Facilities were then to be developed at Trincomalee, but never on the scale of substantial Admiralty investment made previously at nearby Colombo and on a huge scale in the 1930s at Singapore. Notwithstanding this, Trincomalee during much of 1944 was probably the busiest base worldwide for the Royal Navy. It had a wide-ranging role, not only defending Ceylon and India from Japanese attack but also launching successful attacks on Japanese-occupied territory, often thousands of miles away.

The presentation considers the background to this rapid change of fortune, possible reasons for the historic lack of investment and how floating docks were deployed in the Indian Ocean to make up for a deficiency in traditional onshore dockyard facilities.

**Richard Holme** recently attained a Masters in UK Shipbreaking 1945/1995 at Newcastle University. He has edited *Dockyards*, newsletter of the Naval Dockyards Society for seven years. He is a trustee of the Falklands Island Maritime Heritage Trust which last year discovered the wreck of the German cruiser *Scharnhorst*. He is also a trustee of the Friends of the Falkland Island Museum Trust and has visited the South Atlantic on nine occasions to date.

## **7. Dr Philip MacDougall: In Support of Napoleon’s Great Adventure - the navy of Tipu Sultan. Its design, construction and purpose**

The naval aspirations of Hyder Ali (1760–82) and Tipu Sultan (1782–99), rulers of the southern Indian state of Mysore, is a much-neglected subject, especially Tipu Sultan’s support for Bonaparte and the projected French invasion of India. Creating a naval force, that clearly emulated those of the European nations, was seen as a means of first neutralizing the power of the British in India before being ultimately used to remove all European colonizers from the subcontinent. Factors both aiding and working against the creation of this fleet will be explored, together with the interest shown by the French in developing a working arrangement with the nascent Mysore naval power. That the efforts of the two Mysore rulers came to very little was a result of a series of swift and decisive actions taken by the British at the outset of any period of hostility, combined with the difficulties faced by a land power developing an effective maritime force.

Relevant publications:

Philip MacDougall, *Islamic Seapower during the Age of Fighting Sail* (2017)

Philip MacDougall, *Naval Resistance to Britain's Growing Power in India, 1660-1800: The Saffron Banner and the Tiger of Mysore (a volume in the ‘Worlds of the East India Company’ series)* (2014)

**Philip MacDougall** (Dr) Author and Historian

## 8. Karim Malak: The Anglo-Egyptian Naval Encounter: A new History of Egypt and Britain

In 2007 Egypt's defence minister halted privatization plans for the Alexandria Dockyards Company out of national security concerns. The story told to the public was that this Egyptian institution could not fall into foreign hands. But was that the case before? This paper sets out to narrate the Anglo-Egyptian naval colonial encounter through that plot of land from 1840–1954. In the 1840s, the Egyptian viceroy Mehmet Aly promised the English East India Company a piece of land in Alexandria for it to manage its incoming mail packets. The Alexandria station was part of a triangular network that comprised two other stations in the Red Sea that managed EEIC mail from London to India (Hoskins, 1928).

Some forty years later, the land deed at Alexandria was lost. What had then become a plot of land that passed from the EEIC to the British Admiralty in 1858, subsequently became a source of controversy. Yet the British Admiralty sought similar strategic bits of land in the Suez Canal; how would the British Admiralty maintain these plots of land and proto-bases in the face of increased legal and social challenges?

By taking a cue from recent scholarship that sees the beginnings of naval power in Joint-Stock companies (Odegard, 2014), rather than the navies of states alone (Rodger, 2011; Morris, 2004), this paper provides a new history of the colonization of Egypt. It does so by zooming in on the network of the EEIC and the land that subsequently became the property of the British Admiralty and persisted after Egyptian decolonization through private contracting firms. Relying on Egyptian sources, India Office Records and records of the British Admiralty, it narrates the story of that Anglo-Egyptian naval encounter from the point of view of the Alexandria EEIC station-cum British naval base.

Relevant publications:

Hoskins, Halford Lancaster (1928). *British routes to India*. PhD diss., Philadelphia University, New York: Longmans, Green and Co.

Morriss, Roger (2004). *Naval power and British culture, 1760-1850: Public Trust and Government Ideology*. Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate.

Odegard E. (2014). "The Sixth Admiralty: The Dutch East India Company and the Military Revolution at Sea, c. 1639–1667." *International Journal of Maritime History*. 26 (4): 669-684.

Rodger, N. A. M. (2011). "From the 'military revolution' to the 'fiscal-naval state'." *Journal for Maritime Research* 13 (2): 119-128.

**Karim Malak** is the 2021 Mohamed Ali Foundation Fellow at the Institute of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (IMEIS) and Grey College, Durham University. Currently he is a PhD student at the Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies at Columbia University, New York. His research focuses on the changes in colonial and postcolonial sovereignty through the introduction of governmental seaborne calculative technologies – such as naval accounting and auditing – during the Anglo-Egyptian colonial encounter of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. He is also the Editorial Assistant of the *Journal of Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* (CSSAAME) and editor of *Comparative Studies at borderlines*, the online ezine publication of CSSAAME.

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