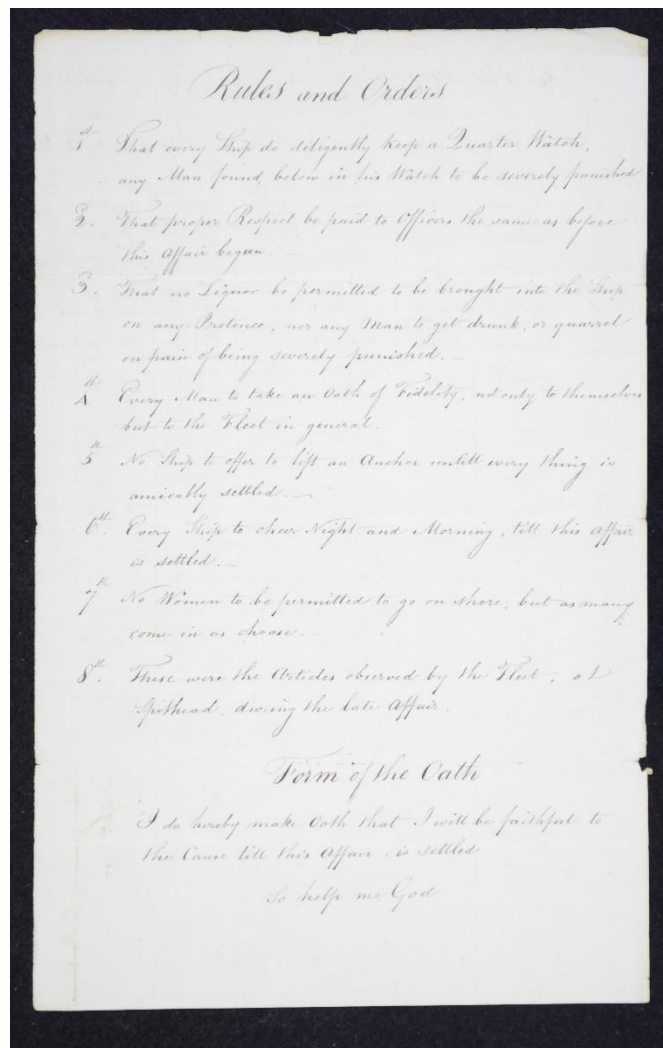


Mutiny at Spithead

CR114A/329

It's a new year and new start for Document of the Month and for January we are looking at crime, so we have chosen something a bit different for a non-coastal county - a mutiny. ¹

This is a collection of papers relating to the mutiny of the fleet at Spithead 1797 (an anchorage at Portsmouth), these include original petitions and communications of the mutineers, as well as depositions. These come from the Seymour Family of Ragley Hall collection, specifically that of Vice-Admiral Lord Hugh Seymour (1759-1801).



¹ Dummy

Vice-Admiral Lord Hugh Seymour

Lord Hugh Seymour was the fifth son of Francis Seymour-Conway, 1st Marquess of Hertford and Isabella Fitzroy, born on the 29th April in London. He was known to be a tall and handsome man and thanks to his friendship with King George IV (then Prince of Wales) gained a reputation as a womaniser and partier in his younger years. He married Lady Anna Horatia Waldegrave in 1790 at the behest of his family, in a successful attempt to curtail his social activities.

Lord Hugh joined the Royal Navy at the age of eleven at his own insistence, and became a captain's assistant on the yacht 'William & Henry', moving after two years to 'HMS Pearl' under Captain John Leveson-Gower, stationed off Newfoundland. He participated in both the American Revolutionary War and the French Revolutionary War, being made Commander in 1778, and Post Captain in 1779. He joined the Admiralty in 1795, when he became Rear-Admiral, later rising to the role of Vice-Admiral in 1799. Lord Hugh served until he died from yellow fever on 11th September 1801 while sailing on the HMS Tisiphone near Jamaica. He is also believed to be the man that popularised the wearing of epaulets by naval officers to help differentiate them from regular seamen.

It was during Lord Hugh's service that the mutinies at Spithead occurred, and we believe these documents are case papers which were in his possession as one of those commissioned to execute the office of Lord High Admiral. ^[2]

The mutiny at Spithead

In April 1797, sailors on sixteen ships-of-the-line from the Channel Fleet, commanded by Admiral Lord Bridport, refused to sail, and mounted a collective mutiny at Spithead. The demands of the mutineers were for better pay, working conditions and treatment in general; at the time, the conditions for sailors were rather poor, with no compensation for sickness or injury, very little shore leave, low pay, and poor victualling (food distribution). On 26th April, a supportive mutiny broke out on fifteen ships in Plymouth, sending delegates to Spithead to take part in negotiations. The mutineers also sent ashore the officers whom they believed ill-treated them, and added to the demands that they be removed from the crews. However, it seems that the mutineers had no grievances with the punishments, as there was no mention of flogging or imprisonment in the demands.

The mutiny, unlike later ones such as those at the Nore^[1] and on HMS Hermione^[4], was peaceful, with no bloodshed and a surprising maintenance of regular naval routine and discipline aboard the ships (mostly with their regular officers still aboard). Some ships were even allowed to leave for convoy duty or patrols, promising to drop everything in the event that French ships (with whom they were at war at the time) were spotted heading to the English shores.

The mutiny was led by elected delegates who negotiated successfully with the Admiralty, with their demands mostly being met; they were granted better pay, a reassignment of unpopular officers, better food rations and a royal pardon for all. In the end, the mutiny came to be known as the 'breeze at Spithead'. ^{[1][3]}

References:

[1] Research guide B8: The Spithead and Nore mutinies of 1797:
<https://www.rmg.co.uk/collections/research-guides/research-guide-b8-spithead-nore-mutinies-1797>

[2] Lord Hugh Seymour (Conway): <https://morethannelson.com/officer/lord-hugh-seymour-conway/>

[3] The London Gazette Extraordinary Wednesday, June 7, 1797: Warwickshire record Office CR114A/329

[4] Narrative of the Mutiny, Murder and Piracy committed on board H.M.S. Hermione, by Captain Mends.: Warwickshire Record Office CR114A,351,1-2