

## The Press Gang

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, life aboard His Majesty's ships of the line was hard, brutal and unhealthy. Figures published by the Navy Board in 1781 reveal that 175,008 men were raised for the navy between September 1774 and 1780. Of these, between 1776 and 1780, 1,244 were killed in action, while 18,545 died of disease and 42,069 deserted. As a result of the growing number of desertions, the press gangs had to increase their activities. A sad epitaph in Warblington churchyard records the fate of William Bean, aged 20 years, who died in 1758, a victim of the press gang:

*Unhappy late imprest and forced was I  
From every friend to fight the Enemy  
Yet harder fate by strange Explosion sent,  
From fire to water mark the dire event.  
Two elements conspire to set me free,  
Lord, from life's tempests rests my soul with Thee.*

The press-gangs were supposed to confine their operations to taking seamen, so coastal towns like Emsworth, where so many men earned their living in some sea-faring trade, were particularly vulnerable. Men were reluctant to join the navy voluntarily, not only because of the long absences from home and the hardships of life on board ship, but also because of the very real danger of mutilation, which might prevent them from earning their living again should they ever return home. For those seized by the press-gang, it was very difficult to escape. Sometimes marriage was accepted as an excuse, especially if the employer of the man was sufficiently influential. Boys often married while they were still apprenticed, but this did not always save them from being pressed.

Men were pressed while out drinking in the local public houses, and some were never heard of again. Mrs Jewell of Emsworth recalled that one man:

... got clear away from the Press Gang and hid in the bottom of a boat for days where food was taken to him. Another was chased to a barge from which he jumped overboard and swam to the Slipper and so escaped. An old man often went out to see if the coast was clear for the young men to fish ... The Press Gang had a boat at the bottom of South Street to take away the men. One was rescued by his sweetheart, she came running down the street and begged to be allowed to kiss her man goodbye. The officer, touched by her devotion, or her good looks, let her come close to the boat to kiss him for the last time, then she dragged him over the side of the boat shouting 'Run you Lubber, run'. The man did, and so fast that he was not pressed. These two married and had 22 children.

When the navy was desperate for men, the Press Gangs abandoned the rule about taking only seamen. Charles Harper, in his book *The Portsmouth Road*, first published in 1895, wrote about the resistance put up by ordinary citizens, and especially by their womenfolk, against the forced removal of their husbands and sons. Describing a Gillray cartoon representing the 'hot press' in the streets of some seaport town, in the years following the American War of Independence when there was a shortage of men in the navy, Harper writes:

A gang has seized a tailor, a poor, miserable-looking wretch with no fighting in him, almost literally as well as metaphorically the 'ninth part of man', and his captors are dragging him off, knock-kneed and incapable of resistance. But if he submits so easily, the women in the crowd have to be reckoned with, and are doing all the fighting. The furious virago in the foreground is pulling at a midshipman's hair with

all the strength of one hand, while with the other she is lugging his ear off, kicking him at the same time on the knee [ ... ] whilst another woman with a heavy mop is preparing to fell him to the ground.

A more refined rescue of a possible victim of the press gang was of Mr Stenning, a man who later became a lawyer. He was pressed in Portsmouth High Street, although he was wearing his school uniform. Fortunately, he was seen by a lady who knew him and his family and he was rescued.

Mrs Jewell tells how the officer of the Press Gang came to John King's boatyard in King Street, Emsworth, demanding his workmen:

But John King closed the big gates and, seizing a hatchet, stood there saying he would chop off any hand that was laid on the gate [ ... ] The Officer said that he would seize the men when they went home to dinner, but King replied that they would not go home for dinner and gave them bread and cheese, and beer, from his own house. King then sent a messenger to Portsmouth on horseback to find out if the men who were building the boats and making all the ash goods for the Navy could be pressed. Later in the day, the answer came back. All men working for Mr King were exempt; they were already serving the King.

#### POSTSCRIPT

The site of the naval hospital at Haslar was specially chosen to make it difficult for sailors who recovered from their wounds to desert. From Haslar, they could be returned straight to their ships. From the earlier naval hospital at Gosport, most of the men who survived took the opportunity to 'disappear'.

*Christine Normand*