

Information sheet no 019

George Rodney

No trace of Rodney's actual birth date has ever been found but records show that he was baptised on 13th February 1719 at St Giles-in-the-Fields, London. Rodney entered the Navy in July 1732 on board HMS *Sunderland*. In May 1733 he joined HMS *Dreadnought*, followed by HMS *Somerset* in 1739 and was promoted to Lieutenant and appointed to HMS *Dolphin* later that year. In 1741 he was Lieutenant of HMS *Essex*, serving in the Channel and Mediterranean, and was promoted Captain on 9th November 1742. In September 1743 Rodney was appointed to HMS *Sheerness*, and in October 1744 transferred to HMS *Ludlow Castle*, serving in the North Sea. A year later Rodney was appointed to HMS *Eagle*, and during 1746 he was mainly employed in cruising off the south coast of Ireland for the protection of trade. His ship was involved in the defeat of the French fleet at the battle of Cape Finisterre on the 14th October 1747.

In 1748, Rodney was appointed to HMS *Rainbow* as Governor of Newfoundland, with secret orders to support the colonists against the encroachments of the French in Nova Scotia. When the ship was paid off in 1752, Rodney commanded various guardships at Portsmouth and sat in the House of Commons. In February 1757, he was moved to HMS *Dublin*, and in the autumn of that year was part of Hawke's fleet which was involved in the abortive attack on the Basque Roads. He then served on the North America station, and was promoted Rear-Admiral on 19th May 1759.

Rodney, with HMS *Achilles* as his flagship, was immediately appointed to command a squadron, which on the 6th July bombarded Le Havre, destroying the stores and flat bottomed boats prepared for the contemplated invasion of England. He continued to be stationed off Le Havre until 1761, when he went out to the West Indies as Commander-in-Chief on the Leeward Islands station. In February 1762, he attacked and reduced Martinique, and took possession of St Lucia, Grenada and St. Vincent. For these actions, he was promoted Vice-Admiral on 21st October 1762. In August 1763, he returned to England, and on 21st January 1764 was created a baronet. In November 1765, he was appointed Governor of Greenwich Hospital, and during the five years that he held this appointment, he introduced several measures to improve the comfort and well-being of the pensioners. He successfully fought in the general election in 1768 to become MP for Northampton at great expense to himself. He was promoted Rear Admiral of Great Britain (an honorary nominal rank) in August 1771 and appointed to the Jamaican command. This came with a considerable cost, as Rodney was told that he had to give up his Governorship of Greenwich Hospital and lose the financial benefits that went with it - despite the fact that other previous Governors had not had to do this when taking up other commands. The election had left him financially ruined and he needed a post such as Greenwich to re-establish his wealth.

Rodney served in Jamaica until 1775, and then retired to Paris to escape his many creditors. He was only able to return to England in May 1778, due to a loan from the French Marshal Biron. Rodney's return was welcomed since the Admiralty was finding it difficult to maintain public confidence in a Navy with few naval commanders of any significant talent.



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Although promoted to Admiral in January 1778, it was not until 1779 that Rodney was offered the command of the fleet on the Leeward Islands station. On his way to the West Indies, he was to relieve Gibraltar, which at the time was being closely blockaded by the Spanish. Rodney intercepted a Spanish squadron of nine ships off Cape St Vincent, and in a battle fought on 16th January 1780, well into the night and in a raging storm, he sank one ship, and captured six others, without any loss to his own fleet. The battle became known as the “moonlight battle”. His achievement was recognised by his appointment as Knight Commander of the Bath and given the freedom of the City of London.

After the relief of Gibraltar, Rodney proceeded to the West Indies as Commander-in-Chief. His financial situation always made him look out for opportunities to gain financial advantage such as in prize money, and to this end, he seized the Dutch Island of St Eustatius as soon as he arrived at the station. The treasure concerned was immense, but the capture caused much legal wrangling that left little in the way of actual gain for Rodney. The problems caused by this venture also meant that Rodney was not available to defend Martinique against a French fleet, forcing Admiral Hood to retreat to Antigua. Ill health was partially to blame and after resigning his commission, Rodney returned home in 1781, where he was given the honorary rank of Vice-Admiral of Great Britain on the 6th November. He returned to the West Indies on 16th January 1782, where he won a decisive victory over the French fleet under Admiral de Grasse, at the battle of Les Saintes off Dominica on the 12th April. Four enemy ships were captured including De Grasse’s flagship *Ville de Paris*. Rodney’s victory restored the English prestige, and enabled the British government to negotiate peace with France on much more favourable terms. On the 22nd May both houses of parliament voted thanks to him, and on 19th June 1782 Rodney was raised to the peerage, and given the title Baron Rodney of Stoke-Rodney and voted a pension of £2000. Rodney retired from the navy and in his last years also retired from public life.

Rodney died suddenly on 23rd May 1792, in his home in Hanover Square, London. Rodney married twice. His first marriage was to Jane Compton in 1753, and they had two sons. His second marriage was to Henrietta Clies in 1764 and they had three daughters and two sons.

Note: The use of the abbreviations HMS in this information sheet is to clearly define the ships of Royal Navy. The abbreviation did not come into common use until c.1790s