

Information sheet no 007

John Fisher

John “Jacky” Fisher was born on 25 January 1841 in Ceylon. Fisher entered the navy as a cadet on 13 July 1854 with a nomination by Admiral Sir William Parker. He joined HMS *Calcutta* and served in the Baltic fleet during the Crimean War. In 1856 he joined HMS *Highflyer* as Midshipman and served in China during the Second Opium War until 1860. He was promoted to Acting Lieutenant in 1860 on board HMS *Furious* and confirmed as Lieutenant in November 1860. In 1863, after qualifying in Gunnery at HMS *Excellent*, the gunnery school at Portsmouth, he joined HMS *Warrior*. After a year, he was appointed to the staff of HMS *Excellent* where he remained until November 1869. During this time, he married Frances Broughton and had a son and three daughters between 1867 and 1876. He was promoted to Commander in August 1869 and spent three years on the China Station until 1872. He returned to HMS *Excellent* where he remained for four years employed in torpedo development. He also established the torpedo school at nearby HMS *Vernon*.

Promotion to Captain came in 1874 and in 1876 he served on the Admiralty’s torpedo committee to study experiments on the Whitehead torpedo, the first self-propelled underwater torpedo. Following this, he saw active service for the next six years, firstly in command of HMS *Pallas* in the Mediterranean and then as Flag Captain in HMSs *Bellerophon* and *Hercules*, both stationed in North America and West Indies. He later re-joined HMS *Pallas* and commanded the ship in the Mediterranean. From September 1879 to January 1881, he was Flag Captain of HMS *Northampton*, serving on the North America and West Indies station. In 1881 he took command of HMS *Inflexible*, the greatest battleship of its time, and played a prominent role in the bombardment of the Alexandria forts in July 1882. He was awarded the Companion of the Bath for fitting out and commanding an armoured train against Arabi Pasha during this action. He returned from Egypt with a fever which lasted for nine months.

From 1883, Fisher served a period of fourteen years ashore, only broken by a brief command of HMS *Minotaur* in the summer of 1885. From 1883 to 1885, he was Captain of HMS *Excellent*, during which time he was awarded the Knight Commander of the Bath. From 1886 to 1891, he was Director of Ordnance and Torpedoes at the Admiralty. After promotion to Rear- Admiral in 1890, he was appointed Superintendent of Portsmouth Dockyard in 1891 and later, in 1892, Third Sea Lord and Controller of the Navy. During this appointment, he was heavily involved in warship design and construction as well as gunnery and engineering developments.

He was promoted to Vice-Admiral in May 1896 and in 1897 was appointed Commander-in-Chief, North America and West Indies station. In 1899, he was the British naval delegate at the first Hague Peace Conference. Fisher was well aware of the inevitability of a future confrontation with Germany; his understanding and vision of modern warfare greatly assisted the conference proceedings. Following the conference, Fisher was appointed Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean Fleet and became a full Admiral in November 1901. He was decorated as Knight Grand Cross of the Bath (GCB) in August 1902.



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In 1902 he was appointed as Second Sea Lord and was able to begin reforming the Navy. The major thrust of the reforms centred on the common scheme of entry and training of naval officers, ensuring that they were familiar with the engineering technology that was now used in warships. This became known as the Selborne Scheme.

In 1903-4 Fisher was Commander-in-Chief at Portsmouth. In this capacity, he oversaw the establishment of the Royal Naval College at Osborne, where new cadets received their initial naval training. He also served on the Esher Committee, whose recommendations, accepted by the Cabinet, called for a reorganisation of the War Office and Committee of Imperial Defence.

On 21 October 1904, at the age of 63, Fisher became First Sea Lord. His main objective was as to prepare the Navy for the inevitable war with Germany by developing a more powerful fleet. He pushed through the design and construction of the first 'all big gun' fast battleship using the new turbine engines. HMS *Dreadnought* was built within a year and launched in Portsmouth in 1906, combining great speed with immensely increased firepower. In one stroke, it rendered most of the fleet obsolete. Additionally, Fisher oversaw developments of the submarine and torpedo weapons. The rapidly changing face of the Navy brought hostile criticism from conservative parties both within the Navy and outside. His greatest rival, Lord Charles Beresford, Commander in Chief of the Channel Fleet, became evermore estranged from Fisher and the Admiralty. Finally, when Beresford's command was terminated in 1909, he publicly criticised Fisher and his naval reforms. Fisher remained in office until January 1910, longer than most previous First Sea Lords. He was succeeded by Sir Arthur Knyvet Wilson VC, who was sympathetic to the reforms and thwarting Beresford's ambitions to the highest office. During his long period in office, he was awarded with the Order of Merit in 1904, appointed Knight Grand Cross of the Royal Victorian Order (GCVO) in 1908 and raised to the peerage in 1909 with the title Baron Fisher of Kilverstone, a Norfolk estate. He retired on his 70th birthday.

In 1912, he chaired the Royal Commission on Oil Fuel. This had been another of his interests while in naval service and the Commission recommended the adoption of using oil fuel in all new ships being constructed. In October 1914, he was asked to return to the Admiralty as First Sea Lord following the resignation of Prince Louis of Battenburg. Although originally close to Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, the pair increasingly fell out over the proposed Dardanelles campaign. Fisher believed that the persistence in attacking the Dardanelles would jeopardise the success of the major naval strategy of the war. He later conceded and allowed the campaign to take place. As the campaign unfolded, it became clear that it was a hopeless cause and he became increasingly discontented and resigned in 1915. The government fell and Churchill was replaced as First Lord. Fisher was invited to serve as chairman of the newly established advisory Board of Invention and Research in July 1915. He served for four months but later unsuccessfully tried to return to the Admiralty as First Sea Lord or any other capacity. This was the end of his naval career.

His wife, Frances, died in July 1918. Fisher died 2 years later on 10 July 1920 and was given a public naval funeral in Westminster Abbey. He was buried on his Kilverstone estate.