

Information sheet no 011

John Jervis

John Jervis was born on 9 January 1735 at Meaford, Staffordshire. He was educated at Burton on Trent Grammar School until 1747 when his father was appointed Solicitor to the Admiralty and Treasurer to Greenwich Hospital. With the move to London, he transferred to a private school in Greenwich. He joined the Navy on 4 January 1748 as an Able Seaman on HMS *Gloucester* on a voyage to Jamaica under the patronage of Admiral George Townshend. He was rated as Midshipman in HMS *Severn* on June 25 1754 when Townshend was due to leave Jamaica. A month later he transferred to HMS *Sphinx* for the voyage back to England. On his return he briefly spent a month in HMS *Seaford* followed by a month in the royal yacht *William and Mary* where he completed his six years qualifying service and passed his examination for Lieutenant on 22 January 1755. He was appointed Lieutenant in HMS *Royal George* on 19 February 1755, but was quickly transferred to HMS *Nottingham* a month later. He sailed to the North American station under Admiral Edward Boscawen. In March 1756, he joined HMS *Devonshire*, followed by HMS *Prince* on 22 June and sailed to the Mediterranean.

In October 1756, he joined HMS *Culloden* under Rear-Admiral Charles Saunders, under whose patronage he remained for several years. During January 1757, he briefly joined HMS *Experiment* while her captain was ill. In March, he commanded the ship in a severe but indecisive engagement with a French privateer off Cape Gata. He returned to HMS *Culloden*, but later followed Saunders to HMS *St George*. Jervis was appointed to HMS *Foudroyant* in May 1758, a captured French prize and he was charged with taking her back to England. On his return to England, he joined HMS *Neptune* and rejoined Saunders, now Commander in Chief at the North American station. Jervis was promoted to Commander on 15 May 1759 and appointed to HMS *Scorpion* where a vacancy had occurred. However, before he was able to join his ship, he was appointed as Acting Commander to HMS *Porcupine* and took part in the expedition to Quebec, leading the advanced squadron in charge of the transports. On his ship, he carried General James Wolfe, who was impressed by Jervis' command and entrusted him with what was to become his last message home. When Jervis eventually joined HMS *Scorpion*, he was charged with returning to England with dispatches from Quebec. His return was brief; on arrival, he was immediately ordered back to the station with important letters for General Amherst. However, before leaving British waters, HMS *Scorpion* sprung a leak and Jervis had to bring her into Plymouth. He was then directed to take another ship, HMS *Albany* and finally departed on 13 January 1760. He arrived later in February and by May was crossing the Atlantic once more for home.

Once back in England, he joined the Channel Fleet under Rear Admiral George Rodney until October, when he was promoted to Captain and appointed to command HMS *Gosport*. This ship was employed in the North Sea until May 1762, when it was ordered to escort a convoy heading for North America. On May 11, the ship fell in with and repelled a French squadron, under M. de Ternay, on its way to capture Newfoundland. Jervis arrived at the North American station in September and the ship took part in operations to recover Newfoundland from the French. After this, HMS *Gosport* returned to England and was paid off in 1763.

Jervis did not see active service again until February 1769, when he was appointed to HMS *Alarm* – possibly the first copper-sheathed frigate in the Navy. He sailed for the Mediterranean in May, arriving in Genoa on 7 September

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Information sheet no 011

1769. On 30 March 1770, while sailing around Marseilles in a violent gale, the ship was driven on to the rocks, but after a strenuous effort, was finally freed and repaired. The Admiralty were very pleased with Jervis' actions in saving the ship. In 1771, the Duke of Gloucester embarked on HMS *Alarm* to recuperate from ill health in the Mediterranean and remained on board until May 1772. The ship then returned to England and paid off. Jervis spent some time travelling through France studying the language. In 1774, he took passage on a merchant ship to Kronstadt, annotating and correcting the pilotage chart and studying the Russian navy. On his return, he travelled through Sweden and Holland to study the methods of their navies.

He returned to active service with an appointment to HMS *Kent* in June 1775, but the ship was unfit for service. In September, he was appointed to command HMS *Foudroyant*, the prize ship that he had brought back to England some years before. The ship was guardship in Plymouth but attached to Admiral Keppel's fleet at the battle of Ushant on 27 July 1778. Jervis was a witness at the subsequent court-martial of Admiral Keppel, due to a dispute between Keppel and his second in command, Admiral Hugh Palliser. The evidence provided by Jervis was so strongly in Keppel's favour that it was influential in acquitting the Admiral of all charges against him. HMS *Foudroyant* remained with the Channel Fleet and was involved in the reliefs at Gibraltar in 1780 and 1781.

On 17 April 1782, the ship gave chase to a French squadron and captured the *Pegase*, one of the largest ships. Jervis received a minor wound during the engagement. One of the deciding factors in the action had been the order and discipline of the English ship's crew, a feature that Jervis was noted for in the future. He received a knighthood for this action. The ship saw further action including another relief of Gibraltar, under Lord Howe, in 1782, and a skirmish off Cape Spartel before the fleet returned to England. *Foudroyant* was paid off and on his return home Jervis married his cousin Martha, the daughter of Sir Thomas Parker.

Jervis was elected MP for Launceston in January 1883 and served until 1884, when, in the general election, he stood for and was elected MP for Great Yarmouth. He seldom spoke except on naval matters. During this period he was promoted to Rear-Admiral on 24 September 1787 and spent a few weeks at sea in HMS *Carnatic*. He spent another few weeks at sea during 1790 on board HMS *Prince* while the Spanish were rearming. Later in the year, he was returned to Parliament as MP for Chipping Wycombe.

In February 1793, he attained the rank of Vice-Admiral and was appointed as Commander in Chief, West Indies. He hoisted his flag in HMS *Boyne* and reached the station in January 1794. During the next few months, the British combined forces captured Guadaloupe and Martinique. However, Jervis was suffering from ill health and was permitted to return to England in November. On his return he was promoted to Admiral on 1 July 1795. Once he had recovered sufficiently, he was appointed Commander in Chief, Mediterranean Fleet in November 1795, hoisting his flag in HMS *Victory*. He introduced a new system of discipline which was to have a decisive influence in future engagements.

The Mediterranean Fleet were engaged on blockading the French fleet in the port of Toulon. With the addition of the Spanish fleet in 1796, the British became vastly outnumbered without a friendly port in the region. Jervis withdrew to Gibraltar.

Information sheet no 011

On 14 February 1797, a fleet of 24 Spanish ships under Admiral de Cordoba, sailed from Toulon for Cadiz while Jervis, with a fleet of ten ships was patrolling off Cape St Vincent. Jervis was later joined by five ships under Admiral Parker. The fleets engaged around midday. The Spanish were not prepared in the line of battle and Jervis ordered his two lines of ships to pass through the Spanish, splitting them into three groups. During the battle, Captain Horatio Nelson wore out of line and ran across the bows of a small group of the Spanish ships. He boarded and captured two of the ships one straight after the other. These ships were the *Santisima Trinidad*, the largest of the Spanish fleet, and the *San Nicolas*. This was a decisive move and was the beginning of the Nelson legend. The battle was won with minimal casualties, the capture of four Spanish ships and the remainder of the Spanish fleet in disarray. On receiving the news in England, a vote of thanks was passed in the House of Commons, a pension settled on Jervis and he was given the freedom of the City of London. In addition, he was created an Earl by the King and he took the name for the earldom from the battle he had just won. Following the battle, Jervis continued to blockade Cadiz, although rumblings of discontent, stirred by news of the mutinies at Spithead and the Nore, were firmly suppressed.

The strain of these actions took their toll on Jervis' health and temper. During this period, he quarrelled with his second in command, Sir John Orde, who requested a court-martial against the Admiral for being overlooked in favour of Nelson, junior in seniority to Orde, having been given the task of pursuing Napoleon and the French fleet in Egypt. The Admiralty refused to allow it but wrote to Jervis in terms of strong disapproval of his conduct. Jervis' rigid maintenance of discipline was becoming unpopular amongst the fleet and in 1798 he ordered the fleet to be refitted at Gibraltar instead of returning to England in order to keep up the blockade, adding to the general discontent. In June 1799, Jervis was forced to resign his commission due to his ill health and return to England.

Back in England, he spent most of his time at his home in Rochetts, Essex. As he regained his health, Sir John Orde continued their quarrel relating to his treatment by Jervis while in the Mediterranean and issued him with a challenge. Both men were ordered not to pursue the duel.

The Admiralty were eager for Jervis to return to active service as Commander in Chief, Channel Fleet and he finally agreed in Spring 1800. Once more he introduced his system of discipline into the Fleet; this meant that certain privileges previously enjoyed by the officers were curtailed, making him unpopular with the officers, but the benefits were apparent in routine, organisation, health and efficiency within the fleet itself.

A year later, Jervis accepted the appointment of First Lord of the Admiralty and went about improving the Navy's administration in the same way as he had done in the fleet. A Royal Commission of Enquiry was set up to investigate into irregularities within the Navy Board, who had responsibility for maintaining dockyards and supplies. It revealed widespread corruption at the highest level and Lord Melville, formerly Treasurer of the Navy and previously First Lord was impeached. This made Jervis extremely unpopular in political circles, especially with those who had vested interest in the Navy Board activities.

In May 1804, the government fell and Jervis was obliged to retire from his post. However, when Prime Minister, Mr Pitt, a known political enemy of Jervis, died, Jervis was once more asked to command the fleet and became acting Admiral of the Fleet. He took up his post off Ushant in 1806. During the winter, he requested special permission to



Information sheet no 011

stay on shore since his health was once more failing. The government changed again in March 1807 and Jervis requested to be relieved and this was granted on 24 April 1807. This was his last active service and he went into retirement.

In the intervening years, he occasionally spoke on naval matters in the House of Lords, making his last appearance in 1810. He spent most of his retirement in Rochetts. His wife died in February 1816, leaving no children. His health continued to deteriorate despite taking up residence in the south of France for the winter of 1818-19. On the accession of George IV (formerly Prince Regent), Jervis was confirmed in rank of Admiral of the Fleet on 19 July 1821. He died on March 14, 1823 at Rochetts. He had requested to be buried at Stone in Staffordshire and a memorial was erected in St Paul's Cathedral. The earldom became extinct as he died without heirs, but his nephew Edward Jervis Ricketts succeeded him as Viscount.

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