

Jack Crawford



Jack Crawford from "The Monthly Chronicle 1888"

Who was Jack Crawford?

Jack Crawford was born on 22nd March 1775 at Pottery Bank, which was then called Thornhill's Bank, in the East End of Sunderland. Pottery Bank would have started at about the eastern end of High Street East today.

His father trained him as a keelman. Keelmen ferried coal from the staithes out to the sea-going coal ships. Their job was so important that press-gangs were only allowed to press keelmen if they looked like they were going to go on strike. The Royal Navy, however, could use keelmen as a reserve force, but only in times of emergency. Keels were small boats that could be sailed or punted on the river. Keelmen wore a uniform of a short blue jacket, grey trousers, yellow waistcoat, white shirt and blue cap. Although their job was important and the work was very hard, they were very poorly paid and at the bottom of the social scale.

Jack was a keelman until 1786 when, aged 11 or 12, he joined the crew of the "Peggy" at South Shields as an apprentice. In 1796, he was press-ganged into the Royal Navy and served on "HMS Venerable" under Admiral Duncan, the Royal Navy Commander-in-Chief of the North Seas.

Sunderland in Jack's time

In the late 18th century Sunderland, with the harbour, was a hive of industry and activity. Businesses included timber yards, boat builders, sailmakers, ropemakers, mills, warehouses, fish markets and many pubs.

The town had grown rapidly due to river trade, in particular the export of coal. With its population of seamen and skilled craftsmen, Sunderland provided ample opportunities for apprentice sailors and artisans, and a perfect hunting ground for the feared press-gangs.

Life in the Navy

Many men did not choose to join the Navy, they were forced or "pressed" into it by gangs of hired men known as "press-gangs". In the 18th century, there were many wars and this was the way that Britain ensured it had enough sailors for its warships. Only seamen should have been pressed, but as the wars continued, all kinds of men, from criminals to pensioners were taken.

Life in the Royal Navy was tough. Sailors would be at sea for months, even years, living in cramped conditions where disease was common, and fresh food was rare. The sea and the weather were a constant danger, and many men were killed or badly injured in naval battles.



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Sunderland
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The Battle of Camperdown 1797

In 1797, Britain was at war with France, Holland and Spain. On the 11th October the British and Dutch navies met in battle off the coast of Norway, near Camperdown, close to Bergen.

Instead of forming a line of ships, Admiral Duncan split the British fleet into two groups, which broke through the Dutch ships, firing damaging broadsides. It was a daring move, but successful, as the Dutch ships were not ready for battle. The victory stopped the Dutch fleet from joining the French navy. The Dutch and French had been planning to invade Ireland, and then to attack Britain.

During the fierce fighting, HMS Venerable was badly damaged and the main mast was broken. Jack Crawford climbed the broken mast and nailed the flag to it, whilst under heavy fire. The Union Flag (the original Union Jack without the red saltire of St Patrick) was the command flag of Admiral of the Fleet. In a time without electronic communication systems this flag was a very important identifier, and a proud symbol of British power. The loss of the flag could be a great blow to morale and could affect a battle. The phrases to “nail your colours to the mast” and “show your true colours” refer back to the original use and meaning of these flags.



Statue of Jack Crawford in Mowbray Park

Jack Crawford after the Battle of Camperdown

After the battle there was a great victory procession in London. Jack's action was said to have helped win the battle. In March 1798, the people of Sunderland presented Jack with a silver medal in honour of his daring act. The medal is now in Sunderland Museum. In January 1806, Jack was formally presented to King George III and granted a pension of £30 a year.

Jack died on 10 November 1831. He was the second victim of cholera in the town and was buried in the churchyard of Sunderland Parish Church. A headstone was erected on the site in 1888 and is still there today. In 1890 a bronze statue commemorating his deed was erected in Mowbray Park and unveiled by the Earl of Camperdown, the grandson of Admiral Duncan.

Find out more about Jack Crawford

For more information, visit the Local Studies Centre at Sunderland City Library and Arts Centre, which has many books on Jack Crawford, such as:

- “Jack Crawford. The Hero of Camperdown” by Michael Maclaren (1997)
- “A sketch of the Life of Jack Crawford” by Capt. John Todd (1889)
- “The Life of Jack Crawford, the Sunderland Sailor and Hero of Camperdown” by Captain Edward Robinson (1866)
- “The Jack Crawford Medal” (Library Circular, unknown date)

To experience what life was like on in an 18th century seaport and on board a war ship of the time, visit Hartlepool Historic Quay (www.destinationhartlepool.com) and HMS Trincomalee (www.hms-trincomalee.co.uk). You can also find out more about the history of Sunderland as a seaport and shipbuilding town, by contacting Sunderland Maritime Heritage (www.sunderlandmaritimeheritage.com) and visiting them on Open Days.

For more information about Britain's maritime heritage see the National Maritime Museum web site at www.nmm.ac.uk. The web site www.nelsonsnavy.co.uk has more details about the Navy at the time of Lord Nelson while www.portcities.org.uk explores the maritime history of five key ports in the UK – Bristol, Hartlepool, London, Liverpool and Southampton.