

CORRESPONDENCE

Royal Naval Engineer Officer's Conference

SIR,

What a pity it is that so often incorrect historical references are made. By 1875 there can have been few, if any, serving admirals who believed that 'this craze for iron ships would eventually give way to common sense and English oak.' The first two real battleships without sails were in commission and the much improved *Dreadnought* was launched.

Even worse is the repetition of the old *canard* concerning Lord Melville's alleged views on steam ships. As Dr. Rodgers of the Public Record Office said in *British Naval Thought and Naval Policy 1820-1890*, 'Only one thing need be said about this: that it was never said. It has been repeatedly quoted from a secondary source of marked unreliability, and it can easily be shown that on the alleged occasion of it, Lord Melville's minute was in exactly the opposite sense.' (See also *Steam and Sail*, Rear-Admiral P. W. Brock and Basil Greenhill.)

Literary debate aside, Lord Melville's administration had a creditable record in ordering steam ships. In fact, the whole nineteenth century was notable for a very progressive attitude to technology by politicians most of all, but also by naval architects and engineers, and by successive Boards of Admiralty.

(Sgd.) D. K. Brown
Chief Constructor,
Ship Department

Naval Engineers' Good Conduct Medal

SIR,

Further to the interesting article on the Naval Engineers' Good Conduct Medal (Volume 25, No. 2 of the *Journal of Naval Engineering*), your readers may be interested to know that a further presentation of this medal has recently been made by a First Sea Lord.

On Friday, 23 November 1979, Admiral Leach presented an example of the 1876 specimen striking to the Wardroom Mess of the Royal Naval Engineering College at Manadon. This medal had been held in the Naval Historical Branch collection whose Head, J. D. Brown, Esq., commented:

'Perhaps the fact that Admiral Sir George Cockburn was able to handle the first medal in his own office, whereas Admiral Sir Henry Leach has to take the last to the Engineers' present "Main Control Room" is a reflection on the changes wrought in 137 years.'

On the subject of the doubtful authenticity of the eighth 'named' specimen, the medal 'presented' to James Urquhart in 1845, your readers may be interested to know that, in the absence of the direct proof of the different types of rim displayed on the 1840s and the 1870s medals as described by Captain Douglas-Morris, the circumstantial evidence that he quotes has in the past been taken as perhaps more definite proof of authenticity than he allows.

The R.N.E. College records at Manadon contain a record of a correspondence initiated in 1949, when the Australian Numismatic Society reported that:

'A member of our society owns one of these medals, named to James Urquhart, 1st Eng., H.M.S.V. Columbia, 1845, with an unnamed Baltic Medal 1854 and an unnamed China Medal 1859-60 (no bar). These were awarded unnamed to the navy.

These three medals (from the family history, etc.) appear to be a group. The Naval Engineers' Medal looked quite genuine but the name of James Urquhart was not on the rolls for this medal.'

The Society then wrote on 10 August 1949 to the Admiralty:

'We would deem it a great favour if you could verify or otherwise disprove the authenticity of this medal and at the same time advise us if James Urquhart was entitled to the medal for the Baltic 1854 and for the China Campaign, 1857-60.'

and received the following reply some months later:

'Ref. RO 154/59
3rd Apr. 1950.

Record Office,
Admiralty,
Whitehall S.W.

Dear Sir,

The delay in replying to your letter of the 10th August relating to a Naval Engineers' Medal of 1845, is regretted.

Although there are no actual papers in existence relating to the actual award, there is an entry in the Admiralty Digests for 1845 stating that "Mr. James Urquhart is to have a medal for an invention of a Tide Gauge—July 8th, 1845". As he was then actually serving in the "Columbia" it appears probable that the medal held by one of your members is, in fact, a genuine Naval Engineers' Medal.

Mr. Urquhart served as Chief Engineer I in H.M.S. "Caesar" from 28th January 1854 until 8th March 1855, and from 9th March 1855 to 14th December 1860 in H.M.S. "Retribution". His service in these two ships qualify him for the Baltic Medal 1854 and the China Medal 1859-60 respectively.

It may be of interest to note that the satisfaction of the Board of Admiralty was conveyed to the Commanding Officer, H.M.S. "Retribution" in February 1860 for the "unremitting exertions of Chief Engineer I James Urquhart".

Head of Record Office.'

Although this is not more than was outlined by Captain Douglas-Morris, the fact that the 'unnamed' medals are genuine makes this at least a very well-researched forgery, if that is what it is. If the medal should reappear on the market, any collector who mistakenly buys it as genuine may well take heart from the fact that while there are only seven genuine and attested examples and 'no more than twenty' of the specimen striking of 1876, there is probably only one 'Urquhart Medal' in existence, and if it is a forgery it will be better 'struck-up' than any of the genuine ones as Captain Douglas-Morris says.

(Sgd.) R. C. F. Nichol,
Lieut.-Cdr., R.N.