

# FOXHILL—FACT AND FICTION

BY

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Until eighteen months ago I had never set foot in the Admiralty other than as a visitor, and had for years congratulated myself that I was not the type wanted there, being far too ignorant of things technical. Of course, during those very same years this lack of knowledge had not deterred me from vociferous criticism of the Admiralty and its ways ; I had been amongst the first to proclaim—‘ those “ clots ” at Bath haven’t the foggiest idea what goes on in ships, why the devil they go on fitting these infernal pumps, which never go—Heaven only knows. If I had my way I’d clear the lot out and send them to sea to get their feet back on the ground ’—and so on and so forth. Alas, retribution came—I was made to eat my foolish words and in July 1952 I found myself one of the ‘ clots ’ at Bath.

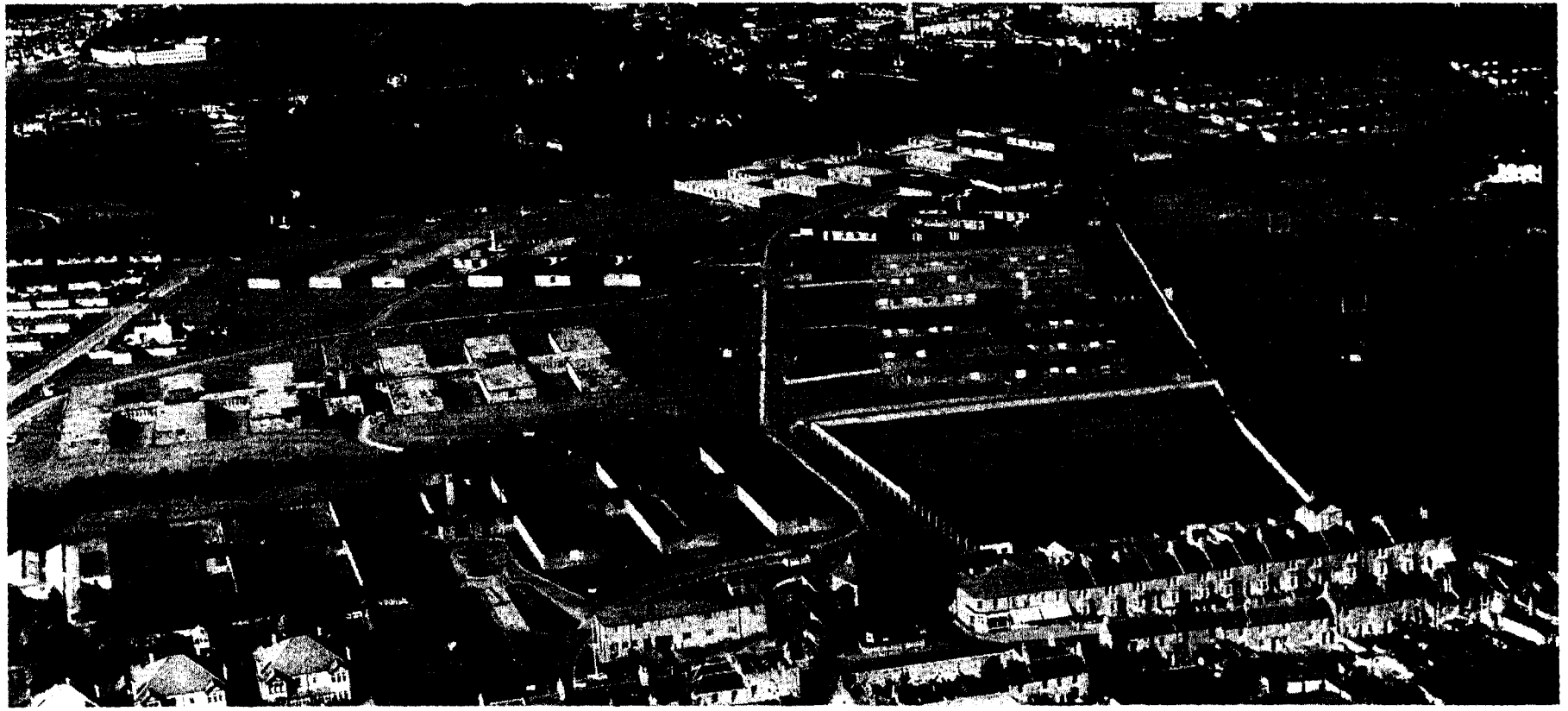
I arrived, and took over from my worthy predecessor with full confidence that it wouldn’t take me long to clear up the mess which for years I had, in my ignorance, considered had masqueraded under the title of E.-in-C.’s Department, Bath.

There must be many officers serving in the Fleet and elsewhere to-day who think the same as I did a while ago, and it might be of interest to them to know what I now think of E.-in-C.’s Department, Admiralty, Foxhill Hutments, Bath, as a result of inside knowledge.

Before I start, I might add that prior to joining I didn’t really relish the thought of the three years to come ; I had heard such dreadful stories of the burning of midnight oil, the haggard white faces, the all powerful civil servants, the humourless travesties of naval officers, and, worst of all, the complete lack of contact with the Navy. All my friends had commiserated with me when told the news of my future ; such remarks as —‘ Poor old thing, three years hard in the mad-house ’, or more ominously—‘ You wait ! ’ had been commonplace.

Let me say right away—it isn’t nearly as black as it is painted. Believe it or not we laugh quite a lot, and though we are not as fortunate as our sea-going brethren in having the inestimable blessing of the ‘ duty-free list ’ as an aid to our enjoyment—there are many compensations—such as draught Guinness to be found in the local hostelries. We run a mess too, not quite the same organization as that in a ship, but for a relatively modest annual subscription we take advantage of the benefits of the bulk buying of wines and tobacco, run parties, dances and games, and as far as is possible reproduce in a job with no actual wardroom, a focus round which our social and sporting activities can revolve.

So much for the more human aspects of life in Bath—now for the actual job. The first thing that strikes the ignoramus joining is the terrifying volume of paper. It is simply vast by ship standards, and during the first few weeks one wonders if one will ever see daylight at all—or just go quietly mad over the treadmill-like task of trying to empty the ‘ IN ’ basket. Then gradually it dawns that paper is, and must be, the medium of Admiralty. With an organization of this size (there are nearly 5,000 Admiralty personnel in Bath alone) the essence of the job is communication with each other. ‘ Why not use the phone like the Americans do ? ’—you will reply at once, ‘ they are far more efficient than we are, and they don’t spend all day scribbling.’



THE FOXHILL FLAT-TOPS

That brings me at once to the first basic truth I learnt—the Admiralty *must* be correct as to fact. From time to time we all criticize the decisions of Admiralty and differ from its judgment, but we seldom query its factual statements. To maintain this standard of integrity and accuracy everything that matters must be recorded, otherwise there is nothing to refer to and we should be at the mercy of man's fallible memory—hence the scribbling and much of the paper. Mind you, our task in Bath would be made far easier, and we should be much quicker and more efficient if we were supplied with secretarial support up to modern commercial standards ; and if all the ancillary paraphernalia of office aids, dictaphones, filing systems, etc., were supplied on a similar scale. It would also help if the Department was staffed-up commensurate with its enormous task, but that would not reduce the volume of paper, it would merely facilitate production, and the ease with which it was handled. We should still be chair-borne troops and our working materials as craftsmen—if we are craftsmen—would still be paper and ink.

I have just said—'its enormous task', I wonder if those who have never served in this Department realize as little as I did how enormous that task is ? The whole of the machinery in H.M. ships, from gas turbines to collar presses, be it in battleships or tank cleaning vessels, is our business. To list it all would be tedious, but some random figures may help to bring home the size of the job. In the Navy to-day there are, fitted and spare, some 28,000 I.C. Engines. The capital value of the spare parts held at Eaglescliffe alone is some £7,000,000. The average *daily* number of official papers entering the Department is 120, quite apart from an unofficial mail of at least twice that size. The aggregate s.h.p. of the ships, vessels and craft under construction runs into millions. Under the guidance and critical surveillance of E.-in-C.'s Department some 3,000 to 4,000 firms, both main and sub-contractors, design and make machinery and fittings. Add to all this the time taken up in constantly revising the internal organization, basic design, amending regulations, supervising ships building, writing technical instructions, investigating defects, planning for war, arranging 'A.s and A.s,' attending meetings with other Departments, buying machinery, visiting firms, etc., and one gets a slight conception of the magnitude of the task at Bath. Please therefore don't ask us questions by letter, signal or telephone which, with a little thought, can be solved either by your own resource and ingenuity or by reference to your elders and betters at sea. Such things only clog the machine, and its day-to-day legitimate business is quite enough for it to digest.

In the July 1953 issue of the *Journal* (Vol. 6, No. 3) a chart of E.-in-C.'s organization was published showing the names of the officers holding the chief responsibility for the various jobs. It is worth study, not only to find out the particular officer you can worry about your current problem, but to appreciate from a general survey of the allocation of duties and responsibilities the size of the job in its entirety. There is a complement for E.-in-C.'s Department like any ship or establishment, and like any ship or establishment it bears little resemblance to the numbers actually borne. All the same, 64 naval officers and 269 civilians shine their trousers daily at Foxhill conducting E.-in-C.'s business. Not very many when you realize that the complement of H.M.S. *Eagle* as a Flagship is 79 officers and 1,146 ratings, exclusive of Fleet Air Arm personnel.

The key men in the whole organization are the Inspectors—as they are called as a gesture to the past—the Commanders (E). It is upon them that the Department relies for the correctness of its statements, quite apart from depending on them to achieve its results. They are also required to make decisions involving sums of money they are never likely to possess, even if Fortune in the form of Littlewoods should shine on them ; and unflinchingly they shoulder

responsibilities, which I'm certain if they paused to ponder their magnitude, would make them blanch a bit. In addition to all this they have to conduct the day-to-day business of the Department—with reference to higher authority on less than 20 per cent. of the problems. When they do so refer, and it is their choice normally whether a problem warrants such reference—they have to justify their opinion against searching criticism and in the end probably have their draft proposals cut to shreds—one of the most infuriating and exasperating experiences known to man.

The second basic truth that I learnt therefore was what a capable, knowledgeable, trustworthy and hard-working chap the average Commander (E) is. Until one meets him in the surroundings of Admiralty his depths of talent often remain partially hidden. I say 'average' deliberately because there are all sorts at Foxhill—'daggers' and far-from 'daggers'—yet all in their various spheres make decisions having far reaching effects on the Navy, and cheerfully shoulder responsibilities far beyond what the sea-goer ever imagines.

On the subject of the 'daggers', I have been surprised and impressed to discover what a large part these officers play in the actual design of ship's machinery. There is no doubt that they give a lead to industry in many instances—though the name plates you see scattered round the engine-rooms of H.M. ships give them no credit for it. To-day this lead is probably more pronounced than ever before and enormous strides forward are being made.

To Commanders (E) who have never served in Admiralty therefore, I would say that you need have no false modesty about your latent capability as administrators, and as a corollary, don't falsely imagine that you won't find yourselves at Bath one day—there's a niche here for every type.

I said earlier on that the volume of paper was terrifying to the newly joined—so is Admiralty procedure. It is like nothing else; and though there is logic in it when understood a bit—at first it is completely bewildering. No amount of written description can explain it, one just has to live with it and learn the hard way. But the way is not quite so hard as might be imagined, as there are many wise, experienced men and women who have spent many years of their lives in the Department—the draughtsmen and clerical officers—to turn to when defeated. If the Inspectors are the key men of E.-in-C.'s Department the civilians are its backbone. They provide the continuity and the resourceful memories, and it is they who in reality are the instructors to all newly joined naval officers, especially on procedure.

Even when Admiralty procedure is understood, it is difficult to appreciate why much of it is necessary. Possibly the most irritating feature of Foxhill life, especially to those trained to make quick decisions at sea and to rely on their own judgment, is the frustration. At times what appears to be the simplest problem is so engulfed in procedure, delayed by questioning, and cross questioning, and apparent opposition Department by Department, that one is tempted to chuck one's hand in. It may be that all this is necessary and that one's attitude springs from impatience and lack of balance, but I have serious doubts. So many seem to have the power to obstruct and so few the responsibility to achieve.

From all I have said to date it must be deduced that we have to work, and by Jove, we do! Our leave regulations are the same as for any other shore duty, but that is all we get. There are no odd hours off to visit the Dockyard, or to watch the Stoker Mechanics' XI, or to play golf with the Admiral. It is a steady Monday to Friday from 0900 to 1730 or later and no seven-bell boat, but a half day on Saturday. All the same we have our compensations—when we pack up and leave the office—we pack up. There are no signals, no phone

calls, no knocks on the door, no raising steam for weather, no duty watch, no jobs that involve working through the night. Once we get home in the evening our time is *all* our own—a strange yet very pleasant sensation.

I doubt really if I have conveyed a comprehensive picture of the task of E.-in-C.'s Department and I wonder if it is really possible to do so. There is always so much going on, and so much that ought to be going on. There is the long-term research, requiring deep concentration and vision ; there is the priority job which interrupts all this ; there is the constant difficulty of trying to get deliveries on time ; and there is the day-to-day business of running H.M. Fleet. In this latter task it must also be realized that E.-in-C. is only one of the eighty odd Divisions and Departments in Admiralty, and it is only about 50 per cent. of the problems which reach us that can be resolved without reference to one or more of these other Divisions and Departments. This in itself causes delays not readily obvious outside the Department.

Brooding ominously and heartlessly over *all* our activities is the Treasury. Virtually nothing needed by the Fleet, materially, organizationally, or in the field of personnel can be achieved without money. Money is tight to-day, we all know that, and the Admiralty is in no different position to ourselves in this respect. Hence the constant pleading for extra funds—provision for money in the annual estimates—diversion of funds from one service to another more important—pruning, saving and trying to get something for the least expenditure. Once again, all this takes time ; so temper your impatience with this knowledge when ' those " clots " at Bath ' don't answer your letter at once.

To sum up, what can I say in my broad appreciation of E.-in-C.'s Department after eighteen months' service, which might be of interest to those in the Fleet which we serve ?—So much to do and so little time to do it, so much which should be done and again so little time. Overriding it all is a very definite sense of being part of the Navy—the large, possibly cumbersome, but nevertheless *very* naval-minded machine, which honestly endeavours to put the interests of its more fortunate brethren who daily wear Her Majesty's uniform, before its own. I have learnt in my time to be amazed at the size of the job, to be tolerant of Admiralty apart from its exasperating procedure, and to appreciate that the Admiralty exists for the Navy and not vice versa. So when your letter from sea, over which you took so much trouble and which to you is so important, fails to get a quick reply—ponder what I have said and remember that the chap you wrote to is on your side, but his reply must be accurate and this alone takes time—delay does not mean he is being lazy.

If therefore to your surprise and dismay you, like I, find yourself appointed to E.-in-C. Bath for the first time, you can have this gleam of comfort—it's nothing like as black as it is painted, but I must admit it's a darker grey than that applied to H.M. ships.

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