

Information sheet no 097

Samuel Pepys

Samuel Pepys was born on 23 February 1633 off Fleet Street, London. Although he was the fifth child of eleven, he was the eldest to survive into adulthood. Although coming from a modest background, his family connections were from Cambridgeshire where his uncle owned an estate at Brampton that Pepys was eventually to inherit. His Aunt Paulina had married Sir Sydney Montagu of Hinchingbrooke and it was his cousin, Edward, later Earl of Sandwich, who was to become his earliest patron. Pepys and his brother Tom spent some of their youth away from London and he attended Huntingdon Grammar School for a short time – the school at which Oliver Cromwell had been educated and although loyal to the monarchy, a person Pepys admired.

From 1646 he attended St Paul's School in London and in 1649, witnessed the execution of King Charles I. In 1650 he entered Magdalene College, Cambridge. After gaining his degree, he entered the service of his cousin, Edward Montagu, a statesman in the Commonwealth administration, as secretary and steward at his London home. After just a year, Pepys married Elizabeth St Michel, daughter of an impoverished Frenchman in two ceremonies, a prayer book liturgy ceremony on 10 October 1655 followed by a civil ceremony on 1 December at St Margaret's at Westminster. The couple were childless, caused possibly by Pepys having a kidney stone removed in a risky operation in 1658.

Through Montagu's patronage, Pepys obtained a position as Clerk at the Exchequer under George Downing. He moved to Axe Yard, close to the present day Downing Street, named after his Exchequer master. This was his first post in public service and he made his first connection with the Navy by taking papers and documents to Montagu who was now a General-at-Sea serving in the Baltic in 1659. Montagu was turning towards the Royalist cause following the death of Oliver Cromwell and the ineffective rule of government under his son, Richard. At the beginning of 1660 amid the political turmoil, Pepys began to write his now famous diary. The diary records not only Pepys' domestic and private life but the events of the country from first hand.

In May 1660, Pepys accompanied Montagu as Admiral's Secretary to escort Charles II back to England to ascend the throne. Montagu was created Earl of Sandwich and in turn, he promised Pepys that they "would rise together". He secured Pepys the post of Clerk of the Acts to the Navy Board. The Board administered the civil transactions of the navy, including shipbuilding, dockyards, victualling and equipment. Pepys was now a Principal Officer of the Navy. He moved into his official lodgings in Seething Lane and resigned from his post in the Exchequer. Pepys had little knowledge of the administration of the Navy in direct contrast to other colleagues on the Navy Board, but Pepys found the Board to be inefficient and corrupt. He set about to bring it into order and undertook extra tuition to get a full understanding of the business; this included employing a tutor to improve his arithmetic and becoming an expert in the weights and measures of the goods that dockyard storekeepers and carpenters worked with. He worked hard and often long hours and soon became a leading member of the Board. Even with all this zeal, he still found time for social activities, mainly music, theatre, drinking and womanising. He was appointed to the Tangier Committee which was to manage the African garrison brought to England as part of the dowry of Queen Catherine of Braganza. He was later appointed Treasurer.

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During the Second Anglo-Dutch War which began in 1665, Pepys worked exceptionally hard to keep the Navy supplied and was described by the Duke of Albemarle (formerly George Monck) as “the right hand of the Navy”. He created a central victualling structure as part of his reforms. In 1666, Pepys was the first person to inform the King about the Great Fire of London, an event he chronicled in his diary. Pepys suggested using dockyard workers to pull down buildings and prevent the fire spreading.

After the humiliation of the Dutch raid of the Medway in June 1667, the Navy Board came under heavy political scrutiny. Pepys addressed the House of Commons on 5 March 1668 for three hours defending the actions of the Navy Board and producing evidence that they were not to blame.

At this time, Pepys found that his eyesight was failing and he feared that he was going blind. His last entry in the diary was 31st May 1669. With his wife, he went abroad to Europe and two weeks after their return, his wife died from a fever. In 1672, the Third Dutch War began and in the battle of Sole Bay, the Earl of Sandwich died. Although no longer close, Pepys acted as a banner bearer at his funeral in Westminster Abbey. In 1673, Pepys left the Navy Board and became Secretary of the Admiralty Commission. He took over most of the duties of the Lord High Admiral as the Duke of York had to resign the post due to the Test Act excluding Roman Catholics from holding high office. Royal favour also helped him win the Parliamentary seat of Castle Rising in Norfolk in 1673; this was despite unsubstantiated accusations of being a Catholic or having Catholic leanings especially in view of the support from the Duke of York. He became a spokesman for the Navy and its administration.

During 1676-77, Pepys introduced many changes to the Navy while Secretary to the Admiralty. This included regulations governing Midshipmen and Volunteers, naval chaplains, men and guns. An examination for Lieutenancy became a key factor in the creating a professional officer corps for the Navy and he persuaded Parliament to provide funds to build thirty new ships. At the dissolution of Parliament in January 1679, Pepys was returned as MP for Harwich.

Later, in May 1679, Pepys and shipwright Sir Anthony Deane were charged with leaking naval secrets to the French and Pepys was once again accused of being Catholic. After resigning from the Admiralty, Pepys and Deane were sent to the Tower of London although both were bailed a month later. Again, the accusations proved unfounded and the charges were dropped. During a period of unemployment, he worked on building up his library. In 1683, he was appointed to accompany Lord Dartmouth to act as secretary for the evacuation of Tangier that had been found to be unsustainable. On his return in June 1684, the Admiralty Commission, set up in 1679, was abolished and the King appointed Pepys as his Secretary for Admiralty Affairs.

At the end of 1684, Pepys was elected President of the Royal Society and Isaac Newton’s *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* was published in 1687 during his tenure. Pepys continued in his Admiralty office after the accession of James II and also again returned to Parliament as MP for Harwich. In 1686 Pepys proposed a special commission covering the work of both Admiralty and Navy Board to restore efficiency to the Navy and it achieved all its reforms earlier than the three years that had been planned.



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Although close to the King in many ways, Pepys never supported James' Catholicism. With news of William of Orange's invasion, Pepys requested payment from the King for his past services; the King wrote him a blank cheque; Pepys optimistically filled in for around £28,000 but it was never honoured. Pepys arranged for the departure of the Queen and the Prince of Wales but was not personally involved in the King's escape. Pepys was defeated in the post-invasion election and with the accession of William and Mary, a purge of office-holders commenced. It was unlikely that Pepys would have been retained but he was also not prepared to swear allegiance to the new monarchs. On 22 February 1689, Pepys completed all his Admiralty business, having dated his resignation two days earlier. He was once again arrested on suspicion of treason to the new government in May and detained in Westminster gatehouse. He was released on medical grounds in July. His long service to the Navy had come to an end.

Now in retirement, he worked actively with the institutions he was associated with – the Royal Society and Trinity House (of which he had been twice Master) - and he continued to build up and organise his library, assisted by his nephew John Jackson, who became his heir. In his last years, Pepys spent most of his time in Clapham at the house of his friend William Hewer. Pepys died on 26 May 1703. He was buried in St Olave's churchyard in London alongside his wife. John Jackson inherited Pepys' property at Brampton and his library. Pepys had stipulated in his will that after Jackson's death, the collection was to pass to his old college at Cambridge, Magdalene, where it was to be kept apart from the other college books. His diary was not translated from the shorthand until the nineteenth century and from then on, it left a lasting legacy of an important influence on the creation of naval administration and social history of the Restoration.