

## **Admiral Broke of the Shannon**

## **Cathy Shelbourne**

On the 13 November we were entertained by Cathy Shelbourne, speaker on maritime heroes and “brazen buccaneers”, who told us about the largely little-known local hero Captain Philip De Vere Bowes Broke. Broke had served with distinction in the Royal Navy and during his lifetime was often referred to as “Broke of the Shannon” a reference to his notable command of HMS Shannon in the last war between the USA and Great Britain 1812 to early 1815.

Broke had been born in 1776, the eldest of 3 sons and 5 daughters, and raised at Broke Hall, Nacton on the banks of the Orwell. As a child Broke had shown a keen interest in the ships on the river and making his own gun powder for a replica toy frigate he had been given as a present. Broke had attended Ipswich School where a house and a swimming pool are named after him.

In 1788 Broke joined the Royal Naval Academy at Portsmouth dockyard in 1788 and began active service as a midshipman in 1792. Cathy explained that it was unusual for Broke as the eldest son to join the navy as they usually ran the family estate. Broke served as third lieutenant on the frigate HMS Southampton during the battle of Cape St. Vincent in February 1797 and was promoted to commander in 1799 and captain in early 1801. However, at this time the war with France was at an ebb and he retired on half pay to Broke Hall to take charge of the estate. In 1802 he married Louisa Middleton and they subsequently had 11 children, the marriage seems to have been very happy and Cathy showed letters that they had sent to each other during his times away at sea.

Broke took command of the Shannon, a 38-gun frigate in August 1806 and was ordered to Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1811 as the diplomatic position between America and Britain deteriorated. The United States Congress declared war on 18 June 1812. There were half a dozen naval battles between Royal Navy and United States navy frigates in 1812 and the early months of 1813 which were all won by the Americans. However, things changed when HMS Shannon met the USS Chesapeake on 1 June 1813 in a single ship action. Although Chesapeake was a slightly larger craft and had a substantially larger crew, the armament of the two ships was evenly matched. However, gunnery was Broke's area of expertise and the crew of Shannon had been exceptionally well drilled by him. Chesapeake was disabled by gunfire, boarded and captured within 15 minutes of opening fire. Fifty-six sailors on Chesapeake were killed and 85 wounded including her captain James Lawrence, who died of his

wounds on 4 June. Lawrence's last command was reported to be "Don't give up the ship". On the Shannon, 24 were killed and 59 wounded, including Broke who sustained a serious head wound from a cutlass blow while leading the boarding party. Lieutenant Provo Wallis, a Nova Scotian, took command of Shannon and the defeated Chesapeake was escorted to Halifax as surgeons worked to save Broke who later recovered at the Commissioner's residence in the Halifax Naval Yard.

Shannon's unexpected victory created a sensation in both the United States and the United Kingdom and in recognition, Broke was created a baronet on 25 September 1813 and became a Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath on 3 January 1815. He was also awarded a Naval Gold Medal, one of only eight awarded for single ship actions between 1794 and 1816. While his serious head wound precluded further active service, Broke served as a naval gunnery specialist in the Royal Navy and was promoted to Rear Admiral of the red in July 1830. Cathy explained that despite his serious wounds Admiral Sir Philip Broke lived on until his death on 2 January 1841 at the age of 64 and is buried at Nacton church.

Whilst the war of 1812 is largely unknown in this country, Cathy explained that the victory of Broke and the Shannon was important in the wider history as this unexpected defeat of the Chesapeake had neutralised the American navy and America had failed to invade Canada which had later become an independent nation. Although Broke and the battle are not generally well known locally there are a number of pubs, roads and areas in Ipswich and the surrounding area which recognise him, the battle and the ships involved.

Cathy was thanked for attending to provide such an interesting talk about a little known local maritime hero.

Lorna Fraser

Membership No: 0170