

Highlights guide

The National Archives has opened up and made accessible over 1,000 Royal Navy Medical Officer Journals (ADM101 series), as part of an extensive cataloguing project supported by the Wellcome Trust.

ADM 101 consists of journals and diaries compiled by Royal Navy Surgeons and Assistant Surgeons who served on HM ships, hospitals, naval brigades, shore parties and on emigrant and convict ships in the period 1793 to 1880.

The journals include a variety of colourful tales of 18th and 19th century ship life from drunken rum-related incidents, venereal disease, scurvy, shark bites, tarantulas to lightning strikes, gun fights, mutiny, arrests and court martial not to mention ship wrecks and even murder.

Bruno Pappalardo, Naval Records Specialist at The National Archives said:

“Medical officers serving in the Royal Navy were required to submit detailed records of the health and treatment of those under their care in the form of journals, which are probably the most significant collection of records for the study of health and medicine at sea for the nineteenth century”.

As a result of this extensive cataloguing work, the records can be easily searched by the name of the Medical Officer, the patient the ship or even by disease or ailment. The cataloguing also revealed some unexpected “bonus” material contained in the journals. For example, the presence of water colour illustrations, sketches, hand-drawn maps, charts showing details of the climate, details about the lay-out of the vessels and ideas about ventilation, and details of the countries visited and people encountered.

Themes from the records

Ship Life

- Drunken debauchery is a common theme throughout the journals notably one surgeon remarking “drunkenness nowadays in the Navy kills more men than the sword” and that with most diseases and accidents “you may trace grog as the principle cause of it” (**ADM101/125/3**). In one case a man performs animal impressions for rum (**ADM101/86/1**).
- There are accounts of gunfights, mutiny and court martials (**ADM101/38/2**), gales, ice storms (**ADM101/103/5**) and even a shipwreck (**ADM101/77/9**). Incidents of a more natural cause are also recorded such as people being struck and killed by lightning, a man bitten by a shark and one boat attacked by walrus.
- Superstitions and strange nautical customs feature for example when prisoners on one convict ship were locked down for three hours while the ship’s company and guard “amuse themselves in the usual ridiculous custom” of crossing the equator (**ADM101/23/2**).

Experimental treatments

- Treatment for Pneumonia included blood letting with one patient having 3.5 pints of blood let in 3 hours with the patient “rapidly proceeding to a fatal termination” (**ADM101/6/2**), diluted sulphuric is used as a gargle (**ADM101/91/4**), and fevers were treated with a tepid salt water bath “in each case making their fevers worse”

(ADM101/107/1). Everyone mentioned as being treated with the bath dies but in spite of this the surgeon remarks it has salutary effects.

- One surgeon hails the benefits of tobacco smoke on a man who had fallen overboard and nearly drowned **(ADM101/115/3)**. The man is admitted to hospital with pneumonia in a later journal.
- A treatment for a tarantula bite or scorpion sting includes pouring rum on the afflicted area **(ADM101/85/4)**.

Disease

- While the treatment of diseases was crude or in many instances barbaric, these records highlight the contribution these naval surgeons made to our understanding of medicine and health today.
- There are detailed descriptions of the living conditions on board the ships including cleanliness, hygiene and disease with one surgeon worrying that his ship the *Dido* was responsible for bringing and spreading the measles epidemic to Fiji which ended up killing nearly a third of the population **(ADM101/245)**.
- Venereal disease was a common occurrence on board. One surgeon conducts an experiment on a young woman with venereal disease, with both her keeper and an officer having “connexion” with her to see how gonorrhoea and syphilis are spread **(ADM101/103/2)**.
- Scurvy is also a common ailment found in many of the files.

Curiosities and discoveries

- A surgeon recounts the case of a 12 year old girl who vomited an 87 inch worm **(ADM101/57/8)** and in another journal a surgeon describes what is possibly the first recorded case of a hermaphrodite in the Royal Navy **(ADM101/97/5B)**.
- One discovery voyage is known as one of the last expeditions in the search for Sir John Franklin in the arctic seas **(ADM101/110/3)**.
- Another discovers that one charted island is “about 40 miles east and south from where it had previously been supposed to be” **(ADM101/103/5)**.
- The same journal also recounts the crew meeting members of an Inuit Tribe and also the discovery of igloos (where they leave gifts for when the owners return). They also ‘procure’ an Eskimo skull from a grave.

The selection of files available to view online

ADM 101/1/9 - Medical journal of the *Albion*, male convict ship from 9 May to 14 September 1828 by Thomas Logan, surgeon and superintendent, during which time the ship has been employed in transporting convicts to New South Wales

The surgeon comments on the convicts reactions to viewing Australia for the first time. “The sight of Australia gives them the liveliest satisfaction. They evince an animated eagerness to behold their future country. Everyone’s looks betrays a lively interest. Fun and frolic arise out of the common hilarity: a game is played in which all concur. It is an imitation of running the gauntlet, he who has passed this ordeal, has acquired the “Freedom of Australia”. This exaltation of the animal spirits, the stimulus of sympathy reflected from so many faces; the bustle and crowding of the gazers on the land of New South Wales – elevate the tone of feeling among the prisoners and give a salutary concussion to their moral nature. The hospital visit declared the beneficial operation of this moral stimulation. The horde of trifling cases which were used daily to assail us, has

disappeared. They seem to have left off getting sick, or are become indifferent about being cured!"

ADM 101/23/3 - Medical and surgical journal of the male convict ship *Eliza*, from 19 June to 26 November 1822 by William Rae, surgeon and superintendent, during which time the said ship was employed in a voyage to New South Wales

In this journal, the Surgeon recounts how some of the convicts perform the play Rob Roy. "Last evening several of the prisoners (amateurs) in testimony of the gratitude which they felt for the liberty they had hitherto enjoyed and the various indulgences which had been granted to them since their embarkation entertained the officers with the performance of the play Rob Roy."

He also recalls how the keys to the prison are lost when the second mate falls overboard, "Last night about 8pm the deck being wet and slippery from rain, Mr R Bowen, the second mate of the ship with the prison keys, slipped and fell overboard [and lost at sea]. This morning the prison locks were picked on account of the keys having been lost." The Surgeon suggests that ships should have spare sets of keys.

ADM 101/38/2 - Journal of occurrences on board the *John Barry* male convict ship for 16 May to 10 November 1821 by Daniel McNamara, Surgeon and Superintendent, during a voyage to New South Wales

The surgeon notes of various incidents of quarrels, unrest, imprisonment and mutiny throughout the voyage. Early on in the voyage a guard is punished for disobedience and is subsequently flogged. Others smuggle liquor aboard and get drunk whilst on sentry duty, threatening to fire at the prisoners. A role reversal is found with the prisoners described as "well behaved and pay great attention" but the guards are "irregular in their conduct and almost mutinous". A convict notifies the surgeon of a plot to seize the ship involving some of the convicts and some of the guard. The Surgeon does not believe the convicts would be involved but does believe that the guard would, and expresses a very low opinion of the guard. One of the guards is later arrested following some reports connecting him with the planned mutiny and some unwary language used by his wife.

Later in the journal the surgeon describes hearing a musket shot and finds some prisoners wounded severely. In the Surgeon's opinion, their wounds indicate they were lying in their beds. A guard arrested following the incident.

ADM 101/57/8 - Medical and surgical journal of His Majesty's convict transport ship the *Ocean* for 21 June 1817 to 16 June 1818 by George Fairfowl, Surgeon and Superintendent, during which time the said transport was employed in a passage to New South Wales

This journal recounts a murder confession. 21 year old convict James Barnes is taken ill on 2 October 1817. After first complaining of a headache he was seized by a fit during the night, followed by delirium. Surgeon Fairfowl concluded that the disease was 'more of the mind than of the body' and must relate to a previously undisclosed crime. Barnes was told that his illness was very serious and that he should make his peace with God and man. The following day he confessed to murdering a woman, "he sent me yesterday a very coherent letter confessing that he had committed a murder upon a woman in Scotland two years ago and that his mind could not rest for it". He signed a confession and was sent home by order of the Commander in Chief at St Helena.

ADM101/76/9 - Medical and Surgical journal of the *Elizabeth* Ship, for 4 May to 21 July 1825 by P Power, Surgeon and Superintendent, during which time the said ship was employed in conveying Irish emigrant settlers from Cork to Quebec

The Surgeon describes the unusual case of Ellen McCarthy, aged 12 whose symptoms include “disease or hurt, pain in the bottom of her belly, increased on pressure, abdomen hard and swollen, picks her nose, starts in her sleep, bowels constipated, pyrexia, tongue foul, pulse quick, skin hot, great thirst”. She is first put on the sick list on 15 June 1825, at sea. Her mother brought the Surgeon a ‘lumbricus’ [worm], 87 inches long, which the child had vomited. Later she has another “motion” and two more worms are found, one 13 ½ inches long, the other 7 inches.

ADM 101/77/8 - Medical and surgical journal of the *John Barry* emigrant Ship, for 22 April to 25 July 1825 by William Burnie, Surgeon and Superintendent, during which time the said ship was employed in conveying emigrants from Cork to Quebec *John Barry* carrying Irish emigrants from Cork to Upper Canada, 1825

The surgeon accompanies the emigrants all the way to their final destination, travelling in river boats and steamers up river in Canada. The emigrants are extremely poor families who suffer illness because the food on board is too rich for them, many of the children die on the way. There is a lot of prejudice against the Irish expressed in these journals. Among the cases featured, one folio describes the illness of the various members of the Regan family where the parents both died but the three children recovered.

ADM 101/77/9 - Medical and surgical journal of the emigrant ship *Juliana* for 17 October 1838 to 21 May 1839 by Henry Kelsall, Surgeon, during which time the said ship was employed in the conveying of emigrants from Gravesend towards New South Wales

The *Juliana* sailed from the Downs and met with a series of storms. The emigrants were very “terrified, sea sick and unable to take care of their children”. The deck leaked and the bedding was wet and the circumstances meant that cleanliness was not observed as it should have been. Because the Surgeon Superintendent had no power to enforce his regulations regarding cleanliness, it was very difficult to clean the decks berths and bedding. It was necessary to drive the emigrants on to deck by closing the hatches and smoking them out with fumes of sulphur or cayenne pepper.

On entering the tropics, remittent fever became prevalent among the emigrants, generally starting with heaviness and pain in the head and pain down the spine. On approaching the Tropic of Capricorn the weather became cooler and the disease subsided but there were so many convalescents the surgeon requested the ship call at the Cape of Good Hope. In doing so, however “the ship was run on shore at Green Point near Cape Town, where she afterwards became a total wreck” on 19 January. The emigrants were safely landed and moved to barracks.

ADM101/85/4 Her majesty’s ship *Arab* 27 March 1799 – 27 March 1800 passage to the West Indies

This journal includes mention of a number of men poisoned by a “mangereen apple” occasioning severe vomiting and violent convulsions. The stomach is corroded by the poison of the fruit and the “effect of this poison is never properly iradicated”.

There is also an incident where three men were killed by lightning at sea, “Our main top mast was splintered to pieces, every man on deck knocked down, many of whom cried out their leg or arm were broke from the violence of the shock; the bolt broke, as it left the main mast, which acted as it’s conductor, and issued a most sulphureous stench accompanied with three sharp cracks, the most astonishing of all, was that a man who

was up at the main top gallant mast head, remained untouched". The men died but the surgeon notes "we kept them till evening, to satisfy the credulity and superstition of sailors, when their bodies were committed to the deep." This journal also records the case of a man poisoned by the sting of a scorpion or centipede "occasioning the most violent symptoms and almost a complete paralysis", the surgeon notes that this could be prevented by "application of rum to the part" if treated early. There is also detail of a man bitten by a tarantula. The surgeon notes "I applied some rum and oil to the part" and then "it is wonderfull what a curious affect, this poison has on the human frame tho not so virulent as that of the scorpion or centipede but the malancholy stage is extremely obdurate, yet if you can once gain their attention, you may observe a very evident change".

ADM 101/86/1 - Journal of His Majesty's Ship *Arethusa* by Mr Thomas Simpson, Surgeon, between 15 May 1805 and 13 June 1806 while the ship was in Europe and the West Indies

This journal features a range of unusual behaviour, sicknesses and disease including a man who performs animal impressions "for grog", a man who fell from the top sail breaking an arm and both his legs, a man concussed from falling from his hammock after being 'severely ducked, shaved and afterwards rinsed' by the crew, and a number of men ill with dysentery from drinking bad water. The surgeon puts this down to the lack of a contract to supply water from a pure source, water is obtained from a stream which passes by cottages and is contaminated by them.

This journal also includes the Surgeon's account of his mistreatment by the Captain. He was arrested on 31 April without warning after dinner in the Captain's cabin and held and tried by Court Martial on 'a charge of as odious, inconsistent and uncandid a nature as ever was exhibited against any man in any Court'. He was acquitted of charge but subsequently persecuted by the Captain.

ADM 101/97/5B - Medical journals of HMS *Dryad*

This journal features the perhaps first ever Royal Navy case of a hermaphrodite. Samuel Tapper, aged 18, is taken ill at Poros. The surgeon was frequently requested to observe this patient (who was an excellent swimmer) bathe with the other boys. He stated that "Tapper's breasts so perfectly resemble those of a young woman of 18 or 19 that even the male genitals which are also perfect, do not fully remove the impression that the spectator is not looking on a female". The surgeon and his assistant examined the patient and found the breasts to "not at all resembling the fat mammille of boys". The journal also contains the case of a boatswain's mate who "on the act of playing tricks upon one of his messmates, his penis was slit with a knife at about an inch wounding the glans to a line in depth". Another case recounts how a man was knifed in the scalp after he was attacked by "two Italian ruffians".

ADM 101/103/5 - Medical and surgical journal by William Leyson, Assistant Surgeon of His Majesty's *Griper* on a voyage of discovery in the Arctic and West Passage commencing 10 June 1824 and ending 8 November in the same year

The surgeon recounts how the ship was visited by about 18 Inuit people who wished to trade clothing, skins and spears for European goods, particularly old knives, needles and beads. There is a detailed description of their appearance. Later in the voyage a herd of walrus was sighted and the boats lowered in an attempt to kill some using muskets and harpoon. There is a description of the excitement and 'sport' of the hunt. Some accounts of walrus attacking boats are related, in one case a walrus was beaten off with a bayonet and by the gunner, firing his musket into the walrus' face.

During the “voyage of discovery” the surgeon recounts how the Captain and Assistant Surveyor found that Southampton Island was about 40 miles east and south from where it had previously been supposed to be. Some of the men go on shore to take observations and sample of flora and fauna. They see various ducks, footprints of a man, a dog and a bear, and the remains of igloos. They find abandoned winter habitations but thought the people would return and left them some presents. The First Lieutenant brought a female ‘eskimaux’ head back, procured from a grave.

Later accounts from the diary include the *Griper* being nearly lost in gales and ice storms on more than one occasion. The Surgeon makes the point that “from the night of the thirty first of August to the twenty fourth of September, no man considered his life in safety, and during a great part of that time each considered his life in imminent peril, and that twice during that time everyone had given himself up for lost”.

ADM101/110/3 – Medical journal of HMS *North Star*, from 21 February 1852 to 19 August 1853 by Robert McCormick, Surgeon, during which time the ship was employed in the Arctic Seas

This journal belonged to surgeon Robert McCormick, this is the same McCormick who was on board the *Beagle* at the same time with Charles Darwin. This particular journal covers McCormick’s time aboard the HMS *North Star*, on the last expedition in search of Sir John Franklin that organised by the Admiralty. During this expedition McCormick volunteers to command the boat (the *Forlorn Hope*) expedition up the Wellington Channel in search of Franklin. The journal contains mention of many on board suffering from “snow blindings” which is “inflammation of the eyes due to intense light being reflected off the snow”. The surgeon notes “the symptoms were most intense clearly showing that the rays of the Sun are most hurtful when they do not fall in a perpendicular direction on the eye”.

ADM 101/115/3a - Medical journal of HMS *Princess Royal* for 7 February 1801 to 7 February 1802 by Ben Lara, Surgeon, during which time the said ship was employed in the Channel service

The surgeon recounts the medical benefits of tobacco smoke as he recounts the case of a man who had fallen overboard and been under water for 12 minutes. Brought on board with the appearance of a corpse, he was taken to the galley, where he was stripped and dried and put in a warm bed with bottles of hot water. Tobacco smoke was conveyed to his lungs through the tube of a common pipe. After a further 45 minutes the surgeon observed “an obscure palpitation of the heart”, the tobacco smoke was continued and after a further 10 minutes “he sighed faintly and closed his mouth”. Shortly afterwards a pulse was detected at the wrist and the tobacco smoke was discontinued. The treatment was hailed a success however in the next journal he is discharged to Haslar Hospital with pneumonia.

ADM101/245 Medical journal of Staff Surgeon Godfrey Goodman of the *Dido* from January to December 1875

In 1874 the *Dido* was present at the formal transfer of the Fiji Islands to the British flag. This journal discusses a measles epidemic which spread from Australia to the South Seas Islands, possibly spread by the *Dido* or by ships returning indentured labourers to their home islands. The epidemic killed nearly a third of the population of Fiji.