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Stephen Sandwell (1772-1801)
&
Sarah Mean/Sandwell/Woodward (1777-1842)

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based on original research by Christopher Sandwell

Stephen Sandwell was born in Margate, Kent on 17 April 1772 and baptized at St John's Church on 3 May. His father was another Stephen Sandwell who was recorded as a "mariner" in the St John's parish register at the time of his marriage to Sarah Spickett on 12 October 1764. After the younger Stephen turned twenty, he married Sarah Mean, a local girl, on 6 November 1792, and they probably lived in the Love Lane area of Margate, at the time one of the town's "slum" districts, where many impoverished herring fishermen lived. (The next generation of Margate Sandwells were living at Spellars Court, off Love Lane, in the 1840's and '50s.) In 1793 Sarah was born and three years later in 1796 a son, who they named Stephen, also came along. Unfortunately, their daughter Sarah would die young in 1806, but Stephen would live on until 1875 and become a mariner, probably an inshore fisherman.

On 1 November 1797, the Stephen who married Sarah Mean joined the Royal Navy, although it's uncertain whether he volunteered or was impressed. Estimates suggest that for the period up to 1802 about half the men in the Royal Navy were pressed. When men willingly joined the navy, it was usually after a long winter when they had not eaten fresh food for months, and one has to wonder whether Stephen

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would have left his wife with a four-year-old daughter and one-year-old son presumably to fend for themselves. As a twenty-five-year-old, most likely with a few years experience on the water due to his mariner father, Stephen would have been a prime candidate for the press gang, who could have forcibly taken him to a rendezvous in the Downs anchorage and then via tender to a receiving ship at Spithead. Stephen ended up serving on HMS *Bellona*, and it's interesting to note that in October 1797, a month before he joined the navy, this 74-gun warship had just returned to Portsmouth from the West Indies to begin a refit. He could have gone aboard this vessel right away. But even if he had joined the navy voluntarily, he would have still been held a virtual slave on board any ship he served on due to the high likelihood of his deserting.

As a two-deck, third-rate ship of the line, HMS *Bellona* normally carried a crew of around 600 and such men-of-war were a mainstay of the British battlefleet in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Stephen ultimately would become a quarterdeck gunner on this ship and was paid 15 shillings and 6 pence a month. If Stephen was on board the *Bellona* by 1799, which is highly likely, it would probably have been when Captain Thomas Thompson was appointed to command the ship in spring of that year, joining the fleet under Lord Bridport, off Brest, France.

On April 25 1799 a fleet of twenty-five ships of the line under Vice-Admiral Eustache Bruix escaped from the port of Brest in foggy weather and soon shook off the only watching British frigate on station. After sailing south around the Iberian Peninsula and entering the Mediterranean, the French fleet were followed by seventeen Spanish ships of the line which sailed from Cadiz on 12 May, under the command of his excellency M. General Massaredo. Deceived into thinking the force was destined for Ireland -- a deception deliberately attempted by the planting of despatches for Ireland aboard a *chasse-maree* captured in mid-Channel by the lugger *Black Joke* -- Lord Bridport, who was blockading Brest from afar, took his British fleet to lay guard off Cape Clear, while having the opportunity only to send out warnings and reinforcements, including the 74-gun HMS *Bellona*, to Lord St Vincent off Cadiz.

However, as St Vincent's health deteriorated in the Mediterranean, an increasing load fell on Lord Keith, who was eventually to succeed him as commander-in-chief in 1800. Keith, who had been blockading Cadiz, demanded immediate reinforcement. Nelson dispatched ten ships of the line to Minorca but declined to leave Palermo

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himself, arguing his presence would deter a French naval thrust towards Naples and Egypt. He thereupon collected the forces available to him, which constituted by the end of May sixteen ships of the line, abandoning the blockade of Malta in the process.

In the summer of 1799, Lord Keith's abilities were put to the test by the concentration of Bruix's fleet with the Spanish fleet in an attempt to relieve the French forces in Corfu, Malta, and especially Bonaparte in Egypt. Hampered by the need to defend Minorca, and facing a nearly point-blank refusal from Nelson to follow orders, Keith was much criticized for not bringing Bruix to action. The blockade of Cadiz was abandoned and although closely pursued, the enemy squadrons were never encountered.

On 30 May 1799 HMS *Bellona* and four other ships joined St Vincent's fleet which was waiting about thirty-five miles off Cape San Sebastian, Spain, in an attempt to intercept the Spanish fleet in case it joined up with the French fleet in Toulon. The British fleet was now augmented to twenty-one ships of the line.

Lord Keith's sole positive success was the capture of the whole of Rear-Admiral Perree's squadron – the frigates *Junon*, *Alceste* and *Courageuse* and brigs *Salamine* and *Alerte*, fugitives from the Levant blockade. This incident took place on 19 June, when the *Bellona*, as part of the advanced or leading division, passed around the eastern side of the island of Minorca and steered to the north. About 20 leagues to the south of Cape Sicie, the *Centaur*, *Captain* and *Bellona* (74s), plus the *Emerald* and *Santa-Teresa* (frigates), captured Perree's five French ships, thirty-three days from Jaffa and bound for Toulon.

However, the allies ultimately lost their nerve and retreated from the Mediterranean before even attempting any of their aims, so Keith's dispositions prevented a serious strategic reverse. By 12 July 1799 the combined French and Spanish fleet under Bruix was at anchor in Cadiz harbour and on 21 July it finally got under way for France.

Bruix had achieved little in the Mediterranean, but he did manage to join with the Spanish fleets in Carthagen and at Cadiz which returned with Bruix into Brest on 13 August 1799. By this time, British fleet commanders had been forced to accept that a fleet refuge further west than Spithead was necessary for the blockade of Brest, and Torbay became more frequently used. Furthermore, with a fleet under Bruix amounting

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to fifty-nine warships, including forty of the line, British commanders realized the necessity to keep their squadrons as far as possible together. The blockade of Brest was thereafter maintained by a British fleet usually consisting of at least thirty ships of the line, including the *Bellona*, which St Vincent in 1800 insisted on keeping on station, even in winter.

Due to the inadequacy of Lord Bridport's long-distance blockade of Brest, he was finally replaced by St Vincent in April 1800. The legendary – and much-feared – discipline of the Mediterranean Fleet was slowly introduced in the Channel. Ships spent more time at sea, resupplied on station and wherever possible refitted and repaired without recourse to a dockyard. Captains were forbidden to spend nights ashore during the fleet's rare visits to Torbay, and defaulters were punished by serving a stint in the Inshore Squadron off the dreaded Black Rocks – known to naval officers as “Siberia.” But with the hardship came a new aggressiveness and *esprit de corps*. The French fleet was not to be allowed the training and experience it so desperately needed, even in the waters immediately outside Brest. It had the further advantage of cutting off more of the port's naval supplies, which because of the poor road system of the Brittany peninsula was mainly brought in by coastal shipping.

St Vincent's concept of close blockade, as applied off Cadiz, meant keeping big ships close in to the French coast in all weathers. It was immensely wearing on both ships and men, and since Bruix's abortive cruise to the Mediterranean, Brest contained not only the most powerful French fleet, but also that of its Spanish ally. This made it doubly important to keep the port well bottled up, but required the proximity of more of the Channel Fleet than had been the case earlier in the war.

On 3 March 1801 the *Bellona*, *London*, *Ganges*, *Eugenie* and *Harpy* sailed from Portsmouth to join Admiral Sir Hyde Parker in the Yarmouth Roads. The fleet that then left the Yarmouth Roads for the Baltic on the morning of 12 March comprised seventeen battleships, four frigates, three brigs, nine gun brigs, three sloops, seven bombships and their tenders, two luggers, a fireship and a cutter. When it had rounded the Skaw (Jutland) and the last stragglers had caught up, Sir Hyde Parker commanded a fleet of twenty ships-of-the-line and almost twice that many smaller vessels. This British fleet anchored at the entrance to the Sound on 21 March 1801. The Battle of Copenhagen was only days away.

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By now Stephen Sandwell was a quarterdeck gunner and probably part of a carronade crew, since this lighter gun was employed almost exclusively on the ship's upper works. Also known as a "smasher," the lethal carronade was a short-barreled gun which could fire a spherical ball of solid iron, but could also fire grape shot, for use against personnel, and bar and chain shot against the enemy's rigging. The gunner's crew were able seamen considered to be the best seamen in the ship. Their duty was to attend to the main yard and rigging, to the guns and whatever related to them. They were allowed one shilling more per month than any other seamen.

The Battle of Copenhagen was a naval engagement which saw a British fleet under the command of Admiral Sir Hyde Parker fight and strategically defeat a Danish-Norwegian fleet anchored just off Copenhagen on 2 April 1801. Vice-Admiral Horatio Nelson led the main attack. He famously disobeyed Parker's order to withdraw, destroying many of the Danish and Norwegian ships before a truce was agreed. Copenhagen is often considered to be Nelson's hardest fought battle, surpassing even the heavy fighting at Trafalgar.

First the *Agamemnon*, a 64-gun ship in which, years before, Nelson had made his name, failed to weather the tip of the Middle Ground shoal and anchored out of range of the enemy. Then the *Bellona*, due to the ignorance of her pilot, kept too far to the starboard and ran aground. So did the *Russell*, 74 guns, which was following her closely – her bowsprit almost overlapping the *Bellona*'s taffrail. Both the *Bellona* and *Russell* could use their guns, though not to much effect and were in range of Danish shot. Throughout the action, the *Bellona* was only able to fire at relatively long range through the gaps between the British ships. Her position, however, allowed her to engage both the *Provesteenen* and *Wagrien*, raking the latter's bows. Although she was less affected by return fire, because of her distance, her casualty list was to be a long one. Her captain, Sir Thomas Thompson, had his left leg shot off early in the action while standing on the third gun on the quarterdeck. Two of the *Bellona*'s guns blew up, killing their crews, seriously wounding scores of men, and bringing down deck beams. The guns were old and may have been badly cast, exploding when they overheated, or in the excitement of the battle they may have been loaded with two cartridges, or three shot.

The *Bellona* had nine seamen and two marines killed, and forty-eight seamen, ten marines and five soldiers wounded. Stephen Sandwell was one of the nine seamen

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who died that day. The *Bellona* and *Russell* floated off the Middle Ground shoal on the morning of 3 April and made north, out of the King's Deep.

For relatives of seamen killed in battle, official letters was rarely sent to inform them of the fate of their husbands, sons, brothers or fathers, and the published lists of casualties seldom provided names, only numbers. Even these lists were not universally available, as local newspapers varied greatly in their coverage. For some people, it was possible to get information directly from the ships just returned from the battle, but the majority received the news from letters sent by the sailors who had taken part in the battle – either survivors, or men writing on behalf of friends.

A look in the Trinity House Petitions, which are appeals for help from mariners who had fallen on hard times, reveals that as a result of his death an appeal was made on behalf of his widow to Trinity House. The result was that the Trinity Brethren awarded Sarah Sandwell a two guinea (two pounds and ten pence) bounty and a pension of four shillings and six pence a month.

The day after her husband Stephen's death at the Battle of Copenhagen on 2 April 1801, Sarah allegedly gave birth to a son called Jethro Daniel Sandwell (1801-1836) who was baptized at St John the Baptist, Margate on 12 August 1801. However, for Jethro Daniel to have been born on 3 April 1801, he would have had to have been conceived around June 1800. Stephen's wife Sarah would have never known when the *Bellona* was coming into Torbay, Plymouth or even Portsmouth for supplies or repairs, so it's highly unlikely they got together in 1800 or even in any of the earlier years after he joined the navy in 1797.

Seamen who were married would have had little chance to see their families during the long period of the war against France. Some wives made heroic efforts to travel to Portsmouth or Plymouth for a chance to see their husbands, but all too often the men were refused shore leave in case they deserted. Often when ships were anchored off Spithead, no boats were allowed to go ashore unless absolutely necessary and those that went were to have a sufficient number of officers to prevent the men from running.

Did Sarah say Jethro Daniel was born on the day after Stephen died at Copenhagen to assuage some of the guilt she perhaps felt over the fact that her dead husband wasn't his real father? If so, who was Jethro Daniel's true biological father?

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On 20 April 1802, perhaps following the traditional one-year mourning period, Sarah Sandwell married a Daniel Woodward, who had been born in 1774 at St Peter's, Thanet. However, I believe that Sarah was impregnated by this man during her first husband Stephen's absence in 1800, and that Daniel probably became her protector at some point. Also, Jethro Sandwell's second given name just happens to be "Daniel" which I think is a vital clue to Daniel Woodward being his real father.

Daniel and Sarah Woodward had nine more children together:

Mary (1802-?) baptized St John's, Margate, Kent, just over one month after her parents were married.

Daniel (1804-1846) baptized Birchington, Kent. Died London, Kent. Buried St Peter's, Thanet.

Sarah (1806-1828) baptized Birchington, Kent. Died London, Kent. Buried St Peter's, Thanet.

Thomas (1808-1893) baptized Birchington, Kent.

James (1811-1894) baptized St Lawrence, Kent.

Martha (1814-1892) bapt. St Lawrence, Kent. Married Richard Gifford Minter 1843

William (1817-1881) baptized St Lawrence, Kent.

Jane (1819-?) baptized St Lawrence, Kent. Married Stephen Bax 1838

George (1821-?) baptized St Lawrence, Kent.

(Sarah Woodward had been born a few months after her half-sister Sarah Sandwell had died at the age of thirteen, which no doubt accounts for the given name being reused in her memory.)

Sarah Sandwell's second husband Daniel Woodward (1774-1823) was the brother of John Woodward (1769-1837), a local builder, who began the construction of Fort Paragon in 1830, which overlooks Margate's Winter Gardens and later became a hotel. John Woodward was a member of the local board and preached for over twenty years at the Love Lane Chapel. (Sarah Sandwell may well have met Daniel Woodward in the chapel if they were both members of his brother's congregation.) John Woodward had a son, also called John (1824-1897), who left Margate in 1846, the year his cousin Daniel died in London, and became a successful builder outside the

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city. In the 1881 census, he's recorded as living in Croydon, Surrey, and a "Master builder employing 150 men." After he retired, John Woodward junior returned to Margate and purchased thirty-three acres of land in 1895, which he donated to the town for the laying out of Dane Park the following year.

Sarah's new husband Daniel Woodward (1774-1823) was a gardener and when he died in London at the age of 49, his body was returned to Margate for burial at St Peter's, a sure sign of a well-to-do family. When his son Daniel junior (1804-1846), a carpenter, died in London as well at the age of 42 over twenty years later, it appears the junior Daniel's 22-year-old cousin, John Woodward junior, may have traveled to the city to take over his work or business.

In the 1841 census, Sarah Woodward (1777-1842) is recorded as being a "cow keeper" living in Newington, St Lawrence, Ramsgate, along with two of her children, Martha and William, who are both entered on the form as "market gardeners." After she died the following year in London at the age of 65 in London, probably in a hospital paid for by the wealthier Woodwards, Sarah's body, like her long-deceased husband's, was returned to Margate for burial at St Peter's.

THE END