

Kent Academic Repository

Full text document (pdf)

Citation for published version

Connelly, Mark L. (2004) Battleships and British Society, 1920-1960. *International Journal of Naval History*, 3 (2/3). ISSN 1932-6556.

DOI

Link to record in KAR

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/7748/>

Document Version

UNSPECIFIED

Copyright & reuse

Content in the Kent Academic Repository is made available for research purposes. Unless otherwise stated all content is protected by copyright and in the absence of an open licence (eg Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher, author or other copyright holder.

Versions of research

The version in the Kent Academic Repository may differ from the final published version.

Users are advised to check <http://kar.kent.ac.uk> for the status of the paper. **Users should always cite the published version of record.**

Enquiries

For any further enquiries regarding the licence status of this document, please contact:

researchsupport@kent.ac.uk

If you believe this document infringes copyright then please contact the KAR admin team with the take-down information provided at <http://kar.kent.ac.uk/contact.html>

International Journal of Naval History

August 2004/ December 2004

Volume 3 Numbers 2/3

Battleships and British Society, 1920-1960^[1]

Mark Connelly

University of Kent, United Kingdom

This article will explore the image of the Royal Navy's battleships in British society between 1920 and 1960. Although much of what follows might be said to apply to Royal Navy as a whole, particularly 'glamorous' vessels such as aircraft carriers, cruisers and destroyers, it is the contention of this piece that the Royal Navy's battleships by virtue of their sheer size and power captured the public imagination more than any other type of warship. The study of the image of the battleship in popular culture provides a significant insight into the atmosphere of Britain helping to reveal and highlight attitudes not just towards the Royal Navy, but also towards politics, the empire and Britain's role in the world. Christopher M. Bell's recent work has revealed that the Admiralty had an ambiguous attitude towards propaganda and publicity in the inter-war years. Disdainful of what it regarded as cheap appeals to the popular imagination, at the same time the Admiralty realised that it had to maintain the profile of the Navy. As foreign navies expanded abroad and the RAF tirelessly highlighted its benefits at home, the Admiralty rather reluctantly became involved in publicity activities.^[2] Ralph Harrington's has recently the great importance of HMS *Hood* to the British people showing that it was far more than a utilitarian and functional piece of equipment.^[3] This article seeks to expand Harrington's thesis by looking at British battleships in general, and place them within the wider framework of British society between 1920 and 1960, the year in which the last British battleship, *Vanguard*, was scrapped.^[4] The article will examine the political and military arguments behind British naval policy in general, and the attitude towards battleships in particular. From this point, it will go on to the main

theme of the piece: an exploration of the image of battleships in British culture, and how they were regarded as symbols of local, national and imperial pride and security.

Although many inter-war criticisms of battleships were proven by events during the Second World War, it will be shown that they continued to exert an important grip on the national imagination. Finally, the piece will turn to the case of Britain's last battleship, HMS *Vanguard*, and show how it came to symbolise the passing of an era.

At the conclusion of the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 the Royal Navy seemed invincible. The Treaty of Versailles demanded the end of Germany's ambitions for naval supremacy. Britain appeared to be the undisputed master of the world's seas. However, the reality was somewhat different. A new threat had arisen which came not so much from former enemies as former allies. Both the United States and Japan had entered the naval arena; both had built strong, modern navies and both had ambitions to erode Britain's influence over the world.

In addition, the Great War had had an enormously debilitating effect on Britain's economy and trading position. By concentrating on supplying its armed forces during four years of war, Britain had let its trading position slip. Markets it once dominated turned to other buyers and suppliers. Financing the war had also forced a huge burden onto the British economy. In 1914, Britain's national debt was £650 million; by 1919 it stood at £7,345 million, of which £1,365 million was owed to the USA. ^[5]

The British government sought to make huge cuts in expenditure and defence expenditure appeared the most promising. Arguing that a war against a first class foe was highly unlikely for at least ten years, in 1919 the British government decided to adjust defence spending accordingly, and this principle dominated defence expenditure until 1932. In 1918-19, the naval budget was £344 million; by 1921 it had been cut to £60 million. ^[6]

Fortunately for British governments, such short-term thinking was given a gloss of respectability by connecting it to high-minded principles. Pacifist principles and lofty moral tones infused the thinking of Ramsay Macdonald and Stanley Baldwin in the twenties and thirties. They were convinced that no sane Briton would ever support great armaments programmes again, and they spent a good deal of time telling their colleagues

within their respective parties that disarmament and a commitment to international arbitration were the only safe foreign and defence policies to follow.

Intimately connected with this supposed rejection of militarism was the concept of enlightened world government. The Paris Peace Conference had created a 'new organisation, the League of Nations, designed to arbitrate in international disputes and maintain world order through the collective will of civilised governments. Never again would nations blunder into war unthinkingly and without having first been ordered to consider their positions by the League. However, many naval analysts looked fearfully at the US and Japanese navies and urged a reconsideration of the position. The position of the USA was extremely ambiguous for it had decided not to join the League and was therefore unaffected by commitments to collective security. Once again, the British government was saved from an assessment of such arguments by the call of international co-operation. In the twenties British governments sought to make a virtue out of the harsh realities of the new situation.

Invited to attend a naval conference in Washington, the British government eagerly accepted and then often acted against the advice of the Admiralty. The Washington Naval Treaty of 1922 set strict ratios on Britain, the USA and Japan in terms of capital ships (5:5:3 respectively, a move that humiliated Japan). An American proposal for a ten-year capital ship building 'holiday' was also accepted. Admiral Beatty, commander of the British battlecruiser fleet at the Battle of Jutland in 1916, and by this time First Sea Lord, argued that such move would be highly dangerous to Britain as it would degrade building facilities and would mean that Britain's already antiquated fleet would decay still further. However, the Treaty allowed Britain to complete two new battleships and so Beatty's objections were stifled.

As the ten-year break agreed at Washington approached its end in 1931, the Admiralty was keen to begin construction on new ships, but in order to keep costs to a minimum was equally keen that no ship should exceed 28,500 tons. For the next four years successive British governments vacillated over the question of naval rebuilding. Placing faith in disarmament did not please the Admiralty especially as the French and Italians refused to sign the Washington treaty's successor signed in London in 1930. This left the Royal Navy severely constrained while the French and Italians built huge ships

such as the 35,000 giants *Richelieu*, *Littorio* and *Vittorio Veneto*. At the same time Germany re-entered the scene as a major naval player with the 32,000-ton ships *Gneisenau* and *Scharnhorst*, which was then trumped by the massive 42,000-ton *Bismarck* launched in 1936. Unable and unwilling to compete with this activity the British attempted to retrieve the situation by signing a naval agreement with Germany in 1935. Germany agreed to limit its navy to thirty-five per cent of the Royal Navy with no submarines and accepted the Washington tonnage limitations. The *Bismarck*, which was already under construction, was largely ignored as a *fait accompli*.

By 1934 it was becoming clear to the Admiralty that Britain was being left behind, but Britain was bound by the London treaty and could not move before it expired in December 1936. There were also plans for an immediate successor conference and treaty, which would aim to contain naval armaments. The contradiction between hope and reality was truly astonishing.

The Admiralty had, however, been quietly forging ahead with their new plans. In 1933 the Controller of the Navy had submitted a memo to the Assistant Chief of Naval Staff laying down the chief considerations in terms of new construction. He urged three new fast capital ships, capable of dealing with any foreign capital ship either in production or proposed. That the ships would probably be in commission by 1941 and they should have a twenty-year life expectancy. That in the first ten years of their lives, the ships should expect to cope with 15-16-inch guns, with a possibility of much larger calibre guns. Significantly, he also predicted that air attack would become a much more distinct threat, that extreme range gun fire needed to be considered, as did the alternative of close range attack by torpedo.^[7] It ended on the usual note that the economy needed to be considered in construction. These considerations were drawn up into full proposals by June 1933

International developments led to further refinements in planning, expressed in a meeting on 20 September 1935 when the Sea Lords concluded that the new ships should be armed with nine 15-inch guns and have a speed of not less than 29 knots. These ships were designed with European navies in mind, in the full knowledge that they would be inferior to Japanese and US ships. But a month later, the American government appeared to offer a significant concession when it stated that it was prepared to accept 14-inch guns

on 35,000 ton ships, provided the Japanese could be persuaded to agree. This placed the Admiralty in an uncomfortable position, if the naval talks were successful, plans for 15-inch gun ships were redundant, but if not they needed to press ahead quickly as guns and gun mountings would need to be ordered before the end of the year if the ships were to be in commission by 1940. On October 10 the Admiralty dealt with this situation by proposing 14-inch guns in 35,000-ton ships capable of 28 knots. This decision was accepted by the cabinet in November and became the basis for the re-negotiation of the London treaty.

In a concession designed to make the treaty look more attractive to the Japanese building ratios were scrapped and much greater emphasis was placed instead on size and calibre limitations. Britain, France and the USA duly ratified the treaty in March 1936, though Italy withheld its agreement until December 1938 and Japan refused to sign. Japan was given until April 1937 to agree, if it had not signed by then the calibre was to revert to 16-inches. Britain then negotiated similar treaties with Russia and Germany, both ratified in November 1937, though in both cases the calibre agreed to was 16-inch.

This gave the Navy the chance to move ahead on the ship designs submitted on 12 November 1935, and in November 1937 the five ships of the *King George V* class were finally laid down with the 14-inch gun as the standard heavy armament. But not one of the ships would be ready by 1939, even with the acceleration of the programme. Such was the demand on wartime labour and dockyard capacity that work had to be suspended on two of the ships for three and six months.^[8]

Naval historians have debated whether the Royal Navy (and indeed any other navy) should have built battleships at all. The rise of air power, many have argued, sealed the fate of the battleship. Large and cumbersome, the battleship was a dinosaur by the twenties and thirties and fatally vulnerable to air attack according to this school of interpretation. The debate has been characterised as one that split navies between a younger, dynamic group who argued the case of the supremacy of aviation against the older men who remained wedded to their reactionary ideas of all-big-gun ships engaging each other in blue water. Geoffrey Till has argued that such interpretations of the Royal Navy are crude caricatures. He sees the Navy as one in which technological innovation was being discussed the whole time and informed doctrinal debate. According to Till, air

power was taken seriously, but as an unproven force it could not be allowed to dominate thinking and planning entirely.^[9]

For over a century the British people had been subjected to naval propaganda glorifying the role of the senior service. In 1894 the Navy League came into existence and promoted the Navy with religious zeal. By 1914 it had over 120,000 members and extolled the virtues of a great fleet to the nation. When the revolutionary HMS *Dreadnought* was launched in 1906, it became a symbol on which to concentrate hearts and minds: the great battleship became the obsession of the British people. A naval building race with Germany was powered on in part by the press's careful management of public hysteria for Dreadnoughts, a hysteria the Liberal government could not dare to ignore.^[10]

During the Great War, the Royal Navy's battleships had played an important but largely unglamorous role.^[11] However, the lack of good copy did not mean they were forgotten. The press and British people retained a keen interest in British battleships throughout the twenties and thirties. The twists and turns of policy and developments in naval strategy were not, therefore, the preserve of government, diplomatic and naval circles, they were presented to the British public via the media. Battleships were evidence of national virility, and industrial skill and prowess.^[12] Knowledge of the Royal Navy, and of battleships in particular, may not have been very sophisticated, but there was certainly a good deal of interest in them, their role and design.

When naval cuts started to become public knowledge during 1920, *The Times* quickly condemned the moves as lacking true vision and clarity. In November an editorial bemoaned Britain's lack of a modern battle fleet, particularly in terms of battleships. It emphasized that both Japan and the USA would soon out-build Britain and that such short-sighted parsimony would allow Britain to fall behind. 'Defence by sea is still the very condition of the existence of the British empire; and the debt of the world to the pacific influence of the British Navy is wholly beyond calculation.'^[13] However, the editorial also questioned whether battleships were in fact the future of the Navy. This was the continuation of a debate opened in the pages of *The Times* by Admiral Sir Percy Scott who had claimed the superiority of the torpedo and the submarine over the battleship.^[14] In December, Admiral R.H.S. Bacon put the other side of the argument, explaining the

role of the modern battleship as a destroyer of enemy forces: 'Battleships... exist to impose their will in certain waters', but with a team of destroyers as defensive and protective forces. He advanced the argument that as long as other nations built battleships, Britain would need them, and given its worldwide role, would always need the biggest and the best. Further, considering Britain's international position, he wondered what would happen if a non-European threat emerged and added: 'Whether this country does or does not require battleships in the future depends rather on international relations and geographical considerations than on the disabilities of the vessels themselves.' Drawing on the experience of the last war, he argued that there was no conclusive proof to show that the battleship was dead and had been replaced by the destroyer and the submarine. Finally, he raised a prophetic point telling his audience that if Britain lost its pool of skilled maritime labour for want of work now it would be hard to re-establish it in an emergency situation.^[15] Thus Admiral Bacon echoed the feelings of Beatty.

Pathé Gazette newsreel asked 'Are Battleships Obsolete?', but didn't really question them as it showed shots of the Atlantic Fleet making an 'imposing sight' leaving for a spring cruise led by the battleships HMSs *Barham* and *Valiant*.^[16] In another newsreel it reassured its viewers that 'whilst critics theorise and experts prophesy revolutionary changes in battleship constructions, the Navy just "gets on with the job"'.^[17]

Popular literature on the Navy maintained the significance and importance of battleships. Sir George Aston's, *The Navy of To-day*, published in 1927 and prefaced by Lord Jellicoe, commander of the Grand Fleet between 1914 and 1916 and then First Sea Lord, used sporting analogies to belittle the threat of air power:

Writing as an onlooker, with no experience of hitting aeroplanes in the air, but plenty of experience in missing driven partridges, the opinion I have formed is that fire would probably be effective against the more deadly torpedo-planes, but ineffective against the speedy and spectacular little fighters, from which, however, battleships have little to fear if the personnel on deck have some light cover.^[18]

Aston clearly believed that aircraft could not inflict fatal wounds on battleships, but were capable of causing damage. ‘On the whole,’ he concluded, ‘air-power can be described as an aid to sea-power, never likely to be a substitute for it.’^[19] Clarence Winchester’s *The King’s Navy*, published in 1936 in conjunction with the Navy Week’s Committee (see below), contained an article by Hector C. Bywater, naval and shipping correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*. For Bywater, air power had a role, but it was as yet unproven and the battleship remained ‘the veritable backbone of naval power.’^[20]

Children’s literature certainly did not discount the value of the battleship. Rupert Chesterton’s *The Captain of the Phantom* recounted the adventures of the Royal Navy’s newest battleship, HMS *Phantom*, a ship graced with the firepower of ‘a super-Dreadnought and [the ability to] run like a destroyer’.^[21] Chesterton’s young readers were told of the *Phantom*’s superb engineering and construction, the incredible roar of its main armament, and its excellent sea-going qualities. The healthy and kindly influence of Britain expressed through its great Navy is also stressed for the *Phantom* helps a friendly Latin-American state to suppress an evil gang of revolutionaries and bandits. When the *Phantom* arrives in the capital of ‘Hondia’, the local people swamp the harbour awed by this display of British power:

As the *Phantom* drew close to the harbour, those on her decks could see that the city was wonderfully beflagged and simply alive with people. The piers were black with vast crowds, craft of all kinds, packed with passengers, cruised up and down; and the masts of the anchored warships were a blaze of bunting. Simultaneously the bells of every church in the city – and there were scores of them – commenced to peal, and the throngs of people that crowded every point of vantage started to cheer.^[22]

However, not all were so sanguine about the value of battleships. The issue of naval disarmament continued the debate over the utility and role of battleships. A Topical Budget newsreel asked ‘can the war-weary world find lasting peace?’ during the Washington negotiations.^[23] Others saw this question in a very different manner. At the

conclusion of the London negotiations in 1930, a correspondent to *The Times* bemoaned Britain's pusillanimous signing of the naval treaty. He complained that it tied Britain's hands until 1936 and yet made no concession to the fact that naval defence was paramount to the nation's security. Quoting Jellicoe, he wrote it was 'one instance more of the British Empire making concessions which no other nation is asked to make on the naval side, the British Empire being the one nation above all others which is absolutely dependent on its sea communications.'^[24] By contrast, *Pathé Gazette*, following the government line as newsreel companies so often did, welcomed a 'battleship building "holiday" for five years' on the signing of the London Treaty.^[25]

While praising the long and glorious history of the Royal Navy, a children's book on the Navy of 1932 took an equally conformist line. Singularly lacking the Nelson touch, a rare quality in children's books on the Navy, and despite the title, *The Splendid Book of the Navy*, the book defended the Washington Treaty on rather dull economic terms:

in these days, when the cost of a battleship of great size runs to several millions of pounds, the tax-payer will think it all to the good that no country shall be allowed to go on building at its own sweet will – or by the depth of its pocket. It is a good thing for us, too, since we have a big National Debt and, the United States could easily out build us if she desired because of her immense wealth.^[26]

There is an atmosphere of introspection here, totally at odds with the self-confident image of the Royal Navy.

When negotiations for naval disarmament were re-opened in 1935, British Movietone asked whether 'powers can prevent armaments race?'^[27] While in 1923, *Topical Budget* assured its viewers of Britain's good intentions, stating: 'Britain keeps her word... To honour Washington Naval Treaty HMS *Neptune* is scrapped at Blyth-on-Tyne.'^[28]

On the whole, however, battleships were regarded as immensely important not simply for national defence and pride, but also as symbols of local prestige and economic health. Given the steep decline in Britain's industrial position in the inter-war years, and

the deep depression of heavy industries in particular, naval contracts were vital to the vibrancy of shipbuilding communities. Of course, the biggest and best contracts were for battleships. When the government announced the decision to build 'two super-Hoods' in 1921, MPs in maritime engineering constituencies welcomed it and all announced their fervent hope that their particular constituents would feel the benefit.^[29] A year later the contracts for the *Rodney* and the *Nelson* were announced. The *Rodney* was to be built on the Mersey and *Nelson* on the Tyne, both cities were overjoyed, as was Sheffield whose steel works would go into full production, but there was intense disappointment on Clydeside at being overlooked.^[30] Such vast projects meant economic repercussions far beyond the immediate builder and suppliers. Battleship contracts were also regarded as good for the imperial economy. The *Liverpool Daily News* announced that Cammell Laird's contract to build the *Prince of Wales* would mean the 'spending of £5,500,000 across the Empire.'^[31] The lead was to come from Australia, nickel from Canada, timber from Borneo and Burma. Returning to Britain, the gun-mountings would be made at Barrow, the armour plating in Sheffield and Glasgow, the hull and propelling equipment in Birkenhead and the whole put together on the Mersey. The loving and painstaking attention to detail with which the *Liverpool Daily News* recorded these facts reveals the intense importance of the battleship to the community.^[32] On the launching of HMS *King George V* at the Armstrong works on the Tyne in 1939, Admiral Sir Roger Backhouse 'stunned [the crowd] into the silence' by announcing that another battleship order was to be placed on Tyneside. 'I realize well what this means in the way of work and in continuity of employment', he said, 'and I am therefore very happy to give you this news'.^[33] An inset in the *Newcastle Journal* explained 'What New Battleship Order Means': the spending of £12 million locally, 70 per cent of which was to go in wages, 58 per cent of the entire work was to be completed in local shipyards and engine works - at least 6,000 men were to be employed on the hull and machinery alone. In addition, much of the work dedicated to the manufacturing of equipment, fittings and components would also be undertaken in the North East.^[34]

Launching ceremonies were enormously significant for local pride.^[35] They served the important purpose of linking the local to the national and imperial; they also acted as a focus for cross-class consensus: the great and the good never missed the

opportunity of heaping praise on the workforce. The Princess Royal launched HMS *Prince of Wales* and told the vast crowd that she was glad to be back in the same yard in which she had launched HMS *Rodney* in 1925. She regarded the two ships as her ‘godchildren’, and thus cemented the London-based Royal Family to the City of Liverpool. Further linking the capital to the provinces, she passed on the express thanks of the Admiralty to ‘this famous shipyard with its long and close association with the Royal Navy’. Geoffrey Shakespeare, the local MP, paid tribute to the Trades Unions for their co-operation with the management, and added:

The workmen were looking upon their work as a sort of livelihood, but were working with a greater pride because they realised that they were building not merely great ships, but something more, they were building the might of Britain, the home of freedom, beneath the haven of whose roof they could shelter safely.^[36]

Such comments reflected the vision held by so many members of the conservative British establishment. For such people Britain was a happy breed of free-living men, held together on their island by tight-knit bonds.

A similar spirit permeated the launch of the *King George V*. King George VI and Queen Elizabeth travelled to Tyneside for the ceremony, and as the local newspaper carefully pointed out, the King lingered much longer than his schedule allowed at the Vickers-Armstrong factory where he spoke to workers about the manufacture of the gun-mountings. The editorial of the *Newcastle Journal* noted on the launch: ‘Yesterday they [the King and Queen] saw what Tyneside can do in the matter of national defence, saw the great part its workers are playing in essential armament work, and we are happy to know that Tyneside will be entrusted with still more.’^[37]

The general public’s main chance to see battleships close-up was via the newsreels, Navy Weeks and regattas. As Bell has shown, the Admiralty retained a rather ambiguous view of cinema, particularly of feature-length commercial productions that might slip into melodrama, but had a slightly higher regard for the newsreels.^[38] Cinemagoers – of which there were vast numbers throughout the twenties, thirties and

forties – witnessed the Navy glorified at every turn in the newsreels, and battleships were always the stars.^[39] ‘The World’s Greatest Battleship – Ours!’ was how Topical Budget greeted the launching of HMS *Nelson*.^[40] When Pathé Gazette covered the visit of the Dominion premiers to the Fleet in 1926, audiences saw the picture rock violently followed by this caption:

The Fleet of England is Her All-in-All (Tennyson). Dominion Premiers see awe-inspiring display of Britain’s sea power. The great 15” guns of *Hood*, *Repulse* and *Renown* open fire. Notice that jar? It’s not the operator or cameraman’s fault – it is the repercussion which lifted our cameraman and his machine on HMS *Hood* every time she fired! ‘Rule Britannia’.^[41]

Fleet exercises were covered and exciting shots were shown, as in 1930 when *Nelson* and *Rodney* were seen zig-zagging and raising their guns.^[42] Similarly, the coverage of the 1934 exercises was dominated by shots of *Queen Elizabeth* firing her guns.^[43]

Naturally enough, a huge Spithead Review marked King George V’s Silver Jubilee in 1935. It provided *The Times* with the opportunity to indulge in some purple prose concerning Britain’s mystical relationship with the sea and the Royal Navy, the twin founts of all its greatness. The affection in which Britain held its Navy was stressed in the editorial, identifying it as an affection based upon the proximity of the Navy to the island. Whereas the British army had fought mainly expeditionary wars, the Navy ‘has fought and patrolled directly on our own threshold’. And of all the ships on display it was the great battleships *Rodney* and *Nelson* that most clearly reflected Britain’s proud naval heritage: ‘The two giants, *Nelson* and *Rodney*, are so well known of themselves that we almost think of the names primarily as of ships and not of the great Admirals who saved England.’ But, as always, the pacific nature of Britain’s naval strength was stressed, reminding all that the Navy did not stand for aggression:

The review yesterday was of a Fleet which no nation in the world feels to be a menace. Rather is it recognised to be a stabilizing factor for the peace of the world, and, moreover, the absolute minimum that our Imperial needs warrant. For

such a Navy, no less than the efficiency of the ships, officers and men, there is reason for a double pride.^[44]

Navy Weeks served to increase the British public's reverence for the Senior Service, and its battleships were always the most popular attraction. Navy Week had been established in 1926 as a way of bringing the reality of the fleet home to the British people.^[45] It was no doubt partly a tactical move by the Admiralty and Navy League to maintain a high profile for the service and thus lessen the likelihood of further economies. They proved to be highly successful propaganda campaigns. Attendances rose throughout the thirties and reveal remarkably little sign of being diminished by a supposed revulsion against all things military. In 1931, a period often identified as the height of British pacifism, Portsmouth alone had 25,000 visitors on one day.^[46] As the day in question was an ordinary working day (Monday), the figure seems all the more remarkable.^[47] Three years later, 155,098 people attended the Navy Week at its centres of Chatham, Portsmouth and Plymouth. By 1937 the figures stood at 400,000.^[48] Revealing the importance of battleships to these displays, *The Times* reminded its readers that a visit to the Chatham Week always required a bit more planning as the battleships couldn't get close in. This meant spectators interested in seeing them had to travel to Sheerness.^[49] 'The world's biggest battleship [HMS Rodney] which cost £7,500,000 to build', was always a big attraction: 'As last year, the battleship *Rodney*, her big guns pointing skyward, was the most popular vessel on view. Hosts of visitors – who would have benefited by experience in steeplejacking – climbed the steel ladders and explored the electrically lit corridors in the heart of the ship.'^[50]

Schoolboys could complete their knowledge of battleships and the history of the Royal Navy in general by collecting cigarette cards. It has been possible to identify twenty sets dedicated to the Navy, including three sets specifically on British battleships, produced between 1920 and 1940.^[51] When HMS *Renown* carried the Prince of Wales on his empire tours of 1920, 1921, 1925, and the Duke and Duchess of York on their tours in 1926 and 1927, it was mentioned in passing almost continually by the press, such references show that battleships were ubiquitous: they were part of the wallpaper of British life.

Showing the flag, as the battleships did on the royal tours, was an important way of impressing British power on the world. Battleships of the Royal Navy drew just as many admiring guests in the empire and in other countries as they did at home. HMS *Hood* had the greatest reputation. As many of its historians have pointed out, *Hood* had a special ability to inspire admiration which lay in the beauty of its appearance.^[52] In the words of Edwin Hoyt, '*Hood* was known throughout the world as the greatest and finest sea-fighting instrument afloat.'^[53] *Hood* achieved this fame by its many courtesy visits. Kept company by the *Repulse*, *Hood* went on a world tour in 1923-4, stopping in South Africa, Zanzibar, Ceylon, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific Islands, San Francisco, the Panama Canal, Jamaica, Canada and Newfoundland. A Melbourne girl remembered the arrival of the ships: 'Every road and pathway was thick, and many families were making a day of it, taking out all the children and hampers of food and bottles of beer. The Bay was dotted with sailing boats.'^[54] The tour was described as 'the most successful cruise by a squadron of warships in the history of sea-power.'^[55]

Like all such cruises, it was a carefully stage-managed public relations exercise and the crews were under strict instructions to maintain an image of dignity and professionalism. On arrival in Sweden, the Captain threw a party to mark the King of Sweden's birthday; it showed 'northern friends that Britain had come out of the war with her naval reputation undiminished.'^[56] An Hawaiian Boy Scout chosen to represent his islands at a gathering in Copenhagen who had missed his steamer passage was given free accommodation in the boys' mess-deck and taken to his destination. A shrewd move that earned favourable press coverage in the USA; and when the ship put in to San Francisco, the mayor, awe-struck by the *Hood*, said, 'we surrender our city unto you. We capitulate.'^[57]

Slightly closer to home, the *Rodney* caused equal excitement when it arrived at Portrush in Ulster. A former officer recalled:

From Belfast in the south to Derry in the west, the men, women and children of this appreciative province descended upon us. They rolled into Portrush by ordinary trains and special trains, by car, bus, and bicycle. They thronged the jetty in gay, excited crowds.^[58]

The ship even managed to make a £70 profit from the sale souvenirs.^[59]

But the most interesting and revealing of the connections between British battleships and the wider world is the case of HMS *Malaya*. The people of the Federated Malay States financed the building of the ship; it was their contribution towards the defence of the empire. Originally, it had been the brainchild of Sultan Idris of Perak. His energy and ambition provided the initial dynamic behind the project. By instigating and encouraging the idea the Sultan revealed that he was a loyal subject of the British Empire and ensured the authorities would smile on his rule. It also gave him further kudos among his own people. HMS *Malaya* was therefore far more than an instrument of war; it was a symbol of the intelligence and beneficence inherent in the ruling partnerships that made up the British Empire. As the formal address by the Federal Council to the Captain said:

[the ship] will enhance in their eyes [the people of the Federated Malay States] the wisdom, and foresight of their rulers whose cordial and unanimous support enabled Sultan Idris's proposals to be carried to fruition and it will strengthen their devotion to His Majesty the King Emperor who personifies for us all both the unity and strength of the British Empire and the splendid traditions of the Imperial Navy of which he is the exalted chief.^[60]

The battleship was also proof to the world of Malaya's political and economic maturity. It revealed Malaya to be a full partner in the global concerns of the British Empire: 'It is the symbol of a feeling of individual partnership on equal terms amongst all who enjoy the protection of British rule.'^[61] A battleship was therefore the symbol of nationhood and provided a young, artificially constructed nation with a heritage. This message was certainly maintained by the *Malaya Leader*, and its whole-hearted commitment to the project must have played a part in stoking the intense sense of interest which increased as the colony awaited the arrival of the new ship. 'The expectations, anticipations, and excitement of weeks culminated to-day, when Malaya's battleship was sighted shortly after 8 am... it will long remain a memorable day in the annals of the

Malay Peninsula.^[62] Battleships obviously provided global reach and influence in more ways than one.

When war broke out in Europe in 1939 and in the Far East in 1941, the battleships had to prove whether they could perform the task of defending British interests. Historians have debated the worth of battleships in the Second World War with a good deal of passion. The case against battleships and those who foresaw their use in great fleet actions stresses the misunderstanding and under-rating of air power and aircraft carriers in the inter-war period. Thus, the carrier actions of the conflict are identified as the truly decisive and important moments – Pearl Harbor, the Mariana ‘Turkey-Shoot’, Taranto and the loss of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*.^[63] However, others have produced a much more complex and subtle interpretation. According to the naval historians Alan Raven and John Roberts, the job of the battleship was to destroy the enemy's capital ships, and in pre-war planning most navies saw aviation as the aerial cavalry, keeping the enemy in play and slowing it down until the heavy units arrived with their superior gunnery. In the Mediterranean where it was possible for battleship fleets to come face to face, the extreme reluctance of the Italian Navy to come to battle made aircraft carrier strikes the best possible way to slow down the enemy, or force it into action. They argue that in many instances the much-vaunted superiority of the aircraft carrier was only equal to that of the battleship, not superior to it citing the action against the *Scharnhorst* as evidence: it occurred at night and was thus beyond the capability of aircraft. The sinking of the *Bismarck* was greatly assisted by aircraft, but could probably have been achieved by battleships alone. Thus the aircraft, especially when tied to the aircraft carrier, was not the absolute superior of the battleship.^[64]

Interpreting those who were circumspect about air power before the war as hopelessly reactionary ignores the very real problems of maritime aviation, which served to undermine its threat. Most bombs were far too crude to cause much damage to a battleship; torpedoes were a far greater danger, as proved at Pearl Harbor, Taranto, and in the sinkings of the *Bismarck*, *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales*. Those who supported the utility of the battleship reasonably argued that all the new developments demanded was that battleships moved with adequate air cover, not that they were obsolete. Stating that battleships already deployed destroyer screens for their protection and assistance, such

observers simply demanded the addition of aircraft carriers to the destroyer element in order to meet the new threat. Therefore air power expressed by aircraft carriers was not the clear-cut replacement of the battleship that should have been recognised by any right-minded admiral or student of naval power. According to historians such as Raven and Roberts the real lesson of the war was much more subtle and mixed. The conflict did not so much prove that battleships were obsolete as that aircraft carriers could act independently. Simply by proving parity with battleships in certain theatres aircraft carriers did enough to displace them. Carrier fleets clashed without ever seeing each other or even needing indirect firepower from a battleship. This situation held sway in the vast oceans of the Pacific, but it was different in the European theatre. Neither Germany nor Italy possessed an aircraft carrier and the threat to British warships in the Mediterranean and Atlantic came from land-based aircraft. In addition, the carriers of the Navy in 1939 were neither numerous enough nor equipped with effective enough aircraft to make them the cutting edge of the Royal Navy.^[65]

Raven and Roberts conclude by arguing that between 1939 and 1945 a combination of circumstances undermined the battleship, none of which were clear in 1939. Navies kept battleships because there was always the risk that 'if a battleship had managed to come within gun range of a fleet without them, it could in theory destroy that fleet and any operation it was involved in'.^[66] During the conflict aspects of this debate would surface in British society. However, for much of the time Royal Navy battleships were presented in precisely the way the British public expected: as decisive weapons crewed by intensely professional sailors.

Battleships were also very reassuring and their seemingly invulnerable qualities made them good metaphors for the nation. 'Steady, powerful and confident, like one of her own battleships, Britain rises from the sea', said the Ealing Studios' 1940 documentary film, *Mastery of the Sea*.^[67] Self-contained, and self-reliant, battleships encapsulated what the British thought of themselves. Verity, a documentary production company, made *Battleship* for the Ministry of Information in 1942. The film looked at life onboard *King George V* and stressed the elements of self-reliance and teamwork – precisely the qualities demanded by the people's war. Emphasis was laid on the diversity of skills and occupations found onboard the ship from bakers and cooks to printers and

photographers. A dramatic finale shows the battleship ploughing through heavy seas as the commentary states: 'As she sails forth at the head of the fleet, there may come at any moment that encounter with the enemy which will bring forth the finest and best of everyman onboard. That spirit which will uphold the traditions and reputation associated with her name, HMS *King George V*.'^[68] A similar spirit infused British Gaumont's *Commissioning a Battleship*, a short documentary on the commissioning of HMS *Howe*. In keeping with pre-war traditions great stress was laid on the skill and dedication of the workforce that had built the ship. *Howe* is presented as a tremendously powerful weapon, 'Her total firepower is like a minor earthquake', and she represents '45,000 tons of ocean might.'^[69] British Gaumont newsreel was equally reassuring and cocky when it described the debut of the *Prince of Wales* on convoy work: 'We are proud to show you now the first pictures of another of Britain's giant new battleships... Oh, what a surprise for the Fuhrer'.^[70] And, as in the twenties and thirties, battleships continued to be the darling of naval gatherings and the guarantee of Britain's pledge of protection to her far-flung empire. Wartime naval weeks were not quite as spectacular as the pre-war events, but they still raised public awareness. The government used these events to raise money by asking communities to sponsor a warship. In November 1941 Liverpool was absolutely determined to adopt its home-built addition to the fleet, the *Prince of Wales*. The cost of adopting the battleship was not inconsiderable, for a figure of £10 million was set. Amazingly, the citizens and businesses of Liverpool reached the sum of £14.5 million beating off the nearest rival of Glasgow which raised £13.5 million.^[71] At the same time, HMS *Prince of Wales* was making its way towards Singapore to act, in Churchill's words, as 'a decisive deterrent' against Japanese ambitions.^[72]

Large crowds welcomed the *Prince of Wales* when she arrived at Cape Town in November 1941 accompanied by the *Repulse*. An estimated 600 cars whisked the crew away for receptions, parties and sightseeing tours. It was an extraordinary act of hospitality and a reflection of the awe in which battleships were still held. The next stop was Ceylon, and then it was on to the great naval base at Singapore. As at Cape Town, the locals turned out in numbers to witness the arrival of the beautiful ship. The *Singapore Free Press* echoed the feeling that battleships were the supreme weapon of war and therefore the best guard against attack:

It is big news not only for Singapore and Malaya but for the whole of the democratic countries bordering on the Pacific; it is bad news for Japan which may begin to see the shattering of her hopes for an unopposed naval advance to the south.^[73]

The Times announced the arrival of the newly constituted Eastern Fleet at Singapore, and referred to it as a 'formidable force'. Although supposedly constrained by security from mentioning the names of all the ships detached, it was possible to name the *Prince of Wales* as chief among them. In fact there was very little attempt to keep the arrival secret. Foreign journalists were allowed onboard the *Prince of Wales* and were lectured on the cutting-edge technology incorporated into the ship's construction. This advertising of the ship's presence goes some way towards confirming the suspicions of Martin Middlebrook and Patrick Mahoney, who have studied the loss of the two ships, that the leak was a deliberate attempt to warn off Japan. *The Times* stated that 'It was the news for which Europeans and Asians alike had been waiting.'^[74]

Even more confident of the battleship-effect was Major Fielding Eliot, a military correspondent, whose syndicated column appeared in a variety of newspapers including the London *Daily Telegraph* and the *Malaya Tribune*. According to Eliot, the new arrivals would keep the Japanese navy from venturing into the South China Sea. 'In fact, the arrival of some British battleships at Singapore would render the Japanese naval problem in the Pacific quite hopeless.' Turning to Japanese naval aviation he made a fatal blunder, claiming it was the weakest branch of the imperial navy and would never be able to cope with the attrition of war. He was clearly ignorant of Japan's 1941 output of 5,088 military aircraft.^[75] Just over a week later Japanese aircraft sunk both the *Repulse* and the *Prince of Wales*.

However, the successes of British battleships were presented as proof of British naval supremacy. When the British landed an expeditionary force in Norway in April 1940, Pathé Gazette showed its viewers dramatic shots of the shore bombardment led by the battleship HMS *Warspite*, and the commentator noted, 'you can see the camera shake as our own ship fires her broadside'.^[76] This is what the public expected from the Navy

and battleships in particular. The action at Cape Matapan against the Italian fleet was covered in an equally exciting manner, and once again battleships were given pride of place in the reportage. For Pathé Gazette it was a chance to show the glory of the British fleet while delivering a jibe about Mussolini: ‘Now with pride we offer you a glimpse of the British men of war who humbled the fat Fascist pride on his own doorstep, Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, and the ships *Warspite*, *Valiant*, *Barham*’.^[77] British Gaumont showed the three battleships at anchor and stated: ‘These are the 15-inch shells – the type that shattered a brand-new cruiser in one salvo.’^[78] *The Times* also emphasised the heavy shelling the ships had meted out to the Italians referring to ‘the terrific broadsides from the British battleships *Warspite*, *Valiant* and *Barham*’.^[79] The tremendous blast of battleship salvos was a continual obsession. The veteran children’s writer Percy Westerman, famous for his action-packed adventures based on life in the Navy and merchant marine, published his new novel, *Fighting for Freedom*, in 1941. Revolving around the figure of a young midshipman, John Cloche, the action takes place on HMS *Tremendous*, a vintage battleship modernised in the thirties, and obviously modelled on the *Nelson* and *Rodney*. Westerman describes the huge scale of the ship: ‘*Tremendous* could not be called graceful, but she looked what she was: the floating embodiment of Britain’s sea-power.’^[80] But it is only when Cloche experiences his first broadside that he truly understands the might of the ship:

Suddenly the battleship shook and shuddered. John’s first impression was that she had been hit, either by a large shell or by a torpedo. He had never heard a salvo fire from four fifteen-inch guns. He had heard it now all right, and he was thankful that, like those of the gun’s crew, his ears had been plugged with wax cones.^[81]

The events that caused most celebration were, of course, the sinking of other battleships, which turned out to be a relatively rare event. When the *Scharnhorst* was sunk, Pathé Gazette rose to the drama of the occasion. The newsreel opened with a silhouette of the *Duke of York* at sea, the commentator then stated: ‘It is fitting that we open this... pictorial account of the great Naval action with the huge bulk of the British

Home Fleet Flagship *Duke of York* framed in the Arctic darkness in which she brought the *Scharnhorst* to her doom.’ It then went on to emphasise the ‘shattering broadsides’ delivered by the battleship.^[82]

Battleships came back into the news in June 1944 when they supported the Normandy landings. Along with most other newspapers, *The Times* paid tribute to those ‘household names’ *Ramillies*, *Rodney*, *King George V* and *Warspite*. In the same issue a further report noted ‘Famous Ships Engaged’ and that:

In this war no action would seem complete without the *Warspite*. She was at the second action at Narvik in 1940 before returning to the Mediterranean to become the flagship of Sir Andrew Cunningham; she was in the battles of Calabria and Cape Matapan, and in the fleet that covered the withdrawal from Greece. Much later she supported the Italian landings and was one of the ships whose fire restored the position at Salerno. The *Rodney* was one of the two ships who sank the *Bismarck*, and she too, with her sister ship the *Nelson*, was in the Sicilian operations.^[83]

Over the next few weeks *The Times* reported on the activities of the *Nelson* and the *Ramillies*, as both continued to engage shore batteries.^[84]

However, the record of British battleships in the Second World War did not give the British press, people or government constant excitement and rejoicing. Battleship losses were the cause of much emotion and debate. Most shattering was the loss of HMS *Hood* in May 1941. As has been noted, *Hood* was the magical medallion of the British fleet, and its loss was felt deeply. ‘The destruction of the battle-cruiser *Hood* is a heavy calamity’, remarked a mournful editorial in *The Times*. ‘With her 42,000 tons displacement she was the largest and most powerful warship afloat... the loss of this mighty unit makes an acknowledged gap in a fighting line that, especially since the defection of our French ally, has had to be stretched round the globe to the utmost limit of its elasticity.’^[85] Luckily, revenge was extracted very soon afterwards for the *Hood*’s victor, *Bismarck*, was itself sunk following a dramatic chase across the Atlantic. This element allowed newspaper editors to comfort their readers with the thought of a swift

retribution. 'When the *Hood* blew up, the Navy set its teeth and went all out for vengeance. Now the account is paid.' The *News Chronicle* editorial went on to explain that Hitler's strategic loss was far greater than Britain's. Having fewer capital ships to risk, the loss of the *Bismarck* was a huge blow to German designs on Britain's naval supremacy.^[86] *The Times* spoke of 'How the *Hood* was avenged', and added that it was a 'Thrilling story of relentless pursuit... so ends another of those moments of thunderous drama that sometimes break in upon the grim, arduous, silent watch from which the Navy in war-time knows no respite.'^[87]

At the end of 1941 the British public was rocked by the loss of two more battleships, *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*. For the city of Liverpool it was as if a member of the family had been lost. The *Liverpool Daily News* referred to the city's shock, but tried to buck spirits by saying that the best form of remembrance was to buy more War Bonds for new ships.^[88] In Singapore grief mingled with fear over the future as the *Singapore Free Press* commented, 'Sometimes there is news which no one will believe.'^[89] *The Times* bluntly called it a 'catastrophe'.^[90] Home Intelligence was keen to measure the effect on public confidence and morale. At first the atmosphere appeared reassuring and it was reported that 'the regard in which the Royal Navy is held... has silenced any criticism of the strategy which resulted in their loss.'^[91] However, a few weeks later it was noted in the end-of-year summary that 'with the passage of time there is increased criticism of the naval authorities concerning the loss of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*.'^[92] This criticism became a lot louder in February 1942 when the German battleships *Scharnhorst*, *Gneisenau* and *Prinz Eugen* managed to sail home from their French bases through the Straits of Dover without serious attack in an incident that became known as the 'Channel Dash'.

In this atmosphere of anger and recrimination serious questions were asked about the direction of the sea war and the utility and significance of battleships. In the wake of the Channel Dash, the *Daily Telegraph* attempted to defend the role and relevance of the battleship. Francis McMurtie, the paper's naval correspondent, wrote a balanced and intelligent piece, but its tone inadvertently gave credence to the anti-battleship position. First, he dealt with the question of why no battleships were moved south to deal with the German ships by reminding his readers that the Navy's fifteen battleships were hard

pressed in many other areas. It was then stated that the sinking of the *Bismarck* required five battleships, which meant these ships dropping their other important duties. In addition, the constant maintenance battleships required in order to keep them working at full efficiency often meant that the strength was diluted still further as one or more moved into dock for repair and refit. Finally, Britain's decision to play by the Washington Treaty rules was quoted as a reason for the stresses and strains faced by the Navy. In attempting to defend the role and relevance of the battleship, the *Telegraph's* piece actually raised more questions than it answered.^[93]

When the *Hood* was sunk questions were asked in the House as to its fitness for battle and whether the ship had been strengthened in line with previous recommendations. Churchill conceded that the *Hood* not been fitted with extra armament. Major Fielding Eliot writing on the strategic implications of this defeat repeated the problems of the battlecruisers. '[T]he loss of the Hood is just another bit of evidence that the battle cruiser or the armoured cruiser is not fit to lie in the line of battle.'^[94]

A.V. Alexander, First Lord of the Admiralty, spoke at a Holborn Chamber of Commerce luncheon soon after the loss of *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*. Clearly aware of the disquiet the incident had aroused, he told his audience that the Navy was bound to suffer some big losses serving, as it did, in the most dangerous and exposed situations. He took on those who criticised the deployment of the ships by saying if they had not been sent another critic would certainly have condemned the inaction. Rounding on the air cover argument, he asked them to remember Greece, Crete and Dunkirk when the Navy managed large operations under constant aerial assault. This relied on a slanted reading of those events and hardly reflected the losses inflicted on the Navy during those operations.^[95]

The mixed record of battleships during the war diminished somewhat their hallowed aura. Aside from the odd spectacular incident, most of Britain's battleships were actually employed on convoy protection duties. While undoubtedly vital to the war effort, this rather dull and monotonous work did not make for very good publicity material, and new talismans such as the Lancaster bomber slowly eclipsed battleships. However, the nation was to have one last battleship sensation and in the form of the last of its class built for the Navy, HMS *Vanguard*.

Battleship construction was a much-debated policy during the war. In January and February 1940 the First Sea Lord argued for four battleships and two 15-inch battle-cruisers. Admirals Pound and Philips even argued that new battleships should be given priority over cruisers and carriers; both men justified their position by stating that such ships would play an important role in the anti-u-boat and anti-mine struggle. But given the immediacy of the problem facing Britain in the North Atlantic, the War Cabinet decided to abandon all long-term construction plans in March 1940.

In September 1940, the First Sea Lord and Phillips tried to revive the battleships programme. Both urged on the production of the *Howe* and the other battleship projects such as the long-awaited *Lion* and *Temeraire*, and that two more ships of this class, the *Thunderer* and the *Conqueror* should be laid down as soon as possible, and a new battleship, the *Vanguard*, should also be built. Pound believed this was even more important than a new carrier fleet. This plan was largely undermined by the overstretch of British industry and the requirements of other theatres, for the Controller of the Navy pointed out that the demand on armour would bring British tank production to a halt.

In early 1941, the Admiralty tried again with a scaled down list, the *Lion* and the *Temeraire*, two fleet carriers, ten cruisers and forty to fifty destroyers. But given the incredible pressure on armour plate manufacturing, the lack of shipyard space and skilled labour, the plan was no more realistic than the last. On 26 March 1941 Churchill shrewdly assessing the situation ordered that no vessel was to begin construction that could not be completed by the end of 1942.^[96] With the scrapping of the *Lion* and *Temeraire*, the only battleship project left under consideration was the *Vanguard*. The ship was eventually launched in December 1944 amid a strange mix of celebration and secrecy. Princess Elizabeth presided over the ceremony accompanied by Admiral Cunningham. Both the newspapers and the newsreels covered the occasion, and the BBC broadcast it on the Home Service, but none gave the ship's name or its exact specifications. Paramount newsreel told its viewers that 'Other warships of the same class maybe on the stocks, so even the name of this one is not made public.'^[97] However, Alexander did state that the ship was scheduled to take part in operations in the Far East, and then, clearly aware that debate over the future of battleships was underway, he added

that: 'This ship is a challenge to the minds of those people who have thought, and who still think, that the day of the battleship has ended.'^[98]

Vanguard was, in fact, completed too late to take part in the war; instead it rapidly took on a symbolical status at a time when Britain's naval and world power status was in clear decline. Battleships had had their last hurrah in the Second World War, and from 1945 until the scrapping of the *Vanguard* in 1960 it is obvious that these ships began to slip from public attention. The *Vanguard* was never the darling of the British people in the way that the mighty *Hood* had been. Establishing the profile of the ship in British popular culture is a lot more difficult compared with its predecessors. Fewer and fewer people regarded the battleship as the ultimate expression of Britain's influence, although it is clear that some found it hard to accept that battleships were anything other than the last word in seapower. The 1947 edition of Harry Goulding's *The Wonder Book of the Navy* is a good example and this highly traditional book on the Silent Service maintained that:

in spite of the dash and excitement associated with the work of destroyers and submarines, the mighty battleships will always retain their interest. As bankers would say, they are the 'gold reserve' of the Navy, and although many arguments have been advanced in favour of replacing them with submarines and small craft, no Navy has yet done so.^[99]

Remaining true to naval traditions, Goulding argued that a strong navy allowed Britain to raise its flag across the globe, outstretch the hand of British friendship and maintain the stability of international relations.^[100]

Lieutenant-Commander P.K. Kemp took a similar line in his 1953 book, *The Boy's Book of the Navy*. Kemp maintained that although battleship actions had been rare in the war and air power had made itself felt at sea, the battleship was still the vital protector of the vulnerable aircraft carrier. A whole chapter was then devoted to life onboard *Vanguard*, 'the most modern battleship in the world... the biggest ever built in this country', but he was forced to admit that, 'very probably she will be the last one to be built.'^[101]

Vanguard was given much prestige and publicity as the ship that took the Royal Family on its trip to South Africa in February 1947.^[102] When the royal party returned to Portsmouth in May, over half a million people turned out to see them and the new battleship.^[103] The ship also made guest appearances in films. Somewhat ironically, on both occasions it stood-in for German warships: along with the USS *Salem* it played the *Graf Spee* in Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *The Battle of the River Plate* (1957), and the *Bismarck* in Lewis Gilbert's *Sink the Bismarck* (1961).^[104] It was also presented as a crucial part of Britain's defence during the Cold War. The Admiralty was certainly very keen to promote the ship's excellent sea-handling capabilities supplying the newsreel companies with footage of the *Vanguard* retaining stability while pushing through 'very heavy seas'.^[105]

However, such celebrations of British power and influence were being undermined by reality. British war films might have presented a glorious vision of the nation at its best under the trials of conflict, but by the 1950s the hard evidence proved that Britain's heyday had passed and military technology was advancing apace. Airpower combined with the development of atomic weapons had fundamentally altered defence scenarios, and the day of the battleship had passed. In addition, tough decisions had to be taken on Britain's defence budgets. Desiring money to spend on atomic weapons programmes and to fund Britain's ambitious welfare programmes, successive British governments were forced to juggle with the nation's finances.^[106] The *Vanguard* was barely completed when questions were raised in Parliament about its role. On that occasion Alexander told the Committee of Supply that all battleship building had been scrapped but he declined to comment on future developments.^[107] Despite service in NATO fleets and impressive performances in many fleet exercises, by the mid-fifties it had become clear that there was, in fact, no further use for the *Vanguard* and the enormous cost of maintaining it could no longer be borne. On 12 September 1955 the First Sea Lord, J.P.L. Thomas, was forced to reverse his adamant decision of a year earlier that the *Vanguard* would not be relegated to the reserve.^[108] The four surviving battleships of the *King George V* class accompanied the *Vanguard* into mothballs.^[109]

Critics of the Navy's finances were now given the chance to express their deep misgivings about battleships. 'May all those who pay taxes or vote money to the Navy

resist the survival of the paralytic mastodon, the *Vanguard*', wrote Reginald Bennett MP. Implying that battleships had become outmoded during the Great War by referring to the Gallipoli expedition of 1915, he added: 'To convert her to post-Dardanelles weapons will be, by all accounts prohibitive, and she will swallow up men like a Moloch'.^[110] Over the next few years the debate swung to and fro. In February 1957 the First Lord, Lord Selkirk, hinted that the *Vanguard* should be kept in service partly thanks to the money saved by scrapping the *King George V* class. However, a month later a group of Labour MPs called for the immediate scrapping of all Britain's remaining battleships. In April the *Vanguard* survived the cuts demanded by the Defence White Paper which sealed the fate of the *King George V* class. It was a brief respite, however, for in August 1958 the Select Committee on Estimates stated that even in reserve the *Vanguard* cost £230,000 a year, her last refit had cost £720,000 and she had burned 6000 tons of oil in the last year. The Admiralty fought hard to retain the ship stressing its value as a training vessel, but to no avail.^[111]

Not surprisingly, the decision brought forth a wave of nostalgia and regret particularly among the communities that had built the ships. When HMS *Nelson* was scrapped in 1955, the Newcastle *Evening Chronicle* paid tribute to the great ship. Stressing its important role in the war, the article then went on to emphasise its deep connections with Newcastle, and concluded: 'For almost 30 years HMS *Nelson* had added fresh glory to the name of Tyneside shipbuilding. Her name and her record live on.'^[112] When the *Vanguard* was taken away for scrap, *The Times* commented 'her passing marks not only the end of a fine ship, but the end of an era.'^[113] However, at just this moment battleships had a new lease of life – in kit form. Airfix models gave young Britons the chance to relive and rebuild the legendary names of the Royal Navy. A 1961 Airfix catalogue carried a picture of HMS *Nelson* on its front-cover and announced: 'The mighty battleship HMS *Nelson* is only one of the famous warships you can make from Airfix Construction Kits. The wonderful model is packed with detail – rotating gun turrets, anti-aircraft guns, whalers and cutters, all made from a 134-part kit costing 7/-.'^[114] The series was also to include models of the *Hood*, *Warspite* and a set of German battleships.^[115] The battleship had passed into history symbolised by the 1960 edition of Kemp's *Boy's Book of the Navy*. Seven years earlier its original edition had dedicated a

whole chapter to the *Vanguard*, now both the *Vanguard* chapter and the battleships chapter were omitted in favour of new material.^[116]

Battleships played a significant role in British life throughout the period 1920-1960; they had an important profile in the local, national and imperial imagination. Between 1920 and 1939 there were debates as to the utility and function of battleships, but such arguments were largely insignificant compared with the enormous degree of faith and trust invested in them by people across the British world. Battleships were both a symbolic and factual guarantee of British and imperial jobs, products, values and freedoms. In the Second World War the reality and experience of modern naval conflict proved battleships to be of mixed value, however they still clung (just) to their mysterious aura. In the post-1945 world the benefits of maintaining these vessels in a rapidly changing world forced them into retirement and saw them gradually eclipsed in British popular culture; although the scrapping of the *Vanguard*, an almost forgotten relic of a by-gone world, resurrected some interest, regret and nostalgia. Ironically, considering their great power and size, battleships appeared to have a heart and soul and were therefore held in much great affection than the faceless, impersonal, indiscriminate terror inherent in the world's new standard of power, atomic and nuclear weapons.

^[1] I am extremely grateful to the members of the British Commission for Maritime History who made many helpful and interesting comments on my ideas when presented at BCMH seminar, King's College, 19 February 2004

^[2] Christopher M. Bell, *The Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy Between the Wars*, Macmillan, Basingstoke 2000, pp 162-179; for RAF publicity see K.R.M. Short, *The Lion Has Wings: Screening the propaganda of British air power*, Flicks Books, Trowbridge, 1998

^[3] Ralph Harrington, “‘The Mighty Hood’: Navy, Empire, War at Sea and the British National Imagination, 1920-60”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 38, No 2, 2003, pp 171-185

^[4] During the inter-war years British merchant shipping, particularly the ocean-lining companies, also had a high profile and sought to promote themselves as expressions of national identity and culture. See Richard Bateman, ‘Emblems of national greatness: the promotion of ocean liner travel on the North Atlantic in the inter-war years’ (Greenwich MA 2003)

^[5] Figures quoted in Correlli Barnett, *Engage the Enemy More Closely: the Royal Navy in the Second World War*, Harmondsworth 2000 edition, p 19

^[6] *Ibid*, pp 19-20

^[7] Alan Raven and John Roberts, *British Battleships of World War Two*, Arms and Armour Press, London 1976, pp 149-283

^[8] *Ibid*

^[9] Geoffrey Till, ‘Adopting the aircraft carrier: the British, American, and Japanese case studies’ in Williamson Murray and Alan R. Millett (eds), *Military Innovation in the interwar period*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, pp 192-226

^[10] See Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1987, p 324

[\[11\]](#) See Paul Halpern, *A Naval History of World War One*, Routledge, London 1994

[\[12\]](#) I am grateful to Professor Andrew Lambert for this point. See also Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, Allen Lane Penguin, Harmondsworth 1976, pp 287-9

[\[13\]](#) *The Times*, 29 November 1920

[\[14\]](#) *Ibid*, 23 November 1920

[\[15\]](#) *Ibid*, 23 December 1920

[\[16\]](#) *Pathé Gazette*, 20 January 1921

[\[17\]](#) *Ibid*, 22 January 1925

[\[18\]](#) George Aston, *The Navy of To-day*, Methuen, London 1927, p 35

[\[19\]](#) *Ibid*, p 96

[\[20\]](#) Clarence Winchester (ed), *The King's Navy*, no imprint, London 1936, p 7

[\[21\]](#) Rupert Chesterton, *The Captain of the Phantom*, Pearson, London 1921, p 65

[\[22\]](#) Ibid, pp 101-3

[\[23\]](#) Topical Budget, 17 November 1921

[\[24\]](#) *The Times*, 20 September 1930

[\[25\]](#) Pathé Gazette 24 April 1930. The newsreel companies, anxious not to fall foul of cinematographic censorship rules and many of them owned and run by men sympathetic to the cause of conformist and Conservative politics, were therefore distinctly anodyne on most political issues. See Nicholas Pronay and D.W. Spring (eds.), *Propaganda, Politics and Film, 1918-1945*, Macmillan, London 1982

[\[26\]](#) G. Gibbard Jackson, *The Splendid Book of the Navy*, Sampson, Low, Marston and Co, London 1932, p 52

[\[27\]](#) British Movietone, 9 December 1935

[\[28\]](#) Topical Budget, 15 January 1923

[\[29\]](#) *The Times*, 19 December 1921

[\[30\]](#) Ibid, 13 December 1921

[\[31\]](#) *Liverpool Daily News*, 2 January 1937

[\[32\]](#) Ibid

[\[33\]](#) *Newcastle Journal*, 22 February 1939. It is not clear what contract he was referring to. It might have been the projected *Lion* class which was never in fact undertaken.

[\[34\]](#) Ibid

[\[35\]](#) Jan Rueger has provided a fascinating study of the symbolism of pre-1914 Anglo-German naval launching ceremonies. See J.M. Ruger, 'Rituals of the Navy: public ceremonies in Britain and Germany, 1897-1914' (Cambridge DPhil 2003)

[\[36\]](#) *Liverpool Daily News*, 4 May 1939. Shakespeare also made an inadvertently prophetic statement. He compared the ship to Achilles saying just as he was dipped in a sacred river to ensure his invulnerability, Liverpool ships were slid into the Mersey. Like Achilles, the *Prince of Wales* was to prove vulnerable in one weak spot – the area around the screws.

[\[37\]](#) *Newcastle Journal*, 22 February 1939

[\[38\]](#) Bell, pp 167-173

[\[39\]](#) By 1939 nineteen million British people went to the cinema every week. This figure represented nearly half the population. See Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It!: the British Cinema in the Second World War*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1986, p 3

[\[40\]](#) Topical Budget, 7 September 1925

[\[41\]](#) Pathé Gazette, 4 November 1926

[\[42\]](#) British Movietone, 31 March 1930

[\[43\]](#) Ibid, 8 March 1934

[\[44\]](#) *The Times*, 17 July 1935

[\[45\]](#) Ibid, 13 August 1934

[\[46\]](#) For further discussion of British pacifism in this period see Martin Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain 1914-1945: The Defining of a Faith*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1980

[\[47\]](#) *The Times*, 4 August 1931

[\[48\]](#) Ibid, 13 August 1934, 30 July 1938

[\[49\]](#) Ibid, 30 July 1931

[\[50\]](#) Ibid, 3 August 1931

[\[51\]](#) Charles Lane Bagnall and Dorothy Bagnall, *British Cigarette Card Issues 1920-1940*, London Cigarette Card Company, Somerset 1978

[\[52\]](#) Ludovic Kennedy, *Pursuit: the chase and sinking of the Bismarck*, Collins, London 1974, p 59

[53] Edwin Hoyt, *The Life and Death of HMS Hood*, Arthur Baker, London 1977, p 29

[54] Quoted in Kennedy, p 60

[55] Ibid

[56] Hoyt, p 14

[57] Quoted in Kennedy, pp 60-1

[58] Charles Benstead, *HMS Rodney at Sea*, Methuen, London 1932, pp 43-4

[59] Ibid

[60] *Malaya's Battleship Visit to its God-Country. Record of a Historic Reception, January-February 1921. Reprinted from the Malayan Leader, Kuala Lumpur 1921, p 4*

[61] Ibid, p 1

[62] Ibid, pp 1-2

[63] See, for example, Robert O'Connell, *Sacred Vessels: the cult of the Battleship and the Role of the US Navy*, Colorado University Press, Boulder, CO, 1991

[64] Alan Raven and John Roberts, *British Battleships of World War Two*, Arms and Armour Press, London 1976, pp 406-8

[65] Ibid

[66] Ibid, p 408

[67] *Mastery of the Sea*, Ealing for AFBD, 1941

[68] *Battleship*, Verity for Ministry of Information, 1942

[69] *Commissioning a Battleship*, British Gaumont for the Ministry of Information, 1942. All three of the above films are available on the Imperial War Museum video cassette, *Royal Navy at War*, catalogue number DD05213.

[70] British Gaumont, 24 April 1941

[71] See *Liverpool Daily News*, 17-25 November 1941

[72] Quoted in Martin Middlebrook and Patrick Mahoney, *Battleship: the loss of the Prince of Wales and the Repulse*, Allen Lane, London 1977, p 32

[73] Ibid, p 68-9, 75

[74] *The Times*, 3, 6 December 1941. See Middlebrook and Mahoney, pp 64, 74-9

[\[75\]](#) Middlebrook and Mahoney, p 75

[\[76\]](#) Pathé Gazette, 25 April 1940

[\[77\]](#) Ibid, 3 April 1941

[\[78\]](#) British Gaumont, 1 May 1941

[\[79\]](#) *The Times*, 1 April 1941

[\[80\]](#) Percy Westerman, *Fighting for Freedom*, Blackie and Son, London 1941, p 146

[\[81\]](#) Ibid, p 158. Interestingly, Cloche's first action is the bombardment of the French fleet at Oran.

[\[82\]](#) Pathé Gazette, 6 January 1944

[\[83\]](#) *The Times*, 9 June 1944

[\[84\]](#) Ibid, 17, 19 June 1944

[\[85\]](#) Ibid, 26 May 1941

[\[86\]](#) *News Chronicle*, 28 May 1941

[\[87\]](#) *The Times*, 28 May 1941

[\[88\]](#) *Liverpool Daily News*, 11 December 1941

[\[89\]](#) Quoted in Middlebrook and Mahoney, p 269

[\[90\]](#) *The Times*, 11 December 1941

[\[91\]](#) Quoted in S.P. Mackenzie, *British War Films, 1939-1945*, Hambledon and London, London 2001, p 82

[\[92\]](#) *Ibid*

[\[93\]](#) *Daily Telegraph*, 13 February 1942

[\[94\]](#) *News Chronicle*, 28 May 1941

[\[95\]](#) *The Times*, 16 December 1941

[\[96\]](#) See Barnett, pp 380-1

[\[97\]](#) Paramount British, 6 December 1944

[\[98\]](#) *The Times*, 2 December 1944

[\[99\]](#) Harry Goulding, *The Wonder Book of the Navy*, Ward, Lock and Co, London 1947 edition, p 81

[\[100\]](#) See *ibid* pp 196, 200, 202. With unwitting foresight Goulding also wrote: ‘The tiniest spark may start a conflagration with world-wide results; a blow at Great Britain is a blow at, say, the Falkland Islands, just as a blow at the Falkland Islands would put the Mother Country on her mettle to defend her children overseas.’ (p.205)

[\[101\]](#) P.K. Kemp, *The Boy’s Book of the Navy*, Burke, London 1953, pp 7, 16, 20-7, 28, 41.

[\[102\]](#) See, for example, Paramount British newsreel, 27 February 1947

[\[103\]](#) *The Times*, 12 May 1947

[\[104\]](#) See J.A. Ramsden, ‘Refocusing “The People’s War”: British War Films of the 1950s’ in *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 33, No. 1, January 1998, pp 35-63; see also Mackenzie, pp 149-150.

[\[105\]](#) Paramount British, 12 October 1953. The British Universities Film and Video Council newsreel archive entry for this issue contains the extra document from the Department of Naval Information dated 7 October 1953.

[\[106\]](#) For a wider ranging discussion of the issues facing British politicians and society during this period see K.O. Morgan, *The People’s Peace, British History since 1945*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1990

[\[107\]](#) See *The Times*, 8 March 1946

[\[108\]](#) For British naval policy see Eric J Grove, *Vanguard to Trident. British Naval Policy since World War II*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis 1987

[\[109\]](#) *The Times*, 13 September 1955

[\[110\]](#) *Ibid*, 10 February 1956

[\[111\]](#) See *The Times*, 26 February, 6, 21 March, 5 April 1957, 9 August 1958, 4 July 1959

[\[112\]](#) *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, 7 January 1955

[\[113\]](#) *The Times*, 1 June 1960

[\[114\]](#) Quoted in Arthur Cross, *Airfix: Celebrating 50 Years of the Greatest Plastic Kits in the World*, HarperCollins, London 1999, p 9

[\[115\]](#) *Ibid*, pp 68, 72, 178-183

[\[116\]](#) Kemp, 1960 edition



The Editors
International Journal of Naval History
editors@ijnhonline.org

© Copyright 2004, International Journal of Naval History, All Rights Reserved