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Destroyer Flag-Flying Visits, Civic Ceremony, Empire and Identity in interwar Britain

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ABSTRACT
The interwar period in Britain saw the Royal Navy performing multifarious duties aimed at reaffirming Britain's naval supremacy and reinforcing a sense of national and imperial unity. As one of the most fascinating and versatile ships, the destroyer had grown to capture the imagination of the British public through tales of courage, heroism and daring. Destroyers conducted many post-war cruises and exercises, and visited numerous regional locations performing mock battles, lighting displays, launches, pageants, sporting events and commemorations. These were ceremonial and interactive events reflecting a symbiosis between naval culture and civilian society. This article explores these regional ceremonies and pageants which showcased the destroyer and considers the agency of the ship in forging symbolic links between local communities, the nation, and the wider empire.

Introduction

The post-war economic climate in Britain immediately following the First World War left little resources or appetite for the grandiose naval reviews of the pre-war period; the substantial loss of life had rendered them too 'morally problematic.'[1] The Royal Navy had largely turned its attention to national recovery so that in 1919 the Admiralty designated the principle preoccupation of the destroyer was in 'showing the flag where it had not been since before the war' and 'preserving order and protecting British subjects.'[2] The work of destroyers' crews in quashing episodes of civil unrest

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[1]Jan Rüger. *The Great Naval Game*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 255.

[2]Statement of the First Lord of the Admiralty. *Explanatory of the navy estimates, 1919-1920,* 1919. Cmd. 451. Vol. 33 [Online] Available from: https://parlipapers.proquest.com/parlipapers/docview/t70.d75.1919-022769/usgLogRstClick!!?accountid=13268 Accessed 2 July 2021.

and aiding industrial recovery saw ships attached to locations such as Liverpool, Ireland and Wales, where they formed a military presence against rioters and strikers.[3] In addition, destroyers undertook vital duties such as transporting mail and food, whilst crews took over the operation of dockyards and coal mines.[4] Despite such issues with 'social discipline' and some anti-imperialist sentiment, the sailors called upon to replace industrial workers were not viewed with the resultant distrust of authority as the other military forces employed in civil control at this time.[5] Rather they received praise for their ability to turn their hands to a number of tasks in keeping the business of daily life going. Performed throughout 1919-1920, these duties left little opportunity for 'exercises, cruises and ceremonies.'[6]

There were, however, a number of poignant ceremonies of which the destroyer played an important part directly following the war, such as the use of HMS Rowena in transporting the body of nurse Edith Cavell back to England in May 1919 amidst an elaborate ceremony.[7] Later, in November of 1920, the body of the Unknown Warrior was transported to England aboard HMS Verdun, with the ship subsequently bearing a commemorative plaque.[8] In both examples, the role of the ship in conveying the bodies of those who had become symbols of the allied cause, served to imbue the destroyer with a poignant significance as a representative of the intrinsic role of the navy in both war and peace. In these ceremonies, the contribution of the destroyer as a symbol of commemoration and homecoming subtly underlined the way in which the navy could stir navalist sentiment with public display. Jan Rüger has argued that the supposed lack of naval celebrations in the years following the First World War was a symbolic representation of the perceived small role that the navy had ultimately played in the outcome of the war.[9] Indecisive action, such as that at Jutland, had somewhat overturned the image of the navy as invincible. However, in tactical appraisal, the work of destroyers and other escort vessels had proven to be a standout success.[10] In fact, destroyer attacks at Jutland were appraised as 'worthy of the highest traditions' of the

[3]*Dundee Evening Telegraph,* 5 August 1919, *The Aberdeen Daily Journal,* 24 September 1918.
[4]*Explanatory of the navy estimates, 1919-1920*
[5]Bernard Porter. *The Absent-minded imperialists: empire, society and culture in Britain,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 268-281.
[6]*Explanatory of the navy estimates, 1919-1920*
[7]*The Illustrated London News*, 24 May 1919.
[8]*The Leicester Daily Post*, 11 November 1920.
[9]Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*, p. 259.
[10]The War Cabinet, *Report for the year 1918*, 1919. Cmd, 325, Vol. 30. [Online] Available from: https://parlipapers.proquest.com/parlipapers/docview/t70.d75.1919-022655?accountid=13268 Accessed 2 July 2021.

navy.[11] The prestige bestowed upon destroyers led to their considerable involvement in acts of 'showing the flag'. The destroyer had come to be an effective U-boat deterrent, safeguarding vital trade routes and protecting the British coast; symbolising security, innovation and the endurance of navy and the nation. The role and reputation of the destroyer led to the epithets of 'the sentinel of Britain' and the 'link in the chain of empire', and their appearance in many regional locations reinforced the pervasive influence that the navy had upon the farthest reaches of the British Isles.[12]

This article addresses the perceived lack of public naval spectacle in the interwar period, making the case for the continued culture of public naval ceremony in the form of destroyer visits and localised events that contributed to civic culture and identity formation. Rüger's assertion that destroyers and smaller ships were just token gestures 'propped up for display' somewhat disregards their role in the immediate post war period.[13] In fact, destroyers proved extremely popular sights during cruises and visits of the interwar period, attracting thousands of spectators. Considering this popularity, there is a lack of scholarship that addresses the agency of the destroyer as a symbolic vessel in the development of interwar culture and identity. Furthermore, the pervasion of localised naval pageantry into civic culture, especially during the interwar period, is a topic which deserves much greater attention to aid the understanding of the relationship between national identity and the navy at that time. Daniel Owen Spence has reflected upon the ubiquity of the navy throughout the British Empire suggesting the use of 'internal campaigns waged by smaller vessels' encapsulated Britain's 'omnipresence' and fostered the 'spread of British ideology'.[14] In using the destroyer for localised flag-flying campaigns the omnipresence of the navy was certainly felt within Britain. The symbolic role of specific ships has been explored by both Jan Rüger, exploring Dreadnoughts in the Edwardian period, and Ralph Harrington who considers the cultural impact of the battlecruiser HMS Hood.[15] These historians have set a precedent for the in-depth study of naval ships as tools for

[11]Official Dispatches, *Battle of Jutland 30th May to 1st June 1916.* 1920, Cmd. 1068, Vol. 29. [Online], Available from https://parlipapers.proquest.com/parlipapers/docview/t70.d75.1920-023942?accountid=13268 Accessed 2 July 2021.
[12]*The Nantwich Guardian*, 23 February 1915, *The Weekly Telegraph*, 2 November 1935.
[13]Rüger, *The Great Naval Game,* p. 259.
[14]Daniel Owen Spence, *A History of the Royal Navy: Empire and Imperialism,* (London: I B Tauris, 2015), p. 1.
[15]Jan Rüger, 'The Symbolic Value of the Dreadnought', in Robert J Blythe, Andrew Lambert, Jan Rüger (eds), 'The Dreadnought and the Edwardian Age', (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 9-18.; Harrington, Ralph. 'The Mighty Hood: Navy, Empire, War at sea and the British National Imagination 1920-1960', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 38, (April 2003), pp. 171-185.

negotiating British culture and identities, which this article will build upon in its consideration of the destroyer as a symbolic connection between navy, nation and empire.

Commemoration and post-war ceremonies

The staging of 'past rituals' immediately following the war was difficult in the 'face of new realities' about the navy and the world.[16] It is a fair assumption that for a nation that had lost many of its men in conflict, jingoistic pageants were particularly distasteful. Anne Summers goes further stating that popular militarism and large scale pageantry waned after 1918 because of the horrors of war quashing any 'defensive ideology'.[17] However, Rowan Thompson identifies this was not necessarily the case as celebrations of militarism and navalism continued throughout the interwar period in various 'institutional, cultural and popular' expressions.[18] This article supports Thompson's assertions that many studies do not consider the impact of militarism in popular culture past 1914 and suggests this 'muted' militarism, in the form of localised pageantry and destroyer visits, perpetuated a navalist culture. Rüger also highlights that a resurgence in historical and militarised pageantry which occurred in the 1920s and 1930s, was a means of propaganda to promote tradition, imperialism, and unity.[19] Emma Hanna goes further to suggest that the 'cult of the navy' was just as pervasive in the interwar period, demonstrated by naval pageants of the 1930s.[20] Importantly, interwar naval pageantry, ceremony and public displays provided a 'crucial platform' for navalist organisations to reinvigorate and 'narrate the navy's place in post war Britain.'[21]

A desire to memorialise and commemorate the war triggered public rituals which negotiated the aftermath of conflict, exploring patriotism, pride, and tradition as tools for local and national cohesion. In the examination of interwar pageants, Angela Bartie *et al*. note that pageants were often part of a spectrum of peace celebrations in 1919

[16]Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*. p. 260.
[17]Anne Summers. 'Militarism in Britain Before the Great War'. *History Workshop Journal* 2, 1, (1976), pp. 104-123, (p. 121).
[18]Rowan G. E. Thompson, 'The peculiarities of British militarism: The air and navy leagues in interwar Britain', unpublished doctoral thesis, (Northumbria University, 2019), p. 3.
[19]Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*, p. 269.
[20]Emma Hanna, 'Patriotism and pageantry: representations of Britain's naval past at the Greenwich Night Pageant, 1933', in Quintin Colville and James Davey (eds), *A new naval history*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), pp. 215-231 & p. 220.
[21]Thompson, 'The peculiarities of British militarism', p. 266.

which forged a 'sense of collective belonging.'[22] Illustrating this, Liverpool awarded the freedom of the city to Admiral David Beatty in early 1919. An historical pageant was arranged for the occasion including 'two destroyers of a powerful new class', which stressed the centrality of the city to the nation and empire, and drew thousands of spectators.[23] Interesting parallels can be evidenced between the protests and rioting of returning servicemen in response to such public spectacles examined by Bartie et al., and the industrial unrest also occurring in Liverpool at the time of Beatty's pageant.[24] The war had proven to be 'unsettling' for the different demographics now working within Liverpool's industrial sectors, compounded by a rise in trade unionism and anti-imperialist sentiment.[25] For a city with strong ties to the navy and so reliant on overseas trade, Admiral Beatty's ceremony aimed to refocus the sense of identification with the naval heritage of the city demonstrating that even in times of social crisis, the navy remained a constant.

It was not only Liverpool that received destroyer visits to mark the contribution of the local community. In April of 1919, the destroyers HMS Velox and Watchman visited the industrial town of Preston, Lancashire. The ships travelled up the river Ribble and moored in the Albert Edward Dock where they were greeted by representatives from the 'Vegetable Products Committee' who had provided the crews of destroyers with fresh vegetables during the war. The vessels were navigated right up to the dock, which was deemed important for allowing attendees to see the ships in close proximity, and they were welcomed by the mayor with patriotic songs such as 'Red, White and Blue' being played by a local boy's home band. The men received dinner at the Guildhall, entertainments, and free theatre shows and tram travel. The mayor acknowledged that local prosperity would not have been possible were it not for the work of destroyers in supporting the 'important military centre' of Preston, stating

> We recognise that it has been what has been called the unswerving vigilance of the British Fleet in protecting our own coasts and effectually blockading the ports of the enemy that has made it possible - but we are given to understand your presence here is an acknowledgment of the work this town has done in ministering to the comforts of the Navy.[26]

[22]Angela Bartie, Linda Fleming, Mark Freeman, Tom Hulme, Paul Readman, and Charlotte Tupman, '"And Those Who Live, How Shall I Tell Their Fame?' Historical Pageants, Collective Remembrance and The First World War, 1919-39", *Historical Research* 90, 249 (2017), pp. 636-661. (p. 640).
[23]*The Scotsman,* 28 March 1919.
[24]Bartie et al., p. 643.
[25]Porter, pp. 268-269.
[26]*The Lancashire Daily Post*, 3 April 1919.

The occasion highlighted a symbiotic relationship between the visiting destroyers and the townspeople due to their mutually beneficial role in supporting each other during conflict. Moreover, the impact of the war on the communities in Lancashire had been substantial, somewhat challenging the local sense of identity partly founded on military association. By demonstrating a naval connection with the people of Preston it was hoped that some of that militaristic character might be rekindled.

Later that year, the Atlantic Fleet commenced a cruise beginning on 2 September 1919 which included various stops around Britain.[27] During a visit of HMS Thanet to the Thanet region of Kent in December 1919, reciprocal ceremonial plaques were exchanged between the mayor and Thanet's crew which symbolised a 'fresh link' between the navy and the Isle of Thanet. The occasion suggested a particular affinity between seaside towns and the navy because of the reliance upon the sea for tourism and fishing industries. This affinity was cemented by the recent naming of the ship as a tribute to 'Thanet's behaviour under air raids and bombardments.'[28] In doing so, the residents of Thanet could feel a sense of local pride and contribution expressed in the actions of the crew and ship. Much like, as Brad Beaven notes, companies of men originating from one locality 'embodied a local patriotism', this common naming practice which materially linked a town with a ship and its crew, encouraged the celebration of civic pride and identity.[29] The residents of Margate and Ramsgate made presentations of silverware to the officers and a ceremony took place at the town hall, emphasising the centrality of the civic space in the naval celebration.[30]

A grandiose spectacle

Although these initial commemoration ceremonies were popular with local communities, as more time passed, they gradually began to make way for carnivalesque occasions including popular entertainments, regattas, sports and imperial celebrations, reminiscent of the popular festivities at fleet reviews. In 1924 a regatta committee in Sandown on the Isle of Wight requested the presence of destroyers to bolster attendance at their sports competitions. HMS Winchester and HMS Tarpon contributed 'very materially to the sport of the day', and the 'destroyer crews helped to make good sport' in the special matches and tournaments which had been arranged.[31] This regatta proved to be for the benefit of highlighting local sporting

[27] *Explanatory of the navy estimates, 1919-1920*
[28] *Sunday Pictorial,* 14 December 1919.
[29] Brad Beaven, 'The Provincial Press, Civic Ceremony and the Citizen-Soldier During the Boer War, 1899–1902: A Study of Local Patriotism', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History,* 37, 2 (2009), pp. 207–228 & p. 218.
[30] *The Observer,* 14 December 1919.
[31] *The Evening News,* 14 August 1924.

prowess and exemplified how aspects of civilian culture dictated the function of the destroyer visit, going as far as to suggest that the ships and their crews embraced 'typical carnival conditions' and the dispensing of naval routine.[32] This type of visit, where the destroyer was specially requested to fulfil the demands of the local civic elites, reflected the developing symbiosis between civic celebrations and naval pageantry.

A resurgence in cruises and visits at this time was partly in response to anxieties over imperial unity and inspired not only the Fleet Review of 1924 but the Empire cruise in that same year[33] The 1924 review was the 'greatest assembly of warships' since 1914 and boasted 200 ships arranged in spectacular formation at Spithead.[34] King George V made his way through 'inspecting' the lines of ships from the Royal Yacht amidst aerobatics displays and presentations to representatives from the Dominions. The year-long Empire cruise of the Special Service Squadron, beginning in November 1923, included visits to countries across the empire with 'a view to encouraging trade, to foster Dominion interest in naval matters and to give His Majesty's ships more experience of long-distance cruises.'[35] Ceremonies, rituals and the public display of naval power embodied by the ships, served as tools to project the navy as a 'common bond of empire' and the ships as 'a link with the Mother Country.'[36] Despite mixed reactions to the cruise, with many questions raised over the ethics of colonialism, it had set a precedent for the use of ships as symbolic bonds to unite divergent notions of identification. In a speech given by Admiral Beatty in Belfast the year before, the navy was reaffirmed as the quintessential representative of the might of the British Empire.[37] This speech, in reinforcing the value of the navy in forging national and imperial unity, was exemplary of much of the rhetoric that surrounded destroyer visits at the start of the 1920s. Beatty stated,

> They [the navy] were not only a fighting service. They were an ambassadorial service. Wherever the white ensign flew there was security, there was a connecting link between those far-flung portions of the empire and the motherland, and it was their proud privilege in the navy to feel and to know that

[32]Ibid.
[33]John C. Mitcham, 'The 1924 Empire Cruise and The Imagining of An Imperial Community', *Britain and the World*, 12, 1, (2019), pp. 67-88 (p. 69).
[34]*The Daily Mail Atlantic Edition*, 28 July 1924.
[35]*Hansard,* H.C. Deb 18 March 1924, vol.171 col. 201-406. [Online] Available from: https://parlipapers.proquest.com/parlipapers/docview/t71.d76.cds5cv0171p0-0002?accountid=13268 Accessed 2 July 2021.
[36]Mitcham, pp. 67-68.
[37]*The Hampshire Telegraph and Post*, 1 June 1923.

> they were as much a peace service, in enabling the empire to band together, as they were a war service in protecting the empire.[38]

Concurrent to these public rituals, there was an increasing demand for visiting destroyers and numerous requests were made each year to the Admiralty, resulting in a strict application system. On 17 June 1924, the first and sixth destroyer flotillas visited Liverpool, for which a range of entertainments were provided, such as golf, tennis and theatre shows. At a luncheon attended by 'prominent citizens', the mayor suggested that 'the Admiralty for too long had neglected the city' and that to 'increase the love for the navy it would be by more frequent visits of the fleet to the port.' Rear Admiral George Henry Baird informed the mayor that the limitations of the Washington Conference dictated the size and number of ships available, making the infrequent visits of destroyers all the more important to the citizens of Liverpool, particularly 'as the greater part of British food and raw material came by the sea, Liverpool people would know how difficult it was to protect 80,000 miles of trade routes.'[39]

Two weeks later, the fifth destroyer flotilla anchored in the Thames around Kent; HMS Malcolm, Vivacious and Voyager anchored at Gravesend, HMS Wryneck and Walrus at Northfleet, and HMS Vampire and Waterhen at Greenhithe. The ships anchored in these relatively small towns proved to be extremely popular with residents owing to the infrequency of such visits. The much larger flotilla leader HMS Osborne was opened to the public, and held a 'fascination all its own.'[40] *The Midland Telegraph* in contrast reported that the interest stirred from these regional visits was good for local patriotism but even the view of destroyers in the Thames could not 'add a fathom to the depth of the sea or make the Thames estuary such a suitable anchorage for the fleet as Spithead.[41] Criticism was atypical as many news reports described localised visits as particularly impactful, appealing to people outside of port towns. Indeed, the *Daily Mail* praised these summer cruises stating, they 'enable our landsmen to obtain a heartening glimpse of the sure shield which keeps invincible guard over our islands and our trade routes; the only regret is that owing to the exigencies of the navy's multifarious duties such visits are necessarily few.'[42] The recurrent complaint that visits were not frequent enough indicated an increased appetite for such spectacles.

[38]Ibid.
[39]*The Manchester Guardian,* 17 June 1924.
[40]*The Daily Mail,* 9 July 1924.
[41]*The Midland Daily Telegraph,* 7 July 1924.
[42]*The Daily Mail,* 9 July 1924.

Honing links with regional communities

To further encourage the relationship between the navy and coastal communities, the presentation of gifts and even charitable acts became popular alongside a growth in the scale of visits from the late 1920s. Spence has examined the impact of the presentation of gifts within colonial territories, however the exchange of symbolic gifts was also used to signify material connections within Britain too.[43] In addition to such exchanges, significant attempts were made to nurture the relationship between communities and the visiting ship by emphasising the integrity of the navy to local industry and culture which led to celebrations of a distinctly local character. Trips to Manchester had been suspended during the First World War but the visit of the sixth destroyer flotilla in 1929 was the 'best peep-show Manchester had seen for a decade' and reportedly attracted over 40,000 visitors to the ships.[44] Spectators were described as practically possessed when overwhelming crowds tried to board ships; crushing several people, causing women to faint, and sending two boys and a sailor overboard. *The Manchester Guardian* suggested that the public were especially thrilled to see the ships that year because they formed a literal representation of taxpayer investment in the navy, stating 'The taxpayer, puffed with so much climbing, stared at his own torpedo and didn't know back from front. [The visit] reassured the taxpayer that his money doesn't all go in paint and polish and tricky gold braid.'[45] The perception that naval resources were often diverted inappropriately was not unfounded. In 1919, there were reportedly naval ports 'crowded with destroyers' that were entirely obsolete, but whose outward appearances were maintained, and stores replenished at a significant cost. This situation, which saw thousands of men engaged in superfluous work, had supposedly 'become a joke', even amongst the Admiralty.[46] The formal programme of elaborate entertainments for the visit to Manchester was deemed a façade for the heart-felt embracing of the navy within the city, a 'cloak' which revealed how 'commercial Manchester took the sailors to its smoky bosom.'[47] A close affiliation subsequently continued between the city of Manchester and destroyers for the remainder of the interwar period, which saw visits by flotillas evolve into extravagant five-day festivals including historical pageants, sports and imperial celebrations. The *Manchester Guardian* recognised the value of the 1932 visit of the fifth destroyer flotilla as part of 'showing the flag' and its promotion of naval and imperial interests.[48] The visits were carefully designed to show just how important the city was in 'the

[43]Daniel Owen Spence, *Colonial Naval Culture and British Imperialism, 1922-67,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), p. 89.
[44]*The Daily Mail,* 29 June 1929.
[45]*The Manchester Guardian*, 24 June 1929.
[46]*The Pall Mall Gazette,* 11 August 1919.
[47]*The Manchester Guardian,* 20 June 1929.
[48]*The Manchester Guardian*, 18 June 1932.

contribution made by the locality to the national story.'[49] It is possible that the visit aimed to curry favour within the predominantly left-wing demographics of the city who generally opposed naval re-armament with anti-war and anti-imperialist sentiment.

In 1929 four destroyers, including HMS Windsor and Vidette, conducted an 'at home' ceremony and reception in Aberdeen for 250 guests. Officers entertained local dignitaries aboard the ships and there was an exchange of gifts between the crew and Lady Provost Lewis. The men had crafted decorative ribbons representing the ships flags and made a wreath to lay on the city's war memorial. The act of laying the wreath was, in contrast to the ceremonies earlier that day, both simple and informal and was not attended by many spectators. This 'spontaneous' and 'human' incident generated much respect for the crew as they had acted without the prompting of the officers and 'quietly' returned to their duty of showing large crowds around the ships.[50] Later in 1934, the people of Exmouth presented HMS Exmouth with a gift following the naming of the ship as a tribute to the town. It was felt that the naming of the ship would encourage a strong bond with the community and proved successful when they raised funds to have a commemorative plaque on board, which was later turned down in favour of using the funds for the accommodation of sailors during a subsequent visit.[51]

Local philanthropists had gone to some lengths to present the ship with a gift to mark their contribution, in this way a piece of the town could travel with the ship, representing a tangible link. Similarly, in Hartlepool in October of 1936, the local community had raised money to repay the crew of HMS Echo following a successful visit. The cheque for £3 10s was sent back from the commander to the mayor of Hartlepool 'in appreciation of the courteous hospitality extended to the officers and men of the destroyer' expressing the money should be donated to the Hartlepool Crippled Children's Guild.[52] The exchange of gifts and fundraising in these examples highlighted how greater attempts were made to establish a firm bond between the ship and the community, but the refusal of funds was considered an appropriate gesture of goodwill and deflected concerns over the escalating cost of such visits.

An increased variety in the scheduled proceedings of such visits into the 1930s was in part due to changes in training and cruising policy in 1931 which allowed individual captains greater autonomy in their coastal cruises. The First Lord of the Admiralty expressed concern that a 'too highly organised fleet routine' had developed and that

[49]Bartie et al, p. 656.
[50]*The Aberdeen Press and Journal,* 24 June 1929.
[51]*The Western Morning News and Daily Gazette,* 16 November 1934.
[52]*Northern Daily Mail,* 19 October 1936.

captains should be able to decide on independent cruises of which the time at sea was to be considerably extended.[53] The extension of the cruise hoped to allow the crew to become more familiar with their ship and shipmates to acquire 'that feeling of intimate knowledge' for which the navy prided itself. Furthermore, in fulfilling this quest for 'intimate knowledge' it was decided that destroyers and other smaller vessels were unequivocally much better suited for the job because 'on a big ship, with a limited cruising time, every minute is precious, and suitable attention cannot be given to young entrants.'[54] Destroyers were well-known for the closer camaraderie and abilities of their crews to adapt to any operational task, which was certainly expressed not only in seafaring but as naval representatives and tour guides in their ambassadorial roles.

In July 1931, several destroyers of the V and W class visited Bridlington and Whitby. The occasion included a multitude of displays and entertainments and the towns were crowded with thousands of visitors in which the crew enjoyed dances, teas, and church services whilst the ships were decorated with bunting to welcome a mayoral party.[55] In return for the town's hospitality, the crew of HMS Vesper held a tea party for 700 local children aboard ship as a gesture of appreciation. Entertainments in Bridlington were enjoyed by local residents and sailors alike; the vast programme including 'festivities, games, fireworks and searchlight displays, dances, special programmes on the Princes Parade and places of amusement.'[56] This epitomised the significant expansion in the scale of events surrounding a visit, especially the inclusion of fireworks and searchlight displays from the destroyers. Colourful lighting displays had previously been a part of reviews and pageants signalling an 'innovation in stagecraft' but advances in technology aboard destroyers made the lighting display even more spectacular.[57] For example, in 1933 HMS Windsor provided a display of new types of lighting. The report of the display suggested, 'It seemed to come from outside the vessel and the hull, from waterline to deck, was bathed in light, as well as the masts, funnels and bridge….so far as is known, a ship has never been lighted in this way before. Certainly, as a spectacle, the experiment was completely justified.'[58] Lighting displays were certainly spectacular, but they also encapsulated the unique combination of demonstrations of technology and popular entertainment, which characterised the naval theatre.

[53]*Hansard,* H.C Deb 7 March 1932, vol.262 col.1453-1608. [Online] Available from: https://parlipapers.proquest.com/parlipapers/docview/t71.d76.cds5cv0262p0-0011?accountid=13268 Accessed 2 July 2021.
[54]Ibid.,
[55]*The Yorkshire Post*, 6 July 1931.
[56]*The Yorkshire Post,* 4 July 1931.
[57]Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*, p. 115.
[58]*The Daily Independent,* 8 August 1933.

Later in 1937, several destroyers visited Cardiff for celebrations which included an exchange of gifts between the crew and dock representatives and various dances and tours for disadvantaged children. These charitable donations or the entertaining of children now occurred frequently as a part of the visits, possibly to stifle concerns over the diversion of public welfare funds to naval armament. For example, in 1934, George Henry Hall, the Labour MP for Aberdare, had expressed the discontentment in his constituency that money spent on armament was 'hampering the economic recovery' and 'retarding the advance of social reform' because a road or nursery school cost the same as a destroyer.[59] In Hall's comparison the ship symbolised a misplaced opportunity to spend funds for the real public good, consequently visits were not just about proliferating navalist ideologies, they were exercises in public relations. The Cardiff visit targeted the disadvantaged demographics, demonstrating that the navy were considerate of social and welfare issues within the polity, currying favour to keep the public attuned to the pressing need for rearmament. Furthermore, the Mayor's speech went some way to reinvigorate support for the navy, suggesting their complacency had maligned any local dependence on the protection of imperial trade, stating,

> Navy Week makes us pause to think of things we are usually too much inclined to take for granted. We bring away the haziest of recollections of much of our sightseeing, but we find it difficult to forget those great maps of the world with their crowded shipping tracks of Empire trade routes. The pull of ships and the call of the sea are as strong as ever they were, however, little we can explain them, it springs from instinct little more than the average physiological allowance of salt. Those trophies had been presented by people in gratitude for help afforded them by the Navy in times of distress…- and they showed us how much the Navy counts in peacetime.[60]

Sailor James Craig recalled these destroyer visits and cruises as requiring of months of preparation for which he took part and conducted tours and ceremonies aboard HMS Mackay. The 1938 destroyer regatta included races and football matches at Portland before trips to various ports in Africa, Iran, Tangiers and Malta. Upon the ship's return, it embarked upon a tour of the British coast, of which Mr Craig fondly remembered their stay in Weymouth. His experience of 'showing the flag' included taking visitors around the ship in groups of ten and delivering a scripted tour which was very popular with the public. He attributes this partly to the fact the public could meet a seaman and see the ship for themselves; and also due to the fact that the navy

[59]*Hansard,* H.C Deb 14 March 1935 vol. 299 col. 533-734. [Online] Available from: https://parlipapers.proquest.com/parlipapers/docview/t71.d76.cds5cv0299p0-0004?accountid=13268 Accessed 2 July 2021.
[60]*The Western Mail and Southwest News,* 30 June 1937.

was held in continuously high regard after the war. The fact that the tour was free was also quite an inducement. Subsequently, the Fleet Review in September of that year was the conclusion of a whole summer of exercises visiting holiday resorts, conducting rowing races and doing gunnery practice.[61]

Rearmament and the display of sea-power

Despite the distinct carnivalesque atmosphere that had developed surrounding the destroyer visits and civic ceremonies, these occasions were a highly visible expression of naval power, employing manoeuvres, fake battles and displays of modern technology. As Rüger states, mock battles and activities for amusement were 'never divorced' in these public displays.[62] Given general anxieties over the strength of the fleet in the interwar period, a display of power in such exercises aligned with the interwar policy of showing a deterrence rather than providing defence.[63] In addition, rapid construction of larger and heavily armoured destroyers in the programmes of 1935 and 1937, provided a number of the most modern and powerful destroyers ever built; a demonstration of naval strength and investment.[64] Whilst cruisers and battleships have typically been considered to be the embodiment of naval power, the innovations in destroyer construction represented a readiness to meet the diverse demands and strategic challenges of modern naval warfare. The establishment of a tactical school to evaluate the lessons of First World War naval strategy, particularly that of destroyers, led to significant convoy exercises and 'imaginary fleet actions' in the 1920s.[65]

Practice manoeuvres were valuable training exercises and powerful displays of new technology; therefore, it was particularly fortuitous to invite important colonial dignitaries to view the spectacle. This conveyed the investment that had been made in naval technology and reassured global premiers that the navy was indeed an imperial service. In a fake battle in 1928, King Amanullah Khan of Afghanistan was treated to a 'spectacular display' on the occasion of his visit to Britain. This included a display of destroyers fighting submarines using 46 vessels, of which the *Western Mail* reported,

[61]Imperial War Museum (hereinafter IWM) 27727, James Craig interview.
[62]Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*, p. 115.
[63]Eric J Grove. 'A War Fleet Built for Peace: British Naval Rearmament in the 1930s and the Dilemma of Deterrence versus Defence'. *Naval War College Review,* 44, 2 (1991), pp. 82-92 & p. 82.
[64]Grove, p. 87.
[65]Arthur Marder. 'The Influence of History on Sea Power: The Royal Navy and the Lessons of 1914-1918.' *Pacific Historical Review,* 41, 4 (November 1972), pp. 413-443 & p. 416.

> The flagship sent out a message to the anti-submarine destroyers that hostile submarines had been sighted, and the King was thrilled by the spectacle of the destroyers racing to his rescue and dropping depth charges on the spot where the enemy was supposed to lurk beneath the waters. The fact that the battleships, cruisers and destroyers were enshrouded in mist only made the spectacle more impressive. The greatest excitement of the day was when the Nelson was attacked by the destroyer flotillas. The first line of destroyers rushed up to within 700 yards…King Amanullah said it had been one of the most thrilling episodes of the day.[66]

These demonstrations of fire power were particularly exciting aspects of any visit, but for an audience in a regional coastal town this may have been their only interaction with warships in action. Given the role of the destroyer in protection against submarines, their use of torpedoes and relative fast speed, this made for an especially dramatic and theatrical display. Rather like the depictions of naval battles in the work of official war artists, fake battles and speed trials provided a romanticised and glorified snapshot of the work of destroyers for curious spectators. Most importantly, the conduct of practice manoeuvres and battles brought the theatre of war into the realms of civilian society and reminded regional communities that in the arena of conflict, Britain was protected by the national, imperial and global force of the navy. The theatrics of such events were sometimes heightened by the presence of the Monarch, such as the visit of King George V to a practice battle in Weymouth in 1932, when destroyers demonstrated their 'concentrated firepower' by 'attacking' the battle squadron.[67]

Further speed trials and tests of new technologies as a part of cruises and visits demonstrated that there had been a significant attempt to strengthen the navy and improve its capabilities. Not only would residents in Britain's coastal towns be reassured that the navy could defend their doorway to the rest of the world; these displays were a powerful deterrent, which as Michael Markowitz notes, ships as symbols of power are only effective when displayed to both 'reassure friends and to deter potential adversaries.'[68] The associated visits still included the popular entertainments such as ship tours, sports and civic ceremonies, but increasingly the demonstration of fire power took centre stage. In 1933, the newly built HMS Cygnet underwent speed trials near Rosyth. Whilst this was not unusual at an established naval base, the incorporation of the trials into a destroyer regatta was fitting of the theatrical spirit that surrounded the conduct of such manoeuvres. *The Scotsman*

[66]*Western Mail,* 4 April 1928.
[67]*The Daily Mail*, 14 July 1932.
[68]Michael Markowitz. 'Fleet Naval Reviews: A Short History'. *Maritime Affairs: Journal of The National Maritime Foundation of India* 11, 2 (2015), pp. 1-8 (p. 1).

reported that 'Although we are anchored, however, the day is by no means over, and boat crews have been turned out for enthusiastic regatta practice while the opportunity offers. The destroyers have a separate regatta from the big ships.'[69]

Although destroyer visits and the staging of mock battles were mostly well received and proved extremely popular, there was some localised opposition to the now vast expenditure on ceremonies and the entertainment of sailors. Particularly, workers unions and Labour Party members in industrial cities were aware of what Bartie et al. have termed 'social control', in that after the First World War wealthy organisers aimed to force a sense of imperial and national cohesion through pageantry which only served to reinforce a sense of hierarchy.[70] Bartie et al. state, 'Civic elites believed that these events would showcase the past glories of town, city and nation, and foster civic pride in the present.'[71] These displays were, after all, highly politically charged demonstrations of authority and military power. A hierarchical relationship between civic elites and spectators in which the didactic staging of naval traditions and imperial discourse, certainly contributed to unrest during some destroyer visits. In Manchester in May 1932, protests occurred at the docks opposing the naval visits and associated celebrations. The Labour Party expressed that such displays should be abandoned, as naval ceremonies were at odds with the climate of disarmament in Britain.[72] *The International Labour Defence,* which instigated the protests, cited that mass unemployment was increasing and welfare funds shrinking, whilst vast sums of money were expended on the entertainment of sailors 'whose real purpose was to make the navy seem attractive to young men so that they might be induced to join it.'[73] For some local residents, the display was an inducement to war, and not a celebration of the navy in peacetime. As Rüger has highlighted, just because public spectacles occurred and were attended by vast number of visitors, does not necessarily mean that the public supported the navy or its promotion of empire.[74] Rather social pressures of not wanting to appear unpatriotic and the benefits of attending naval celebrations, such as public holidays and popular entertainments, most likely attracted a fair portion of the visitors.[75]

Ship Launches

In contrast to the ostentatious launch ceremonies of battleships and cruisers attended by large crowds, destroyers rarely had grandiose launching ceremonies. In fact, on

[69]*The Scotsman,* 17 May 1933.
[70]Bartie et al., p. 659.
[71]Ibid.
[72]*The Manchester Guardian,* 14 May 1932.
[73]*The Manchester Guardian,* 27 June 1932.
[74]Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*, p. 118.
[75]Rüger, p.115.

several occasions, such as the launch of HMS Escort, 'only a few officials were present' and there was 'no official ceremony.'[76] However, from around 1932 ceremonies, including launch patrons, for destroyers gained popularity. The role of the launch patron, often a female relation of a naval officer or politician and a recognisable dignitary, was to give a speech and bestowed good luck upon a new vessel directly before its launch. Whereas the launch ceremony of a new battleship or cruiser was charged with ideas of physical power, the launch of a destroyer was not solely about creating an imposing image but more about representing the strengthening of the foundations which bolstered the whole fleet.

To some extent, destroyers were the expendable pawns; yet they also represented the backbone of naval operations, and therefore embodied the integrity and combined strength of Britain and its empire. These themes were especially evident at the launching of Tribal class destroyers which took place from 1937 onwards, however prior examples of launches from around 1930 stressed the symbolic importance of the destroyer in fostering imperial relationships. In 1930, the launch of HMCS Skeena for the Royal Canadian Navy included a ceremony conducted by Mildred Bennett, the sister of the Canadian Prime Minister. In contrast, HMS Brilliant launched just the day before and constructed for the Royal Navy, received no naming ceremony and was attended only by shipwrights, demonstrating the launch of the Skeena to be a means of publicly displaying unity with Canada. As discussed below, the role of colonial representatives in the launch of the Tribal class vessels from 1937 specifically symbolised links with the wider empire through formal naming ceremonies.

The naval construction programme of 1931 instigated a number of symbolic launches which emphasised connections between destroyer construction and the industrial prosperity of the region. Most ships of this programme were launched between 1932 and 1934 which triggered an increased number of launching ceremonies conducted by prominent launch patrons. Due to the large number of destroyers constructed at regional shipyards and the creation of thousands of jobs, the launch of a new ship symbolised the bolstering of the local economy and the continuance of traditional skills and trades. Ship launches have been explored by Rüger as 'rituals' which brought together ideas of gender, religion, monarchy and navy to form influential pageants in the public naval theatre.[77] The launch ceremony was just one aspect of the naval theatre that reiterated imperial and national unity with its naval traditions, blessings from imperial dignitaries, and religious practices, uniting 'otherwise divergent senses of identification and nationhood'.[78] Lady Eyres Monsell conducted the ceremony for

[76] *The Daily Mail,* 30 March 1934.
[77] Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*. pp. 31-36.
[78] Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*. p. 197.

HMS Defender and HMS Daring in 1932.[79] Her speech accompanying the double launch highlighted the link between local industry and the destroyers, stating 'The long association of Thornycrofts with torpedo craft construction is emphasised by the fact that the Daring is the third British destroyer of this name built by the firm.'[80] The launch was also good for local morale as it was reported that a lack of orders left 23 berths empty and the state of shipbuilding was 'not bright'.[81]

Similarly, in 1934 HMS Encounter was launched from Hawthorn Leslie. The managing director of the firm said the ship marked the future prosperity of the town through the continued association with the navy, stating he 'rejoiced that the government was going to spend £2,000,000 on extending the navy, first of all because they were British, and secondly because it provided an opportunity for more work on Tyneside and the distribution of large sums of money in wages.'[82] Later in June of that year, HMS Foresight was launched at Birkenhead. Lady Brown, wife of Vice-Admiral Sir Harold Brown, conducted her first naming and launching ceremony on the occasion which was celebrated with an opulent luncheon given by local civic representatives. In the conduct of the launch Lady Brown made a short speech of thanks, and her husband said that he hoped the vessel would live up to the traditions of its famous namesake. The mayor and an executive of Cammell Laird expressed the view that the ship symbolised the saviour of the company and the local shipbuilding industry from disaster as 'it had been the means of giving employment to thousands of men who would otherwise have been unemployed, and more than that, it had been the means of preserving their skill.'[83] For these industrial cities with a strong reliance upon shipbuilding trades, the launch of a destroyer was a celebration of the employment and economic benefit brought about by the increasing number of ships under construction.

Colonial representatives were sometimes invited to attend ceremonies and launches as a demonstration of imperial unity, a practice which had begun at the start of the century.[84] Whilst these launches, ceremonies and naming practices aimed to encourage a sense of shared imperial identity, they also stressed a hierarchy in which Britain was the head of an imperial family.[85] Several references to the 'imperial family' and 'family gatherings' emphasised unity but also supported the existence of a familial

[79]*The Times,* 15 March 1932.
[80]*The Times,* 8 April 1932.
[81]Ibid.
[82]*The Times,* 31 March 1934.
[83]*The Liverpool Echo*, 29 June 1934.
[84]Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*, p. 177.
[85]Ibid.

hierarchy which was subsequently mirrored in the size and status of different vessels.[86] In April 1939 a writer in the *Naval Chronicle* asked, 'What part do warships' names play in Empire, unity, national prestige, regional patriotism, and naval spirit?' concluding that ships named after locations were symbolically important to national and imperial unity and 'preference should be given to territorial and place names'.[87] Capital ships best represented the 'imperial parents' in their embodiment of power and innovation, whilst smaller ships represented the 'sons and daughters' of the imperial family.[88] Rüger asserts that 'battleships specifically' were a means of projecting 'imperial sentiment', and as such were afforded names 'designed to foster the link between mother country and colony' such as Hindustan, Dominion and Commonwealth.[89] As Spence notes, in 1911 the name HMS Maori was rejected when the King Edward VII class battleship HMS New Zealand was renamed to allow the name to be used for the new Indefatigable class battlecruiser then under construction, because it was 'inappropriate to name a capital ship after a 'native people'.[90] Spence goes on to suggest that it was deemed more appropriate by the Admiralty to assign 'native' names to destroyers as they would follow but never lead a fleet, representing a subordinate place in the imperial hierarchy.[91] Furthermore, destroyers had been compared in 1916 to a group of unruly and sickly children to be corralled by an obsolete cruiser, the mother ship; emphasising the perceived subordinate role of the destroyer utilising the familial metaphor. The *Dundee Courier* of 1939 stressed that destroyers were simply not suitable to bear the names of 'distinguished' individuals for more than just their smaller size, but also due to their possible 'mundane' work.[92]

The naming of the Tribal Class destroyers aimed to gain the 'allegiance of these peoples to the Empire', for instance in the case of HMS Ashanti, the Ashanti people of Ghana.[93] Spence highlights a tour of West Africa by the ship in 1939, filmed for the purposes of imperial propaganda, which captured the Ashanti people marvelling at their namesake vessel and portraying them as still in need of 'Britain's paternalistic guidance'.[94] In this, the ship was an important tool for stressing imperial unity but also conveyed a sense of British superiority and influence. In numerous launch ceremonies the links between various indigenous peoples and the empire were expounded. HMS Sikh was launched in Glasgow in December 1937 with a naming ceremony performed

[86]*Northampton Daily Echo*, 1 October 1939; *The Advertiser,* 24 December 1937.
[87]*Hampshire Telegraph & Post and Naval Chronicle*, 6 April 1939.
[88]Ibid.
[89]Ruger, p.176.
[90]Spence, *Empire and Imperialism,* p. 126.
[91]Ibid.
[92]*The Dundee Courier* 3 May 1939.
[93]*The Scotsman,* 6 November 1937.
[94]Spence, *Empire and Imperialism,* p.149

by Lady Allia Abbas Ali Baig. The ship was said to symbolise the role of Sikh people in 'maintaining peace in the Empire' of which 89,000 individuals fought in the First World War.[95] As hundreds of Indian soldiers were reportedly on standby in China to protect peace in the Empire, so too were the new flotilla of destroyers which bore their namesake.[96] The following day, HMS Punjabi was also launched with an equally auspicious ceremony in which the High Commissioner for India highlighted the ship's forthcoming career in 'preserving the peace of the world' and commemorating the sacrifice of 38,000 lives that the Punjabi people had sacrificed during the First World War.[97] Sir Firozkhan Noon, who named the ship after his province, wished it 'a long and successful career in preserving the peace of the world' just as 500,000 Punjabis had done.[98] Furthermore in 1938, HMS Gurkha received a bronze trophy from Major General C H Powell, a representative of the Gurkha brigade, in recognition of the work of twenty Gurkha battalions.[99]

At the time, the Tribals represented the biggest and most powerful destroyers ever constructed for the Royal Navy and it was claimed that HMS Afridi, named after the Afridi people originating from Pakistan and Afghanistan, could be 'reliably counted upon' to counteract 'the super destroyer of certain Continental Powers'.[100] The application of martial race theory in the selection of ship names is particularly significant in understanding the role of the destroyer as symbolic of imperial identities. In assigning names of the perceived martial races, the ships were imbued with warlike qualities yet considered subservient when compared to the battleships at the head of the fleet. To this end, the image and status of the powerful Tribal class destroyers were aligned with martial races and this was reinforced through a succession of naming ceremonies and material links which stressed the connection between ship and people. Whilst these examples only hint at the broader role of the navy in navigating imperial relationships and identities of the interwar period; this has suggested how destroyers had their own part to play in publicly symbolising and reinforcing imperial relationships.

Conclusion

The destroyer visit was borne out of operational exercises but quickly became an incredibly popular and much requested aspect of local culture, that reached its zenith in the 1920s and 1930s. The possibility of going aboard a ship and seeing the navy at work was an exciting spectacle for many people in locales that existed outside of dockyard towns and encouraged a culture of associated ceremonies and spectacles

[95] *Northern Daily Mail*, 17 December 1937.
[96] Ibid.
[97] *The Lancashire Daily Post,* 18 December 1937.
[98] Ibid.
[99] British Pathe, *Presentation to HMS Gurkha,* 24 November 1938.
[100] *The Western Morning News and Daily Gazette*, 29 April 1938.

which embraced sailors into the heart of the community. By exploring the ways in which destroyers were used in the conduct of regional visits, ceremonies and pageants, this article has demonstrated that destroyers were an influential exponent in the development of a localised naval theatre which explored and negotiated local, national and imperial identities. Despite the tendency of some historians to focus upon the obvious projection of power by large ships in fleet reviews, this article has shown how the destroyer symbolised the combined power of Britain, the navy and the empire.

A visiting ship could act as a site for ceremonies, civic culture and naval celebrations which created tangible links between the ship and local people. However, many of the associated ceremonies, pageants and entertainments surrounding a visit were organised and funded by wealthy civic elites, which led to discontentment amongst some portions of society over misspent public funds. Despite these pockets of resistance to naval pageantry, communities were largely encouraging of such visits as a means of feeling connected and supportive of the work of the navy. By examining how the presence of a destroyer in visits or ceremonies impacted upon civilian culture and civic celebration, this article has highlighted one way in which the navy remained a deeply engrained part of British culture and identity formation in the interwar period. In turn, a rise in the celebration of civic identity and pageantry in the interwar period encouraged more frequent and much more elaborate destroyer visits which explored the central role of the community to the work of destroyers in national and imperial defence. Cruises of coastal resorts saw the increasing role of the civilian from spectator to participant. The use of destroyers in localised ceremonies had helped to successfully proliferate naval theatre beyond the war and renegotiated the place of the navy in a subtle yet pervasive way.