

MICHAEL JEFFERSON

Jefferson was the favourite surgeon of Horatio Nelson, attending him between 1794 and 1798 during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars through the loss of vision in his right eye, treatment of his amputated right arm, and a severe head injury.

One assumes that most medical practitioners would return home on completing their training rather than volunteer for the dangers and discomforts of service in the armed forces. Choosing the second option would suggest that they lacked the family connections and wealth to establish a lucrative practice, or had insufficient education to be successful in a competitive marketplace.

However, on completing his medical training (most likely a three-to-five year apprenticeship with a surgeon-apothecary) Jefferson volunteered for the Navy at a time of significant expansion in Naval manpower, and sat a brief oral examination in anatomy, physiology and surgery on 4 April 1793 (aged 21). He was passed as a Surgeon's Mate by the London Company of Surgeons (a rank equivalent to Midshipman). He joined *HMS Agamemnon* and first saw service at the attacks on Corsica at Bastia and Calvi, where Nelson was hit in the face by debris and lost his eye. As a result of Jefferson's care of him, Nelson wrote to Lord Hood, Commander of the Mediterranean Fleet, recommending his promotion to Surgeon (equivalent to a Warrant Officer)¹ – which followed in 1794.

At the attack on Santa Cruz, Tenerife in July 1797, Nelson sustained the musket ball wound which led to the amputation of his right arm. He was in severe pain from the ligature attached to nerves in the stump, and returned to England. Jefferson was in London in October 1797 preparing for his exam for promotion to Surgeon in a higher rated ship. He was consulted by Nelson and treated the amputated stump. In December the ligature came away accompanied by a foul discharge which relieved Nelson of pain, and the wound healed quickly. Nelson earmarked him for future employment.

In March 1798 Jefferson joined Nelson as Surgeon on *HMS Vanguard*, Nelson's flag ship. He saw service at the Battle of the Nile, attended 106 casualties and performed 3 amputations. Among the wounded was Nelson himself, who suffered a severe head injury after being struck by a piece of scrap metal used by the enemy as shot. Although the wound itself healed, Nelson complained of severe headaches for months, and others noticed personality changes and lack of judgement.

Jefferson moved with Nelson to a new flag ship, *HMS Foudroyant*, in June 1799. He saw action when *Le Guillaume Tell* was taken as a prize in March 1800, and attended to 69 casualties. He served with Nelson until the latter was recalled to London in June 1800.

¹ In this rank he would have received pay of £5 a month, supplemented by an annual lump sum depending on the size of his ship, subscription income from each member of the crew, and prize money - out of which he had to purchase his own instruments and medicines.

After 7 years of loyal service Jefferson wrote to Nelson in London seeking employment with the Admiralty or, failing that, with the British Naval Hospital in Malta. Nelson obliged, and on 17 December 1800 Jefferson left *Foudroyant* to become Surgeon in Charge at the Malta Naval Hospital. He remained there until it was closed on 14 May 1802 when Malta temporarily became neutral after the Treaty of Amiens. Staff were subsequently transferred to the Military General Hospital, where there were both army and navy medical personnel. Although the Navy re-established its own hospital in Valetta in January 1804, Nelson (now Commander in Chief, Mediterranean) appointed someone else as Surgeon in Chief.

So where did Jefferson fail? Apparently Jefferson wrote to Lady Hamilton in 1803 asking her to help him secure the post of Surgeon on *HMS Victory*. Nelson replied in March 1804 that he was very happy with his current surgeon and would not replace him even if he was able to do so. Nelson indicated that Jefferson had lost his position in Malta due to misconduct (possibly lack of attention to his duties through excessive drinking) and must start again.

Nelson's correspondence with Dr J Snipe (25 Nov 1803), an Admiralty medical adviser, included the opinion (based on reports from Admirals and Captains who had served in the Mediterranean for some considerable time) that the situation of the former Hospital at Malta was particularly unhealthy, and that he should seek a well-appointed house in an airy and health situation. Was this failing also laid at Jefferson's door? (Another temporary site was found and a new permanent Naval hospital was not opened until 1830.)

Whatever the reason for his fall from grace, Jefferson's name was not included on the board recording Medical Officers in Charge, Royal Naval Hospitals, Malta. The first name recorded is that of Jefferson's successor in 1803, although Jefferson was still employed there in 1804.

By September 1804 Jefferson had left active service and on 10 September married Ann Mepham (born 1781, Tonbridge, Kent) by Licence at St Pancras Old Parish Church. He had purchased a 10 year lease on 9 Judd Place, Somers Town (now the site of the British Library), presumably from his savings although we do not know how he subsequently supported himself and his wife. He died aged 37 on 19 August 1809 of unknown cause, and was buried on 24 August in the graveyard at Hampstead Parish Church.

In 1810 Ann appealed to the Navy for charitable relief. Since Jefferson had remained on the Admiralty's list of Surgeons on half pay, and had contributed to the relief fund, she became a beneficiary. But on 30 April 1811 she remarried at St Pancras Old Parish Church to Daniel Relph – presumably driven by either her financial or her social situation as a young widow.

Based on an article by Ian Douglas Fraser, "The rise and fall of Horatio Nelson's favourite surgeon" (Journal of Retired Fellows of the Royal Society of Medicine) with additional information from our own research