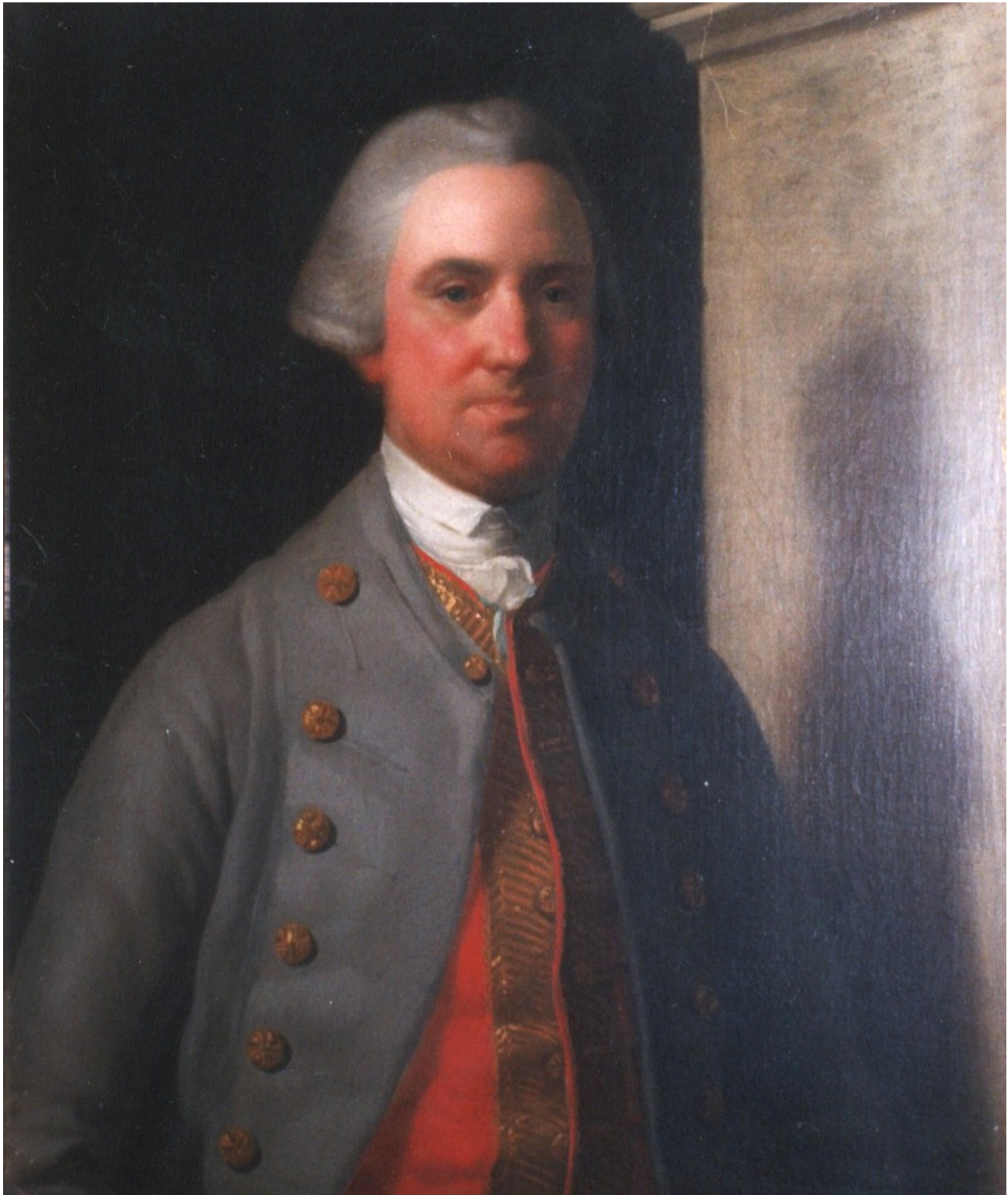


Commodore William Wilson of Great Ayton (1715 – 1795) by Cliff Thornton



Such is the pre-eminence of Captain James Cook that he has eclipsed some of Cleveland's other residents who in their day also achieved national fame for their exploits. One such is William Wilson, who although not a "son" of Cleveland, chose to retire to Great Ayton in 1762 and spent 33 years of his life in the village, compared with the 8 years spent there by the young James Cook.

Wilson is said to have been descended from a respectable Yorkshire family. He joined the East India Company as a 14 year old midshipman, and in the years that followed he worked his way through the ranks, eventually becoming Captain of his first trading vessel, the Suffolk, in 1749. Over the next eight years he completed three voyages to India and China in the Suffolk. Most captains retired after three voyages, when they had made

sufficient profit from their private trading. However, the outbreak of war with France in 1756 brought Captain Wilson more money and fame than he expected.

On 9th March 1757 the Suffolk was sailing homewards in convoy with two other East India Company vessels, the Houghton and the Godolphin. As they were approaching the Cape of Good Hope they were attacked by two French frigates. Captain Wilson assumed overall command and brought the Company's ships into line. Despite being outgunned by the French vessels, his ships being heavily laden and with reduced manoeuvrability, after a three hour battle Wilson successfully drove off the French attackers.

The Directors of the East India Company were so impressed that they awarded each ship a gratuity of £2,000 to be divided amongst their crew. Captain Wilson also received a large silver tray, costing 100 guineas, as a token of the Directors' appreciation. Although this was a relatively minor skirmish in naval terms, it was a major success for the East India Company and Wilson's victory was commemorated in an engraving of the battle that was published in 1758.

Wilson's leadership impressed the Directors of the Company so much that they promoted him to the rank of Commodore and gave him a new commission to sail to China in a new vessel the Pitt "...with full power to take, sink, burn, or otherwise destroy all and every ship or ships or war belonging to the French, outward or homeward bound, or within the limits of the Company's Charter." The Pitt was at that time the Company's largest vessel with 50 guns and 250 crew.

The voyage of the Pitt, from 1757 to 1760, brought Wilson even more fame as he discovered and charted a maritime channel, subsequently called the Pitt Passage which provided Company vessels with an alternative route to China. The Pitt came home from China using this new route in only 3 months, the quickest return voyage ever made at that time. The Court of Directors of the East India Company once again showed their appreciation of Captain Wilson's achievements by awarding him a 100 guinea gold medal that commemorated his discovery.

Wilson's voyage in the Pitt was to be his last, and after returning to England he accepted a Company appointment as Assistant to the Master Attendant. This position gave him responsibility for inspecting the construction of those ships being built for the Company, to ensure that they met the high specifications necessary for such vessels. After two years in office Wilson tendered his resignation and retired from London to live the rest of his life with his wife in the village of Great Ayton. This was an unusual move for one who had achieved such fame during his career. Most East India Company captains retired to select areas on the outskirts of London, such as Woodford. The reason behind the move to Great Ayton may lie with Captain Wilson's wife. In 1755 he had married Rachel Jackson (third daughter of George Jackson of Hill House, Richmond, North Yorkshire). She was the sister to Ralph Jackson (Cleveland's 18th century diarist) and George Jackson (Deputy Secretary to the Admiralty).

They had nine children, of whom only five survived. Most were born in Greenwich, but their two surviving sons were born in Great Ayton; George in 1764, and William in 1774.

Details of the Wilson's retirement to Great Ayton are recorded in the diary of Ralph Jackson. Thanks to Ralph's daily journal we know that he helped to arrange for William Wilson to acquire Ayton Hall from Thomas Skottowe; and in October 1762 Ralph records the Wilson's household furniture arriving at Newport on board the Mary of Stockton and being conveyed in 12 cartloads to Ayton Hall.

William Wilson appears to have easily adapted to life as a country gentleman and became a well respected member of the local gentry. He was appointed as a local magistrate and showed such an interest in agriculture

that he is said to have invented his own seed drill – although the actual patent was taken out by Christopher Perkins of Stockton in 1790, Patent No. 1773.

Such was the status of William Wilson in the maritime field that even though he had moved 250 miles away from London, friends and acquaintances from the East India Company called to see him from time to time. Two such visitors are of particular importance and were detailed by Ralph Jackson in his diary as follows;

Thursday "...while we were breakfasting at Ayton Mr Dalrymple 12 September an acquaintance of Br. Wilson in the East India came."

1765

This was Alexander Dalrymple who was later to become the first Hydrographer to the Admiralty. Wilson had first met Dalrymple in 1752 when the latter was a passenger on board the Suffolk en route for Madras where he had been engaged to be a writer for the East India Company. Wilson had taken the young man under his wing and looked after him until he had taken up his post. Dalrymple's career progressed rapidly and by 1758, when Wilson arrived in Madras in the Pitt, Dalrymple had risen to become Deputy Secretary of the Madras Council. It is quite possible that Dalrymple supplied Wilson with maps and charts which assisted him in the discovery of the Pitt Passage.

Thursday " Spent all day at Ayton, this afternoon came Capt. Jas. 26 December Cook (& his wife) whose father lives in that Town, this 1771 Gentleman lately commanded the Kings Bark Endeavour.....he and his wife lay'd at Br. Wilson's."

This is the only contemporary record of Captain Cook's visit to Great Ayton and supports the claim in a Wilson family obituary that William Wilson was a

"...steadfast friend of the illustrious Capt. James Cook, between whom and himself a correspondence at once professionally scientific and personally affectionate subsisted during their joint lives."

By 1790, William Wilson was in his 75th year and his 17 year age difference with his wife was beginning to show. Wilson had successfully placed his two sons in business; his eldest son George was in India working for the East India Company, whilst William was a 16 years old apprentice to a British merchant in St Petersburg, Russia. With both sons having left home and their daughter Hannah married to Dr Francis Blackburne (son of the Reverend Blackburne of Richmond) Ayton Hall was now too large for Mr and Mrs Wilson. The poor state of the country's economy meant that Wilson's investments did not yield sufficient annual returns necessary for the upkeep of the Hall, and it was with some reluctance they placed it on the market.

Despite doing his best to give his sons a good start in their careers, they did not experience the success that their father had enjoyed. Young William completed his apprenticeship in April 1794 only to find that he was not allowed to leave St Petersburg until he had discharged his debts which totalled £ 600. With his son imprisoned as a debtor in a foreign land Wilson cashed in some of his investments and sent sufficient money to St Petersburg to clear his son's debts and secure his return home. George Wilson was more successful in pursuing his career within the East India Company and rose to become Pay master and Garrison store keeper at Vizagapatam before dying in post at 35 years of age in 1799.

William Wilson died in June 1795 aged 80 years, and it was his younger son who having returned home erected the memorial to his father inside the old parish church at Great Ayton. The white marble plaque is inscribed with a glowing tribute to William Wilson and is carved with the scene of his famous naval victory copied from the 1758 engraving.

Apart from his memorial plaque, there is little left to show the contribution which William Wilson made to 18th century life in and around Great Ayton. However, one landmark remains as a reminder of the Commodore. High on the southern slopes of Roseberry Topping stands the empty shell of a small, one-roomed stone building now called "The Shooting Box". This belvedere is thought to have been built in the late 18th century to provide Commodore Wilson and his hunting parties with shelter during times of inclement weather, a function that it still discharges today for those unfortunate to be caught in a sudden squall on the slopes of Roseberry Topping.