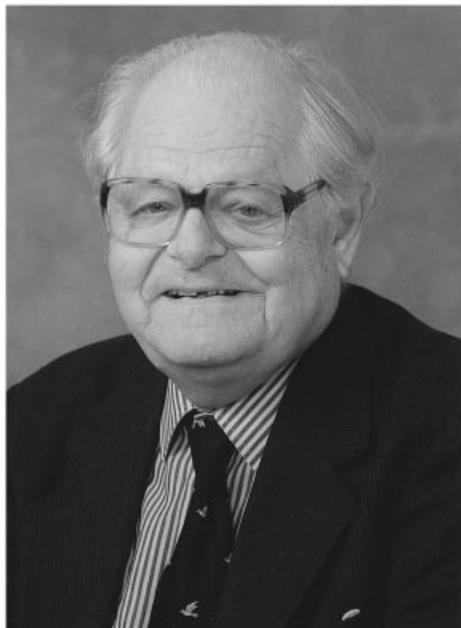


Derek Howse (1919–98)



Commander Derek Howse, who has died aged 78, was a man of many talents which he used unstintingly in time of war, and in times of peace for the public benefit. After a distinguished career in the Royal Navy he joined the Museum service, and rose in it to become the leading authority on the history of the buildings, instruments and astronomical timekeepers of the Royal Observatory at Greenwich, on the solution in the eighteenth century of the problem of determining the longitude at sea by lunar distance and by chronometer, and on the development and use of radar at sea.

Derek was the son of a Captain of the Royal Navy, and at the age of thirteen and a half years followed his father into the Navy as a Naval Cadet. In HMS *Britannia* (then the Royal Naval College, Dartmouth) for the next three and a half years Derek was given a very broad – for those, even more for present times – education, for it was in the

sciences and the humanities, in marine engineering and in seamanship, before going to sea as a midshipman in the 16''-gun battleship HMS *Rodney* for some two years. He then completed his sub-lieutenant's qualifying courses in navigation, gunnery, torpedoes, anti-submarine warfare and signals in 1939, as the Second World War broke out, when he again went to sea.

Derek quickly became a master of his chosen profession. This was made evident by his wartime service, all of it in 'small ships' fighting in the Narrow Seas, in the Battle of the Atlantic, in the Mediterranean and in the Adriatic. Thus in July 1943, when first lieutenant (second in command) of the destroyer *Inconstant*, escorting a convoy off Algeria, an attacking U-boat was detected by Asdic. A skilful counterattack by *Inconstant* forced the U-boat to the surface, the crew abandoning ship as she sank. Derek received a 'mention in despatches' for this 'excellent example of a single ship hunt'.

He then returned to Portsmouth in order to qualify as a specialist in navigation ('N'), going back to the Mediterranean in April 1944 as 'N' of the minesweeper *Rinaldo*, leading the 19th Minesweeping Flotilla. After taking part in the capture of Elba in June 1944, and

the landings on the South of France in August, Derek was again mentioned in despatches. Until the end of the war *Rinaldo* was kept busy clearing channels close to the Mediterranean and Adriatic coasts, often under shell-fire, to enable supplies to be delivered to the front lines of the advancing armies. For these services Derek was mentioned in despatches for a third time and, after the war, in December 1945, he was awarded the Distinguished Services Cross (DSC) for his service in *Rinaldo*.

He then qualified in Fighter Direction, a new specialization developed during the war on the basis of radar. He was appointed to the radar staff of HMS *Dryad*, the navigation school, near Portsmouth. For his services as ‘N’ of the cruiser HMS *Newcastle* during the Korean War, 1952–4, operating in some of the navigationally most dangerous waters in the world, Derek was made a Member of the British Empire (MBE). He retired from the Royal Navy in 1958, and turned his talents to commerce, but the life was not to his liking.

Meanwhile, at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, a Department of Navigation and Astronomy had been established in 1960. By 1963 it was in search of an assistant keeper, for the Museum was about to undertake the restoration of the ‘old’ Royal Observatory on the escarpment to the south of the Museum, which had been founded by King Charles II in 1675, ‘in order to the finding out of the longitude of places for perfecting navigation and astronomy’. The Observatory had by now been vacated by the astronomers in favour of Herstmonceux Castle, situated under the clear skies of East Sussex; what they had left behind – bomb-blasted domes, shattered, neglected buildings and a variety of historic astronomical instruments in various states of preservation, for the most part encased in boxes – was now entrusted by the Government to the care of the Museum. Derek applied for the advertised post of assistant keeper. Fortunately for posterity he was successful.

But the Museum, opened only a few years before the Second World War, during which it had been shut down, was also being brought back to life after the austerities of the immediate post-war years as a museum devoted to telling and illustrating ‘man’s encounter with the sea’. Consequently, the navigational side of the Department – by then with a staff of four, all former seamen – also had need of Derek’s practical experience as a sea-going navigator. Therefore one of Derek’s first tasks on joining was to assist in revitalizing the display in the spacious navigation gallery. Soon, with his aid, the display of the nation’s most important collection of navigational instruments and marine timekeepers was the envy of museums world-wide. Sadly, this aspect of Derek’s contribution to nautical scientific scholarship exists no more. However, to Derek was delegated the task of devising, and preparing, initially for use within the Department, what became, on publication after five years of departmental use, *The Greenwich Geographical Classification Code for Charts and Maps* (1970). Due acknowledgement of the key role that Derek played in its conception and preparation is given in the preface. It is a fine example of his organizing ability and grasp of essentials; it enables diverse charts and maps to be catalogued precisely and retrieved with celerity – every researcher’s desiderata. Meanwhile, in 1965, the restoration of the Meridian Building of the old Royal Observatory had begun, and the Caird Planetarium had been opened in the Thompson Dome of the South Building. One of Derek’s duties for several months was to present the night sky to the public by means of the Spitz projector.

At the same time the Meridian Building was being restored to display Halley's and Bradley's transit instruments and Pond's and Airy's of the nineteenth century. As Derek put it in his *Greenwich Observatory*, 'It was decided that, as far as possible, each part should be restored to its state when in active astronomical use, and that the ancient instruments should be re-instated in their working position' (iii, 15).

As completion of the rebuilding work neared, the question of how the shutters to Bradley's transit instrument had been fitted had still not been resolved. Some solution had to be devised, for the roof had to be made weatherproof! Typically, Derek took himself off yet again to Herstmonceux, and after prolonged delving in the vast store of archives discovered at last, and in the nick of time, the drawings of the shutters, and of their mechanism, made in 1852 by Sir George Airy, the then Astronomer Royal, when he had had the roof sealed up. Modestly, Derek protested that it was just a matter of serendipity. In 1967 the restored Meridian Building was opened by the Astronomer Royal, Sir Richard Woolley.

Two years later Derek became head of astronomy; in 1976 he was promoted to deputy keeper and head of navigation and astronomy, and in 1979, keeper. He retired in 1982, when the Trustees immediately appointed him to the prestigious Caird Research Fellowship for four years; he was also Clark Library Professor, University of California, Los Angeles, 1983–4. He edited *Background to Discovery – Pacific Exploration from Dampier to Cook* (1990), of which his 'Navigation and astronomy in the voyages' is a model survey of the revolutionary navigational developments made in the eighteenth century and their fundamental contributions to 'the advancement of science generally'.

Besides contributing numerous articles to learned journals associated with navigation, horology and astronomy, Derek was always a hive of industry, producing for many years, until 1996, the *News Letter* of the Society for Nautical Research. His published works were: *Clocks and Watches of Captain James Cook* (1969); *The Tompion Clocks at Greenwich and the Dead-Beat Escapement* (with B. Hutchinson, 1970); *The Sea Chart* (with H. Sanderson, 1973); *Greenwich Observatory, Vol. 3, The Buildings and Instruments* (1975), the standard history; *Francis Place and the Early History of the Greenwich Observatory* (1975), again the standard work on the subject; *Brousson's Tidal Almanac, 1546, an Explanation of Sir Francis Drake's Nautical Almanack* (1980), a valuable study of an early printed tide table; *Greenwich Time and the Discovery of the Longitude* (1980, revised edition 1997); *Nevil Maskelyne: the Seaman's Astronomer* (1989); *A Buccaneer's Atlas* (with Norman J. W. Thrower, 1992), which describes and reproduces a looted Spanish chart book; *Radar at Sea* (1993), the standard work. He was a council member of numerous learned societies, president of the Scientific Instrument Commission, IUHPS, 1977–82 and president of the British Astronomical Association, 1980–2. Derek married, in 1946, the talented and beautiful Elizabeth de Warrene Waller, and they lived happily together until his death. She bore him three sons and a daughter.

D. W. WATERS