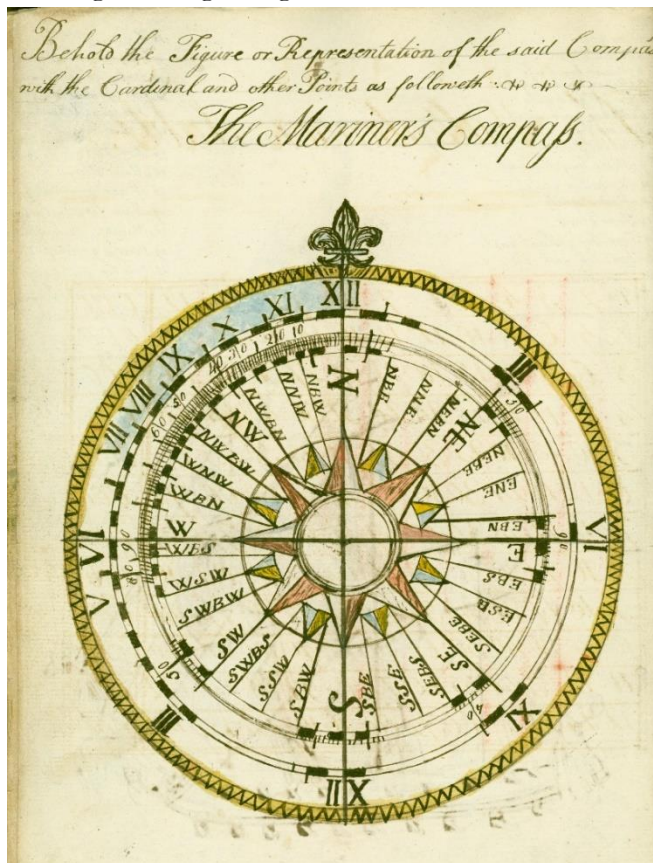


Nephew Bill Goes to Sea

In 1776 the diarist James Woodforde left his comfortable college rooms here at New College and his family home at Ansford in Somerset, to take up his new post as rector of Weston Longville, a college living in Norfolk. He took with him for company his young nephew Bill, by then aged sixteen. Bill, however, found life in rural Norfolk lonely and rather tedious; he was not cut out to be a shooting and fishing country gentleman or the protégé of a clergyman, and he rapidly became very bored and truculent.

Things came to a head two years later. On 11 May 1778 Parson Woodforde wrote the first of a series of troubling thoughts in his diary: ‘William was up in the Maids Room this morning, and Sukey was still abed—I think there is an intimacy between them.’ That may or may not have been an accurate fear; William himself later blacked-out the relevant entries when he inherited the diary,¹ but the maidservant Sukey was indeed pregnant and left Weston parsonage later that summer, having named a local labourer as the father of her child. Nevertheless, after close questioning of his nephew and doing some arithmetic, Parson Woodforde remained uneasy. The whole business signalled the growing need to find Nephew Bill a career, preferably abroad.

At that time, Britain was involved in the American War of Independence and the royal navy was desperate for able young men. Bill had already shown an interest in maritime matters while still in Somerset back in 1774, setting out (in a laborious copperplate hand) in a notebook the sort of information likely to be needed by a young man learning the business of a customs house—how to draw up lading bills correctly, how to borrow money (!), the rates payable for wharfage and lighterage, and so on. That notebook is now in the college archives (NCA 9544)



William Woodforde's sketch of a mariner's compass
New College Archives, Oxford, NCA 9544

among several other papers of William Woodforde, and reveals that by late 1778 he had agreed with his uncle that he should become a midshipman in the navy. His notebook was already adorned with sketches of a ship's compass and an identification chart of a fully rigged warship, and Parson Woodforde must have felt optimistic that he could offload his nephew to an honourable career at sea. In this matter, his negotiations were greatly assisted by Mr Hammerton who owned the local papermills and put in a good word for young Bill with his brother at the Admiralty, even offering to pay for the young man's uniform and generally ease his way into the navy if his family could not provide the funds. Bill was duly dispatched to London to take up a midshipman's place on the warship *Chatham*; but at the last minute he lost his nerve and fled back to Somerset. Hammerton confided in Parson Woodforde that he thought Bill 'very unsteady... He will never, I believe, turn out well anywhere' (Diary, 22 January 1779).

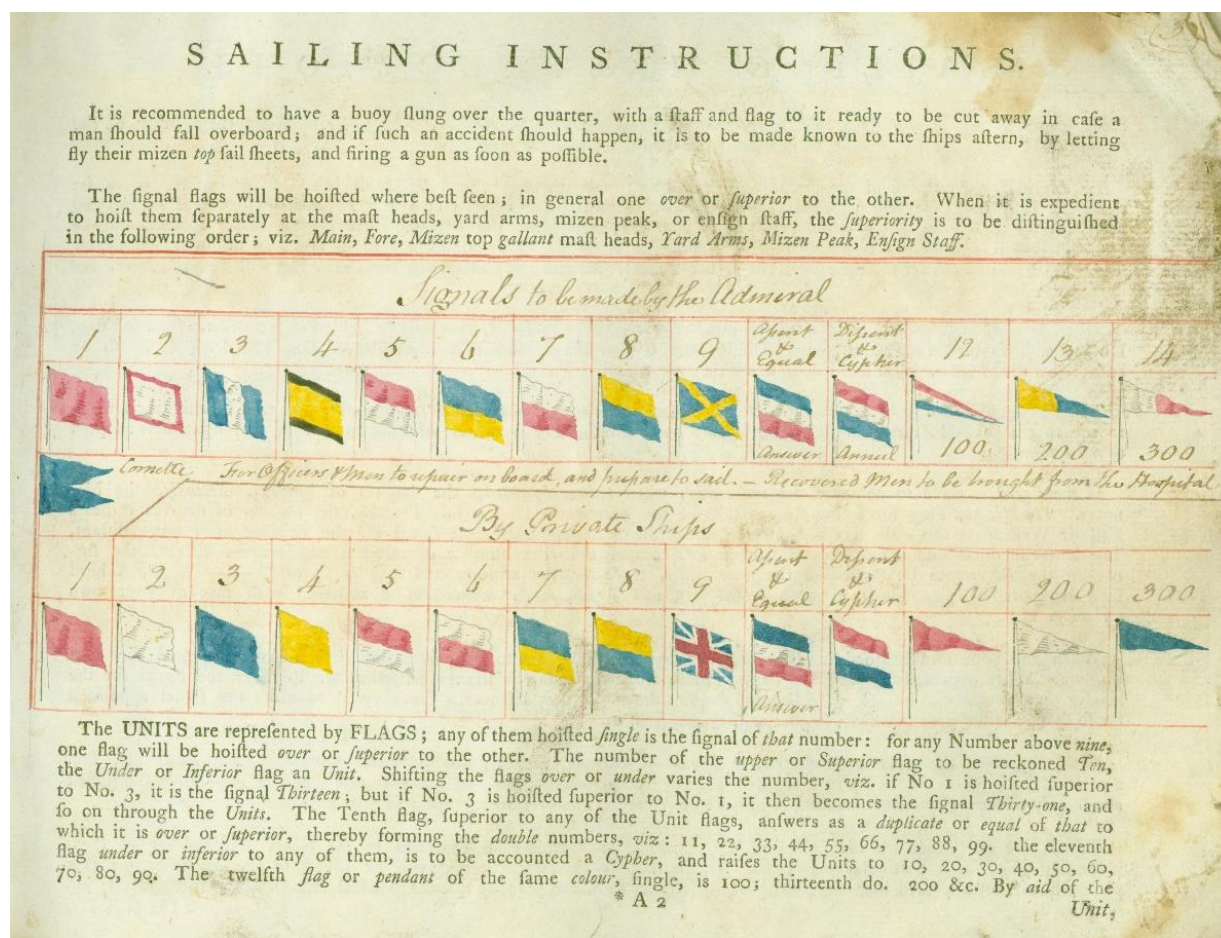
¹ The entries were partly deciphered in the 1990s by Roy Winstanley; see his *Parson Woodforde: The Life and Times of a Country Diarist* (Bungay: Morrow & Co., 1996), pp. 201-205. All the Diary entries cited or quoted in this article derive from Roy Winstanley's multi-volume edition published by the Parson Woodforde Society in the 1980s and 1990s.



William Woodforde's sketch of a fully rigged warship, with a key to its various components
 New College Archives, Oxford, NCA 9544

Negotiations must have continued, however, for during a visit to family and friends in Ansford that summer Parson Woodforde learned that Bill was about to leave for Portsmouth, to join the twelve-gun sloop of war *Fortune* (Diary, 9 July 1779). There follows a slew of entries in the parson's diary which reveal Bill's ongoing ambivalence about his career: he had been to the Barbary coast on the *Fortune*, and 'was tired of the sea already' (Diary, 23 October 1779), but things looked

up after his uncle Thomas Woodforde put in a good word for him with Lord Guildford, father of future Prime Minister Lord North, who apparently voiced approval of the young man (Diary, 1 January 1780). As a result Bill moved on to the larger sloop *Ariadne* and within a few weeks 'saw battle but was not hurt' (Diary, 15 January and 27 March). By now he was under the command of the ever-patient Captain Matthew Squire and would continue to serve under him for the rest of his naval career, despite a major falling-out in November 1780, probably concerning prize money, that took a month to be resolved. Much of their service was spent in the frigate *Astrea* off the coast of North America (Diary, 9 June 1780 to 24 January 1784 *passim*). At one point Bill was stationed at New York and Parson Woodforde noted with relief that he was 'very happy and very well, has gone through a great deal and weathered it all...He has taken many Prizes and is in no want of Cash...He is on board the *Astrea* Frigate with his old Capt. Squire.' (Diary, 20 December 1782). Like any midshipman at this date, Bill spent much time memorising the intricate systems of flag signals which were crucial to manoeuvres and communications between ships at sea (NCA 9546).

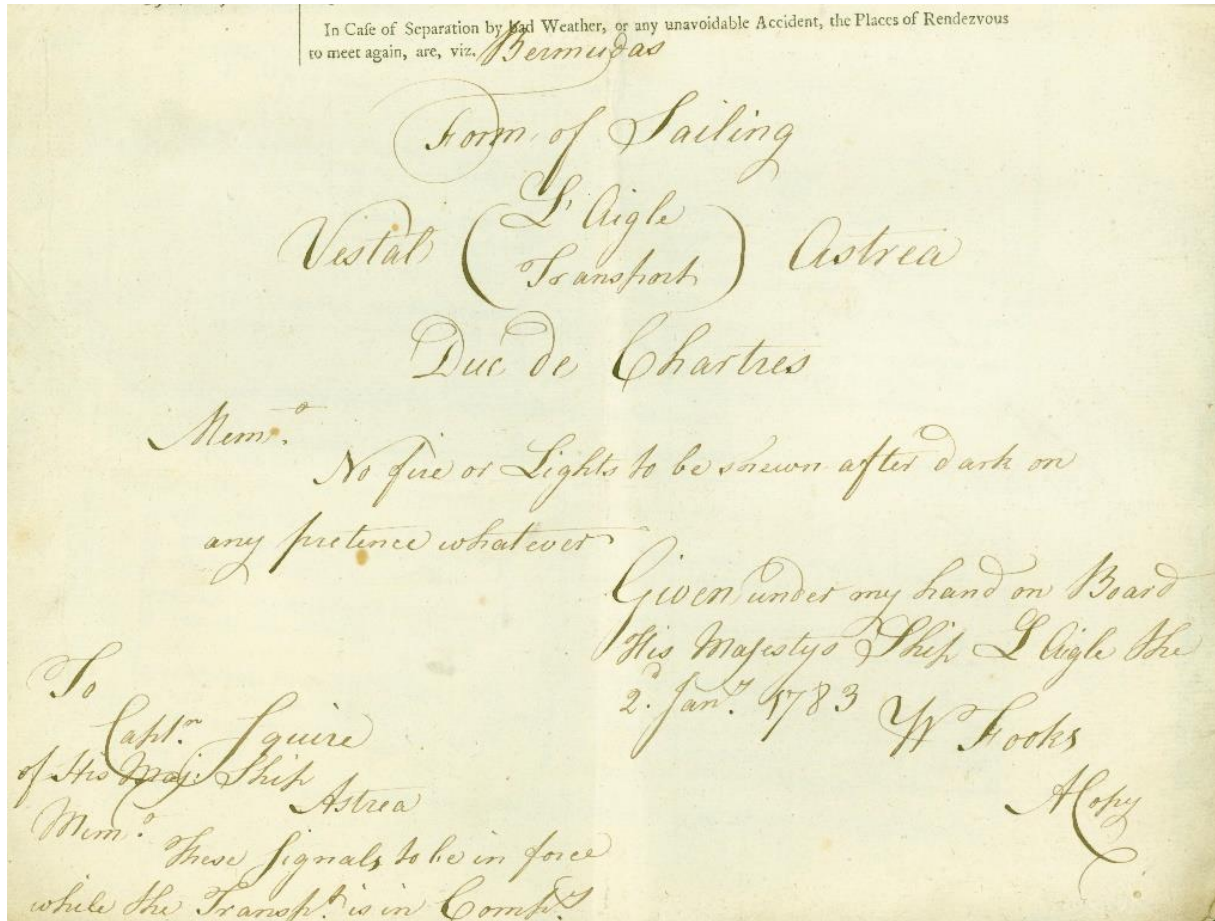


A much-thumbed page from the printed book 'Sailing Instrugtains' manual containing flag signals for use at sea
New College Archives, Oxford, NCA 9546

He also kept the obligatory midshipman's logbook while in *Araidne* and *Astrea* and the volumes for 1780 and 1781 still survive, now in the New York Public Library.² These were exciting times,

² NYPL, MssCol.123, described in their catalogue as follows: 'William Woodforde kept these logbooks (2 vols.) of the H.M.S. Ariadne and H.M.S. Astrea. Entries for the Ariadne date September 16, 1780 through February 10, 1781, when the ship sailed from the Isle of May (Scotland) in a convoy, by way of Yarmouth and Newport (England) to the Carolinas. Entries for the Astrea date from May 8-December 31, 1782, when the ship was part of a convoy sailing between Cape Henry, Quebec and New York City, apparently patrolling the coastline. Woodforde mentions several skirmishes with American and foreign vessels.'

and in 1783 the *Astrea* was part of the convoy escorting the transport ship *L'Aigle* full of fighting men and supplies, under draconian orders that 'No fire or Lights to be shewn after dark on any pretence whatever', according to its Instructions and Signals sheet (NCA 9545). Two years later William had been promoted to the rank of Captain and returned to Weston Parsonage in high spirits (Diary, 8 November 1785).



Part of the Instructions and Signals sheet for the convoy accompanying HMS *L'Aigle* off the coast of North America, 1783
New College Archives, Oxford, NCA 9545

It did not last. Parson Woodforde was soon complaining to his diary that Nephew Bill treated the parsonage as little more than a convenient B&B, and spent most of his time out and about with his sister Nancy, who had replaced him as the parson's companion—and was becoming equally bored with life in the Norfolk parsonage.

Bill subsequently returned to Somerset, where out of the blue came the news that he had eloped with a Miss Jukes, and married her at Portland Chapel on 16 November 1788. He was thirty, she was seventeen. Nancy and her uncle apparently took the news well (they had little choice, really): 'We drank their healths' noted Parson Woodforde, before going on to the, for him, more important news that 'After tea we got to cards, lost 4s 6d, so Nancy owes me now but 7s 6d' (Diary, 27 December 1788). They finally met the bride during a visit to Somerset the following June, and the happy couple later visited Parson Woodforde but—perhaps mindful of his rather strange tastes in food—turned down his invitation to dine with him. Their daughter was born in August 1789, and eighteen months later Parson Woodforde noted that 'Bill was not a little proud of a Son and Heir, his Wife & Child as well as can be expected' (Diary, 18 February 1791).

Nephew Bill's days at sea by now were over, and he had settled in Somerset, building a fine house at Gallhampton. The kindly Matthew Squire had become a Rear-Admiral and kept in touch, for in 1799, shortly before he died, he visited William Woodforde and his family. But the Napoleonic wars were now in full spate and William, by now a respected landowner, turned his interests to the defence of the west country coast. In 1804 he raised the first Corps of Somerset Volunteer Infantry, and it was at about this time that his brother Samuel Woodforde painted the portrait of Bill in officer's uniform. Four years later the Corps became the East Somerset Regiment of Local Militia, with William Woodforde appointed as its Lieutenant-Colonel Commandant (NCA 9546).



Samuel Woodforde's portrait of his brother William in officer's uniform of the Somerset Volunteer Infantry, 1805
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