

Conference Report: 'Dutch Raid on Chatham Dockyard in 1667: its Anglo-Dutch Context and Legacy', 23–24 June 2017, Amsterdam

Known in the Netherlands as Tocht naar Chatham (Expedition to Chatham) or De aanval op Chatham (Attack on Chatham), this Dutch expedition's 350th anniversary has been extensively commemorated by the British and celebrated by the Dutch to interpret its significance. Instances includethe 'Battle of Medway' exhibition and 'Tocht naar Chatham' Symposium at the Rijksmuseum; Den Helder Marine Museum's 'Zeeslag (Sea Battle) Tocht naar Chatham (1667)'; '350 jaar (year) Tocht naar Chatham' at Zeeland Maritime Museum Vlissingen (do view the excellent Dutch videos at <http://www.muzuum.nl/nl/programma/350-jaar-tocht-naar-chatham>); Historic Dockyard Chatham's 'Breaking the Chain' exhibition; Dutch tall and naval ships visiting the Medway; '1667 The Dutch Raid on the Medway' exhibition at Upnor Castle; Medway Council's 'Medway in Flames' festival; and finally the University of Kent/Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust conference, 'The Dutch in the Medway – 1667 Anglo-Dutch rivalry in its global context'.

The raid is perceived as one of the Dutch Navy's most successful naval actions. Jonathan Coad described it in the 2017 Upnor Castle guidebook: 'The 1667 raid on the Medway was an extraordinary display of Dutch seamanship, courage and daring, and a humiliation for England.' This outstanding international conference, devised jointly by the Vrienden van De Witt and the Naval Dockyards Society, and sponsored generously by the Society for Nautical Research, Vaderlandsch Fonds ter Aanmoediging van 's-Lands Zeedienst, Royal Dutch Navy and the Dr Ernst Crone Fellowship of Het Scheepvaart Museum, mustered leading scholars to explore new knowledge and meanings.

On Friday, 23 June 2017, delegates were welcomed by Christian Melsen, Chairman of the Vrienden van De Witt, and an opening address was given, fittingly, by Brigadier-General Frank van Sprang, Commandant Royal Netherlands Marine Corps.

Day 1 Papers

Anglo-Dutch relations in the seventeenth century: causes of the Second Anglo-Dutch War, Dr David Onnekink (Utrecht University)

Johan de Witt's battle fleet/naval organization, Dr Marc van Alphen (Netherlands Institute of Military History, NIMH)

The Stuart Navy, Dr Richard Blakemore (University of Oxford)

Dutch naval dockyards/stores/facilities/provisioning, Dr Alan Lemmers (NIMH)

English dockyards and coastal defence, Dr Ann Coats (University of Portsmouth)

The Second Anglo-Dutch War in Asia and the Atlantic, Prof. Emeritus Henk den Heijer (Leyden University)

Day 2 Papers

Early modern naval warfare – state, technology and tactics, Prof. Louis Sicking (Leyden/Free Universities)

Dutch amphibious tactics/execution of Chatham Raid, Dr Adri van Vliet (NIMH)

English defence response to Chatham Raid, Dr Philip MacDougall (Author, historian)

Chatham as De Witt's finest hour – ideology, Dr Gijs Rommelse (Dr Ernst Crone Fellow, Het Scheepvaartmuseum Amsterdam)

Chatham and the Stuart monarchy – political and ideological damage, Dr David Davies (SNR and NRS)

The Royal Netherlands Navy commemorating Chatham, Anselm van der Peet (NIMH)

Summing up and conclusions: Prof. John B. Hattendorf (Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island)

Themes addressed the causes and course of the second Anglo-Dutch war (1665–7), early modern naval warfare and ideologies, Dutch and British navies and dockyards, Dutch amphibious tactics and

British responses, state formation, and wider commemoration and legacies. Dr David Onnekink and Professor Henk den Heijer were stimulating keynote speakers, while Professor John Hattendorf provided a critical summary and conclusions.

To give a brief background to the raid, in autumn 1666 the financially straitened Charles II began slow peace negotiations to end the Second Anglo-Dutch War. In 1667 only small squadrons would be prepared and privateers licensed to attack Dutch trade. The fleet would be laid up in the Medway, protected by a gun platform at Sheerness Point, and the 42-gun guardship *Unity* (the former Dutch *Eendracht*, captured in 1665) stationed off Sheerness. Further guardships and fireships were to be prepared, with first and second rates moored upstream of a boom and chain below Gillingham. However, in June 1667 Sheerness fort was not complete, fireships were not ready and the chain had only just been refurbished.

On 7 June Admiral Michiel de Ruyter sailed into the Thames estuary with approximately ninety ships in three squadrons, accompanied by Cornelis de Witt (brother of Grand Pensionary Johan de Witt), member and deputy of the States of Holland and West Friesland. On the same day, Cornelis revealed to the commanders his secret instructions from the States General, written on 20 May. The fleet reached the Nore on the 10th, when Colonel and Lieutenant-Admiral Willem van Ghent led an amphibious force of ships and marines to attack Sheerness. *Unity* was unable to repulse the Dutch squadron and withdrew up the Medway, leaving Sheerness with a minimal garrison. Chatham Commissioner Peter Pett appealed to the Navy Board and removed his ship models and plans. On 10 June Charles II instructed Admiral George Monck, Duke of Albemarle, to take charge at Chatham. Sir Edward Spragge's squadron was sent to defend Sheerness, but its fort and naval stores were destroyed on 11 June. As well as Albemarle, former Navy Commissioner Sir William Coventry and Navy Commissioner William Viscount Brouncker were in the Medway area from the 11th, aiming to save the fleet and Chatham Dockyard. The Dutch breached the chain at midday on 12 June and three ships upstream were set alight. *Royall Charles*, which had not been moved upstream by Pett, as ordered, was captured. *Mary*, *Royall Oake* and *Loyall London*, moored close to Upnor Castle, were burnt on the 13th. Above them *Royall Katherine* had been sunk in the channel. On 14 June the Dutch towed away *Royall Charles* and regained *Unity*. Commissioner Pett was imprisoned in the Tower on the 17th and questioned by the Privy Council on the 19th. The Dutch did not leave the Thames Estuary until the Treaty of Breda was signed on 31 July.*

Several causes of the raid were argued, the foremost being revenge for Sir Robert Holmes's destruction of around 150 Dutch merchant ships sheltering in the Vlie Roads (West Frisia) in August 1666 and sacking and burning houses and storehouses on Terschelling. Losses amounted to £1 million, and the Dutch perceived the actions ashore as breaking an acceptable code of behaviour. For his part, during the Medway Raid de Ruyter gave strict orders that no civilian property was to be plundered or destroyed. A second theory was that the raid would accelerate peace negotiations. What is certain is that the Dutch deliberately targeted *Royall Charles* (the former Commonwealth-built *Naseby* which, renamed, had restored King Charles to England in 1660), towing it away under the Dutch flag with the English flag flying upside down. The ship was then moored at Hellevoetsluis for several years as a deliberate insult to any British Continental travellers.

Another debate was whether Jan van Brakel broke or sailed over the chain (or boom) – clearly Dutch ships penetrated beyond it. A further unresolved question is whether the door of St James's Church on the Isle of Grain was repaired by the Dutch after Willem van Ghent's Dutch Marine Corps

* England used the Julian or Old Style (OS) calendar at this time, the Dutch used the Gregorian or New Style (NS) calendar, so English dates were ten days before Dutch dates, hence the differences between English and Dutch accounts.

supposedly damaged it. Peter Pett's actions came under scrutiny: did he commandeer ships' boats to remove his models and plans? An esoteric argument was made that 'republican' was an inaccurate term to describe de Witt supporters in the contemporary 'Stadholderless' Netherlands because the rival Orangists were also republicans. However, David Onnekink asserted that it was used in contemporary pamphlets. The discussion continues about how many ships were destroyed in the raid, and who by. The final debate focused on how serious a setback the raid was to the Stuart navy. David Davies argued that Charles II had rebuilt or replaced the lost ships by March 1672, in particular the 90-gun second rate *St Michael*, signifying 'the avenging archangel against evil', built at Portsmouth in 1669, therefore the raid was not a serious material setback for the navy.

As in all the best conferences, time to converse with speakers and other delegates was an additional benefit. The programme, excellent surroundings and food provided by the Royal Dutch Navy allowed plenty of opportunities. One of the most common Dutch questions was 'Why would you commemorate it?' They could not understand why so many British historians were actively researching this humiliation. I responded that failure always provides valuable lessons. (The second was 'Why are you leaving Europe?' I couldn't answer that one except with a shrug of incomprehension.) We had a marvellous conference dinner in De Waag in Nieuwmarkt, formerly St Anthony's Gate, built in 1488 as part of the medieval city walls, which in the seventeenth century became a weigh house for goods entering Amsterdam and home to several guilds. It is regrettable that so few British delegates attended this ground-breaking conference, when its fee was so low and travel/accommodation no more expensive than visiting a UK location. The Naval Dockyards Society contributed fourteen delegates/speakers, including one student, to the impressive total of seventy-five. Many of the audience were Vrienden van De Witt members, who were very lively questioners.

Conclusions

By assembling such expert international specialists, this conference explored new hypotheses and focused the lens innovatively on particular events. In one sense the Raid failed – to reach Chatham Dockyard and its stores – but otherwise it was a magnificent success – it undermined English confidence in the monarchy, administration and navy, and advanced the Peace of Breda. It also exposed mismanagement and chaos. For deeper findings and conclusions, look out for *War, Trade and the State. Anglo-Dutch Conflict 1652–1688* (forthcoming, 2018), editors David Ormrod and Gijs Rommelse, also sponsored by the SNR.

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