William Chambers: Nelson's forgotten surgeon


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At the end of the siege of Toulon (29 August – 19 December 1793), the Royal Navy burnt the French fleet and retreated to Corsica. Here, during the Siege of Calvi (17 June – 10 August 1794), Nelson injured his right eye whilst undertaking shore duties (1,2,3) At the time he was in command of HMS *Agamemnon* and in a letter of 18 August 1794 offered the following account of the injury to his wife Fanny:

“On the 10th of July last a shot having struck our battery the splinters of stones from it struck me most severely in the face and breast. Although the blow was so severe as to occasion a great flow of blood from my head, yet I most fortunately escaped by only having my right eye nearly deprived of its sight. It was cut down, but is as far recovered as to be able to distinguish light from darkness, but as to all the purpose of its use it is gone. However, the blemish is nothing, not to be perceived unless told. The pupil is nearly the size of the blue part, I don't know the name…”(2)

Three doctors examined Nelson’s eye and documented his injury in two medical certificates. (3) These are presented below in chronological order and this article considers the author of the second certificate, a surgeon named Chambers:

“These are to Certify, that Horatio Nelson, Esquire, Commander of his Majesty's Ship *Agamemnon*, did, on the 10th day of July 1794, while Commanding the Seamen before Calvi, receive a wound of the iris of the right eye, which has occasioned an unnatural dilatation of the pupil, and a material defect of sight. Given under our hands, on board his Majesty’s ship Victory, off Calvi, this 9th day of August 1794.

JOHN HARNESS Physician to the Fleet
MICHAEL JEFFERSON Surgeon attending on shore”. (2,3)

“These are to Certify that Captain Horatio Nelson of his Majesty's Ship *Agamemnon*, now serving on Shore at the Siege of Calvi, was on the 10th day of July last, wounded in the face and right eye, much injured by stones or splinters, struck by shot from the Enemy. There were several small lacerations about the face; and his eye so materially injured, that in my opinion, he will never recover the perfect use of it again.

W. CHAMBERS,
Surgeon to the Forces in the Mediterranean.
Calvi, August 12th, 1794” (2,3).
The purpose of the certificates was to document evidence of injury sustained on duty with a view to a disability pension. It is clear that Nelson must have presented the certificates when he was assessed by the Company (later Royal College) of Surgeons of London at Lincoln’s Inn Fields, Holborn, in 1797:

“Three weeks after his arrival in London, that is, on October 12th, Nelson appeared before a private Court of Examiners of the Surgeons’ Company at their new premises in Lincoln's Inn Fields. One of the functions of this Court was to assess for purposes of pension or superannuation the severity of the wounds or disabilities suffered by members of the Royal Navy and Merchant Service and to approve the amounts spent on surgical treatment. The purpose of Nelson’s visit was to gain the opinion of the surgeons about the injury to his eye sustained three years previously at the siege of Calvi, in Corsica...” (4)

Until recently the identity of surgeon ‘W Chambers’ was unknown. Chambers’ service records show that he started his career as a Surgeon’s Mate (a rank subsequently renamed Assistant Surgeon) prior to promotion to Staff Surgeon on 7 November 1793. This rapid appointment to ‘surgeon to the forces’ appears to have been made in the field at Toulon. (5) Between 1797 and 1803 Chambers is recorded as surgeon to the 10th (Prince of Wales’s Own) Regiment of (Light) Dragoons.

Our research reveals new information about his biography. (1,5). From 1803 to 1804 he was stationed with the Dragoons at Brighton, Sussex. Here Chambers held the office of ‘Surgeon Extraordinary’ to the Prince of Wales (later King George IV). (1) In 1803, Chambers directed the establishment of a military hospital in Brighton that appears to be an early example of a general (rather than regimental) hospital. (5) In the same year Chambers founded a vaccine centre entitled the ‘Brighton Royal Jennerian Institution for the extermination of the Small Pox’. (1) This provided free vaccination for Brighton’s ‘indigent poor’ at their own homes, at St. James Street (probably Chambers’ residence) and later at a medicinal laboratory in Great East Street (see photo). Chambers’ Assistant Surgeon was William Taylor who later served in the Peninsular War and was Deputy Inspector of Hospitals at Waterloo. (6)
Great East Street, Brighton (today known as East Street).
Near here in 1803 stood a ‘Medicinal laboratory’ which was home to Surgeon Chambers’ ‘Brighton Royal Jennerian Institution for the extermination of the Small Pox’.

In 1803 Chambers was promoted back to the staff, probably to direct one of the army hospitals in the south of England in preparation for casualties from Napoleon’s anticipated invasion. (1) Central to defending the realm was the Royal Navy, England’s ‘wooden walls’. Wider land-based measures around this time included army redeployment, extensive fortification, a military canal and a semaphore telegraph. After June 1804, Chambers disappears from the records. His name is absent from roll calls for the Peninsular War (1808-1814) and Waterloo (1815). We conjecture that Chambers may have died soon after 1804. Arguments for this conclusion are twofold. First, the apparent absence of any census or death record is consistent with a period of national upheaval. It was also early in the century that formal registration of death was in its infancy. Second, there is Chambers’ forgotten link with Nelson. Had he lived well beyond victory at Trafalgar, Chambers’ association with, or recollections of, Nelson would surely have been preserved (beyond his medical certificate).

We write to ask if anyone can furnish us with further information about Surgeon Chambers’ biography? In particular, we wish to enquire whether his original (presumably hand-written) certificate survives?

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Notes
1 Cooper MJ, Whiston B. *William Chambers: British army surgeon (Toulon, 1793) and his vaccination institution (1803) in Brighton, England*. Journal of Medical Biography. Published online Feb 2021
5 Cooper M and Whiston, B. *William Chambers, Surgeon at Toulon (1793) and Corsica (1794)*. The Waterloo Journal. 2021; 43(2): 10-13
6 Cooper M, Whiston B, Fernandes C. *William Taylor, Peninsular War surgeon and deputy inspector of hospitals at Waterloo*. Journal of Medical Biography. Published online May 2021.