

ST GEORGE'S CHAPEL ARCHIVES & CHAPTER LIBRARY



Research guides

No.3 Naval Knights

Foundation

The institution of the Naval Knights of Windsor was established by the will of Samuel Travers, a barrister and a Member of Parliament for New Windsor who died in 1725. The increased demands made on the fleet by the seventeenth century Dutch Wars had led to the establishment of a professional Royal Navy and the creation of a national system of ranks, including from 1677 that of Lieutenant. Travers' will provided for annuities to be paid to 'seven Gentlemen who are to be superannuated or disabled Lieutenants of English Men of War'. Travers had served as Surveyor General of Land Revenues and was closely associated with John Evelyn, Treasurer of The Royal Hospital for Seamen, a charitable naval foundation constructed at Greenwich between 1696 and 1751. The Naval Knights' establishment at Windsor was intended to operate much like that of the Poor or Military Knights, whose origin and surviving records are described in **Research Guide no.2**. Indeed, the institution was originally founded as 'The Poor Knights of Windsor of the Foundation of Samuel Travers', only later becoming officially known as the Naval Knights through the passing of an Act in 1861. Impoverished veterans were to be accommodated and maintained in exchange for their regular attendance at services at St George's Chapel. The will made provision for the purchase of a house in or near Windsor in which the Knights could live together 'in a collegiate manner', and also prescribed that the Naval Knights were to be single men without children who were 'inclined to lead a virtuous, studious and devout life'.

The will of Travers became the subject of much dispute and litigation and the trust relating to the Naval Knights was not validated until 26 July 1793, almost seventy years after his death. The first appointments of Naval Knights were made on 27 November 1795 but they were not officially installed in St George's Chapel until 1803. In 1798 Letters Patent were issued granting corporate status to 'The Poor Knights of Windsor of the Foundation of Samuel Travers'.

Land and premises

Following the terms of Travers' will, land was purchased in 1799 on Datchet Lane in Windsor for the construction of living quarters for the Naval Knights. The Travers' College buildings were completed three years later, comprising seven houses and a messhouse, all joined by a colonnade, with a roof topped by a clock tower and a cupola. The architect is believed to have been Henry Emlyn who sold the land upon which Travers' College was built and who had been employed in the late eighteenth-century restoration of St George's Chapel.

Travers' bequest specified that the Naval Knights were to receive annuities from an estate worth £500 per annum. Land was therefore purchased in Essex to provide this income, namely Great Holland Farm, Alton Park Farm and Bovell's Hall Farm. In 1805 Travers' endowment was supplemented by a legacy in the will of Lieutenant Robert Braithwaite, who bequeathed to the Naval Knights the interest on his property.

Uniform

The Naval Knights were required to wear uniform when attending services at St George's Chapel and upon the feast of St George. This uniform initially consisted of a knee-length embroidered blue coat with white facings and with white breeches. In 1825 blue trousers were used in place of the white breeches, and a little later the embroidered coat was replaced by a double-breasted tail coat. The rank of each individual Naval Knight was originally denoted by epaulettes. These were later replaced by stripes. One stripe denoted a lieutenant and two a commander until the introduction of the rank of sub-lieutenant in 1861. Commanders were then required to wear three stripes and sub-lieutenants two.

Appointment

The early Naval Knights were chosen through an elaborate process of appointment. When a vacancy arose in the institution it would be advertised in *The Daily Advertiser* by the Commissioners of the Navy. The Commissioners would then select three men, two of whom were to be confirmed by the Lord High Admiral or the Commissioners for the Admiralty. These two names were then given to the Sovereign who subsequently chose the final successful candidate to fill the vacancy.

Dissolution

By 1860 the numbers of applicants were falling, as naval pensions and the procedure for retirement had improved, and also because lieutenants were often given the higher rank of commander upon retirement, which made them ineligible for the position of Naval Knight. In an attempt to remedy this anomaly, regulations were amended in 1867 to allow former lieutenants retiring as commanders to apply and from 1885 all naval captains and commanders became eligible for appointment as Naval Knights.

Moreover, by the 1870s the need for change in the institution was becoming increasingly recognised. Travers' ideal of devout men living in common had never been entirely successful. The records reveal many instances of fighting, drunkenness and profane language among the Knights and there countless complaints, reprimands and disagreements. Travers' prescriptions that Naval Knights should remain bachelors and that they should attend services daily were becoming increasingly contested by the Naval Knights. In 1874 they formally requested that attendance at Chapel be voluntary. The Dean agreed to a minimum of four Naval Knights to be present at services.

The decision to dissolve the Naval Knights was taken at the end of the nineteenth century. The last appointment took place in 1887 and the institution was formally disbanded under the Naval Knights of Windsor (Dissolution) Act of 1892. The Naval Knights' property then consisted of 1140 acres of land in Essex and £18,805 8s 9d of Government stock, producing an income of over £200 per annum for each Naval Knight. Understandably, the Naval Knights were reluctant to resign their pensions and to leave the College buildings. Three departed under protest, whilst Governor Willis was forcefully evicted on 20 January 1893. In 1895 Great Holland Farm was sold, followed by Alton Park Farm in 1899. The funding was transferred Greenwich Hospital and is now paid out as Travers' Pensions to naval officers. After lengthy negotiations, the Dean and Canons were permitted to rent the Travers' College buildings on Datchet Road to house their choir school. In 1934-35 the Datchet Road site and buildings were purchased by the Dean and Canons and remain the home of St George's School.

What information do we hold?

1. Establishment

A range of documents relating to the foundation of the institution of Naval Knights is kept in the St George's Chapel Archive. These records include a copy of the will of Samuel Travers Esq., dated 16 July 1724, which contains the provisions for the foundation of the Naval Knights, a Scheme for the charity dated from December 1792, the charter of 23 June 1798 for the incorporation of 'The Poor Knights of Windsor of the Foundation of Samuel Travers' (SGC XI.O.17), and the bargain or sale document by which Henry Emlyn granted a plot of land on Datchet Lane in New Windsor for the building of the residences of the Naval Knights (SGC XVII.34.7) There is also an extant charter for the Naval Knights dating from 1842 (SGC II.J.21).

2. Attendance

A series of 'Check Books', which record the attendance of Naval Knights at services in St George's Chapel for the years 1834-1849, is held in the St Georges' Chapel Archives (SGC V.A.9-10).

3. Correspondence

The Chapel Archives include a collection of the Dean's correspondence relating to the Naval Knights, dating from 1871 to 1886 (SGC XI.O.18-23,27) and a series of letters regarding the abuse of leave of absence by Naval Knights in 1859 (SGC XI.J.20).

4. Plans and drawings

A.Y. Nutt produced a sketch plan of Travers' College in January 1893, at the time that the final Naval Knights were being evicted from their residences (SGC P.107/15).

5. Chapter Acts

The Chapter Act Books of the Dean and Canons of Windsor, the formal record of the business concluded and decisions taken at meetings of Chapter, also contain occasional information about the Naval Knights. The Chapter Acts which cover the years during which the Naval Knights existed are kept in six registers (SGC VI.B.6-11)

6. Records relating to dissolution

The Chapel Archives include a file of correspondence and other papers relating to disputes concerning Travers' College just before its dissolution (SGC XVII.50.1), a lease of Travers' College to the Dean and Canons by the Lord Commissioner of the Admiralty in 1893 (SGC XVII.34.8) and the conveyance of the property by the Admiralty to the Dean and Canons in 1935 (SGC XVII.34.9)

Further reading

Peter J. Begent & Hubert Chesshyre, *The Most Noble Order of the Garter, 650 Years* (London, 1999)

Peter Clissold, 'Samuel Travers and the Naval Knights of Windsor', *Mariner's Mirror* 60 (1974). Includes a reproduced image showing Travers' College in 1804.

Peter Clissold 'The Naval Knights of Windsor' parts I & II (unpublished transcript held in St George's Chapel Archives and Chapter Library)

Edmund H. Fellowes, *The Military Knights of Windsor, 1352-1944* (Oxley and Son Ltd., Windsor, 1944)

For further information contact St George's Chapel Archives and Chapter Library, The Vicars' Hall Undercroft, The Cloisters, Windsor Castle, Windsor SL4 1NJ (email: archives@stgeorges-windsor.org) or consult our website (www.stgeorges-windsor.org/archives.html).