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Chagos News

The Periodical Newsletter of the
Chagos Conservation Trust

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EDITORIAL

HRH The Duke of Edinburgh

Midshipman HRH Prince Philip of Greece (as he then was**)** visited the Salomon atoll of the Chagos Archipelago in HMS Kent on 27th May 1940**.** His Royal Highness has very kindly permitted us to print an excerpt from his Midshipman's Journal. This provides us with a unique glimpse of history. We are most grateful.

Chagos Expedition 2006

This is the big news for 2006. Dr Charles Sheppard is leading this Expedition as he did the very successful one in 1996. Charles is Reader in Marine Science at Warwick University, Editor of the journal *Marine Pollution Bulletin*, and the author of several books and nearly 100 scientific papers. He has over 30 years personal experience of the Chagos Archipelago and is a member of the CCT Committee. He is also the Conservation Adviser to BIOT. In this issue of Chagos News Charles gives us a very full account of the plans and scientific objectives, who is taking part and what they all hope to achieve. It should be noted that this research expedition has been made possible only through the support and enthusiasm of the BIOT Administration in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Eagle Island Rat Eradication

Details of this splendid plan are also reported overleaf. This will be a magnificent achievement if all the rats are removed. It is a very difficult task but fortunately a dedicated team has been gathered and we wish them the best possible luck.

History

Nigel Wenban-Smith, our enthusiastic historian, has been delving deep into the Public Records Office, Kew and elsewhere to add to our knowledge in an article he has entitled 'Hard Work But Someone Had To Do It'. It was also Nigel who wrote to Buckingham Palace to ask HRH for the excerpt from HRH's Midshipman's Journal.

RNBWS

A report of their visit is inside.

Seasons Greetings

We hope our next issue will be in colour again with reports on the Chagos Expedition 2006 and the Eagle Island rat eradication. Meanwhile we wish all those participating fair seas and following winds.

John Topp

The Prince of Salomon

The cruiser **HMS *Kent*** is at Aden on 12 May 1940. In the ship's log we find this entry:

*1720 Joined **Midshipman HRH Prince Philip of Greece.***

Next day, the Kent sailed for Colombo and, after a short stay, sailed again southwards, visiting the Maldives; and then, on 27 May

1035 Lowered pinnace to obtain intelligence from inhabitants of Salomon Is
1042 Incr: to 10kts. & proceeded to Peros Banhos
……..
1235 Came to with Port Bower, 6 shackles in 18 fthms. over sand, in the Peros Banhos Islands (Anchor bearings Mapou de l'ile du Coin 144°, Ile du Coin 186½°, Ile Anglaise 285°)
…..…
1601 Weighed & pointed ship.…..
…..…
1734 Stopped in position 354°/2' from Diable Island. Embarked landing party & hoisted pinnace.……

Next morning

0937 Came to with pt. bower, 5 shackles in 14 fathoms over sand, at Diego Garcia. (Anchor bearings East Point 182°, Pt Marianne Pier 260°)
1331 Weighed & pointed ship.…..

It is thanks to **Marcelle Lagesse** that these manoeuvres came to our attention. In 1947 she made public[i] one of her wartime experiences as radio operator on Salomon, where her father Raoul Caboche was the plantation Administrator. We are most grateful to her for sending us the text of her article. In it she tells how, while the islanders offered the pinnace's crew coconuts, she and her father received the officers at their residence.

"Lieutenant Commander Blundell announced briskly that the Midshipman Philip Mountbatten was related to Admiral Mountbatten and was a descendant of Queen Victoria …..Nothing astonished us any more. Not even that this tall, fair-haired young man, with a sailor's tan, cheerful smile and generous heart, who looked you in the eye, should have thought of bringing us poor savages a thousand comforts AND fresh meat, an unheard of delicacy of on our island. What could be more natural than that this young man should be of royal descent and conduct himself as a normal mortal? Or that he should appreciate our simple boiled breadfruit with butter? Or that, when I complimented him on his impeccable French, he should remark "I lived for nine years in France and I'm very fond of that country"?

"After tea, our visitors asked to take a stroll. Philip Mountbatten filmed our departure, our passage along the verandah, decorated with its anchors and lifebuoy, our halt at the garden fence, some scenes of daily life, the silhouettes of some women, including the sailing captain's wife, who spent 18 months with us – all souvenirs to remember when he got home, when the world was at peace again.

"My own souvenirs were our visitors' visiting cards and a sailor's hat that someone gave me and which I still wear when I go sailing."

What then was that midshipman's view of his brief encounter with the Archipelago? Here it is, revealed to the world for the very first time.

"2nd June, 1940. After doing about one and a half turns in the 9° channel we again steered south. This time we were officially enlightened as to our business. We were back on our original job, which has since come to be known as Island hunting. We passed the Maldive Islands and soon after we sighted the first of the Chagos group which was our destination. We passed several close to, keeping good lookout for any masts showing above the coconut palms. We crossed the line again that evening and the next day the ceremonies were going to be carried out. It was probably due to the fact that I was the only member of the gunroom who had a crossing-the-line certificate that I was detailed to go with the pinnace that day, and the 1st Lt., to visit the Salomon group. We left the ship about 1030 having filled the boat up with our lunch and tea, rifles, ammunition, revolvers, wireless sets and telegraphists. After a rather haphazard navigation of the rocks in the lagoon, we eventually came alongside a small jetty. We were very cordially met by the French manager, his wireless operator and the skipper of a copra schooner which was lying in the lagoon. Having told the boat to lay off, the first Lt., two W/T ratings and self adjourned to the manager's house. A long and complicated bilingual cross-examination ensued while the schooner captain seemed to take a great delight in airing the least printable words in the English language on people who could fully appreciate them. Eventually all the necessary information was wheedled out of the reluctant and somewhat suspicious manager. He then told us rather resignedly that every time a British warship came through he had to answer exactly the same questions.

"We then decided it was time for some food and having offered the manager's daughter some fresh meat and bread as a peace offering, we returned to the boat, assured the crew that the natives were friendly and the sharks tame, and collected our lunch. We returned to the house and broke our bread while the hosts drank coffee. The skipper's wife joined us there. She was small and pretty in a French way and spoke no English, in fact she hardly spoke at all. After lunch we were shown the island. Before we left the ship, the Captain had expressed a (universal) desire for fresh fish, so having made enquiries at the island, we left with a guide and proceeded to blow them up with small charges. We let go about four charges and collected about fifty or sixty fish. This was probably the most amusing episode of the day. Four of us got into bathing suits and as the fish came to the surface we dived in and threw them into the boat. Eventually, after a most interesting day we returned aboard at 1800.

"The ship in the meanwhile had gone to another island to pay a similar call. The same thing happened next day when we visited the largest and most southerly of the Chagos group, Diego Garcia, of Blue Lagoon fame. We left the same afternoon and returned to Colombo without further adventure. Having spent Thursday, Friday and Saturday in Colombo we left again for Bombay and after that another secret job as yet not announced."

A wonderful vignette. Perhaps also a comment, as readers of *Peak of Limuria* will have realised at once, on the scars which the *Emden* had left in the Royal Navy's collective memory since her visit to Diego Garcia in 1914, in shrewd anticipation of the damage which the *Admiral Scheer* was to inflict less than a year later.

Nigel Wenban-Smith

[1] Mauritius *Journal Officiel* 1947 "Savez Vous Que"

Chagos 2006

by

Charles Sheppard

I have once again been given the humbling honour, frightening administration, tremendous responsibility and copious workload of organising a large research expedition to the Chagos Archipelago. So, having just overseen the despatch of the first 21 crates filled with boats, diving equipment, spares and other materials, I can take a brief but deep breath to describe the purpose and nature of the work that we will be doing in the islands in February and March 2006.

It began in one sense with the approval by the BIOT Administration of the Chagos Conservation Management Plan, written a couple of years ago. Management of Chagos outside the southernmost atoll of Diego Garcia is difficult because of remoteness and complex logistics, while the uninhabited nature of the other atolls adds many complications of its own. Although there are no residents in most of the group to add direct human impacts to these reefs, thus making Chagos a most unusual and excellent opportunity for research on 'baseline' conditions, there is also no infrastructure from which any management can be directed. Yet it is acknowledged, by scientists and not least by the BIOT Commissioner and Administration, that the remarkably unimpacted reefs and islands of Chagos are a natural treasure store, one which is scientifically both unusual and increasingly important in a world where human impacts are causing ever-increasing distortions to the natural world. They were affected by the warming event in 1998 and by subsequent smaller warmings, but still they lack the direct impacts from which most locations suffer. While most of us do not suggest that all human changes are detrimental, many of them clearly are, and it is only in increasingly uncommon sites like Chagos that scientists can provide answers for the solution of problems in many parts of today's world.

Thus, this research programme, whose start date is February 2006, has two broad goals. First is improving and furthering the environmental understanding and management of the Chagos Archipelago for the BIOT Administration. Part of this is the development of ways to secure and further its environmental conservation given the region's constraints. Second is the improvement of our knowledge of how a relatively unimpacted system of coral reefs and islands works, including better understanding of what the role is of the Chagos Archipelago within the Indian Ocean. By doing this we also provide information with which to inform its management. In many ways it follows from the expedition of 1996, though the passage of a decade since then has seen the rapid development of several scientific techniques which will be brought to bear this time, notably genetic and DNA tools and remote sensing and other analytical methods.

The project elements

We can't do everything, and I decided to focus firstly on stony corals because these are the main creatures which build the reefs. On the expedition there is quite a large group of coral reef scientists. John Turner from Bangor university, David Obura from Kenya, Anne Sheppard and myself will focus on several elements of stony coral ecology, erosion, new recruitment, resilience and recovery from the mass mortality from warming of 1998 and subsequent bleaching episodes. This becomes increasingly important because these corals are living near their lethal temperature threshold, and temperatures are rising year on year. Whether they can adapt to warming, or how quickly, is a question being asked in many parts of the world, but in most places it is difficult to tease apart the effects of warming from those of various forms of pollution. In Chagos, without the usual forms of pollution we can separate the confounding effects. We will

be revisiting sites and transects we have measured many times before, and this time the measurement of the extent of anchor damage will be a new addition.

Fundamental to this and to the goal of better conservation and easier management is biological reef mapping. Mapping of the reefs and their corals, using satellite, visual and acoustic techniques will be done by Bernhard Riegl and Sam Purkis from Nova university in Florida. Their techniques of 'draping' the ecological character over relief maps of reefs is visually striking as well as scientifically indispensable.

While on the subject of striking outputs, the very large London aquarium currently being planned will feature, for its tropical tank, a reef of the Chagos archipelago. Rachel Jones from the Zoological Society of London will use her visit to help plan this exhibit, and in addition will specialise on diseases of corals in Chagos. Many coral diseases are triggered or otherwise come about from human activities, yet most are very poorly understood – diseases which nearly eliminated the shallow water reefs in the Caribbean are the classic example. In Chagos, the minimal human impact will provide a reference point for the Indian Ocean region in a way which no other location can provide. And as part of his work in the above mentioned coral group, Robert Gibbs of Bangor university will be stitching together photo-mosaics of reef transects, essential to some of the quantitative coral ecology work, but also providing potentially spectacular display material.

Soft corals will be included again in this visit, by Mike Schleyer from South Africa's Oceanographic Research Institute. Soft corals are a major occupier of space on reefs, though they do not build reefs like stony corals do. They too were killed, almost eliminated, in the warming of 1998 and curiously have not shown a very successful recovery – we suspect partly because of recruitment difficulties to such a remote site. There remain large areas of reef which used to be dominated by soft corals, such as eastern Salomon atoll, which as recently as February 2005 were still devoid of anything very much, lacking even algae which usually are quick to move in to any empty space. In 1996, soft corals were surveyed in some detail and were seen to be abundant then, showing the usefulness of baseline research and providing another very fortuitous reference point for the coming work.

Illegal poaching of sea cucumbers has increased recently, with the arrest of several camps of fishermen from Asia. The pressure on Chagos' relatively untapped riches of several species is bound to increase further as marine resources all round Asia collapse from over-fishing. In Sri Lanka, for example, sea cucumbers used to be harvested for generations by gleaning, but after collectors started using scuba the populations crashed after just a couple of years; Sri Lankan colleagues have told me that they have talked to skippers of vessels filled with this beche-de-mer which they say was poached in Chagos. We know where the arrested fishermen were camped so know which reefs were fished recently. We will therefore survey those reefs for sea cucumbers, along with reefs which may have been fished, and others which we can be certain have not been (Diego Garcia's small islands would be a good example) to quantify the impact from poaching. Poaching for many species is an issue which will only increase in importance in the coming few years. At the same time the coastal 'rapid assessment' and quantification of shoreline debris, started in 1996, will continue by Andrew Price of Warwick university; this also forms part of a world-wide study by many people. Al Harris, also from Warwick university, will be undertaking a more direct comparison of aspects of reef productivity and species abundance between the unimpacted Chagos reefs and heavily used sites elsewhere.

Introduced and invasive species can cause havoc to natural systems, familiar examples to most people being those on land. However in the sea this can be equally important and the global

bill for marine invasives is now billions of dollars. Carl Lundin and Jerker Tamelander from Switzerland and Sri Lanka's IUCN offices will focus on this using now standard protocols. On land, birds and turtles will again be surveyed. Andy McGowan specialises in birds as well as turtles and joins from Exeter university, funded also by OTEP. His work will continue the important Chagos surveys as well as help fulfil his broader brief of survey in many of the UK's tropical Overseas Territories. Seychelles-based Jeanne Mortimer returns for her third visit, funded by a turtle conservation foundation, to continue work on physiology and genetics of Indian Ocean turtle populations.

Reef fishes will be examined again, by Nick Graham from Newcastle university. Where appropriate his methods will follow those of past work to ensure continuity, expanding this where possible, especially in sites around Diego Garcia where similar work has not yet been done at all to date. The story of reef fishes around the tropical world is mixed, in some areas showing marked changes over recent time, and in others not. Use of the Chagos reefs to understand fish ecology therefore, as in so many cases, provides a body of knowledge of far wider importance than its importance to us alone.

In addition, we have had numerous requests from other scientists to collect small samples for their work. Today, genetic finger-printing techniques have progressed immeasurably, and we are going to provide samples of tissues not only to our own labs but to various scientists around the world, of groups such as fishes, molluscs, corals and reptiles, all to help further our understanding of Chagos' position in the grand ebb-and-flow of species across the Indian Ocean. Our expedition doctor, Bob Crawford, who was expedition doctor for us in 1979, will assist many of us in this work.

Chemistry is again important. We found before that, with the odd exception like copper which possibly came from fungicides used in copra-harvesting days, Chagos waters and tissues had the lowest levels seen in the tropical world. Anne Sheppard and Andrew Price will continue with the programme of screening for trace, toxic substances, expanding the 1996 work to include some of the newest chemicals that today are entering the world's oceans. We hope to find again that Chagos has almost none, which, as with many aspects of our work, will serve a wider purpose for those working in many other parts of the world.

Eagle Island rat eradication

There is a simultaneous expedition also planned, again funded mainly by OTEP, to Eagle Island on the Great Chagos Bank. I mentioned above the subject of invasive species. This Eagle Island project has the objective of exterminating the rats on that island. The basis of this goes back about 30 years, after the first research expedition to that island under the scientific leadership of Prof. David Bellamy. As David explains in his forward to *Ecology of the Chagos Archipelago*: "In my book *Half of Paradise*, I mused on the idea that if the rats were removed to allow the birds to return in force, the islands and reefs could become a reserve of even greater international importance." Eagle Island is (after Diego Garcia of course) the largest island in Chagos. The other islands of the Great Chagos Bank, Nelson Island, Danger Island and the four islands of the Three Brothers group, are rat-free and packed with birds. Ridding Eagle of rats would double the area of rat-free land in the whole archipelago, not just the Great Chagos Bank.

Nigel Wenban Smith has long pursued this aim for CCT, and now a group of a dozen people will be going to Eagle Island for a three month visit under the leadership of Guntram Meier, a specialist in eradication of pest species from islands, and Alex Page of Fauna and Flora International who obtained funds to achieve this goal. Their method will involve laying out a

grid of bait-stations, involving tremendous physical labour, but with a goal which could lead to spectacular results. Their start date is the same as ours. Some logistics are being shared between the two expeditions of course, including use of the Fisheries Protection Vessel for transport.

For myself, a 3 month stay on Eagle Island was my very first experience of the Chagos Archipelago, visited in 1975 with the Joint Services in the expedition that David Bellamy refers to above. I was captivated by the place then, and have been ever since. Now, imagining Eagle Island to be rat-free, with a returned bird and turtle population similar to those seen on its adjacent islands… that would redouble the view of Chagos' position right at the top of the list of sites of world importance.

Support and funding

We are fortunate again to have the strong support of the BIOT Administration and the Commissioner, who have allocated to us the Fisheries Protection Vessel for the time needed, which is a very large contribution, additional to their provision of funding for some of the equipment. These expeditions don't come cheap. The core cash funding was from OTEP, a joint FCO and DFID fund for environmental work in Overseas Territories. With contributions from CCT, Cable& Wireless and other sources, and notably from all participants with their own grants for scientific research, the total cash budget is a six-figure sum again. This is well under half the real cost which must include the value of the FPV of course, not to mention the research grants of participants who will continue with their sometimes expensive work-up of results on their return. Some of the DNA and chemical analyses, for example, will cost several tens of thousands. (This excludes the budget of the Eagle Island project, which came also from OTEP, and which was preceded by a feasibility study, done a couple of years ago, funded by DEFRA.)

We are confident that we can provide answers to improve the understanding and conservation of the Chagos Archipelago. I have said in many lectures now all round the world that, given the immense and increasing pressures by people on natural resources in the tropical world, every ocean and every sea today needs its own Chagos Archipelago, where human impact is negligible, and where understanding of natural systems in the absence of direct human distortions can be gained. The preservation, understanding and management of the one which serves the Indian Ocean is again the objective for the research programme of 2006.

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CHAGOS ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION PROJECT 2006

Not before time, a project which has long been close to our hearts is under way: to rid Eagle Island of an invasive species – *Rattus rattus* - which has plagued it for over two centuries. Funded by the OTEP fund, DEFRA and the CCT, a hand-picked team under the direction of Fauna and Flora International is poised to leave for the island. The aim is to make possible the recovery of the island's original habitat, so allowing the populations of seabirds, turtles and hardwood trees to recover. Hence the title: Chagos Ecological Restoration Project 2006.

The rats arrived on Eagle Island with the first inhabitants in the eighteenth century and were left behind when the coconut plantations were closed down for good in 1935. By that time, neither turtle nor seabird nests were to be found. And the position has only slightly been redeemed by the subsequent

absence of humans. Yet tiny Cow Island, only half a mile to the south, teems with bird life and despite the unsuitability of its beaches receives nesting turtles. In the 1970s, David Bellamy, camping on both Eagle Island, "silent for want of birds, but alive with the scuttling of rats", and Ile Sud-Est of the Egmont group, which "abounded with rats", described in humorous terms the nuisance these animals caused to the scientific researchers. Before they had cleared the area round their campsite, the rats "no longer skulked in the shadows, but made open sorties into the cookhouse, tents, boatshed, in fact anywhere they wanted to go. The final blow came that morning when our leader woke up with a large rat sitting on his foot…." After clearance it was only slightly different: "the now broad open glades beneath the palm leaf canopy, bathed in the yellow wash of moonlight, were swarming …… all we had done was to produce a rat clearway from their retreat in the forest to the heart of the camp, and in they came for their Saturday night on the town.". The title of Bellamy's book, *Half of Paradise*, reflected both his deep concern at the harm rats continued to cause to the islands' native species and his wish to see this paradise made whole again.

Eagle Island is a good place to begin the task of clearing the whole archipelago. It is rarely visited and has no other rat-infested islands close by. Its area (243 hectares, second in size only to Diego Garcia) means that the gain in nesting habitat will be substantial. So is the challenge. Even though the techniques to be adopted are tried and tested, the ten-person team will have their work cut out to complete a 30-metre grid of bait-laying trails, deal with the rats, making certain of a 100% result, and getting themselves and their kit off the island again, and all within the 14 weeks allocated. We look forward to reporting their adventures and achievement in our next issue.

Nigel Wenban-Smith

HARD WORK, BUT SOMEONE HAD TO DO IT

With the re-publication of *Peak of Limuria* and two articles about the exploration of the Chagos, there were bound to be inconsistencies; and with the alertness of *Chagos News* readers, these were sure to be spotted. Nothing for it but to return to the original sources! These works, fortunately, do far more than show how we all got things wrong ; they also bring to light new and, I hope to others besides me, exciting bits of information about the Archipelago.

In 1772, three of the East India Company's ships were exploring the northern atolls. In May, Captain Neale, in the *Swift*[ii], was sent to look for the Three Brothers islands and, after various adventures, ended by discovering the Salomon atoll.[iii] This island was not however given a name until 1776, when the French Captain Bourdé arrived there and gave it the name of his vessel, the *Salomon*; he had just come on from Peros Banhos, which he had named the Bourdé Islands. But neither Neale nor Bourdé took any steps to claim the atoll for their country. That was not done until Salomon was visited by Lieut. Archibald Blair in 1786. We will come to that story.

Later in 1772, two other ships were sent from Bombay……These were the *Terrible*, a bomb[iv], and the *Eagle*, a snow[v]. *Terrible* was soon forced to turn back by a storm, but *Eagle*, under Captain John Moore, managed to do a "distinct" survey of Egmont and others of the Six Islands group. Unfortunately, as recorded in CN 25[vi], a duel between Moore and one of his surveyors, Lieut. D.Thomas, after they had returned to Bombay resulted in the latter's death (what the duel was about is not recorded). The rough sketches he had prepared could not therefore be turned into proper charts. As *Peak of Limuria* records, the *Eagle* did nevertheless return to this area in 1773 and gave her name to Eagle Island, having already, in 1771, given her name to another island in the Amirantes (as Mme. Restif well describes in her thesis quoted in CN 25).

One of our readers has raised a different question concerning Mme. Restif's account of Captain Neale's voyage. Neale's own commentary does not support the view that he actually found, as he believed he had, the Three Brothers; in fact, he fetched up in the Seychelles, as Donald Taylor records. Nor does it state that he visited Diego Garcia, let alone make a report stimulating the British to interest themselves in settling the island. Mme Restif was relying on an academic journal article by Dr. William Spray in which this claim was made. This article is based on Spray's own doctoral thesis[vii], which however makes no mention of this claim; and neither document cites any document substantiating the assertion of a visit to Diego Garcia. Nor is there anything lending credence to it in Dalrymple's comprehensive list of voyages made to the area. In the absence of fresh evidence, we must find Spray's claim 'not proven'.

Let us now move on to 1786, by which date the British had both settled Diego Garcia (on recommendations made by Captain Sheriff, who visited the island in 1774) and decided to give it up. Lieutenant Archibald Blair had first of all surveyed Diego Garcia and was then instructed, notwithstanding the decision to withdraw, to carry out a survey of the adjacent islands of the Archipelago. He set sail on 8 October and, after surveying in turn the Six Islands (of the Egmont group), Danger Island, Eagle Island, the Three Brothers and Peros Banhos, turned his attention to the Salomons. Here is Blair's own account of that investigation. It is clear that he was, as so many yachtsmen have been since, besotted by this atoll. The richness of its flora and fauna gives a hint of what might be achieved by efforts to restore its ecology ……

"November 20th [1786] Working towards a cluster of islands to eastward, which I set from the NE island of Peros Banhos, from which the centre of the cluster bore W 18° S [sic, but as Dalrymple noted, he must have meant E 18° S] distant 17 miles. A.M. working round the southern side of the islands where they are joined by rocks and sands with breakers on them, [then] standing around the east side where they are also joined. To NW found a channel and within there was an appearance of a good harbour; hoisted out the boat and sent her ahead to sound; at 11.30 stood over a bar, which lies across the entrance. The least water we had was three fathoms. When over, [took] regular soundings - from 10 to 18 fathoms coral and some spots of land; working up, passed several shoals, on which there seemed to be but little water. At 1.30 p.m. anchored with the stream in 13 fathoms (sandy clay) near the SE island, the entrance bearing NNW distant about two miles.

"It is probable this cluster of islands are what have been called by different ships, which have made them, Les Iles Bourdé & Les Iles Solimin and it is evident they are the same islands which Captain Neale made in the *Success* grab [another mistake noted by Dalrymple; one of Neale's earlier voyages had been made in this vessel] – the innumerable cluster he mentions to have seen to the eastward [No! Neale says westward] must have been Peros Banhos. He says the harbour is open to SW winds, but this appears to have been a mistake, for by his bearings at noon when he dispatched his boat to sound the harbour, he was within half a mile of the north side of the cluster, & as he returned at 1, it was improbable he could have gone round to SW and sounded the harbour in so short a space as 1 hour – he must have meant the NW as the entrance is in that quarter.

"From Nov 21st to 25th we were employed wooding and watering; the well was dug 5 feet deep about 30 fathoms from the high water mark, and in a copse of coconut trees on SE island. The water was perfectly clear, well tasted and in abundance. We caught 20 turtle, 2 large seals and fish enough both for present consumption and salting – but they are not so plenty as at Diego Garcia, probably from the number of seals.

"The 25th sent the detachment [of soldiers] on shore, hoisted the English flag & saluted it with 3 vollies of musketry on taking possession of this cluster by name of Governor Boddam's Islands. If a judgment may be formed from the soil and productions, these may be supposed much older than any we have visited, the

soil is tolerable & much deeper than at Diego Garcia or Peros Banhos; consequently the trees take much deeper root & grow to larger size; one sort peculiar to these islands, which appears to be very good timber, grows the height of 130 feet, many very straight, some 4 feet in diameter and 40 feet from the ground to the branches; the young timber is white, but the decayed trees are of a deep chocolate colour & the timber perfectly sound. The harbour is very secure, but the bar at the entrance, on which there is not more than 4 fathoms at high water spring tides, makes it impossible for large ships to enter. There are a number of shoals within, which may be easily avoided by keeping a good lookout from the masthead, as the clearness of the water makes them easily distinguished. I did not see one rat on any of the islands, with which vermin these [other islands] in the neighbourhood are much infested, nor do I recollect to have seen insects or reptiles of any kind. Besides the sea fowl common to the adjacent islands, there is one sort which seems peculiar to this cluster. They burrow in the ground & make a noise more disagreeable than a jackal; curlew & small plover are in great abundance – which were very good [to eat?]. The productions which might turn to account are the timber, which I have mentioned, coconuts and tortoise shells – of the last but a small quantity would be procured.

At 10 a.m. I sailed out of the harbour with the intention of proving whether Ady & Candy do exist where they are laid down in the chart, and to return [to Diego Garcia] by way of Speaker's Bank ……"

Blair got back, after a hard voyage, on 12th December, leaving Diego Garcia again at the end of the month, just after the arrival of two ships, the *Drake* and the *Morning Star*, to remove the British settlement[viii]. He was ready to leave sooner, having repaired storm damage to his two small vessels and obtained all the victuals needed – except bread, which he was told would not be available until 27th December. Should we infer from this that he was willingly or unwillingly detained to enjoy a final Christmas feast on the island?! It certainly looks as if he was sad to be leaving the area in which he had worked so hard; and perhaps his calling the Salomons Governor Boddam's Islands was an attempt to ingratiate himself with his bosses in Bombay. If so, it did not work; Dalrymple firmly noted that "I have appropriated this name to the harbour and not to the islands". Nevertheless, all subsequent voyagers in these waters owe to the courage and seamanship of Blair and his colleagues an enormous debt of gratitude. It is easy to imagine from the names of their vessels and from pictures of men-o'-war that large ships abounded in these waters. Not so. And realisation of how small they were can only increase our admiration for the men who sailed them.

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[i] Mauritius *Journal Officiel* 1947 "Savez Vous Que"

[ii] The *Swift* was a grab, from Arabic *gurab* galley – Anglo-Indian, a large coasting vessel, built with a prow and usually two-masted; used in the East. In old records, a ship's name and her type are often written as if the type was part of the ship's name. In this case, the Captain wrote of the Swift Grab, which unfortunately escaped into *Peak of Limuria* as *Swift Crab.*

[iii] See Dr Donald Taylor's article in CN 17.

[iv] A small war-vessel carrying mortars for throwing bombs.

[v] Snow – from Dutch *snauw,* a small sailing vessel resembling a brig, carrying a main and foremast and a supplementary trysail mast close behind the main-mast; formerly employed as a warship.

[vi] Article by Manonmani Restif, citing Dr William Spray's 1970 article in the *Mariner's Mirror*. Incidentally, Spray's account of the duel and its consequences is rather careless. The duel *was* followed by the Captain's court-martial, but the case had nothing to do with the duel, being the result of a complaint by the ship's surgeon during the voyage; and the Captain was later promoted to the rank of Commodore. Spray also wrongly accuses Alexander Dalrymple of getting the surveyor's name wrong! No-one knows what the duel was about.

[vii] *British Surveys in the Chagos Archipelago and Attempts to form a Settlement at Diego Garcia in the Late Eighteenth Century (Mariners' Mirror, January 1970),* based on *Surveying and Charting the Indian Ocean:the British Contribution 1750-1838*, University of London, 1966.

[viii] It is thus clear that the account of the closure of the settlement in *Peak of Limuria* (1st ed, p 31; 2nd ed, p 32) is not quite accurate.

RNBWS VISIT TO DIEGO GARCIA

8 members of the Royal Navy Bird Watching Society visited Diego Garcia and conducted bird surveys for a week from 26 May 2005. The notes below are taken from the RNBWS report published in their magazine **Sea Swallow** with the kind permission of the author.

Four members concentrated on the Barton Point IBA survey. Each day the team deployed by vehicle, with ocean kayaks and mountain bikes on board, to the survey area. Once the limit of driveable track had been reached, the team would then continue on foot, bike or kayak, depending on which section of the IBA was to be surveyed. It should be noted that textbook transect recording cannot be employed for counting the breeding boobies of Barton Point. All of the birds nest within 20m of the waters' edge, often in dense impenetrable habitat. However, because of the obviousness and tameness of breeding boobies in trees, all nests and chicks can be found and counted by standing in front of the colony and looking in – this often entailed counting transects waist deep in water or from the seat of a kayak.

The survey methodology employed was to navigate by kayak, bike or foot, directed by a Global Positioning System (GPS), to one of the 272 pre-determined transect points around the colony. When the exact latitude, longitude and minutes were arrived at a point was marked indicating the front-centre of the transect plot. From this point two boundaries were marked out, 15m either side of the central point, and all of the birds present to a depth of 20m, (giving a transect area of 30m x 20m), were then recorded by categories. The principal categories used were adult on nest (no other information), adult on eggs, downy chick, partially feathered chick, fully feathered chick, fledged chick still dependant, juvenile, immature and adult non-breeding. Recording a randomly selected 115 transects from across the entire area of the colony over a five-day period allowed, by a process of mathematical extrapolation the total number of birds to be calculated.

A précis of the seabird counts from the Barton Point IBA is that the Red-footed Booby colony had a total of 4370 breeding pairs, found on Barton Point (3340 pairs), West Island (157 pairs), Middle Island (255 pairs) and East Island (618 pairs). The extent of the breeding colony of Red-footed Booby on Diego Garcia, the parameters being determined by Global Positioning System (GPS) was from 7° 21.161'S, 72° 27.856'E ocean-side (Cust Point area) to 7° 17.800'S, 72° 29.665'E lagoon-side (East Point area).

Further seabirds breeding were Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus*, with a minimum 128 pairs at the egg stage of breeding on West Island, Lesser Noddy *Anous tenuirostris* with an estimated 30-50 pairs on Middle Island, and White Tern *Gygis alba*.

Concurrently the remaining four expedition members covered the areas of ornithological importance throughout the rest of Diego Garcia. They made numerous sightings including some new records. Full details are available from the Editor **Sea Swallow** via Carr Pete Maj RM (DC IPT) [mailto:pete.carr670@qcis.mod.uk

The movement and possible arrival of waders on and around the atoll were of particular interest, and it is hoped that the data gathered will contribute to a project analysing the use of the Central Asian Flyway by waders (Peinkowski, in prep); the Chagos is likely to be the final destination for migrant/vagrant waders heading south from Asia.

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(Editors Note. When I was British Representative 1984-6 there was but a handful of Red Footed Boobies at Barton Point. I let the area be cut off and it remained thus for several years. It has been good over the years to watch the birds breed more and more and extend their nesting area further and further south.)