

## A NOTE ON THE VERNON BOWL

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In the Spring of 1980, the writer dug from the Thames foreshore near the site of Paul's wharf the bowl illustrated below (together with another, two-thirds complete), which celebrates one of the many famous British naval victories of the eighteenth century. It is in mint condition and, as can be seen, the left hand side depicts Admiral Vernon and the right, Don Blas, the opposing Spanish Admiral of the Fleet at Cartagena. Various pieces of identical or similar bowls have been found previously in London (three in the Museum of London, three in private collections) but the lettering, where it existed, was in all cases unclear.

Admiral Edward Vernon, 1684-1757, was at the height of his career at the outbreak of the Spanish Wars in the mid-1700s. In 1739 he was sent to oppose the Spaniards in the Antilles and his capture of Porto Bello on 21 November catapulted him to national fame. He was nicknamed 'Old Grog', because of his grogram coat (which the bowl probably shows him wearing) and after he had ordered in 1740 that navy rum should from then on be diluted with water, the drink immediately became known as 'grog'.

The Vernon Papers printed for the Navy Records Society give an account of the battle of Cartagena, then a fortified town on the north coast of what is now Columbia, near the Panama Canal. They include a record of a petition to Vernon from the English prisoners in the forts: 'we, prisoners under the tyranny of Don Blas de Leso, Chief Admiral to his Catholic Majesty, humbly pray god almighty for your triumph over your enemies, and a releasement to ourselves'. Vernon, on board the Princess Carolina, attacked with his fleet Cartagena harbour in March 1741 and at the beginning of April sent the following despatch (154 in Navy Papers) to the Duke of Newcastle (later Prime Minister) and Sir Charles Wager at the Admiralty: 'On 25 March our people boarded the Galiccia, Don Blas's own ship where they found both flag and colours flying and took prisoners the captain of the ship and sixty men. The wonderful success of this evening and night is so astonishing that one can't but cry out with the Psalmist 'It is the Lord's doing and seems marvellous in our eyes''.

The Galiccia was a 70 gun ship carrying 24 pounders below and 18 pounders on the upper decks and is probably the frigate moulded on the back of the bowl, which shows no fewer than five flags flying at full mast. Vernon is depicted as accepting the sword of surrender from Don Blas (note the mis-spelling on the bowl), who, on bended knee, holds his tricorne hat behind him in his left hand. A very similar scene is on the obverse of one of the several commemorative medals struck at that time.

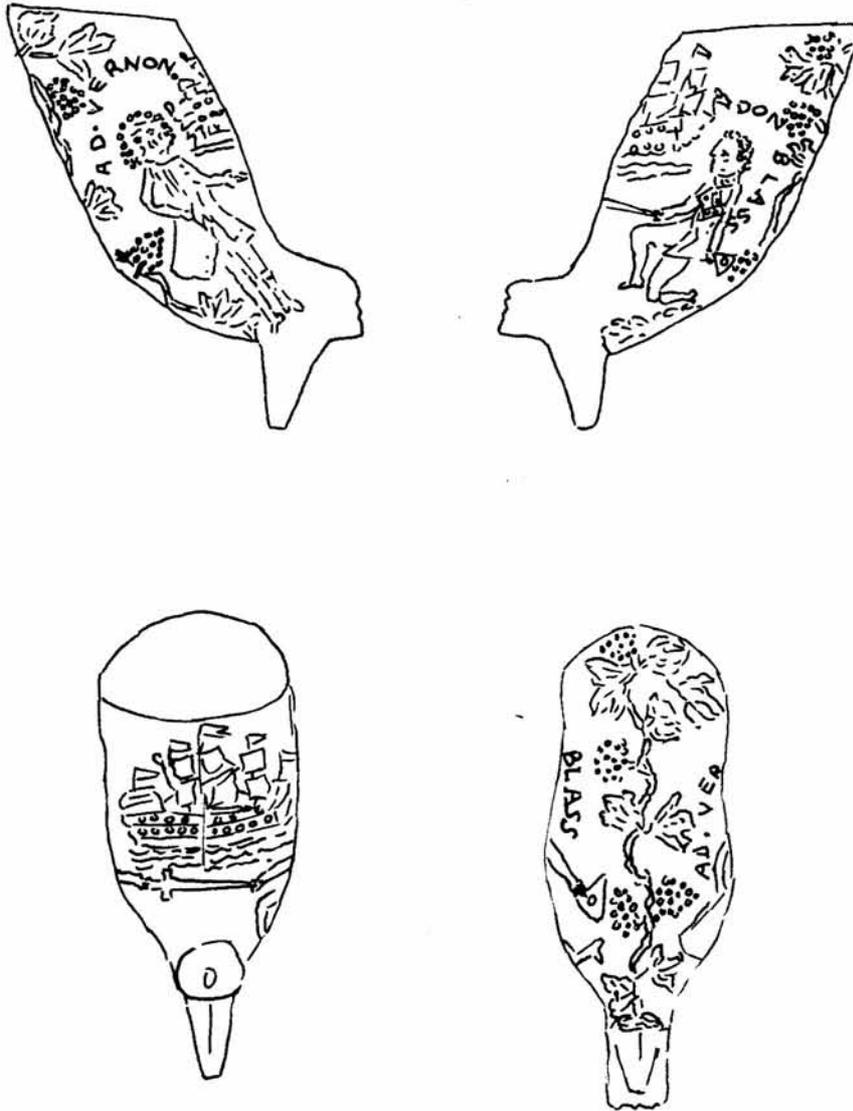


Fig. 1 Four views of the Vernon bowl.

Sir Charles Wager replied by despatch to Vernon on 23 May 1741 (Navy Records) and gives an indication of his fame throughout the country at large in the elections of that year. 'For the success of Cartagena I heartily congratulate you upon it. . . . I found that you are very popular here, you was set up at Ipswich, at Rochester and at Penrhyn for which three places you are returned. You was afterwards set up for the City of London, and two days before the election for Westminster, and at the election a poll demanded for you which continued six days with such mobs and riots as never was seen before'. (He had already been a Member of Parliament since before Porto Bello).

On a lesser scale the Wandsworth<sup>x</sup> Vestry Accounts of 10 June 1741 also show the strength of public feeling for Vernon, albeit with a sting in the tail. 'The churchwarden do pay 10s for beer which the ringers drank for ringing the bells upon the taking of the forts at Cartagena, but that no allowance shall be made for the future upon such like occasions, without a previous order from the vestry'. (A 'charge upon the parish', no less.)

Photographs of all four aspects of the Vernon bowl are included in the writers's separate paper on pipes from Paul's Wharf (Fig. 17, no. 37, p. 121 & 126 below).

It will be seen that the front of it is decorated with a vine bearing alternating bunches of grapes and leaves, suggesting that the pipe was made for a tavern, or perhaps merely that it was likely to be smoked in the proximity of a bottle of wine. Bryant Lillywhite in *London Signs*<sup>2</sup> notes two Admiral Vernon taverns, in North Audley Street dating 1755-1827 and in Bishopsgate Street Without, 1752-71, but he also quotes a contemporary observation that in 1739 after his capture of the fort of Porto Bello, Vernon's portrait 'dangled from every signpost'. Horace Walpole commented in May 1746: 'we have got Admiral Vernon's head on our signs'. It is clear that Vernon was commemorated in a number of different ways at around this period and in the light of the association of the bowl with Cartagena it seems reasonable to date its manufacture to the year 1741. The maker is unknown and there are no initials on the spur.

In his paper on further Wiltshire pipe makers<sup>3</sup> D. R. Atkinson notes an oval stem stamp on large spur pipes from Salisbury which features a head in the style of a Roman emperor surrounded by A. VERNON in small relief letters. It is likely that these pipes also celebrated a victory by the Admiral, perhaps that of Porto Bello referred to above.

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1. See *British Naval Medals* by Marquess of Milford Haven, 1919, fig. 292.

2. Published by George Allen and Unwin Ltd. in 1972.

3. *More Wiltshire Clay Tobacco Pipe Varieties*, D. R. Atkinson, 1980. B. A. R. III.

x London SW18 district