

Dudley North, Admiral

by Gordon Braddock



Residing in Langstone High Street and at Warblington from the late 1920s to the early 1940s, Dudley North served with the Royal Navy for nearly fifty years and can rightly be called a local resident.

He was born in November 1881 at Great Yarmouth into a family of military heritage. His father Roger Edward North (1846-1897) was a General who had served in Burma with the Royal Artillery. Grandfather Charles Napier North (1816-1869) was a Colonel in the 60th rifles, decorated for his roles in both the siege and the relief of Lucknow, India.

Roger North, Dudley's father, actually encouraged him to join the Navy where he initially served on *HMS Powerful* and *HMS Terrible*. Dudley was described as a Lieutenant in the 1911 census living at 10 Somerset Place, Stoke, Devonport with his wife Eglantine née Campbell whom he had married in 1909 at Sydney, Australia. In 1917 she died without issue in London, aged 29.

Dudley North saw action at Heligoland Bight, Dogger Bank and Jutland during World War I, initially as First Lieutenant and later Commander of the battle cruiser *HMS New Zealand*. After the Great War North commanded *HMS Caledon* and *HMS Tiger*.

In 1924 Dudley married Eileen Flora Graham at Charminster, Dorset. Daughter Susan was born at Langstone Towers, High Street, Langstone in 1925. Other children – Roger, Mary and Elizabeth – were also local. The latter was an accomplished author whose eight novels included *Least and Vilest Things* (1971) and *Ancient Enemies* (1986).

Captain North was residing in the former Warblington Castle with his wife and family in 1930 when he hosted the Church Pageant and took a leading role as Henry VIII.

Four years after the pageant Dudley North held the post of Vice Admiral commanding the Royal Yacht, *HMY Victoria and Albert III*.

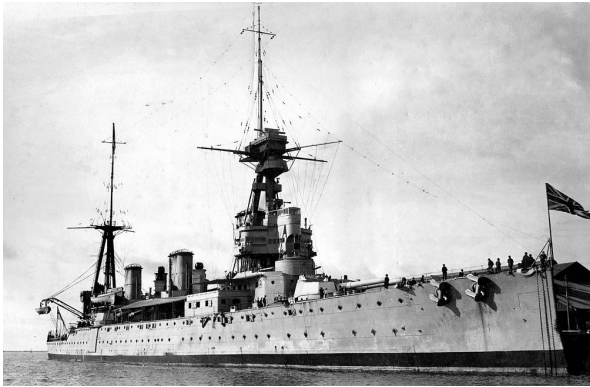
During this period North befriended the Prince of Wales who became King Edward VIII. Local historian, the late John Reger maintained that North is likely to have hosted the abdicating King briefly during his clandestine journey to Paris via Portsmouth in December 1936.



In July 1930 over 300 people contributed to the pageant organised by Mary Soames to raise money for a new central heating system for Warblington Church. Mrs Neville Ellis played Anne Boleyn while Margaret Pole, Countess of Salisbury was enacted by Mary Ogilvie Grant, soon to marry Lt Cdr Norman Scott Luard. King Henry VIII was played by host Captain Dudley North who stands between Ann Boleyn on his right and Margaret Pole.

Continued overleaf

Dudley North, Admiral contd



HMS New Zealand, a gift from the New Zealand Government, was called a 'lucky' ship because she was hit by enemy fire only once during her wartime service in WWI. She destroyed two cruisers and sustained no casualties.

As World War II approached Vice Admiral North was in charge of the Royal Squadron for the Royal Yacht on an official visit to the United States (7-12 June 1939) and Canada (17 May-3 June, 12-15 June 1939). His diplomatic skills were tested to the limit.

Three weeks after the start of Britain's entry into the Second World War in 1939, a register of the population took place. The information obtained included the names, addresses, occupations and dates of birth of everyone in the population of England and Wales except active servicemen not on leave. Since Vice Admiral Dudley North was listed as residing at Warblington Castle one assumes he was on leave.

This snapshot survey was employed to produce identity cards, issue ration books, administer conscription and direction of labour, and to monitor and control the movement of the population caused by military mobilisation and mass evacuation. After the war it was used to help set up the National Health Service records in 1948. The 1939 Register was designed to capture the details of every member of the civilian population on a specific date. It contains details of around 40 million people, recorded in more than 65,000 volumes (transcript books).

Soon after Britain declared war on Germany Admiral North found himself in charge of Gibraltar. On 9th December 1940 he was relieved of his command, controversially. It was alleged that he had failed to challenge a Vichy French Naval Squadron of six warships passing through the Straits of Gibraltar into the Atlantic. The arrival of these ships at Dakar on the West African coast frustrated the capture of this port by an Allied attack and a catastrophe ensued.

Admiral North was put in an invidious position by the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. Dudley North did not know of the planned attack on Dakar but had orders not to interfere with any French naval force unless it was sailing to a German-held port. At a time of great peril the War Cabinet and Admiralty dared not admit their blunder. North was the scapegoat in this tragic episode. He was summarily dismissed from his post of Flag Officer Commanding North Atlantic Station, based in Gibraltar. North returned home in disgrace, blamed for the errors of others.

Admiral North had previously narrowly escaped replacement because of his opposition to the attack on Mers-el-Kébir near Oran on the Algerian coast in July 1940. This action by the British on the French was designed to neutralise the French Fleet, part of Operation Catapult. Potentially an aggressive act of war, it was actually intended to prevent the fleet being controlled by the German Navy in the aftermath of the Battle of France. Nearly 1300 French sailors were killed at Mers-el-Kébir, mostly when the battleship *Bretagne* sank after a shell hit its ammunition store. Five other warships were damaged. The Vichy French eventually scuttled their own ships at Toulon on 27th November 1942 to counteract the Nazi Operation Lila which was thwarted.

After this sorry incident the Norths left Warblington and moved near Beaminster in Dorset, from where Eileen hailed. Around Christmas 1942 Dudley received instruction

from the Admiralty to take command of the naval base of Great Yarmouth and environs, the most easterly part of England incessantly subjected to air raids. He was not exonerated but it is clear the Admiralty respected him as a leader without reversing their decision.

North was refused an inquiry or court martial, even when the war was over. King George VI and Earl Mountbatten of Burma sympathised. Although he fought to clear his reputation with support from historians, Members of Parliament and five Admirals of the Fleet, Dudley North was never completely vindicated until well after his death in May 1961.

The jettison of Admiral Sir Dudley North is described in detail in the book A Matter of Expediency by Charlotte and Denis Plimmer, published by Quartet Books in 1978.



Admiral Sir Dudley Burton Napier North, GCVO CB CSI CMG