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Sir John Thomas Duckworth 1st Baronet

9 February 1748 – 31 August 1817



John Thomas Duckworth

Sir John Thomas Duckworth 1st Baronet was Born in Leatherhead, Surrey, England, Duckworth was one of five sons of Sarah Johnson and the vicar Henry Duckworth A.M. of Stoke Poges, County of Buckinghamshire. The Duckworths were descended from a landed family, with Henry later being installed as Canon of Windsor. John Duckworth went to Eton College, but began his naval career in 1759 at the suggestion of Edward Boscawen, when he entered the Royal Navy as a midshipman on *HMS Namur*. *Namur* later became part of the fleet under Sir Edward Hawke, and Duckworth was present at the Battle of Quiberon Bay on 20 November 1759. On 5 April 1764 he joined the 50-gun *HMS Guernsey* at Chatham, after leaving *HMS Prince of Orange*, to serve with Admiral Hugh Palliser, then Governor of Newfoundland. He served aboard *HMS Princess Royal*, on which he suffered a concussion when he was hit by the head of another sailor, decapitated by a cannonball. He spent some months as an acting lieutenant, and was confirmed in the rank on 14 November 1771. He then spent three years aboard the 74-gun *HMS Kent*, the Plymouth guardship, under Captain Charles Fielding. Fielding was given command of the frigate *HMS Diamond* in early 1776, and he took Duckworth with him as his first lieutenant. Duckworth married Anne Wallis in July 1776, with whom he had a son and a daughter.

After some time in North America, where Duckworth became involved in a court-martial after an accident at Rhode Island on 18 January 1777 left several men dead, the *Diamond* was sent to join Vice-Admiral John Byron's fleet in the West Indies. Byron transferred him to his own ship, *HMS Princess Royal*, in March 1779, and Duckworth was present aboard her at the Battle of Grenada on 6 July 1779. Duckworth was promoted to commander ten days after this and given command of the sloop-of-war *HMS Rover*. After cruising off Martinique

for a time, he was promoted to post captain on 16 June 1780 and given command of the 74-gun *HMS Terrible*. He returned to the *Princess Royal* as flag-captain to Rear-Admiral Sir Joshua Rowley, with whom he went to Jamaica. He was briefly in command of *HMS Yarmouth*, before moving into *HMS Bristol* in February 1781, and returned to England with a trade convoy. In the years of peace before the French Revolution he was a captain of the 74-gun *HMS Bombay Castle*, lying at Plymouth.

Fighting against France, Duckworth distinguished himself both in European waters and in the Caribbean. He was initially in command of the 74-gun *HMS Orion* from 1793 and served in the Channel Fleet under [Admiral Lord Howe](#). He was in action at the Glorious First of June. Duckworth was one of few commanders specifically mentioned by Howe for their good conduct, and one of eighteen commanders honoured with the Naval Gold Medal, and the thanks of both Houses of Parliament. He was appointed to command the 74-gun *HMS Leviathan* in early 1794, and went out to the West Indies where he served under [Rear-Admiral Sir William Parker](#). He was appointed commodore at Santo Domingo in August 1796. In 1798 Duckworth was in command of a small squadron of four vessels. He sailed for Minorca on 19 October 1798, where he was a joint commander with [Sir Charles Stuart](#), initially landing his 800 troops in the bay of Addaya, and later landing sailors and marines from his ships, which included the frigates *HMS Cormorant* and *HMS Aurora*, to support the Army. He was promoted to rear-admiral of the white on 14 February 1799 following Minorca's capture, and "Minorca" was later inscribed on his coat of arms. In June his squadron of four ships captured Courageux.

In April 1800 was in command of the blockading squadron off Cadiz, and intercepted a large and rich Spanish convoy from Lima off Cadiz, consisting of two frigates (both taken as prizes) and eleven merchant vessels, with his share of the prize money estimated at £75,000. In June 1800 he sailed to take up his post as the newly appointed Commander-in-Chief at Barbados and Leeward Islands, succeeding [Lord Hugh Seymour](#).

Duckworth was nominated a Knight Companion of the most Honourable Military Order of the Bath in 1801 (and installed in 1803), for the capture of the islands of St. Bartholomew, St. Martin, St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix and defeat of the Swedish and Danish forces stationed there on 20 March 1801. Lieutenant-General Thomas Trigge commanded the ground troops, which consisted of two brigades under Brigadier-Generals Fuller and Frederick Maitland, of 1,500 and 1,800 troops respectively. These included the 64th Regiment of Foot ([Lieutenant-Colonel Edward Pakenham](#)), and the 2nd and 8th West Indies Regiments, two detachments of Royal Artillery, and two companies of sailors, each of about 100 men. The ships involved, in addition to *Leviathan*, included *HMS Andromeda*, *HMS Unite*, *HMS Coromandel*, *HMS Proselyte*, *HMS Amphitrite*, *HMS Hornet*, the brig *HMS Drake*, armed brig *HMS Fanny*, schooner *HMS Eclair*, and tender *HMS Alexandria*. Aside from the territory and prisoners taken during the operation, Duckworth's force took two Swedish merchantmen, a Danish ship (in ballast), three small French vessels, one privateer brig (12-guns), one captured English ship, a merchant-brig, four small schooners, and a sloop.

From 1803 until 1805, Duckworth assumed command as the commander-in-chief of the Jamaica Station, during which time he directed the operations which led to the surrender of General Rochambeau and the French army, following the successful Blockade of Saint-Domingue. Duckworth was promoted to vice-admiral of the blue on 23 April 1804, and he was appointed a Colonel of Marines. He succeeded in capturing numerous enemy vessels and

5,512 French prisoners of war. In recognition of his service, the Legislative Assembly of Jamaica presented Duckworth with a ceremonial sword and a gold scabbard, inscribed with a message of thanks. The merchants of Kingston provided a second gift, an ornamental tea kettle signifying Duckworth's defence of sugar and tea exports. Both sword and kettle were subsequently gifted to the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich.

Duckworth remained in Jamaica until 1805, returning to England that April aboard *HMS Acasta*. On his return to England again, he was called to face court-martial charges brought by Captain James Athol Wood of *HMS Acasta*, who claimed that Duckworth had transgressed the 18th Article of War; "Taking goods onboard other than for the use of the vessel, except gold & etc." Duckworth had apparently acquired some goods, and in wishing to transport them home in person reassigned Captain Wood to another vessel on Jamaica station knowing that the vessel was soon to be taken under command by another flag officer. Consequently Duckworth was able to take the goods to England as personal luggage, and Wood was forced to sail back as a passenger on his own ship. The court-martial was held on board *HMS Gladiator* in Portsmouth on 25 April 1805, but the charge was dropped on 7 June 1805.

In 1805 the Admiralty decided that Duckworth should raise his flag aboard *HMS Royal George* and sail to join [Vice-Admiral Horatio Nelson](#) off Cadiz. However, the Plymouth Dockyards could not make *Royal George* ready to sail in time, and Duckworth was directed to raise his flag in *HMS Superb*, with Captain Richard Keats as his flag-captain. By the time of his arrival on 15 November, the Battle of Trafalgar had been fought. Duckworth was ordered to take command of the West Indies squadron involved in the blockade of Cadiz, with seven sail of the line, consisting of five 74-gun ships, the 80-gun *HMS Canopus* and the 64-gun *HMS Agamemnon*, and two frigates.

Although known for a cautious character, he abandoned the blockade and sailed in search of a French squadron under Admiral Zacharie Allemand, which had been reported by a frigate off Madeira on 30 November, on his own initiative. While searching for the French, which eventually eluded him, he came across another French squadron on 25 December, consisting of six sail of the line and a frigate. This was the squadron under Contre-Admiral Jean-Baptiste Willaumez, heading for the Cape of Good Hope, and pursued by Rear-Admiral Sir Richard Strachan. Duckworth gave chase, but with his squadron scattered, decided not to risk engaging with his one ship, and gave it up.

Duckworth then set sail for the Leeward Islands to take on water, dispatching the 74-gun *HMS Powerful* to reinforce the East Indies squadron. There, at Saint Kitts, he was joined on 21 January 1806 by the 74-gun ships *HMS Northumberland* and *HMS Atlas* commanded by [Sir Alexander Cochrane](#), and on 1 February a brig *Kingfisher* commanded by Nathaniel Day Cochrane, which brought news of French at San Domingo. The French had a squadron of five ships: the 120-gun Imperial, two 84-gun and two 74-gun ships and two frigates, under the command of Vice-Admiral Corentin Urbain Leissègues which escaped from Brest and sought to reinforce the French forces at San Domingo with about 1,000 troops. Arriving at San Domingo on 6 February 1806, Duckworth found the French squadron with its transports anchored in the Occa bay. The French commander immediately hurried to sea, forming a line of battle as they went. Duckworth gave the signal to form two columns of four and three ships of the line.

In the Battle of San Domingo, Duckworth's squadron defeated the squadron of French when Duckworth at once made the signal to attack and "with a portrait of Nelson suspended from the mizzen stay of the *Superb* with the band playing 'God Save the King' and 'Nelson of the Nile', bore down on the leading French ship *Alexandre* of 84 guns and engaged her at close quarters. After a severe action of two hours, two of the French ships were driven ashore and burnt with three others captured. Only the French frigates escaped.

Despite this, it is thought that Duckworth used his own ship cautiously, and the credit for the victory was due more to the initiative of the individual British captains. Duckworth nearly grounded his own ship as he attempted to board *Impérial*.

His victory over the French Admiral Leissègues off the coast of Hispaniola on 6 February together with Admiral Alexander Cochrane's squadron was a fatal blow to French strategy in the Caribbean region, and played a major part in Napoleon's eventual sale of Louisiana, and withdrawal from the Caribbean. It was judged sufficiently important to have the Tower of London guns fire a salute. San Domingo was added to Duckworth's coat of arms as words; a British sailor was added to the supporters of the Arms in 1814.

A promotion to vice-admiral of the white in April 1806 followed, along with the presentation of a sword of honour by the House of Assembly of Jamaica, while his naval feats were acknowledged with several honours, including a sword of honour by the corporation of the City of London. A great dinner was also held in his honour at the Mansion House. On his return to England, Duckworth was granted a substantial pension of £1,000 from the House of Commons, and the freedom of the city of London.

Santo Domingo was the last significant fleet action of the Napoleonic Wars which, despite negative claims made about his personality, displayed Duckworth's understanding of the role of naval strategy in the overall war by securing for Britain mastery of the sea, and thus having sea-oriented mentality having placed a British fleet in the right strategic position. Duckworth also displayed the willingness of accept changing tactics employed by Nelson, and maintained the superiority of British naval gunnery in battle.

Duckworth was appointed second in command of the Mediterranean Fleet in 1805 primarily on consideration by the Admiralty of having a senior officer in the forthcoming operations with the Imperial Russian Navy. Sailing in the 100-gun first-rate *HMS Royal George* with eight ships of the line and four smaller vessels, he arrived at the island of Tenedos with orders to take possession of the Ottoman fleet at Constantinople, thus supporting Dmitry Senyavin's fleet in the Dardanelles Operation. Accompanying him were some of the ablest Royal Navy officers such as Sidney Smith, Richard Dacres and [Henry Blackwood](#) but he was in doubt of having the capability to breach the shore batteries and reach the anchored Ottoman fleet. Aware of Turkish efforts to reinforce the shore artillery, he nevertheless took no action until 11 February 1807 and spent some time in the strait waiting for a favourable wind. In the evening of the same day Blackwood's ship, *HMS Ajax* accidentally caught fire while at anchor off Tenedos, and was destroyed, although her captain and most of the crew were saved and redistributed among the fleet. Finally on 19 February at the Action at Point Pisquies (Nagara Burun), a part of the British force encountered the Ottoman fleet which engaged first. One 64-gun ship of the line, four 36-gun frigates, five 12-gun corvettes, one 8-gun brig, and a gunboat were forced ashore and burnt by the part of the British fleet.

The British fleet consisted of *HMS Standard*, under Captain Thomas Harvey, *HMS Thunderer*, under Captain John Talbot, *HMS Pompee*, under flag captain Richard

Dacres, and *HMS Repulse*, under Captain Arthur Kaye Legge, as well as the frigate *HMS Active*, under Captain Richard Hussey Mowbray, under the command of Rear-Admiral Sir Sidney Smith, commanding the rear division. They took one corvette and one gunboat, and the flags of the Turkish Vice-Admiral and Captain Pasha in the process, with adjacent fortifications destroyed by landing parties from *HMS Thunderer*, *HMS Pompée*, and *HMS Repulse*, while its 31 guns were spiked by the marines. The marines were commanded by Captain Nicholls of *HMS Standard* who had also boarded the Turkish ship of the line. There were eight 32 lb and 24 lb brass guns and the rest firing marble shot weighing upwards of 200 pounds. On 20 February the British squadron under Duckworth, having joined Smith with the second division of ships under command of Rear-Admiral Sir Thomas Louis, reached the Ottoman capital, but had to engage in fruitless negotiations with the Sultan's representatives, advised by Napoleon's ambassador Sébastiani, and with the accompanying British ambassador [Charles Arbuthnot](#) and Russian plenipotentiary Andrey Italinski, the latter being carried aboard on *HMS Endymion*, under the command of Captain Thomas Bladen Capel, due to the secret instructions that were issued as part of his orders for the mission, and therefore losing more time as the Turks played for time to complete their shore batteries in the hope of trapping the British squadron.

Smith was joined a week later by Duckworth, who observed the four bays of the Dardanelles lined with five hundred cannon and one hundred mortars as his ships passed towards Constantinople. There he found the rest of the Turkish fleet of twelve ships of the line and nine frigates, all apparently ready for action in Constantinople harbour. Exasperated by Turkish intransigence, and not having a significant force to land on the shore, Duckworth decided to withdraw on 1 March after declining to take Smith's advice to bombard the Turkish Arsenal and gunpowder manufacturing works. The British fleet was subjected to shore artillery fire all the way to the open sea, and sustaining casualties and damage to ships from 26-inch calibre (650 mm) guns firing 300-800 pound marble shot.

Though blamed for indecisiveness, notably by Thomas Grenville, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Duckworth announced that

I must, as an officer, declare to be my decided opinion that, without the cooperation of a body of land forces, it would be a wanton sacrifice of the squadrons to attempt to force the passage

After his departure from Constantinople, he commanded the squadron protecting transports of the Alexandria expedition of 1807, but that was forced to withdraw after five months due to lack of supplies. Duckworth summed up this expedition, in reflection on the service of the year by commenting that

Instead of acting vigorously in either one or the other direction, our cabinet comes to the miserable determination of sending five or six men-of-war, without soldiers, to the Dardanelles, and 5000 soldiers, without a fleet, to Alexandria.

Soon after, he married again, on 14 May 1808 to Susannah Catherine Buller, a daughter of William Buller, the Bishop of Exeter. They had two sons together before his death, she survived him, dying on 27 April 1840.

Duckworth's career however did not suffer greatly, and in 1808 and 1810 he went on to sail in *HMS San Josef* and *HMS Hibernia*, some of the largest first-rates in the Royal Navy, as commander of the Channel Fleet, One of the least pleasant duties in his life was his

participation in the court-martial of Admiral Lord Gambier, after the Battle of the Basque Roads.

Probably because he was thought of as irresolute and unimaginative, on 26 March 1810 Duckworth was appointed Governor of Newfoundland and Commander-in-Chief of the Canadian squadron's three frigates and eight smaller vessels. Although this was a minor command in a remote station spanning from Davis Strait to the Gulf of St Lawrence, he also received a promotion to admiral of the blue, flying his flag aboard the 50-gun *HMS Antelope*.

While serving as Governor he was attacked for his arbitrary powers over the territory, and retaliated against the pamphleteer by disallowing his reappointment as surgeon of the local militia unit, the Loyal Volunteers of St John, which Duckworth renamed the St John's Volunteer Rangers, and enlarged to 500 officers and militiamen for the War of 1812 with the United States.

Duckworth also took an interest in bettering relationship with the local Beothuk Indians, and sponsored Lieutenant David Buchan's expedition up the Exploits River in 1810 to explore the region of the Beothuk settlements.

As the governor and station naval commander, Duckworth had to contend with American concerns over the issues of "Free Trade and Sailor's Rights." His orders and instructions to captains under his command were therefore directly concerned with fishing rights of US vessels on the Grand Banks, the prohibition of United States trade with British colonials, the searching of ships under US flag for contraband, and the impressment of seamen for service on British vessels. He returned to Portsmouth on 28 November in *HMS Antelope* after escorting transports from Newfoundland.

On 2 December 1812, soon after arriving in Devon, Duckworth resigned as governor after being offered a parliamentary seat for New Romney on the coast of Kent. At about this time he found out that his oldest son George Henry had been killed in action while serving in the rank of a Colonel with the [Duke of Wellington](#), during the Peninsular War. George Henry had been killed at the Battle of Albuera at the head of the 48th (Northamptonshire) Regiment of Foot. Sir John was created a baronet on 2 November 1813, adopting a motto *Disciplina, fide, perseverantia* (Discipline, fidelity, perseverance), and in January 1815 was appointed Commander-in-Chief, Plymouth 45 miles from his home; a post considered one of semi-retirement by his successor, [Lord Exmouth](#). However, on 26 June that year it became a centre of attention due to the visit by *HMS Bellerophon* bearing Napoleon to his final exile, with Duckworth being the last senior British officer to speak with him before his departure on board *HMS Northumberland*.

Duckworth died at his post on the base in 1817 at 1 o'clock, after several months of illness; after a long and distinguished service with the Royal Navy. He was buried on 9 September at the church in Topsham, where he was laid to rest in the family vault, with his coffin covered with crimson velvet studded with 2,500 silvered nails to resemble a ship's planking.