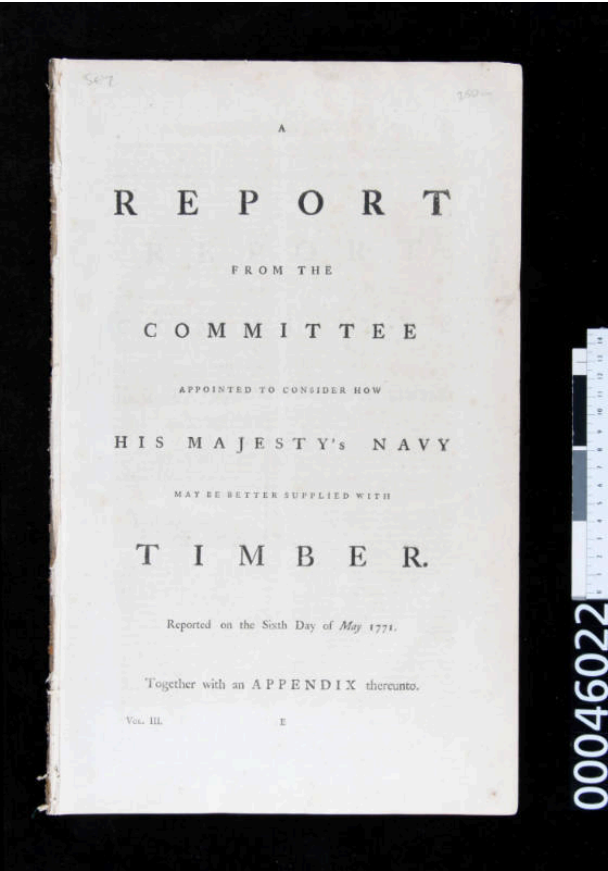


Basic Detail Report



00046022

Title

A Report from the Committee appointed to consider how His Majesty's Navy may be better supplied with Timber

Date

1803

Medium

Ink on paper

Dimensions

Overall: 424 x 265 x 4 mm, 165 g

Name

Report

History

In the 16th, 17th and 18th century timber was an essential strategic commodity required for the construction, repair and replacement of merchant and

naval vessels. Countries that had extensive maritime interests like France and Britain attempted to protect their timber stocks by introducing policies to plant new oak forests, to selectively cut existing timber and to prohibit the cutting of mature trees in the Royal forests without permission. However in the latter half of the 18th century England's Royal timber reserves were at a very low level and demand could not be met from private forests or imports. More and more vessels were being built using unseasoned or poor quality timbers and although the strategic ramifications of this shortcut were not fully seen until the American Revolutionary War in 1776-1781 where more British navy vessels were lost through foundering than through military action concerns were being raised by the Admiralty and shipbuilders long before then. In March 1771 a bill entitled 'For the More Effectually Securing Sufficient Quantities of Oak Timber for the use of the Royal Navy' was brought before the British Parliament, by Mr Buller and Mr Augustus Hervey, both Lords of the Admiralty. The aim of the Bill was to limit the tonnage of East India Company ships, with the Admiralty supporters claiming that the construction of large wooden trading vessels by the East India Company was consuming the vital and dwindling supplies of English oak and elm which were required by the Royal Navy for the repair and construction of its own ships. After the motion for the Bill was carried Mr Stephens, Secretary to the Admiralty and Captain Phipps RN were ordered to ensure that a Committee be appointed to consider how His Majesty's Navy may be better supplied with timber. At least two opponents to the Bill, William Burke and Mr Dempster, who both had financial interests in the East India Company, were also appointed to the Committee. According to Snyder (1992) the Committee was neither a witch hunt against nor a crusade in favour of the East India Company. Individual Committee members had their

own personal views concerning the Company but first and foremost the Committee was under the obligation to maintain the strength of the Royal Navy without which Britain could not maintain its standing as a world power. The Committee investigated four areas relating to the timber issue 'First, the State of Timber fit for the supply of His Majesty's Navy, its Sufficiency or Insufficiency for that purpose; Secondly, in case of Insufficiency, to what Causes it might be imputed; Thirdly, its Operation on prices; Fourthly, the Means of further Supply at Home, and by Importation; and under the Head, naturally come the Nature and Quality of the different sorts of Timber." After convening for a year, the Committee reported that the East India Company was not solely responsible for the shortage of timber and that other factors were at play including the reliance upon oak for the manufacture of charcoal used in smelting and iron foundry work, the use of timber in the construction of houses and factories, the general increase in the demand for timber for shipbuilding brought on by a larger mercantile fleet, a general increase in the size of both naval and merchant vessel, the conversion of shipbuilding timbers into cooper's ware (wooden casks and buckets) and the failure to plant and conserve additional timber stocks. The Committee recommended more competitive pricing of timber to encourage access to privately held stock, the importation of suitable timbers from the Baltic States and encouraging the development of the timber industry in the American colonies. However, by 1772 the Company was in serious financial difficulty. In the face of mounting pressure for government control of the Company, the Timber Bill became another vehicle in the debate on whether the Crown or the Company should control India. Although passed, the Timber Bill, which did end up reducing the size of the EIC fleet, had less to do with the merits of preserving vital oak for the Royal Navy than it did with efforts to limit the powers of the East India Company. Even with the decline in tonnage of the EIC fleet the timber crisis did not go away. Some authors including Geoffrey Blainey and Alan Frost have stated that the loss of the American colonies in 1781 resulted in an even greater demand for reliable timber stocks. This demand, along with other factors, resulted in the development of a strategic settlement on the east of Australia which had as one of its primary objectives the securing of timber stocks.