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# RESEARCH ARTICLE

## KICKER ROCK: BOOT, WHALE OR SEAMARK?

By: K. Thalia Grant

Puerto Ayora, Isla Santa Cruz, Galapagos, Ecuador. <galapagos@earthlink.net>

### SUMMARY

With a few exceptions, the origins of the English names of the Galapagos Islands have been clearly elucidated. Kicker Rock (León Dormido) is one of the exceptions. It is sometimes assumed that the name Kicker derives from the boot-like shape of the islet, but no historical evidence for this has been found. Here I argue that Kicker Rock got its name instead from a famous pair of 17th century British seamarks, the Kickers of Portsmouth Harbour.

### RESUMEN

**Kicker Rock: ¿bota, ballena o marca de navegación?** Con algunas excepciones, los orígenes de los nombres ingleses de las Islas Galápagos han sido bien dilucidados. Kicker Rock (León Dormido) es una de las excepciones. A menudo se asume que el nombre se derive de la forma de bota que tiene el islote. Sin embargo no se ha encontrado evidencia histórica para apoyar esto. Aquí propongo en cambio que el nombre Kicker Rock fue inspirado por un par de famosas marcas de navegación británicas que datan del siglo 17, las Kickers del puerto de Portsmouth.

### INTRODUCTION

Modern lore has it that Kicker Rock (known in Spanish as the sleeping lion, León Dormido) got its English name from its resemblance to a boot or foot (*e.g.* Dodd 1930, Pinchot 1930, Boyce 1998, Woram 2016). This is a plausible explanation, because from some angles it does appear shoe-like (Fig. 1), but it is not supported by historical evidence. Captain James Colnett, who labelled the islet for the first time on his 1798 map of Galapagos, never likened the formation to a piece of footwear. When he first sighted it, on the afternoon of 25 June 1793 (recorded as 26 June in Colnett's logbook, because he used the nautical day which ran from noon to noon), he remarked that it resembled a "Sperm Whales head mouth open & up" (Colnett 1794). Kicker might therefore mean whale, perhaps one kicking up from the deep (as in breaching or spy-hopping). However, there is no supporting evidence in the historical literature that Kicker was ever slang for whale, while kicking is not a historical whaling term and kick feeding (also known as lobtail feeding, a foraging behaviour specific to a North Atlantic population of humpback whales) did not become part of cetological terminology until the end of the 20th century (Weinrich *et al.* 1992, Greenberg 2003). What therefore is the origin of the name?

As revealed in his book about the voyage (Colnett 1798), Colnett named several other islands in the Galapagos, all after British peers, or admirals of the Royal Navy:

Hood and Chatham islands after "Lord [Samuel] Hood" and "Lord Chatham" (John Pitt, 2nd Earl of Chatham); Gardner, Caldwell, Barrington, Duncan and Jervis (spelt Jarvis in the text of Colnett's book, and Jervis in the accompanying map) islands after Admirals Alan Gardner, Benjamin Caldwell, Samuel Barrington, Adam Duncan and John Jervis. This suggests there should be an eminent Lord, Captain or Admiral Kicker in the annals of British history. I could find none, but did find two prominent Kickers of a different kind.

### THE KICKERS OF ENGLAND

Gill-Kicker and Kicker-Gill (also spelt Gilkicker and Kickergill, and collectively known as "the Kickers") were a pair of famous purpose-built seamarks, erected in Hampshire on the south coast of England in the 17th century, to help ships safely navigate the Solent between Portsmouth Harbour and the Isle of Wight (Avery 1721, Mackenzie 1821, Le Fevre *et al.* 1995) (Fig. 2). This well-fortified but shallow and narrow stretch of the English Channel was the "favourite rendezvous of the British navy, and the point from which the fleets of Nelson, Howe, St. Vincent, and Rodney...often set forth" (King 1858). The Kickers were prism-shaped towers, made of whitewashed stone, plaster and brick, standing between 15 and 38 m tall (at various times in their history) and set roughly 1 km apart (Grose & Astle 1784, Le Fevre *et al.* 1995). Gill-Kicker was the older, seaward mark,



**Figure 1.** Kicker Rock (León Dormido), from the east (photo by KTG, 2014).

erected by Admiral Robert Rich, Earl of Warwick, in or soon after 1643, as deduced from the inscription it bore which, although only partially legible when recorded in print over a century later (Grose & Astle 1784), referred to Robert and to “Captaine chard blie senior [probably Captain Richard Blith senior] his captaine in the Prince Royal”; Blith and the *Prince Royal* were under Warwick’s command only in 1643 (Powell 1962). Kicker-Gill was the landward back mark, erected in or just before 1698 (Le Fevre *et al.* 1995). Gill-Kicker presented a rectangular front, with its other two sides sloping downwards so that the rear point of the triangle was lower (Grose & Astle 1784), whereas Kicker-Gill was of even height on all three sides, until a triangular pediment was added on top of the front in later years (Pevsner & Lloyd 1967) (Fig. 3). Gill-Kicker was dismantled late in 1779 and replaced by a fort (Fort Monckton), while Kicker-Gill remained standing until 1965 (Anon. 1779, Grose & Astle 1784, Le Fevre *et al.* 1995). Eighteenth and 19th century directions for entering Portsmouth Harbour specified lining up the two Kickers (later, Kicker-Gill and Fort Monckton on “Kicker Point”) “in one”, or in combination with a nearby church or castle (Avery 1721, Norie 1839, Hobbs 1859). Several ships’ logbooks from this period include bearings taken off one or both of the Kickers (Le Fevre *et al.* 1995). For example, the log of HMS *Bounty* for 3 December 1787 reads: “at 2 pm came to anchor and moored in 5 fathoms the Kicker NNW1/2N and South Sea Castle EbS” (Galloway 2012).

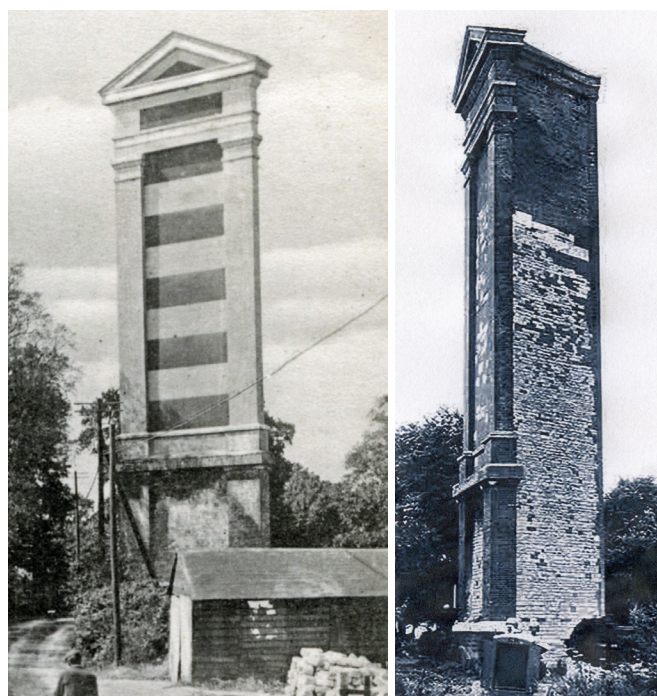
Colnett would have been familiar with the Kickers. He joined the Royal Navy in 1770, sailed on several of its ships (e.g. HM Ships *Hazard*, *Scorpion* and *Resolution*), and from 1783 to 1786 was based at Portsmouth on harbour duty aboard HMS *Pégase* (Galois 2004). Portsmouth was also the harbour where, in late December 1792, Colnett boarded the merchant ship *Rattler* and began his voyage to Galapagos (Colnett 1798). That he didn’t record a bearing off Kicker-Gill in the *Rattler*’s log is explained by the fact he didn’t start writing in it until already at sea (on 5 January 1793).



**Figure 2.** Google Earth image of the entrance to Portsmouth Harbour, England, showing the locations of the Kicker seamarks and South Sea (now Southsea) Castle.

### THE KICKER OF GALAPAGOS

The importance of the Kickers to the British Navy, and by extension, to Colnett, is indisputable, but did Colnett really name Kicker Rock in Galapagos after them? Points suggesting that he may have done so include the fact that Kicker Rock, like the Portsmouth Kickers, is a prominent seamark, *i.e.* an object visible from the sea, which serves to aid sailors in navigation. Logbooks show that many of the 19th century ships following in Colnett’s wake, *e.g.*



**Figure 3.** Kicker-Gill tower, Clayhall Road, Alverstoke, England. Left: front view (cropped from a postcard mailed in 1910, unknown photographer: KTG’s collection). Right: side view (unknown photographer, 1965: Gosport Society).

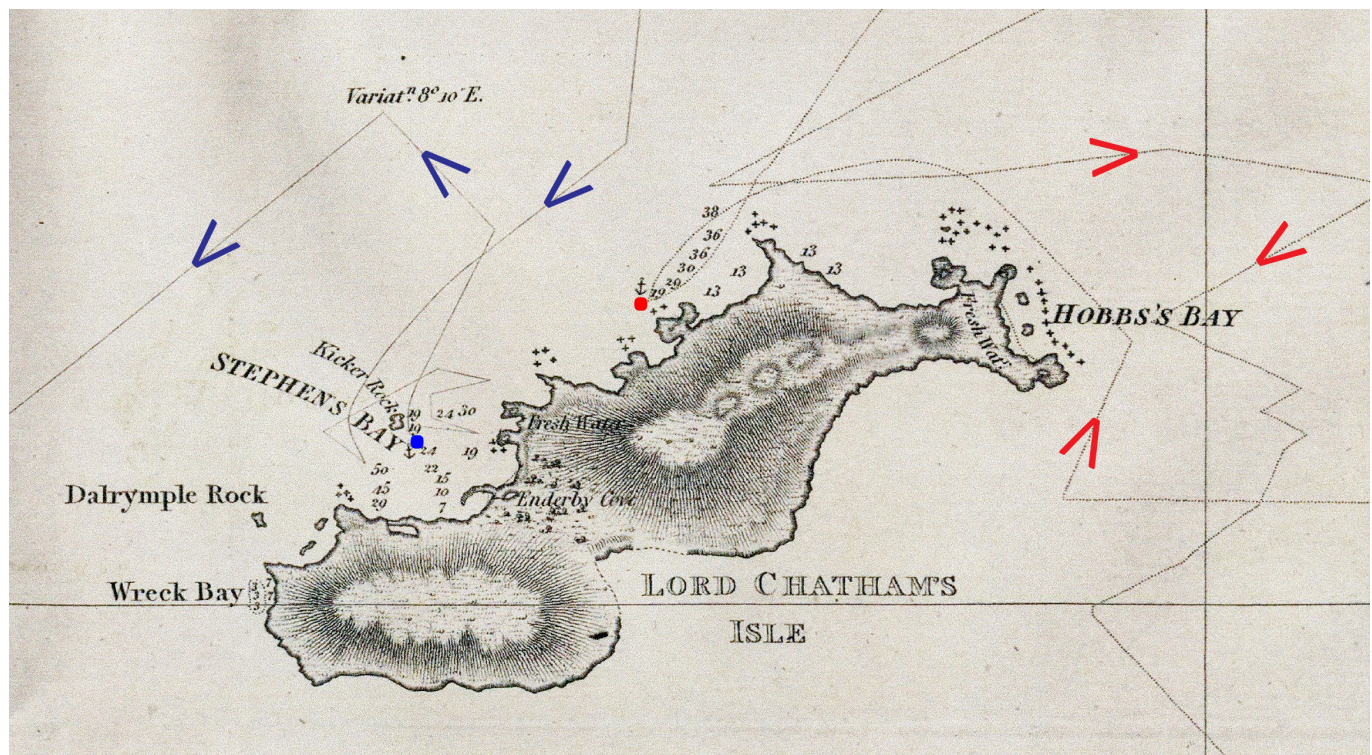
HMS *Tagus* (Pipon 1814) and HMS *Beagle* (FitzRoy 1835–6), oriented themselves with compass bearings recorded off Kicker Rock, and even today, the U.S.A.'s National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency's 2014 sailing directions for Galapagos specify Kicker Rock, "a sheer, high rock shaped like a church with a high, square tower", as a principle navigation target for the area. Another indication that Kicker Rock was named after the Kicker towers of England is that when Colnett first mentioned the name in his Galapagos account he wrote that the feature resembled "one of the Kickers" (Colnett 1794), in the plural.

Colnett saw Kicker Rock on two different occasions. The first time, on 25 June 1793, was from a distance of more than 17 km, when the *Rattler*, after closely rounding the northeastern head of San Cristóbal and stopping briefly near Hobbs Bay, came to anchor off the northwest coast, in front of the tuff cone today known as Pan de Azúcar (Fig. 4). He did not give the rock a name, but merely wrote, "... Ex[tent] of Land from S 13 W to E 34 N. a Rock of [f] the SW point like a Sperm Whales head mouth open & up W 33 S." (Colnett 1794). The *Rattler* did not get any closer to Kicker Rock that year, but Colnett did send some men in a small boat to Stephens Bay, off which the rock lies, in search of freshwater. Spelt Stephen's Bay in Colnett's book, this was probably named for Sir Philip Stephens, First Secretary of the Admiralty, to whom Colnett dedicated his book. Two days later the *Rattler* weighed anchor, headed off to the northeast, tacked back southwards around the eastern tip of San Cristóbal, passed within 5 miles of

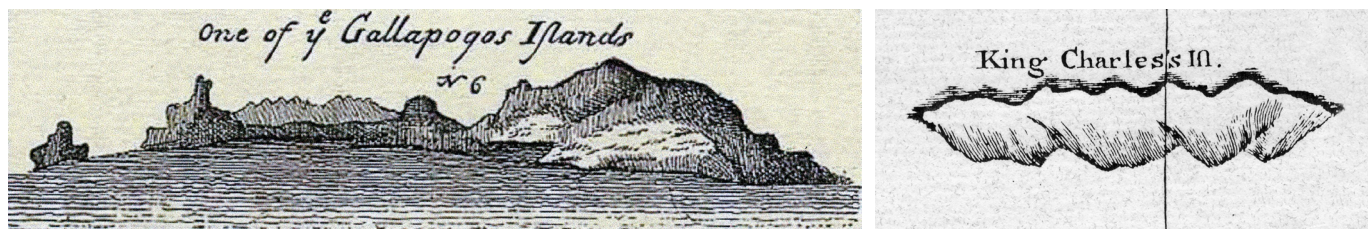
Española (on 30 June), and then headed eastward, out of the archipelago.

The second time was on 12 March 1794 when the *Rattler* re-entered the Galapagos archipelago after 8.5 months along the western coasts of Central and North America. This time Colnett sailed the ship directly into Stephens Bay (Fig. 4). In the following insufficiently punctuated and somewhat ambiguous entry for that day, Colnett (1794) recorded the name Kicker for the first time (bold type added by KTG):

*"Moderate Breezes at NE stood along to the SW with an Intention to pass to the W<sup>i</sup> of a Remarkable Rock resembling in Hight & Size & shape in several points of view one of the Kickers which lay N of a Deep Bay in which one of the Boats had good sound<sup>ss</sup> when here before off the Rock to the N of it 2 Cables lengths 19 f<sup>m</sup> Rocky as we rounded in to the W<sup>d</sup> & S<sup>d</sup> no Sound<sup>ss</sup> with 50 f<sup>m</sup> Line & the wind hauling more to E prevented now our getting into the E<sup>i</sup> Corner. we at last got sound<sup>ss</sup> within a Mile of the Shore in the W<sup>i</sup> Corner a low point at 29 f<sup>m</sup> Rocky hauled out to beat up - I set out with a Boat to sound the Bay found good bottom at the E part 5 or 6 Miles from the Shore 21 f<sup>m</sup> sand two points of the Bay NE & SW **the Kicker Rock** WNW 2 ½ miles. got on Board & fetched into the bay with the ship & came too on the same Bearings - At daylight sent two Boats away one to the NE other SW to search the Lee side of the Isle for Salt. the Jolly Boat also went a fishing under the big Rock - & in a short time caught great numbers of large Cod which form 10 to 30 weight & also sea Breems."*



**Figure 4.** San Cristóbal Island, taken from Colnett's 1798 map of Galapagos, showing the tracks and anchorages of the *Rattler* (with coloured arrows and dots added by the author) in June 1793 (red) and March 1794 (blue), as they correspond to the ship's logbook.



**Figure 5.** Left: Edward Cooke's 1709 sketch of San Cristóbal, with Kicker Rock and Cerro Brujo on the left, viewed from a position southwest of Stephens Bay. Right: Cowley's depiction of San Cristóbal, from map in Hacke (1699).

The "Remarkable Rock" is "the Kicker Rock", so what did Colnett mean by likening it to "one of the Kickers"? There can be three interpretations of this. In the phrase in bold, Colnett could have been referring to two or more formations in Galapagos, which had either (1) already been named Kicker by a previous visitor, or which (2) he had named himself in 1793; alternatively (3) he could have meant that the "Remarkable Rock [*i.e.* Kicker Rock] ... lay N of a Deep Bay" (which it does: Stephens Bay) and the intervening mention of the resemblance to "one of the Kickers" referred to some other Kickers, elsewhere in the world.

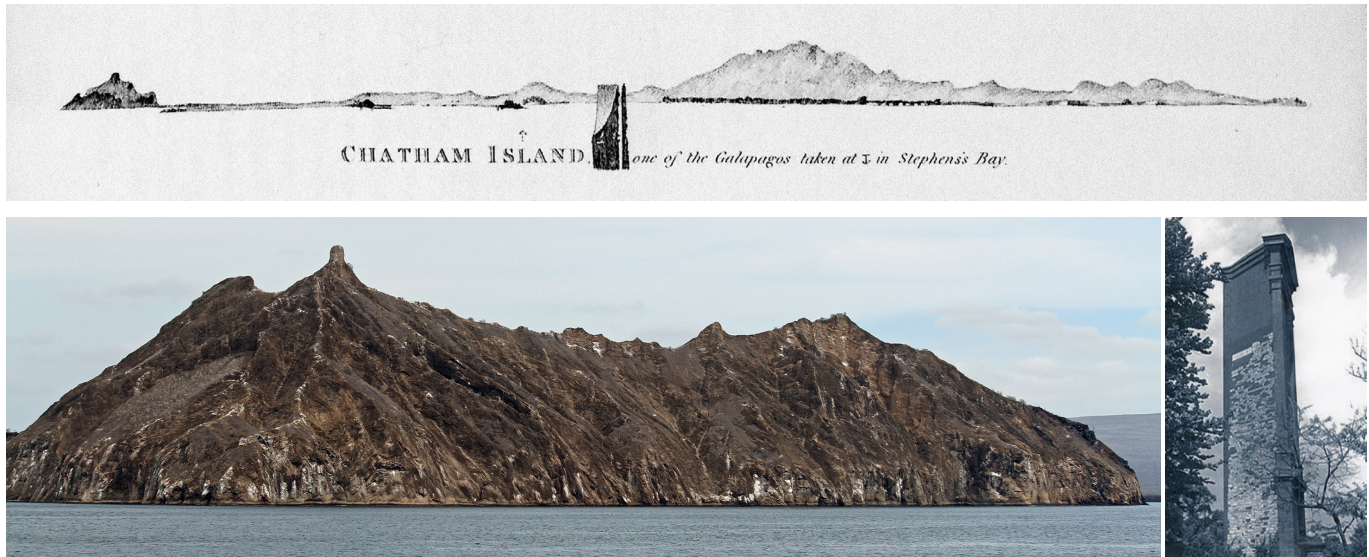
The first possibility, that Colnett was referring to some Galapagos formations named Kicker by someone else, is unlikely. Colnett (1795) had on board the *Rattler* a map of the islands, copied from a Spanish chart of the South Seas (item MPI 1/400/4, National Archives, London). He also had several "purchased ... voyages of former navigators", which, from clues in his book, almost certainly included Woodes Rogers' and Edward Cooke's separate accounts of their cruise with William Dampier through the islands in 1709 (Cooke 1712, Rogers 1712). He may also have had accounts of Dampier's earlier voyage to Galapagos with Ambrose Cowley in 1684 (Dampier 1729), and a version of Cowley's chart of the Galapagos Islands first published by William Hacke (Hacke 1699). However, none of these references contains the word or name Kicker. Furthermore, although Rogers noted a "little Rock appearing like a Sail" and a "great Rock" off a large island, which from their descriptions and geographical positions relative to each other were undoubtedly Dalrymple, Kicker Rock and San Cristóbal respectively, Colnett failed to recognise them. Nor did Colnett recognize Cooke's illustration of San Cristóbal, which Cooke (1712) "call'd Marqueses Island", nor Cowley's depiction of it, which he named "King Charles's Island" (Hacke 1699) (Fig. 5). Colnett believed that the principal Galapagos islands he saw in 1793 (San Cristóbal and Española) were uncharted and therefore free to be named, stating, with reference to San Cristóbal (which he dubbed Chatham) and Española (which he named Hood), that "I could not trace these isles by any accounts or maps in my possession" (Colnett 1798).

The second possibility, that Colnett was referring to some Galapagos formations that he or his crew had already nicknamed "the Kickers", but not recorded in writing, also lacks support. There are several prominent formations (rocks and headlands) around San Cristóbal

and Española that could be regarded as seamarks, and thus potential candidates for a second Galapagos "Kicker", but with no evidence in favour of Colnett naming any of them as such, so we can only guess which one(s) he might have. Dalrymple Rock (Roca Cinco Dedos in Spanish, meaning Five Fingers Rock), the most likely choice due to its proximity and physical similarities to Kicker Rock, can almost certainly be discounted. Dalrymple and Kicker Rock are both off-shore tuff islets lying at an equal distance (c. 5 km) from the coast of San Cristóbal (Fig. 4), and they are often paired in print, as for example, by Captain Tanner (1890) of USSFS *Albatross*, who likened the taller (145 m) Kicker Rock to a "square-rigged vessel" and the smaller and lower (19 m) Dalrymple Rock to "a boat with lug sail" (Fig. 6). However, Dalrymple lies 15 km southwest of Kicker Rock. Colnett could not have seen it in 1793 (the *Rattler* was anchored too far north), and although the men he sent to Stephens Bay that year might have (because Dalrymple is faintly visible from the northern end of the bay), Colnett made no mention of it in his logbook, nor in the text of his book. Dalrymple is only included (and labelled as such) on his map as a result of the survey of the southwestern coast of San Cristóbal conducted by his whaling master and chief mate on 13–15 March 1794, with the name probably provided after the voyage by someone in the Admiralty, presumably in honour of Alexander Dalrymple, first hydrographer of the Admiralty (Woram 2016). On the other hand, Wreck Bay, off which the rock lies, was more likely named by Colnett during the voyage, for "a part of the wreck of a ship" that his men found there (Colnett 1798); coincidentally, Rogers (1712) recorded "some of the Wreck and Rudder of a Vessel" on this same stretch of coastline 85 years earlier.



**Figure 6.** Two views of Dalrymple Rock, topped with a 20th century beacon (photos by KTG, 1996).

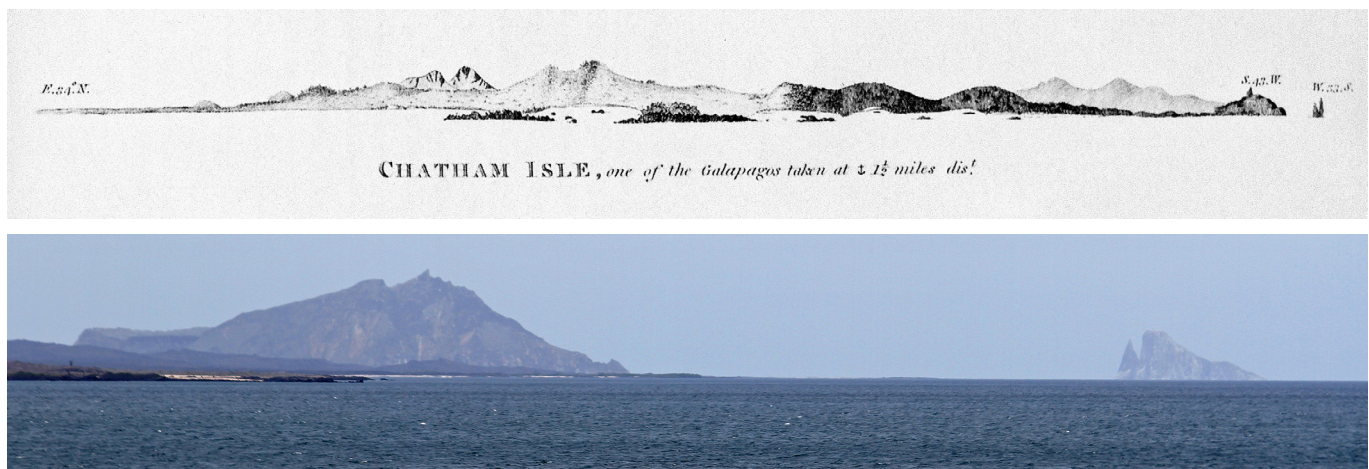


**Figure 7.** Top: Colnett's illustration of San Cristóbal as viewed from a position somewhat seaward of the *Rattler's* anchorage in Stephens Bay, 12–16 March 1794, with Kicker Rock in centre front, and Cerro Brujo (with its exaggerated knob) on the far left (Colnett 1798). Bottom left: Cerro Brujo with its tower-like projection on the summit (photo by KTG, 2016). Bottom right: Kicker-Gill tower, photographed by Eric Lane, 1965 (Hampshire Record Office).

The third interpretation implies that Colnett was likening Kicker Rock to some “Kickers” elsewhere in the world. If so, these were almost certainly Gill-Kicker and Kicker-Gill, as I have been unable to find any land formation or manmade structure called Kicker in the 18th century, save for these seamarks. Evidence in support of this interpretation exists in two island profiles of San Cristóbal (Figs 7 & 8), drawn by Colnett and included in his book (Colnett 1798). One (Fig. 7 top) is a panorama of Stephens Bay with a stylised representation of Kicker Rock in the foreground. As depicted, the rock bears a resemblance to Kicker-Gill, as it was just before the seamount's demolition in 1965 (Fig. 7 bottom right). Note the rectangular face, the horizontal “belt” and chisel top

of both the rock and the seamount. Gill-Kicker, which lacked Kicker-Gill's triangular pediment in front, was probably an even closer match to Colnett's sketch. With the exaggerated peak of Stephens Bay's northern headland (Cerro Brujo: Fig. 7 bottom left) appearing like a second, back mark in the distance (6 km from Kicker Rock), the allusion to the British Kickers is strong.

Colnett's other island profile shows the northwestern coast of San Cristóbal with Kicker Rock on the far right, as it was first viewed by Colnett from the distance, at his anchorage off Pan de Azúcar in June 1793 (Fig. 8). Here, Kicker Rock and Cerro Brujo's peak are depicted as twinned features, the peak a miniature version of the rock, and a compass bearing is written over each. It is



**Figure 8.** Colnett's sketch of San Cristóbal as viewed from the *Rattler's* anchorage far to the northeast of Stephens Bay on 25 June 1793, showing Cerro Brujo and Kicker Rock on the far right (Colnett 1798). Bottom: magnified shot of Cerro Brujo and Kicker Rock, taken from a similar angle and distance (photo by KTG, 2016).

easy to imagine Colnett regarding the two formations as a pair of seamarks equivalent to the Kickers of England; the rock and peak signal the entrance to Stephens Bay, just as Gill-Kicker and Kicker-Gill once did for Portsmouth Harbour. The analogy would have been reinforced when Colnett's men were sent to Stephens Bay in 1793, for they would have seen that Cerro Brujo's summit projection resembles a man-made watch tower or navigation beacon (Fig. 7 bottom left). Colnett did not name this projection but only referred to Cerro Brujo as "the bluff", a "Mountain ... [that] appears like an island" and at one point "Mineral Mount" for the sand full of yellow "topazes", actually olivine, that his men found at its base, a bucketful of which was brought back to England, to assess their value (Colnett 1794, 1795, 1798). However, Captain FitzRoy of HMS *Beagle* later dubbed it Finger Peak (FitzRoy 1835–6), while Darwin (1835) called the headland itself Finger Hill and Finger Point, a name still sometimes used today, as in the list of navigational landmarks of the USA's National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (2014): "Punta Finger ... a conspicuous dark colored cliff topped by a pinnacle rock".

In final support of a link between Kicker Rock and the Kickers of England is this telling description of the islet written by Commander David Porter of the United States Frigate *Essex*, after seeing it in 1813:

*"This rock is very remarkable in its appearance, and is the surest mark for finding the bay. It is very high, flat on the top, and from some points bears strongly the appearance of a castle. On the western side the rock is split from the summit to the base, and the part detached stands like an obelisk on a very narrow base."* (Porter 1815; bold type added by KTG).

If Porter hadn't been American (and an enemy of the British in the war of 1812–15) one could almost believe he was thinking of the entrance of Portsmouth Harbour when choosing the words for this passage.

## CONCLUSION

So, boot, whale or seamar? There is no evidence that Colnett was thinking of a foot when he chose the name Kicker; that appears to be a 20th century interpretation. He imagined a whale when he first looked at Kicker Rock from a distance, but there is no evidence linking the word Kicker (which Colnett did not record until the following year) to a cetacean. Colnett did not refer in his book to the likeness to a whale, and his close up illustration of the rock bears no resemblance to one. Colnett may thus have been alluding to the Kicker seamarks of England, famous among British mariners of the time, when he used the word Kicker for the Galapagos rock. This is supported by the connection of the name to the Royal Navy and thus to the other Galapagos island names that Colnett chose; Colnett's logbook reference to more than one Kicker but his application of the name in Galapagos to only one; the islet's importance as a navigation mark, both then and now; and the resemblance of Colnett's illustration

of Kicker Rock to Kicker-Gill and probably to Gill-Kicker too, with the obvious utility of Cerro Brujo's peak as a second mark. The historical record is sketchy, and we may never know the origin of the name for certain, but this possibility seems strong.

## ETYMOLOGY

There is no certain explanation why the seamarks in England were called Gill-Kicker and Kicker-Gill. However, a possible answer lies in the etymology of the words gill and kicker. The place-name "gill" means a stream or small wooded glen, and Gill-Kicker, the first seamar to be constructed, was backed by a marshy creek (now dammed and known as Gilkicker Lake), while Kicker-Gill stood above a wooded slope by Alverstoke creek (now Stoke Lake). The surname "Kicker" derives from the Middle English word "kiken", meaning "to watch or spy" (Reaney & Wilson 2006). From the same root come English and Scots dialect "keeker" and Dutch "kijker", all meaning "watcher" and from which the 17th-century application of the word Kicker to the seamarks could have derived. In a sense they were "watching" (facing) the sea, were "watching over" sailors (assisting in safe navigation) and were themselves objects that sailors "watched for". The interpretation is thus at least logical, and we might think of the Kicker Rock in Galapagos as the watching rock or the rock to watch for, when locating and navigating Stephens Bay.

The origin of its more recent Spanish name "León Dormido" is another story...

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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