

# The BATTLE *of* TRAFALGAR

from Bob and Kath Hollingsbee

"OF ALL the great and glorious exploits which, colour the pages of English history books, few capture the imagination more than the Battle of Trafalgar, fought 155 years ago today (1960)". That was the introduction to a retrospective story written by a Dover Express journalist and published in the newspaper's edition of October 21, 1960.

The proud flagship Victory still graces the Portsmouth dockyard, a memorial to the greatest of all sea stories.

Back in 1960 the Dover Express article was based on an account written by Mr Norman A. Line, then the Senior Pilot of the old Cinque Ports pilots. Delving into old records Norman brings Trafalgar even closer to the hearts of Men of Kent and Kentish Men by revealing how mariners in this corner of the country had far more to do with this epic battle than is generally known.

'The home port of the Victory was Chatham, where she was built in 1765, underwent a major refit in the early 1800s, and where she was commissioned on April 9, 1803. And it was at Chatham where her gallant crew, which subsequently fought at Trafalgar, were assembled,' he wrote.

Amongst the names appearing in her muster book, says Mr Line, are to be found a number of Kentish Men and Men of Kent, and several who hailed from Dover. It also records whether they volunteered or were rounded up by the Press Gangs who, in those days,

played a conspicuous part in manning the British Fleet.

## Dover names

There are too many names to include them all in this article, but amongst them we find a Peter Sutton, of Dover, who fell victim to the Press Gang, as did Edward Gilbert and Robert Bowen, also of Dover. Philip Horn, another Dovorian, was a midshipman in the Victory and was promoted on January 19, 1805, to Master's mate. Richard Brockman, of Margate, was a bosun's mate. He was a volunteer, as was James Proctor from Rye, but William Lambkin, from Horsmonden, was pressed. There was a William Leek, from Canterbury, John Robinson of Sandwich, John Terry of Deal, and James Rawlinson of Maidstone; all of them co-opted - if that is the right expression - by the Press Gang.

'A number of books and articles have been written describing the Battle of Trafalgar, but comparatively little describing the events which took place after the action was over and the dangerous position that both fleets found themselves in,' wrote Mr Line.

He continues: 'The battle opened at about 11.30am when the wind was light and variable, but at about 5pm, when the action finished, the wind had increased considerably with every indication that it would strengthen still more. One of Lord Nelson's last orders to Captain Hardy was "Anchor, Hardy,"

HMS Victory



but this could not be done as his anchor cables had been shot away. Other ships were in the same condition, and with masts and rigging shot away they were drifting before the increasing sou'westerly wind on a lee-shore and the dangerous Les Cabezos Shoals.

So, after the gun battle with the French and Spanish fleet, another battle had to be waged with the weather'.

### **On a lee-shore**

It is not possible to describe what was happening in all ships of the British Fleet, but with the aid of the log books of the Victory it is possible to give an idea of the parlous state of the flagship. The blood on her decks was sanded to give her crew foothold, the wounded being tended as well as possible; the

dead were thrown overboard to make way for the living, and the living were engaged with their battle with the weather and ever-increasing wind. Darkness was setting in, and they were on a lee-shore.

The Victory's damage as recorded in her log was: "Lower masts, yards and bowsprit all damaged; rigging and sails very much damaged; struck fore and main top-gallant masts. Stood to the southward under the remnants of the foresail and mainsail."

And so, under this jury rig, the Victory endeavoured to claw her way off a lee-shore and the dangerous shoals that lay to leeward of her. However, she wanted further assistance as we read in her log, dated Thursday, October 24, 1805.

"The Polyphemus was a 64-gun ship. She was by no means a small vessel, and those who are acquainted with the ways of the sea may well ponder on the truly magnificent feat of seamanship in connecting up two sailing ships in the weather conditions that were prevailing and bearing in mind that steam tug-boats were unknown in 1805 and this feat had to be accomplished by boat work.

### **Main yard carried away**

The troubles of the Victory were not yet over, for her log records: 'Saturday, October 26, 1805: Strong gale from the sou-west carried away mainyard. Polyphemus cast off tow, the tow-rope parted.'

And so the Victory was left to her own resources to make Gibraltar, which she did, on October 28. No greater tribute could have been paid to the British Fleet than that of Captain Prigny, who was the French Admiral Villeneuve's Chief of Staff. He was asked by a British admiral 'What was the act by the British Fleet which made the greatest impression on your mind during the battle?' His reply was: 'The act that astonished me most was when the action was over. It came on to blow a gale of wind, and the English set to work to shorten sail, reef topsails and rerig their ships with as much regularity and order as if their ships had not been fighting a dreadful battle. We were all amazed, wondering what the English seamen could be made of. We never witnessed such clever manoeuvres before, and I shall never forget them. All our seamen were either drunk or disabled and the officers could not get any work out of them.'

This situation in the French fleet is reflected in the fact that several of them

drifted ashore with appalling loss of life, writes Mr Line. To quote the fate of three only, the Indomitable an 80-gun ship, had two-thirds of her crew drowned; the Intrepide, a 74-gun ship, lost half her crew; and the Berwick, an English name but a French 74-gun ship, lost her entire crew through drowning.

Not one British ship was lost on this dreaded lee-shore. The pay of a British seaman in those days was £1 and 18 shillings a month - and no overtime!

### **Rigid discipline**

The efficiency of Nelson's fleet was maintained by rigid discipline, and the punishment given to offenders would seem, in these enlightened days, to be harsh, Captain Hardy's log-book records:

'Saturday October 19, 1805: Punished 10 seamen with 36 lashes for drunkenness.' This was two days before the Battle of Trafalgar.

Again, when Victory was homeward bound after the action, an entry in the log reads: "December 3, 1805: Approaching St Helens (Isle of Wight) anchorage. Punished J. Dennington - seaman - with 72 lashes for theft and drunkenness."

Theft in Nelson's fleet was very severely dealt with. There are a number of similar entries with punishments for such offences as neglect of duty and contempt.

Assault or attempted assault on a superior officer could lead to a hanging from the yardarm. Perhaps a cruise in the Victory would have done those thugs of today who assault defenceless women and children, the world of good and an introduction to the lash might well be a better cure than an introduction to the Probation Officer!' commented Mr Line.

From punishments to a more congenial subject. It is recorded that when Victory was on her passage from Spithead to the River Thames with the body of Lord Nelson on board, she anchored on December 13 off Dover owing to bad weather, and on December 17, she moved to the southern end of the Downs, where she again anchored. On December 18, 1805, her log states: "At anchor in the Downs. Received on board 40 butts of beer and 10 butts of water from Dover." A butt of beer is 108 gallons, and let us hope that it was brewed from good old English hops - and that it was somewhat stronger than some of the present-day beer.

The Victory left the Downs on December 19, and after disembarking the body of Lord Nelson at The Nore on December 23, she arrived at Chatham on December 25.



LORD NELSON.

(A Dover Society vice-president, Terry Sutton points out that Nelson's body was preserved on board ship in a barrel of alcohol to prevent deterioration before the funeral. Various folk tales have been in circulation about the crew tapping this 'brew' on the voyage back to England such was their liking for alcohol, with suggestions the barrel was far from full when it reached our shores!)

And so the famous Victory came back again to her home port, and her log-book tells us: "Wednesday, December 25, 1805: At moorings in Long Reach, River Medway."

The Dover Express account concludes, 'Home again on Christmas Day, perchance the Men of Kent and Kentish Men and the men who hailed from Dover were able, on Christmas night, to gather round their firesides and, with distant memories of the roar of the Victory's and the howl of the sou'westerly gale, spin many a yarn about The Battle of Trafalgar'.

## Two Gunners of Dover Castle

◆ ◆ ◆ by Peter Burville ◆ ◆ ◆

**F**OR THE FAMILY HISTORIAN and other researchers, wills and inventories can be a rich source of information on past lives that is not available from other records. The subjects of this note, gunners William and John, were two of the sons of John Burvill who was born in the parish of Little Mongeham but spent his adult life in the Hougham and Hawkinge area.

John senior was well connected. He was the sole executor, and his family a major beneficiary, of yeoman John Avery of Hougham's will<sup>1</sup>. The Mayor of Dover, Thomas Broome, was overseer of the will. According to Bavington Jones<sup>2</sup>, in 1659:

'Thomas Broome was a Sergeant at Law. At the time of his election there was some expectation of the restoration of