

Salcombe Maritime History Paper No. 7

The Threat from France: 1778-83 and 1793-1815

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Part 1. The American War of Independence (1776-83)

*On the ninth day of November, at the dawning in the sky,
Ere we sailed away to New York, we at anchor here did lie;
O'er the meadows fair of Kingsbridge, then the mist was lying grey;
We were bound against the rebels, in North Americay.*

*O, so mournful was the parting of the soldiers and their wives,
For that none could say for certain they'd return home with their lives.
Then the women they were weeping, and they cursed the cruel day
That we sailed against the rebels, in North Americay.'*

This ballad, dating from between 1776 and 1780, recalls the time when British soldiers, destined to fight in the American War of Independence, embarked on troopships from the West Country, thus saving a week or more beating down channel against the prevailing westerly winds. The main impact of the war locally, however, came when France, the old enemy across the Channel, joined the fray in 1778.

The first event of note was on 9th October 1779 when Richard Valentine, the Customs Officer at Salcombe wrote to his superior at Dartmouth, Captain Mitchell, informing him that, on the previous night, a Topsham pilot-boat had come into Salcombe with thirteen of the crew of the frigate *HMS Quebec* which had been blown up in an engagement with a French forty-gun ship, off Ushant. Three of the men were severely wounded and a doctor, sent for from Kingsbridge, had dressed their wounds. Captain Mitchell, immediately on receiving this news ordered clothing, necessaries etc., to be sent by post horses.¹

During the many wars with France in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, prisoners were exchanged by means of specially commissioned ships known as cartels. These sailed between cartel ports such as St. Malo and Morlaix in France and Plymouth and Falmouth. On at least three occasions, British sailors returning from captivity, forced the cartel ship to land at Salcombe, rather than face the prospect of being immediately pressed back into service. In 1757, during the Seven Year's War, Samuel Stokes, Lieutenant of Marines in the *Terrible*, a Privateer, recounted how:

At length the happy day of our deliverance arrived, when on the 7th of August, we embarked at St. Maloes on board the *Barrington Tender*, a Cartel Ship, with 256 English prisoners. We, of the *Terrible*, who had suffered such great hardships, fearing that we would be pressed before we had the pleasure of seeing our wives and families once more, agreed, with a number of other sufferers, who were bound to Plymouth, to land ourselves at Salcombe.²

In March 1781, during the American War, the *Minerva*, a French cartel sailed from St. Malo with four hundred English prisoners, under orders to land them at Falmouth, but when they got to sea, the prisoners took command of the ship and carried her into Salcombe, where they all went on shore.³ A similar incident was to take place during the Napoleonic Wars and is recounted in *Part 2* under the heading *Cartel Ships*.

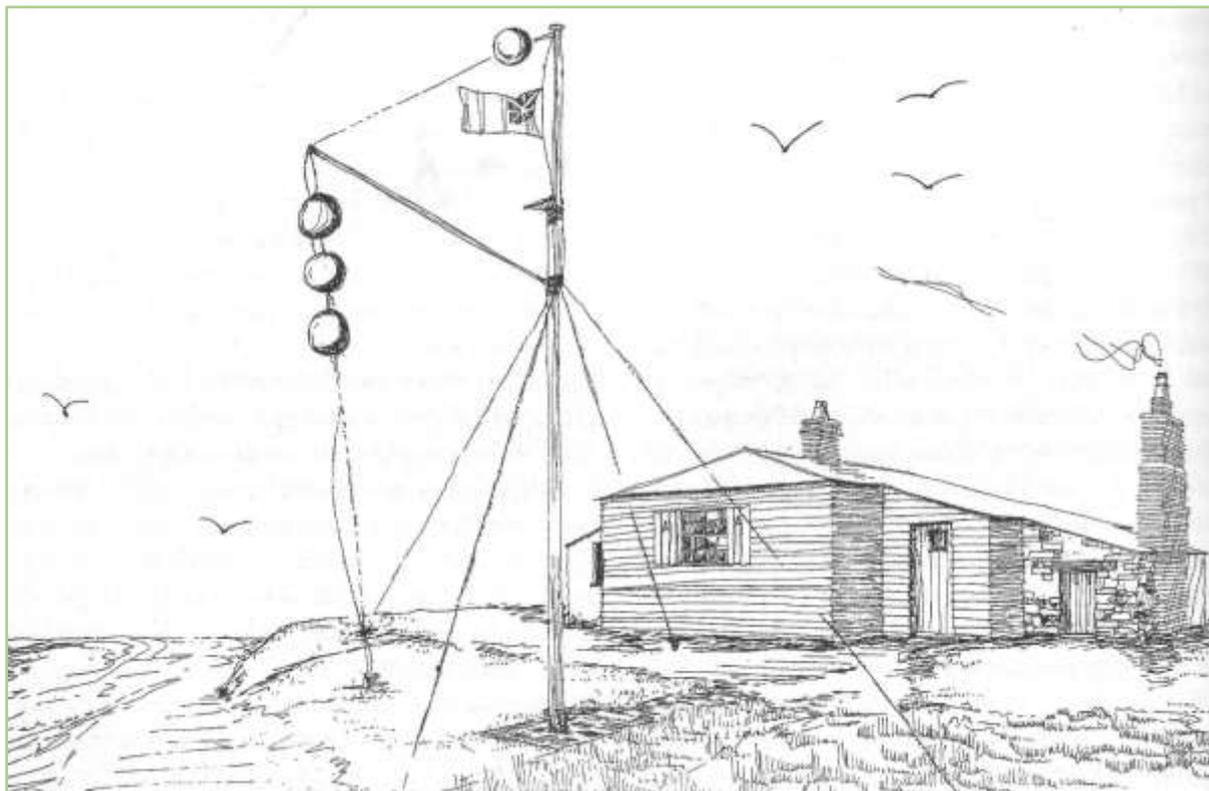
French privateers were active off the coast throughout the war of 1776-83. One them was the 16 gun *Eclipse* commanded by Nathaniel Fanning, an American who had previously served under John Paul Jones. On 2 August 1782 Fanning captured four prizes off Cornwall. Three were sent with prize crews to France and the fourth, a sloop with culm (anthracite dust for the lime kilns) bound for Salcombe, was given to the prisoners, who later landed at Salcombe.⁴ Two months later the merchant vessel *Polly*, bound for Newfoundland, was captured by a French privateer and the crew taken off, except for one man. With the assistance of some local fishermen he brought the *Polly* into Salcombe on 1 October 1782.⁵

Part 2. The Revolutionary & Napoleonic Wars 1793-1815

Admiralty Signal Stations and the Sea Fencibles

When war with France broke out again in 1793, the Channel coast was threatened not only by commerce raiding privateers but also with invasion. To counter this, the Admiralty set up a series of 'early warning' signal stations in prominent coastal locations. West Sewer Signal Station, which was established in 1795 between Bolt Head and Bolt Tail at a cost of £120, had visual contact with the Prawle station to the east and South

Ground station near Kingston, to the west. Coded messages were sent by various combinations of pennant, flag, or ball. For example, the flag flying on the mast while three balls hung from the gaff signified 'enemy landing to the westward' (as in the picture below). For night signals furze faggots or tar barrels were burnt in a beacon. Suspicious coastal shipping was then investigated by fast naval sloops, after warnings had been passed along the chain to Maker Heights above Plymouth.⁶



A typical Napoleonic War Coastal Signal Station (John Goodwin)

The stations were commanded by a half-pay naval lieutenant, assisted by a petty officer or midshipman and two men – generally sailors who were considered too old or unfit for service at sea. After 1798 the men were drawn from the local corps of Sea

Fencibles. This was a naval 'home guard' largely made up of fishermen and local mariners who, by volunteering, gained immunity from impressment into the Navy and from the ballot for the militia. Formed in 1798, the Corps of Sea Fencibles continued to operate until 1810, with a break of a few years after the Treaty of Amiens in 1802. The Salcombe force numbered about 140 in 1799 but the strength was reduced in later years as the threat of invasion diminished – 104 men in 1805 and 42 in 1808. Salcombe was part of the Teignmouth to Rame Head District and, with Beesands (Start Bay) and Thurlestone (Bigbury Bay), formed a sub-district under the command of a naval captain with a lieutenant as second-in-command. In 1805 the Beesands force had 59 men and Thurlestone 48, making a total, with Salcombe's 104, of 211 men.^{7, 8}

The roles of the Corps were 'to use the pike and, where appropriate, the cannon; to assist with coastal signal stations; help the revenue services and eventually to man small boats and gunboats in coastal defence'.⁹ The men initially attended drill once a week, but in later years this was reduced to once a month. Payment for attendance was a shilling a day. The bosun's mate received four shillings. In 1804 the captain's pay was £42 whilst the lieutenant received £11 18s. per month.

Captain Nathaniel Portlock



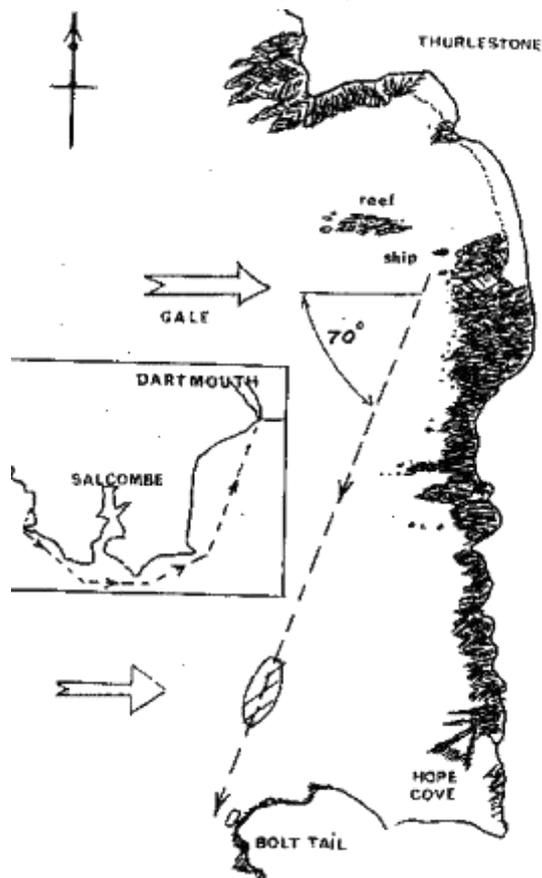
*Captain Nathaniel Portlock,
Commander of the Dartmouth
Sea Fencibles 1805-1807
(National Maritime Museum,
Greenwich)*

Between April 1804 and November 1808 the Salcombe District Sea Fencibles were commanded by Captain Nathaniel Portlock, an American who, in a long and illustrious naval career, sailed with both Captain Cook and Captain Bligh and commanded a three-year expedition to North West America. He also carried out what must be one of the most remarkable feats of seamanship ever witnessed on the South Hams coast.

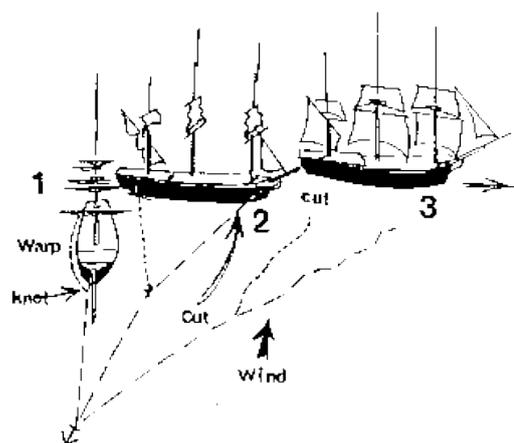
Nathaniel Portlock was born in Norfolk, Virginia in 1748. He went to sea at the age of 12, became a mate on a merchant vessel and in 1772 entered the Royal Navy as volunteer to avoid being 'pressed'. Within six months he had progressed from able seaman to midshipman. On 30 March 1776 he sailed on Captain Cook's third Pacific voyage as master's mate on the *Discovery*, transferring to the *Resolution* on Cook's death. On his return he was promoted lieutenant. In 1785 the King George's Sound Company was formed to prosecute the maritime fur trade between the Pacific

coast of north-west America and Canada and China. Portlock, now aged 37, was given command of the larger of two company vessels, the *King George* and his friend, George Dixon was appointed to the *Charlotte*. In 1787 Portlock and Dixon sold their combined cargo of 2,552 skins at Macao for 54,857 dollars and then sailed for England, bringing home, in 1788, a consignment of tea for the East India Company, as well as valuable charts and surveys. Returning to service in the navy, Portlock was given command of the brig *Assistant*, in which he accompanied Captain William Bligh in 1791 on his second attempt to transport bread-fruit plants from Tahiti to the West Indies. On his return, Portlock was appointed to the command of *HMS Arrow* and in September 1799 he cut out and captured the Dutch frigate *Draak*. In recognition of his gallantry he was promoted to post captain, but ill health confined him to the shore.¹⁰

In 1804 Portlock was appointed Captain of the Salcombe district of Sea Fencibles and set up home in the town. In 1805, the year of Trafalgar, he accomplished an incredible feat of seamanship by saving the 300 ton Danish barque *De Lille Catherina* from destruction in Bigbury Bay. In a westerly storm the *De Lille Catherina* dragged her anchor until her stern was just yards from the towering Thurlestone Rock.



Summoned to the scene, Portlock got on board her with a few local fishermen from Hope Cove. By swinging the ship on a stern spring, and with a split-second setting of sails and the cutting away of the anchor cable,



Portlock's Gamble: the saving of the Danish barque 'De Lille Catherina' in Bigbury Bay, 1805 (Salcombe Maritime Museum)

Portlock managed to get the *De Lille Catherine* to sail clear of the rock and narrowly weather the jagged rocks at Bolt Tail a mile distant. It had been a desperate gamble which only a seaman of consummate skill could have pulled off.¹¹

In recognition of his efforts, the owners of the ship presented Portlock with a silver cup which later became part of the mess silver at the Royal Marines Commando Training Centre near Exmouth, Devon. The cup is inscribed as follows:



The silver cup presented to Capt. Nathaniel Portlock for saving the 'De Lille Catherina' (Royal Marines Commando Training Centre, Exmouth)

'The Owners of the Ship *De Lille Catherina* of Copenhagen request CAPT NATHANIEL PORTLOCK of the Royal Navy to accept this Piece of Plate as a small token of Respect and Gratitude for his voluntary, indefatigable and judicious exertions in extricating the ship from her perilous situation in Bigbury Bay on the 20th January 1805'.

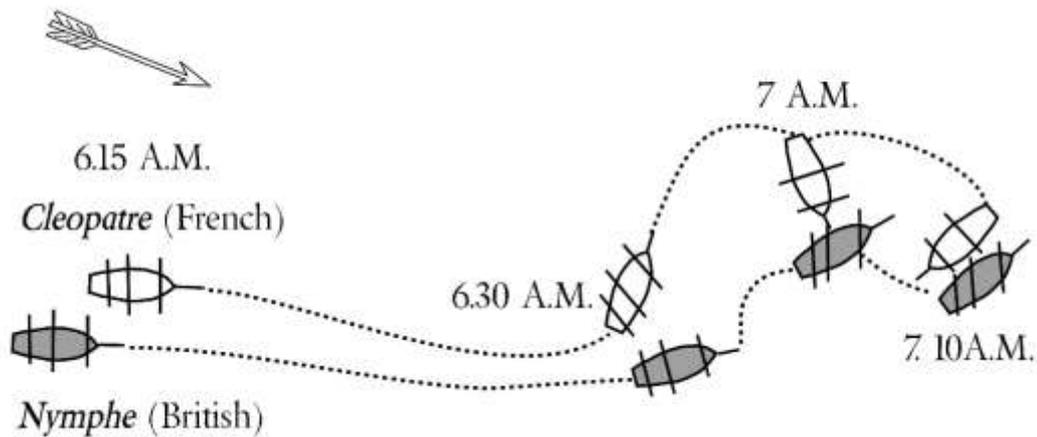
A large wooden anchor stock, believed to be from the *De Lille Catherina*, is on display in Salcombe Maritime Museum.

Returning to 1793 - four months after France declared on war on Great Britain - two French prisoners escaped from the Mill prison at Plymouth. On 24 May they were caught at Salcombe where they had hoped to take a boat and make off for the coast of France.¹² A similar event took place some years later

when, on 8 December 1806, Salcombe Sea Fencibles apprehended two French prisoners of war who had escaped from Mill Prison and escorted them back to Plymouth.¹³

The Battle of Prawle Point 1793

In June 1793, the first naval action of the war in home waters, took place off Salcombe. The Battle of Prawle Point, as it was later dubbed, was between *HMS Nymphe*, commanded by Captain Edward Pellew, and the French National Frigate *Cleopatre*. According to the *Naval Chronicle*, 'the capture of the *Cleopatre*, 40 guns, 320 men, by the *Nymphe*, 36 guns, 250 men, on the 18th of June 1793, was accomplished with a gallantry not to be paralleled in any country but our own, and vindicated the superiority of the British navy' ¹⁴



The Battle of Prawle Point, 18 June 1793

(Salcombe Maritime Museum)

Equally jingoistic in its tone is this stirring account of the action recounted by Ellen Luscombe of Salcombe in 1861:

Mr. Edwards saw this battle from Prawle Point; and doubtless, as his eye kindled, and his blood swept through his veins in quickened rout, he longed, as any Englishman would long, to be in the midst of the fury of the fray. He saw the *Nymphe*, commanded by Pellew beating up channel, on the morning of 18th June 1793, a few miles to the south-west of the Start. At 6am she fell in with a French ship of war, the *Cleopatre*. A furious cannonade followed, which was kept up until seven o'clock by both vessels, when the *Nymphe* was skilfully laid alongside of her opponent; and in ten minutes every Frenchman was driven from the decks of the *Cleopatre* by the irresistible rush of the sailors of Pellew, who had thus gallantly won the first-fruits of the long series of naval engagements which immediately followed.

Fighting their way aft, the British sailors reached the *Cleopatre's* quarterdeck and hauled down her colours. The French captain, Captain Mullon, who was lying mortally wounded on the deck, pulled a paper from his pocket, tore it to pieces and, whilst attempting to swallow it, died. The poor man had believed he was destroying the secret French signals, but in fact he



The Nymphe and Cleopatre
(Derek G.M. Gardner)

had eaten his own commission, and so the signals fell into British hands.

Pellew put a prize crew aboard the *Cleopatre*, and *Nymphe* headed down wind to Portsmouth with the battered *Cleopatre* in her wake. When Pellew arrived on 21st June it was to a hero's welcome. Rewarded with a knighthood, he did not forget the widow of his gallant opponent, sending her her husband's belongings and a sum of money to 'ease her grief'.



Sir Edward Pellew, later Viscount Exmouth. Painting by Thomas Lawrence, 1797 (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich)

Coastal defences

During the wars of 1793-1815, Salcombe was again used as a haven for prizes taken by British ships or as a port of refuge for

vessels chased in by French privateers. In order to deter privateers from attempting to enter the harbour, Richard Valentine, the Custom House officer at Salcombe wrote to his superiors on 5 April 1794 suggesting that a battery of six guns be erected over the Old Castle (Fort Charles). Valentine was sure that, 'if the attention of government were drawn

to the very great coasting trade in grain carried on from the port, they would protect it.'¹⁵ Valentine's advice went unheeded at the time but half a century later a battery was erected above Fort Charles at a time of renewed tensions with France.

Later in the 1790s some rather half-hearted attempts were made to defend the harbour by building a little fort on Limpyer Rocks upstream from Fort Charles. Little more than mock defences, its purpose was to convince the French that the harbour was well-fortified. Known as 'the battery' it was manned by local militia in 1802. (In 1900 it was used as a saluting platform when news reached Salcombe of the relief of Mafeking). Three small buildings nearby have been identified as



The mock fort on Limpyer Rocks below Woodcot (Salcombe Maritime Museum)

possible lookout towers dating to around 1795. They are the Tower House in Newton Road, the Tower House in the grounds of Stonehanger Court, Devon Road and the tower adjacent to the car park at Salcombe Harbour Hotel. The *Salcombe Conservation Area Appraisal* refers to all three as defensive structures, but one expert considers it to be 'unlikely that all three would have been built for the same purpose during a similar period, located so close together'.¹⁶ Another possible lookout was a small turret or *guèrite* on the old battery at Fort Charles, which may have been added in the late 18th or early 19th centuries.¹⁷

French Privateers

On 4 July 1793 a sloop from Dartmouth, with baggage and a few sick men belonging to the North Gloucestershire Militia was chased into Salcombe by a French privateer.¹⁸ The following year on 1 April the *Nimble* cutter, Captain J Smith, was chased on shore between Start Point and Prawle Point by three French frigates. She later got off, after receiving considerable damage, and was towed into Salcombe Range.¹⁹ On 27 November 1797 the *Esther*, Captain Green, from Poole to Newfoundland, which had been taken by the *Buonaparte* privateer, was retaken, and sent into Salcombe. Several ships bound for Salcombe were reported as having been taken by enemy privateers.²⁰ On 27 March 1798 the *Air Balloon*, Gidney, from Blakeney to Salcombe, was taken and carried to France²¹ and on 28 March 1801 the *Dart*, from Guernsey to Salcombe, was taken by French privateers.²²

On two occasions the crews of ships taken by the enemy came into Salcombe in a small boat. In September 1800 the 14-gun sloop-of-war, *HMS Spitfire*, detained the American merchantman *Robust*, on passage from Baltimore to Amsterdam, and put a prize crew in her. However, the Americans, armed with pistols, managed to re-capture the ship. The prize crew were forced into a boat off the Eddystone and after a long pull reached Salcombe.²³ The following year a large French cutter privateer fell in with a fleet of ships sailing from Plymouth to London off the Bolt, and captured nine of them and sent them to France. Among them was the *Grace* brig of Plymouth, the crew of which, except the master and a boy, took to their boat and got ashore near Salcombe on 1 March 1801.²⁴

The Salcombe customs boat, under the command of that enterprising officer, Richard Valentine, whose success in combatting smuggling is described in *Salcombe Maritime History Paper No. 8: Smuggling*, made two successful recaptures of English ships taken as French prizes. On 30 August 1794 the crew of the customs boat boarded a brig, the *Two Friends*, of London, in Salcombe Range, and found her to be in the possession of a French prize crew. She had been taken by a French frigate nine days before, and had

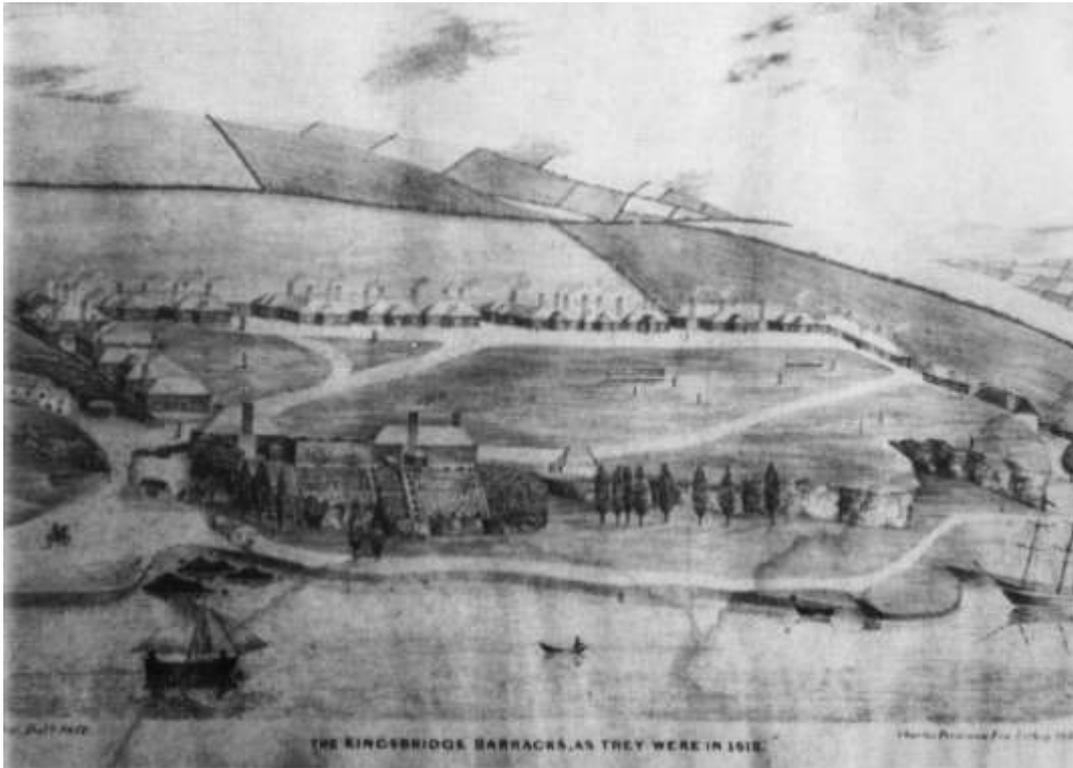
been drifting about in the Channel, the crew not knowing how to manage her. She was later towed into Salcombe.²⁵ On 22 November 1799 the schooner *John and Grace* of Plymouth, was captured off the Bolt by a French brig privateer. After being informed by the officer of the signal house at West Sewer, 'the chief officer of the customs at Salcombe, immediately manned the Custom House boat, pursued the said schooner, recaptured her, and brought her into Salcombe; this is the second recapture made by this active officer during the war.'²⁶

Secret Intelligence

British agents and messengers carrying important intelligence occasionally put into Salcombe. On 6 July 1790, three years before the start of the French Revolutionary War, Captain Joseph Drewe, was put ashore at Salcombe from a Swedish frigate from Cadiz from where he brought intelligence on the size of the Spanish fleet lying there.²⁷ On 14 September 1795, dispatches for the Home Secretary arrived on *HMS Thames*, Captain Gillespie, from New Providence in the Bahamas. It fell to Richard Valentine to take them to the post at Totnes. In yet another letter to his superiors Valentine pointed out that, situated as it was between the Bolt [Bolt Head] and the Start [Start Point], Salcombe harbour was the first landfall for many foreign ships. A great many letters came to Kingsbridge and the people would like to see the post regularly established there. He often incurred expenses in carrying letters to Totnes and on this occasion it had cost him eleven shillings (55p) which, having a salary of £30 per year, he hoped would be reimbursed.²⁸ Hopefully Valentine was spared a similar expense when letters from *HMS Renown*, 74 guns, at Malta were landed at Salcombe on 7 June 1802, from a frigate as she passed up Channel. They brought news from Lord Keith's Mediterranean fleet.²⁹

Kingsbridge Barracks

In 1804 barracks to accommodate 600 officers and men were erected on the east side of the estuary on the Warren at Kingsbridge. They were occupied by various regiments during the war. 'Ebrington Street was renamed Barrack Street and a tavern called the Military Arms was opened'.³⁰ Materials from the buildings on the site were sold by auction in the spring of 1815, but some, including the former hospital, were still standing in 1874. Ellen Luscombe, writing in 1861, said 'the part which formed the officer's mess room and hospital still remains, a black weather-boarded building looking towards the river and the shipwrights' yard [William Date's yard]. Three stone walls, capped with a



*The Kingsbridge Barracks in 1812. Engraving by Charles Prideaux Fox
(Kingsbridge Cookworthy Museum)*

slate roof, away to the north of this fragment of the old barracks, formed a retreat for a piece of ordnance, which used to fling its iron food across the water with an angry roar at a mark in the quarry opposite, before which a small cluster of houses now stand, called Tacket Wood'. Luscombe was told by one old gentleman that the barracks were famous for fleas when he served there as a youth.^{31, 32, 33}

The Battle of Trafalgar 1805

Many mariners from Salcombe and the Kingsbridge Estuary served in the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic Wars, either as volunteers or pressed men and at least eleven local men served in the British fleet at the Battle of Trafalgar in 21 October 1805.³⁴

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Birthplace</i>	<i>Ship</i>	<i>Rank/rating</i>
Richard Weeks	33	Salcombe	<i>HMS Royal Sovereign</i>	Boatswain's Mate
William Pope	30	Salcombe	<i>HMS Dreadnought</i>	Ordinary Seaman
Ian Goslin	27	Salcombe	<i>HMS Leviathan</i>	Ordinary Seaman
John Distin	23	Kingsbridge	<i>HMS Belleisle</i>	Ordinary Seaman

John Muchmore	27	Kingsbridge	<i>HMS Belleisle</i>	Ordinary Seaman
Thomas Rowe	20	Kingsbridge	<i>HMS Prince</i>	Landsman
Edward Stephens	28	Kingsbridge	<i>HMS Euryalus</i>	Able Seaman
John Prickard	20	Kingsbridge	<i>HMS Dreadnought</i>	Ordinary Seaman
Gilbert Kennicott	18	Dodbrooke	<i>HMS Royal Sovereign</i>	Midshipman
Thomas Marsh	26	Charleton	<i>HMS Agamemnon</i>	Able Seaman
William Stone	27	Chivelstone	<i>HMS Colossus</i>	Ordinary Seaman

Source: TNA, Nelson, Trafalgar and Those Who Served

Cartel Ships

Just as in 1781, when during the American war sailors returning from captivity in France forced their ship into Salcombe to avoid being pressed back into service, the brig *Active*, a cartel from Morlaix, was run into Salcombe on 9 January 1800 by the nineteen British seamen aboard her. Not all the repatriated prisoners who landed at Salcombe were sailors in danger of being pressed for in June 1806 the Duke and Duchess of Newcastle, Lady Charlotte Pelham Clinton and her children, with General Crawford, from Morlaix in the *Jupiter* cartel, landed at Salcombe.^{35,36}

When the war finally ended in 1815, following Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, French prisoners-of-war held in Dartmoor were progressively repatriated in cartel ships. On 6 January 1816, a small ship, the *Betsey*, sailed from Plymouth for France with 65 cavalry officers from the 20th Regiment of Cuirassiers, the 4th Regiment of Chasseurs and the Young Guard of the Horse Chasseurs. Caught in a storm, the *Betsey* was driven on shore near Yarmer Sands, Thurlestone where she was smashed to pieces. Twenty-eight of the French prisoners were drowned and many of the survivors were injured on the rocks. Nineteen bodies were recovered and buried in Thurlestone churchyard.³⁷

'Boney' and the 'Billy Ruffian'

As well as being the scene of the first naval episode in home waters in the wars between 1793-1815, the sea off Salcombe was to provide the stage for the very last. On 4 August 1815, six weeks after the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte surrendered to Captain Maitland of *HMS Bellerophon* at Rochefort, Maitland was ordered to cruise off Start Point and await the arrival of *HMS Northumberland*, which was to transport 'Boney' to exile on St. Helena.

For two days the 'Billy Ruffian', as the *Bellerophon* was affectionately known, sailed up and down the short stretch of coast between Start Point and Bolt Head at the entrance

to Salcombe Harbour. 'The grey sea under the louring, grey sky seemed to reflect the air of gloom which had settled over the passengers on the *Bellerophon*. Napoleon became increasingly depressed. He no longer appeared on deck but remained shut in his cabin ... at one stage he talked about ending his life'. On 8 August Napoleon and his followers transferred to *HMS Northumberland* and then 'vanished into exile over the horizon'.³⁸



Napoleon on the Bellerophon. Oil painting by Sir William Quiller Orchardson, 1880 (Tate Gallery, London)

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