

1797 French Invasion at Fishguard

Historical European Background

Until 1789 France was very much a monarchy government. The population of the country was made up of approximately 135,000 members of the church, around 400,000 nobles and aristocracy and 26,000,000 other members of the population. The general population held a determination to break the monopoly of property and power in the hands of the privileged minority. In theory the monarch was to be advised by the Estates General consisting of 300 clergy, 300 nobility, and 600 from the third estate. However, this organisation had never met from 1614 for 175 years until 1789.

Thus in early 1789 the Estates General was called and the clergy nobility and third estate met with the intention of giving France a written constitution.

By early July 1789 with French army troops moving to threaten Paris, huge crowds gathered, seized arms and led by some other army elements stormed the Bastille. This was an old empty prison, but also an arms depot. This event signalled the start of the French Revolution.

By August 27th, 1789 the "Declaration of the Rights of Man" had been agreed. This entitled every citizen to liberty, equality, property and security. It was also the duty of every citizen to defend these rights for himself and others, sharing in Government, in armed protection of the community and payment of taxes demanded by the state. Feudalism was abolished.

The King Louis XVI refused to sign and sanction these reforms, which removed the power held by the Crown.

By October 5th, the people of Paris now armed formed a procession of women and others to the Palace at Versailles with the intention of taking the King and family to Paris. As a result the next day, the King and family returned with the people to Paris and were lodged in the Tuileries, virtually as prisoners.

By 1790 the estate had taken over the church, its wealth, property, and provided for the payment of the clergy. On the 20th June 1791 the King and Queen Louis XVI and Maria Antoinette reach Varennes. They were pursued and returned to Paris as prisoners.

On 3rd September 1791 the French Constitution was introduced.

Among one of these 750 deputies elected to the National Convention was Thomas Paine. (See later).

Part of the aims of the legislative assembly of 1791 under the Girondin Party was to export the revolutionary aims, and to emancipate the nations of Europe. By 1792 French armies and Austrian and Prussian armies were all engaged in various military actions. By 1793 the Revolutionary Government was formed. This Government was to remain revolutionary until peace was achieved.

The Government had a small powerful executive a legislature deprived of initiative centralised administration, ruthless power of summary arrest and execution. Under the Government there was a committee of public safety and on the 6th April 1793 Robespierre was a member of this committee. However, by the 10th July 1794 he had been executed.

In June 1795 British naval and land forces supported a royalist invasion of France at Quiberon Bay . The Royalist army landed, met and were defeated by the General Lazare Hoche. in command of the revolutionary army. From November 1795 to November 1799 France was controlled by the Executive of 5 directors and this period came to be known as the Government by the Directorate.

By March 1796 Napoleon Bonaparte had been appointed to control the French army in Italy.

External activities of the French Government and Directorate included the following:

- Channel Islands attack 1793
- Expedition to Bantry Bay 1796
- Expedition to Bristol under William Tate 1797. This led to the French Invasion at Fishguard.
- 1798 expedition to Ireland.

All of these expeditions were following the determination to invade England and spread the Revolution. By November 1799, Napoleon Bonaparte in charge of the republic.

As early as 1795 Carnot the military strategist for the Directorate had drawn up detailed instructions for establishing a Revolutionary movement in England".

By 1799 after the successful military campaigns, Napoleon Bonaparte became Dictator of France, later to become Emperor. The threat of invasion by France to England remained very real.

English coastal defences were strengthened, the Martello towers stretched from Folkestone, Kent to Seaford (Sussex). Romney Marsh was defended with a military canal for 23 miles on its northern boundary with cannon emplacements and strategic defence positions.

From 1803 to 1805 Bonaparte mostly at Boulogne was assembling his fleet and a fleet of 2,000 boats and an army of 132,000 men. He is reputed to have said, "with three days of east wind I could repeat the exploit of William the Conqueror."

However, on 21st October 1805 Nelson's victory at the Battle of Trafalgar over the French fleet prevented an invasion of England.

Last Invasion at Fishguard.

On 15th September 1779 an armed privateer ship called the Black Prince arrived off Fishguard. It was commanded by Captain Stephen Manhant and a crew of English and Irish smugglers. Two demands were made, £500 to return a seized merchant ship belonging to Samuel Forton and £500 ransom for the town. Some cannon fire bombarded the town hitting some chimneys and the church roof. An armed smuggler ship returned fire and drove the Black Prince away empty handed.

As a result Government Authorities agreed to build a fort to protect shipping and the harbour and the town. Thus, in 1781 Gwyn Vaughan of Jordanston House and Estate (north west of Letterston) and owner of Parc y Morfa Farm, leased the small coastal headland to the east of the harbour for the purpose of building a fort. This fort was situated in a defensive position, with buildings for stores and accommodation and eight 9lbs cannons installed. At the time of the invasion in 1797 there were three elderly gunners running the fort.

Under the direction of the French Directorate and the orders of General Lazare Hoche a French fleet of 4 ships left Brest loaded with 1,400 French soldiers on 16th February 1797. Their orders were to sail around the English Channel, up the Bristol Channel, land at Bristol, capture Bristol and proceed in a northerly direction. If that was not possible they were to land in Cardigan Bay.

The whole plan was based on the presumption that once the French landed in England the general population would rise to support them and a combined French forces and population would defeat any opposition.

Contrary winds made it impossible to sail up the Bristol Channel and as a result the squadron sailed around the Pembrokeshire Coast with the intention of landing in Cardigan Bay.

On the afternoon of Wednesday 22nd February the French squadron appeared off Fishguard. It has been sighted that morning by Captain Thomas Williams at St. Davids and he sent word to Fishguard that a French squadron was heading up the coast. The squadron consisted of La Vengeance and La Resistance two large and new French frigates, a courvette La Constance and a lugger Vautour. One of the French ships probably the lugger appeared off Fishguard Harbour and the fort fired apparently a blank shot. This action caused the French ship to turn back and as a

result no landing was attempted at Fishguard Bay but took place on the coast at a point called Carreg Gwastad some 2 miles west of Fishguard.

Historical rumour says that the fort had only three rounds of ammunition. However, a naval round has 9 shots, thus three cannons could have fired a total of 27 cannon balls. The range of 9lbs guns would have probably been 600 to 800 yards. The French ships were armed with 28 - 18lbs guns and 12 - 8lbs guns on each frigate. It is possible that the French ships guns would have had a greater range, but their total fire power if pressed in an engagement with the fort would have overwhelmed the defences. Luckily for Fishguard this did not happen. Today, a public footpath leads from the car park at the top of the hill leading to Lower Town to the site of the fort with some cannons in place and the remains of the buildings sighted at the fort.

On the way to Fishguard the sloop Britannia was captured and sunk, the crew and the master John Owen were taken aboard the French ships.

Instead of attempting to land in Fishguard Bay or Goodwick Sands, the small French fleet anchored off Carreg Gwastad point, about 2 miles from the entrance to Fishguard Bay. There they unloaded their forces, stores, ammunition, etc. and marched inland reaching the homestead of Trehowell Farm. It is likely most of this work was done in darkness. At the point chosen for disembarkment, there is no steep cliff only a grassy slope running down to the rocks at the edge of the sea. Equally, with small boats and in darkness it must have been a difficult operation.

The French forces comprised the following ships and men: Two French frigates La Vengeance and La Resistance each with 28 - 18lbs guns and 12 - 8lb guns. Constance with 24 guns, a lugger with 14 guns. In addition to the crew these four ships were carrying 1,400 soldiers made up of 400 from Legion Noire and about 1,000 of others. Many of the others had come from French prisons and other sources with very little military training.

The General in charge was William Tate, Irish born, lived and fought in the American Colonies against British forces and officers Le Brunn (second in command) and including Lieutenants Barry St. Leger, Robert Morrison, and Nicholas Tyrrell all Irish born. Barry St Leger later escaped from Porchester Castle,

It is recorded that in landing at this point, they carried 47 barrels of gun powder, 13 boxes of grenades and 2,000 other arms, including muskets, cutlasses, etc. from the ships to their headquarters. The headquarters were located at Trehowell Farm, approximately 1 mile from the landing place, and at that time in the ownership and occupation of John Mortimer.

After a night spent in the open, on Thursday 23rd February some of the troops penetrated inland occupying Garnwnda and Garn Gelli overlooking Fishguard Bay, Goodwick and Fishguard areas. There are reports that some of the French troops penetrated down as far as the Goodwick St. Davids road close to Manor Owen and

certainly laid in wait in ambush for British forces on the small roadway leading from Goodwick to Garn Gelli.

The majority of the French forces were engaged in searching for food supplies on the neighbouring farms of the Pencaer (Strumble Head Peninsular). The historical records show that somewhere between 40 and 50 different farms, cottages and houses were raided in the search for foodstuffs. In addition to food supplies the French found considerable supplies of beer, wine and spirits. As a result by the afternoon of Thursday 23rd February, this military force was basically in an uncontrollable situation with large number intoxicated from the supplies which they had found and refusing to obey their officers.

As of Thursday morning 23rd February, the only British forces near Fishguard were the Fishguard Fencibles under the command of Lieutenant Col. Knox in two divisions Fishguard and Newport about 200 men who were assembling that morning.

The Commander in Chief for West Wales was Lord Milford of Picton Castle as Lord Lieutenant but by Thursday morning he had delegated his authority to John Campbell, Lord Cawdor of Stackpole.

Cawdor had already since 1792 organised a Yeomanry Company of some 43 ridden troopers who assembled on Thursday morning and marched towards Fishguard. Also that morning in Haverfordwest, was Lieutenant Col. Colby a regular soldier with 100 of militia troops from Cardigan. Further troops included Capt Ackland's Volunteers, 93 no, Fishguard Fencibles under Lt Colone Knox no 191, Naval party and 2 canons 148 strong , 24 Officers and others .

In addition during the day, 150 seamen with 8 - 9lbs guns came from Milford to Haverfordwest and joined the troupes heading for Fishguard. It is likely that the combined British forces were about 600 ahead together with 8 cannons and some of them mounted.

During the morning Col Knox having received some intelligence of the strength forces and being outnumbered by at least 4 to 1, had decided to retire from Fishguard and met the advancing forces under Lord Cawdor somewhere south of Letterston approximately 7 to 8 miles from Fishguard. The whole local forces under Cawdor's command then proceeded to Fishguard arriving at approximately 4.00 p.m.

The invasion events and surrender

Late on the Thursday afternoon some skirmishing took place between French and local forces, but there was no major engagement. Most of the French forces were incapable of any direct action and refused to obey their officer's orders.

The French fleet under the command of Commodore Castagnier had by late afternoon left the area, as they did not wish to be engaged or captured by British Naval forces.

During the course of the evening, Col. Tate decided that as he was unable to control his forces, he had better surrender to the British Authorities. As a result, negotiations took place and eventually late at night a surrender was agreed. It was reported that the following morning Lord Cawdor visited the French camp and confirmation of a surrender agreements were made, although no copy of the documents can be found today.

It was agreed that the French forces would leave their encampment at 12 noon, and march to Goodwick Sands where they would lay down the arms and proceed in captivity to Haverfordwest.

It is believed that at some time on Thursday afternoon the local heroine Jemima Nicholas went from Fishguard onto the Strumble Head peninsular armed with a pitchfork and using that, captured 12 Frenchmen which she brought back to Fishguard and were kept in custody.

On Friday 24th February, in the early afternoon the French forces marched from Trehowell Farm to Goodwick, lined up on Goodwick Sands and laid down their arms. The opposing British forces were lined up not only on Goodwick Sands but on surrounding areas and took control of the French forces and marched them to Haverfordwest. There they were imprisoned in various places including St. Marys' church and in due course moved on to other prison locations, mostly in the south of England.

In due course in 1798 a prisoner exchange was agreed between the French and British Government and the majority of the French troops and officers who took part in this invasion on the Fishguard area returned to France by means of prisoner exchanges.

Among the traditions and stories of the French Invasion is the part possibly played by the Welsh ladies of Fishguard, dressing up in red cloaks, and who were mistaken for British regular troops. This story has been heavily publicised over the years, but there is little historical evidence to show that it took place. Other results of the landing were financial problems for the British Government, because there was a run of gold withdrawals from the Bank of England. It was decided very quickly to prevent any further withdrawals and instead to institute a paper system of payment guaranteed by the Bank of England.

This was undoubtedly the start of the modern payment by cheque system, which later came into general use. It was not until 1823 that the Bank of England resumed allowing withdrawals of gold coin from the bank.

A further result after the invasion was the arrest of two people, Samuel Griffith of Pointz Castle Farm, Solva and John Reed, and Thomas John on charges of treason. They apparently visited the French camp on Thursday 23rd February. Griffith and John were committed to imprisonment awaiting trial in Haverfordwest and the trial did not take place until September 1797. The prosecution evidence depended on details from French prisoners stating that they had seen or recognised the defendants in the French camp. However, before the trial commenced the French witnesses changed their story and as a result the trial was abandoned. However, the two innocent parties had spent six months in prison in Haverfordwest.

Further Notes

Thomas Paine

Thomas Paine was a son of a Quaker corset maker from Thetford in Norfolk. After a hard and difficult early life as a sailor, teacher, and excise man, the death of his first wife, he immigrated to America in 1774. He had a lifelong sympathy for the poor and unfortunate and believed in the Republican Government. In the American colonies he became the Editor of the Pennsylvania magazine writing many articles and pamphlets including:

- Common Sense (advocating American Independence),
- The Crisis and Public Good (calling for a National Convention),
- Essays to Rhode Ireland,
- Dissertations on the Bank (attaching paper money),
- Prospects on the Rubicon (attaching William Pitt's small policy),
- The Reflections on the Revolution in France, and by Edmund Burke was answered by Paine in 1791 under the title 'The Rights of Man', and part II published in 1792.

From 1787 to 1802 he was in England and France. His pamphlets were widely circulated and gave some credence to the revolutionary movements in England. Because of the danger of a revolution the Prime Minister Pitt caused Paine to be indicted for treason. However before the trial he escaped to France and there in 1792 he was triumphantly made a member of the French Convention as one of 1,750 deputies. In France in December 1793, he was arrested on suspicion of having royalist tendencies and imprisoned until November 1794. He continued to write and publish and to advocate that Government should be a beneficial agent with a positive humanitarian programme.

Thomas Jefferson who became US President in 1800 used Paine's 'Rights of Man' publication in support of his election. Paine died in New York City on the 8th June 1809 and in 1819 his remains returned to England. He failed to turn England from a monarchy to a republic, but no doubt his written work was widely read, provoked

immense discussion and influenced subsequent political reforms, possibly the (1832 Reform Bill) in England.

Napoleon Bonaparte

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At the junction of Romney Marsh and the mainland a military canal of 23 miles in length was constructed on the northern boundary of the marsh with cannon emplacements and strategic positions for defence.

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