

Napoleon's Obsession – The Invasion of England

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ABSTRACT

By the end of the eighteenth century the threat of French invasion was a way of life. Nevertheless, it was Napoleon's determination to succeed, where others had failed, that brought the terror of the Revolution from the cities and towns of France to the shores of England. The nation's response greatly affected Britain's naval strategy, resulted in a complete overhaul of the country's auxiliary forces and provoked an unprecedented building frenzy of multifarious defences and communication systems along the southern and eastern coasts of England. As it was, the defences were never tested, but the initiatives had made any planned invasion more problematic and ipso facto made Britain a safer place.

Introduction

Over the centuries England has been invaded by Celts, Romans, Germanics, Vikings and, in 1066, by the Normans.¹ In January of that fateful year the nation's patron saint and monarch Edward the Confessor died and with his passing the lights of Saxon England were snuffed out.² Harold, the king's counsellor, was crowned opening the gates of war and initiating two rival claims to the throne. Both claimants, one *bona fide* the other hopeful and determined, were outside the British Isles; so both needed to mobilise and invade. The first was Tostig (Harold's exiled and vengeful half-brother) who landed in the Humber estuary supported by a Norwegian army; he was soon defeated by Harold's army at the decisive engagement at Stamford Bridge. Harold's victory was, however, spoiled by news that 'William the Bastard' had landed at Pevensey. William, Duke of Normandy, with a force of Normans, French and Bretons, had capitalised on Harold's predicament and landed on the Sussex coast. Harold raced south with his army but was killed in the ensuing battle and the English accepted conquest and bowed to a new destiny.

¹ Often portrayed as the last invasion of England but there can be no denying the fact that William of Orange successfully invaded the country in 1688 despite the rhetoric of portraying the act as a Glorious (internal) Revolution. See Ian Herson, *Fortress Britain, All the Invasions and Incursions since 1066* (Stroud: The History Press, 2013) for a full list – although the author does seem to interpret *invasion* rather liberally.

² St. George became the patron saint of England during the Hundred Years War 1337-1453.

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Thereafter English security was reliant on Normandy's protection and English silver. When the former fell to French invasion in 1204 and the latter was exhausted through the construction of defensive fortifications, the Channel became England's first line of defence and a strong navy a prerequisite. Invasion of England became an infatuation for the French and a way of life for the English. The first nine decades of the eighteenth century witnessed successive French monarchs fashioning no less than nine hostile designs on their northern neighbour.³ These plans were ingrained in French politics and the national psyche long before the birth of Napoleon. Nevertheless, it was Napoleon's passion to succeed where other French leaders had failed which turned invasion into an obsession. It was an obsession which, not surprisingly, transported the terror of the Revolution from the cities and towns of France to the shores of England. In short, the threat of invasion terrorised the British nation, greatly affected Britain's naval strategy, resulted in a complete overhaul of the nation's auxiliary forces and provoked an unprecedented building frenzy of multifarious defences along the southern and eastern coasts of England and in Ireland.

French Invasion Plans 1793-1802

Every son of France was imbued with a bitter hatred for England; it was the one correlation between the *ancien régime* and its grisly successor and Bonaparte, the apotheosis of the Revolution, cherished and embellished that antipathy. Yet plans for invading Britain during the Revolutionary Wars were instigated long before the young Corsican had earned his reputation. In 1792 General Charles Dumouriez led a Revolutionary army into the Austrian Netherlands, captured Brussels, drove the Austrians from Belgium and annexed the region. Dumouriez, with the ear of the Convention, dusted off his invasion plans of 1777-8 and presented these for consideration. They were rapidly approved along with orders for the armament of 30 ships and the construction of 25 more. It was a plan of hope over substance. At the time the French navy had 76 ships of the line, while Britain had 115. Furthermore the French navy were more patriotic than professional.⁴ Support foundered and the plan was scuttled only to be resurrected in 1796 by General Louis Lazare Hoche, Bonaparte's redoubtable rival and the peacemaker of La Vendée. Initial plans against England were refocused in support of General Jean Humbert's initiatives to stir up rebellion in Ireland. However, even before these preparations matured, the Directory, politically divided and fickle, had given approval to another invasion plan. It was the brainchild of a young French captain called A.M. Muskein. Muskein, a Fleming by birth, may have been innovative but he was clearly not a leader of any note for, within days, many of the soldiers allocated to the invasion force had deserted. The attempt, when it was launched, then floundered in sight of the French coast when

³ H F B Wheeler and A M Broadley, *Napoleon and the Invasion of England, The Story of Great Terror* (London: Nonsuch Publishing 2007), p. 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

one of the vessels sank. The Directory was forced to think again; Hoche was recalled and given the green light for his invasion of the Emerald Isle.

Hoche's fleet consisted on 44 ships and while 17 of these vessels were warships only seven were dedicated transports, the balance being frigates and gun brigs. The force numbered 14,000 men resulting in dangerous overcrowding in the troop carriers. The fleet slipped out of Brest harbour in December 1796. Vice Admiral John Copoys, commanding the British blockading force cruising off the French coast, was led to believe (through questionable intelligence) that the fleet was destined for Portugal and rather carelessly lost sight of it. London had no idea what was going on and, not for the first or last time, the weather became the nation's saviour. Winter storms proved too much for the French sailors; after a week in difficult seas and with the fleet dispersed the French turned for home without landing. Westminster, the Admiralty and Horse Guards breathed a collective sigh of relief; lessons were quickly identified and remedies instigated, particularly with the Irish military. For now the Irish emergency was over and a potentially disastrous situation avoided but it served to refocus the nation's attention to the likelihood of invasion. Two months later alarm bells sounded again, this time off the Welsh coast at Fishguard. Hoche had despatched a motley group of 1,400 'jail birds and ragamuffins' under Captain William Tate, an Irish-American from South Carolina. It ended in comic farce when Tate mistook the red cloaks of the Welshwomen, who lined the surrounding Pembrokeshire hillsides watching the spectacle, for battalions of British soldiers and duly surrendered.⁵ The upshot was a nation in the initial stages of trauma at the prospect of a successful invasion; there was a run on the banks and the Bank of England was forced to suspend the cashing of bills.⁶

The nation's gaze, so firmly fixed across the Channel ultimately led to the biggest intelligence blunder of the Revolutionary Wars. In late 1797 Bonaparte returned in triumph from his first campaign against the Austrians and Sardinians in northern Italy. He was appointed commander of the Army of England encamped outside the French channel ports and, in February 1798, was sent to inspect the situation and report. He was seen by a British agent whose intelligence sparked a flurry of speculation in Whitehall. The process of conjecture was myopically drawn towards the inevitability of invasion; actually, because of the dispersion of the French fleet, Bonaparte considered an invasion (at that time) most impractical. Never a man to underestimate his destiny he declared that the best way to attack England was by seizing Malta, occupying Egypt and then invading India.⁷ In May 1798 Bonaparte set sail with an army from the Mediterranean port of Toulon, Whitehall had been

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁶ Roger Knight, *Britain against Napoleon, the Organisation of Victory 1793 – 1815* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), p. 87.

⁷ Wheeler and Broadley, *Terror*, p. 86.

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blindsided. In the north of France the Army of England, which numbered 56,424 men, had lost its commander and its *raison d'être* and slowly disbanded. Invasion, for now, was placed on the back burner.

Britain's Defensive Strategy 1793–1802

Despite the risk of invasion from French or Dutch shores having manifested itself throughout the eighteenth century, coordinated and systematic British national defence planning did not commence in earnest until the mid-1790s. Colonel George Hanger published his paper on *Military Reflections on the Attack and Defence of the City of London* in 1795 cogently argued that the Royal Navy could not be relied upon to guarantee sovereignty of England's shores.⁸ Confirmation was sought on the coastal areas most at risk. It was concluded that these lay between the mouth of the Solent and the Suffolk and Norfolk coasts as far north as Lowestoft. Plans were drawn up to enhance the natural defences and, at the same time, a series of pre-emptive strikes against the French coast were proposed by the Secretary for War, Henry Dundas. The first of these raids took place against Ostend in May 1798; it was relatively successful in destroying the harbour facilities and some of the shipping therein, but the British force, of about brigade strength, was eventually surrounded and forced to surrender.

Despite unrelenting French aims and intentions the fact remained that they suffered a number of problems in trying to mount an invasion from their channel ports. Ostend, Calais, Boulogne, Dieppe, Le Havre, Harfleur and St Malo were each too small to contain a transport fleet large enough to move an army and all suffered from narrow entrances which complicated departure on a single tide. In the age of sail, once committed there was no turning back, as the *invincible* Armada had discovered in 1588. One possible solution lay in the Scheldt (or Escaut as the French called it) a watery refuge large enough to contain a large fleet which could be victualled from the large base at Antwerp. Since 1794 this had been in French hands – it was, as Napoleon stated, 'a pistol pointed at Britain's heart', a sentiment reinforced by the fact that Britain tried to recapture the Low Countries on no less than four occasions between 1793 and 1814.⁹ The strategic importance of the Scheldt and the Dutch/Belgian coast to Britain's defence was indisputable. It was a vulnerability which led Britain into the Great War in August 1914, in the subsequent peace negotiations

⁸ Knight, *Against Napoleon*, p. 88.

⁹ Namely April 1793 to November 1794 under the Duke of York; August to November 1799 the Anglo-Russian landing in Den Helder; July to December 1809 the Walcheren expedition; and December 1813 to April 1814 the British campaign in the Low Countries in support of the Dutch revolt against the French. For a good overview of these actions and the importance of the area to the defence of Britain, see Andrew Limm, 'Forsaking the good cause?' *The Changes and Obstacles in Reforming the British Army, 1815-1914*, in LoCicero, M., Mahoney, R. & Mitchell, S. (eds.), *A Military Transformed? Adaptation and Innovation in the British Military, 1792-1945* (Wolverhampton: Helion, 2014), pp.36-50.

at Versailles in 1919 and in the German plans for Operation Sea Lion, the invasion of Britain in 1940. The commander of the first British expedition to recapture the Low Countries in 1793-4 was the King's youngest son, Frederick Duke of York; his rather questionable performance led to him being made Commander-in-Chief of the Army by way of a sop. He turned out to be an ideal choice, indeed Sir John Fortescue, author of the seminal work on the *History of the British Army*, wrote that the Duke of York did 'more for the army than any one man has done for it in the whole of its history'. York certainly laboured to streamline the auxiliary forces available for national defence of which there existed a bewildering array. 'Such a multiplicity of denominations might be construed to indicate activity' wrote Fortescue, but he went on to clarify that its 'true significance is poverty of thought and of power of organisation'.¹⁰

Bonaparte's departure for Egypt provided Britain breathing space but Britain failed to seize the moment, not because of a lack of will but because of an institutional straightjacket. The question of military power and the authority over it were an integral part of the English constitutional struggle, a struggle which came to a head in the mid seventeenth-century. The constitutional safeguards were provided by vesting the command of the army in military officers responsible to the Crown, and by vesting the administration of the Army in civil ministers responsible to parliament. This provided a dual control where one authority acted as a check upon the other.¹¹ The treasury controlled most but not all of the funding; the Home Office was in the process of handing responsibility for defence matters to the Secretary of State for War but he, his deputy and the Secretary at War continually clashed. The Duke of York, as Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, did not have control over all the auxiliary forces and, most crucially, had no control over one fighting component, namely the artillery, which came under the Board of Ordnance along with the engineers and all matters to do with fortifications. The net result was a shambles. The Royal Navy, which posed no threat to Parliament or the Crown, did not endure similar frustrations. It was, however, about to undergo a far greater crisis. Protests against over-zealous discipline and insufficient pay boiled over into two mutinies; the first at Spithead in May 1797 and the second, more serious incident, at Nore the following month. Fortunately for Pitt's government and the nation, common sense prevailed (on both sides) and a greater part of the immediate fleet, under Admiral Adam Duncan, reassumed its blockading position off the Dutch coast.

A total of 60,000 men were earmarked for the defence of London and the south and east coasts. They were a mixture of regular and auxiliary forces and organised into

¹⁰ John W Fortescue, *A History of the British Army 1645- 1870*, 20 vols (London: Macmillan, 1899-1920), vol. 4, Part 2, p. 894.

¹¹ Hew Strachan, *The Politics of the British Army* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 44.

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three armies, two of 15,000 men and one of 30,000 men, as well as a reserve. An early warning system and the rapid movement of these troops was a prerequisite to successfully defeating any invasion. The solution lay in a telegraph system and it just so happened that the French had trialled and introduced the Chappe Telegraph in 1793. The Duke of York was quick to pick up on the importance of a comparable system to the army generally and in the role of defending the nation in particular. He tasked the Reverend John Gamble, Chaplain-General to the Forces and a Cambridge mathematics scholar, to investigate. However, it was the Admiralty and not Horse Guards who were to take the project further and, as speed was of the essence, they were happy to commence with a system less elaborate than that of the French but one which, nevertheless, was fit for purpose. In September 1795 the project was approved and George Roebuck (Superintendent of Telegraphs – as he became known) was tasked with selecting sites for stations to link London to Deal and Portsmouth. As early as 1797 the shutter telegraph system was up and running and not a day too soon.¹²

Napoleon's Great Invasion 1803-05

Bonaparte returned from Egypt in August 1799 and, on a wave of popularity, judged the time and circumstance right to conduct a *coup d'état*. As First Consul his initial military act was to attack the Austrians in Italy; a move designed to raise national morale and to redress the balance of recent military victories by the Second Coalition. His gamble paid off with a close-run victory over the Austrians at Marengo in June 1800. A subsequent victory, by General Jean Moreau, at Hohenlinden that December effectively knocked Austria out of the war. Within months Tsar Paul I of Russia had been assassinated and the Second Coalition had all but collapsed, leaving Britain alone in the struggle. News of the British victory over the French at Alexandria in March 1801 promoted a rather energetic retort from Bonaparte; 'Well, there remains now no alternative but to make the descent on Britain'.¹³

Bonaparte appointed Admiral La Touche Tréville to instigate plans for the defence of the French northern coastline and ports and, more crucially, to spearhead strategy for the Great Invasion. Tréville was an ideal choice; he was one of the few really capable naval commanders in the French navy and a man with an innate hatred of the English, an abundant zeal and an unflinching optimism. However, in April 1801 news that Nelson had broken the Danish fleet at Copenhagen bringing the power of the Maritime Confederacy to an end, left Bonaparte questioning the wisdom of invasion, for failure would almost certainly bring him down. He required more time, France was weary and peace would provide him the breathing space he desperately needed.

¹² See Howard Mallinson, *Send it by Semaphore, The Old Telegraphs during the Wars with France* (Marlborough: Crowood Press, 2005) for more information.

¹³ Walter Scott, *The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte Emperor of the French*, 9 vols (Edinburgh: Longman, 1827), vol. 4, p. 364.

Prime Minister Pitt's unexpected resignation in February 1801 (over giving Catholics a role in the army and navy) provided Bonaparte an opportunity to further his ambitions by playing on the divisions within Henry Addington's new government. The subsequent negotiations at Amiens were concluded on 25 March 1802; they were, quite simply, a French diplomatic triumph. British cartoonists who had a few weeks earlier caricatured Bonaparte as 'an unshaven Scaramouch from a Corsican hovel, looting burning and murdering', now depicted him as a great man and worthy of his elevated status. Alas, it was not to last for 'unlike the English, Bonaparte had not made peace because his people wanted liberty to trade. What he wanted was liberty to re-plan the world'.¹⁴

Despite peace British distrust of Bonaparte remained, prompting the government to sanction an additional 20,000 men for the navy and 66,000 for the army and to maintain the armed forces at high levels of readiness.¹⁵ For a short time Bonaparte concentrated on reforms at home but it was not long before his ambitions manifested themselves. 'In an incredibly short period the First Consul became President of the Italian Republic, subdued Switzerland, seized Piedmont, occupied Parma and Piacenza, and obtained Elba from the King of Naples'.¹⁶ As early as May 1803 Addington felt compelled to once again declare war on France; the peace had lasted just one year and 16 days. Bonaparte was furious. His navy was far from ready; many warships were either in the mid-Atlantic, West Indies, on the African coast or Indian Ocean. The seaworthy forces at Toulon and Rochefort were negligible, the arsenals were almost empty and crews inadequate and untrained. The Royal Navy, conversely, reacted with commendable speed and captured two French ships in the mid-Atlantic. Bonaparte threw another, by now, characteristic rage and ordered all British travellers in France to be arrested and the closure of all continental ports to her ships.

A race of insolent shopkeepers barred Bonaparte's path to world dominion. The narrow strip of water between Calais and Dover was all that stood between an amalgamation of his dream and his revenge. 'They want us to jump the ditch' he cried, 'and we will jump it!'¹⁷ Bonaparte mobilised the army and every French seaport to build vessels, the Dutch were ordered to provide ships of the line, gunboats and barges as well as troops, the Swiss were cajoled into providing a large body of soldiers and finally the Spanish were bullied into opening their ports to French

¹⁴ Arthur Bryant, *The Years of Victory 1802 – 1812* (London: Collins, 1944), p. 22.

¹⁵ The army numbered 132,000 of which 81,000 were in Britain, 18,000 in Ireland and the balance of 33,000 overseas. In addition the militia numbered 48,000. The Royal Navy retained 32 ships of the line and 217 smaller craft, although the dockyards were short of timber and stores – see Knight, *Against Napoleon*, p. 222.

¹⁶ Wheeler & Broadley, *Terror*, p. 219.

¹⁷ Bryant, *Victory*, p. 47.

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vessels and coerced into paying a substantial sum of money to assist the cause. In June 1803 General Adolphe Mortier invaded Hanover (of which the British monarch was Elector) at the head of 25,000 men and captured the large arsenal; the Rhineland territories were annexed *en route* and their vast forests plundered for wood. Even Louisiana, the core of Napoleon's new Empire, was sold to the United States for 80 million francs to fund the endeavour. By the summer of 1804 more than 70,000 French soldiers, the nucleus of the Army of England under generals Ney and Soult, were encamped at the northern sea ports. On 3 December both generals were on the list of 17 officers made marshals of France, the day after the First Consul had ascended the steps of the French throne as Bonaparte and walked back down as Napoleon, Emperor of France. By August of the following year, the new emperor had accumulated enough landing craft in the Channel ports to transport 167,000 soldiers.¹⁸

It was his intention to cross the Channel on a foggy night or immediately after a gale when the British frigates would be becalmed. A total of 1,500 barges would slip out of Boulogne, Wissant, Ambleteuse and Etaples, 300 would emerge from Dunkirk, Calais and Gravelines, a further 300 from Nieuport and Ostend and the final contingent of 300 (manned by Dutch troops) from Flushing. There were four types of vessels. The largest of the boats were called *prames* armed with 24-pounder guns and capable of carrying 150 men; the second and most numerous were the *pinnaces*, armed with howitzers and capable of transporting 55 men; the *chaloupes canonnières* were also armed with howitzers and used to escort the convoys; finally, the gunboats were used to transport horses, ammunition and artillery. All were equipped with specially designed landing bridges. Years later, following his captivity on Saint Helena, Napoleon talked about his plans and intentions for the invasion to Dr Barry O'Meara one of his physicians. O'Meara subsequently wrote a lengthy report to the Governor, Hudson Lowe. The account provides an illuminating insight into Napoleon's mind:

It was my firm intention to invade England and to head the expedition myself. My plan was, to dispatch two squadrons to the West Indies (he did not say from what ports). There they were to meet and unite at a specified place and instead of waiting there, after shewing themselves amongst the Islands, they were to proceed back again to Europe with all dispatch. They were to raise the blockade of Ferrol and take the fleet out of it. They were then to proceed to Brest and in like manner to release and join the squadron there. By these means I would have had a squadron of about seventy sail of the Line, besides frigates etc. They were to proceed directly and sweep the English Channel, where they would meet with nothing strong enough to oppose them, for by means of false intelligence adroitly managed, I would

¹⁸ Knight, *Against Napoleon*, p. 252.

have induced your ministers to send squadrons to the Mediterranean, East [word erased – assume Indies] and West Indies in search of mine. I intended then to push over under their protection the Boulogne Flotilla, with 200,000 men, to land near Sheerness and Chatham, and to push directly for London where I calculated to arrive in Four Days. During the march, I would have made my army observe the most exemplary discipline, marauding or otherwise injuring or insulting the inhabitants would have been punished with instant death. I would have published a proclamation (which I would have had ready) declaring that we were only come as friends to the English nation, to render them free and to relieve them from an obnoxious and despotical [sic] Aristocracy, whose object was to keep them eternally at war in order to enrich themselves and their families at the expense of the blood of the people. Arrived at London I would have proclaimed a Republic - Liberty, Equality, Sovereignty of the people, abolished the Monarchical Government, the nobility and the House of Peers, the House of Commons I would have retained with a great reform, the property of the nobles I would have declared to be forfeited and to be divided amongst the people, amongst the partisans of the Revolution, a general equality and division of property. By these means I hope to gain a formidable party, to be joined by all the 'canaglie' [rabble] in such a great city as London, by all the idle and disaffected in the kingdom and that, perhaps, I might ultimately succeed.¹⁹

Napoleon's plans pivoted on the ability of the French fleet to clear and hold the Channel. The French troops were, throughout 1804, in a buoyant mood and trained for the impending assault landings with great enthusiasm. The camps grew daily and every type of military store was stockpiled in anticipation; meanwhile Antwerp was converted into a massive naval arsenal. The largest camp, just outside Boulogne, was transformed into a provincial town with well-built huts and elaborate gardens astride tree-lined avenues.²⁰ The Emperor visited these camps regularly, reviewing the troops and raising morale. However as weeks turned to months waiting for Admiral Villeneuve to appear with the French fleet boredom began to take its toll. Napoleon threw another tantrum castigating the treacherous Villeneuve and all his unworthy sailors but secretly he was most likely relieved at the provision of a suitable scapegoat for he was becoming increasingly concerned about the practicality of his plan.

British Countermeasures 1803-1805

The renewal of war and the need to counter the growing threat of invasion inspired six specific responses from the British state and its armed forces. The first was to

¹⁹ British Museum, Add. Ms. 20214 folios 77r – 80v.

²⁰ David Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967), p. 323.

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increase naval blockading operations throughout France and the Spanish port of Ferrol; the second to continue to attack French colonial interests; the third to mobilise the army and the population; the fourth to construct a series of field and defensive fortifications and structures at key invasion sites; the fifth to conduct pre-emptive strikes against the French invasion flotilla; and finally, the sixth was to rebuild a viable coalition to counter Napoleon in central Europe.

Preventing the concentration of the French fleet, and thereby denying their ability to clear and hold the Channel, required the blockade of the French ports on the north and west coasts as well as those in the Mediterranean. By mid-1804 the Channel fleet under Vice Admiral William Cornwallis had 44 ships of the line; their task was to watch over Brest, Rochefort and the Spanish port of Ferrol. The North Sea fleet under Admiral Lord Keith had another 80 ships, including 11 ships of the line and 20 frigates (and a number of other support vessels). The title of this fleet is misleading as it had responsibility for blockading French, Belgian and Dutch ports as well as complex defensive responsibilities in cooperation with the army. During the period 1803-05 the Royal Navy grew from 388 to an impressive 534 vessels; although only five were ships of the line. Over the same period 47 ships were lost to storms and accidents, while they gained 103 ships by capture from the French, Dutch and Spanish.²¹

Striking, or continuing to strike at French colonial interests and power, was integral to the government's strategy. French and Dutch islands in the West Indies and South America were the first to be targeted. St. Lucia fell quickly followed by the Dutch colonies at Demerara, Essequito, Berbice and, most significantly, Surinam. Then came the capture of Saint Dominique and, with it, the arrest or destruction of 18 French ships, including a ship of the line. All of this activity in the West Indies disrupted French colonial interests and frustrated Villeneuve's plan for the respective French fleets to break their blockades, sail to the area (thereby drawing the Channel Fleet in pursuit) before rendezvousing and returning with great haste to hold the Channel and protect the invasion force during the planned crossing.

Throughout the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars (and indeed many wars prior to and since) Britain had to contend with a small standing regular army. Even before the rupture of the Peace of Amiens, the Secretary-at-War had declared that the government was not satisfied with the defence of the country. The King was required to uphold his prerogative of compelling all his subjects to take arms, as they had done in the time of the Plantagenets and Tudors. In 1802 the Militia Acts enabled 49,000 men to be called up immediately and an additional 23,000 to be formed as a

²¹ Bruce Collins, *War and Empire; The Expansion of Britain 1790-1830* (Harlow: Longman, 2010), p. 231.

‘supplementary’ militia.²² This was followed by the General Defence Act, the Army Reserve Bill, the *Levy en Masse* Act and a host of other statutes all designed to categorise and mobilise the population, complicate ‘escape’ from conscription, spread the costs down to parish level and divide the nation into defensible districts in order to augment the military defence of the nation. The plethora of acts was as confusing and complex as the groups they re-energized or spawned.

The regular army establishment was fixed at 132,000 men of which 70,000 were specifically earmarked for the defence of the United Kingdom (Ireland had become part of the Union in 1800) and over 25,000 for the colonies. After the regulars came the Army of the Reserve; a formation raised by ballot, which had the sole task of defending the nation. The Army Reserve Bill fixed this force at 50,000 but in fact never more than 30,000 were raised; although two-thirds of these men were subsequently induced to join the regular army. The militia and supplementary militia added another 72,000 men. Militia service was for five years and restricted to home service.²³ Each county had a quota and the ballot and recruitment of men was the responsibility of ‘lieutenancies’ within the county. There were fines (£10 per man) for failing to meet quotas and despite being unpopular in the 1790s, recruiting ceased to be a problem from 1802 onwards when there was a national willingness to fight Napoleon and resist attempts at invasion.²⁴ The militia were exclusively infantry and their roles included the guarding of military installations and keeping civil order. Regiments were not based in a particular area indefinitely and they did not serve in the county in which they were raised; this avoided the complication of vested interest and local sympathies.

The next body raised for home defence were the Volunteers. The Fencible Regiments had all been disbanded by the end of 1802 and the government were determined to mobilise every able-bodied man, whether he liked it or not.²⁵ The Volunteers Corps had first been established in 1794 with the Volunteer Act. They had three roles; to man coastal artillery batteries, to augment the regular Militia in the infantry role, and to form cavalry troops, which were called Yeomanry. The *Levy en Masse* Act, passed in July 1803, enshrined the undoubted right of the Sovereign to demand military service of all his subjects. It also outlined the requirement and provided the machinery for execution,

The Lords-Lieutenant, to whom the entire execution of the Act was entrusted, were required to obtain lists of all men between the ages of seventeen and fifty-five, and to sort them into four classes, namely: first,

²² Fortescue, *Army*, vol. 5, p. 167.

²³ Service outside the country was possible with consent.

²⁴ In the 1790s men could pay for a substitute and therefore avoid being called up.

²⁵ The Royal Manx Regiment was the only fencible unit to survive past 1802; they were disbanded in 1811.

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unmarried men under thirty years of age, with no child living under ten years old; secondly, unmarried men between thirty and fifty years of age, with no child as aforesaid; thirdly, married men from seventeen to thirty years of age, with no more than two children living under ten years old; fourthly, all other men whatsoever. Exemption was granted to the infirm, to the judges, to clergymen, to schoolmasters, persons actually serving in the Army, Navy and Reserve Forces, Lords-Lieutenant, their Deputies, and peace-officers.²⁶

Failing to join the Volunteers left an individual open to ballot and the more exacting service in the Militia. By the end of 1803 nearly 400,000 men had answered the call (3.6% of the population) and the Corps consisted of 604 troops of cavalry, 3,976 companies of infantry and 102 companies of artillery.²⁷ Great credit must be given to the government (and indeed the opposition) and the Duke of York at Horse Guards for their collective handling of the army's manning challenge. In consequence, by the end of 1803 a total of 615,000 men were available for the nation's defence.²⁸ Numbers alone, however, only tell half the story for despite sound patriotic feeling, these men could resign at their own will and many were not properly armed. Hardly a match for the *Grande Armée*. The navy too had to execute measures to increase their establishment. Their equivalent of the Militia and Volunteers was the Sea Fencibles; a force established in the 1790s and reinvigorated in 1803. Their duties included the manning of coastal defences (mainly Martello towers) and the provision of crews for small coastal vessels. By the end of 1803 their numbers peaked at 25,000 and they still boasted 23,000 when they disbanded in 1810.²⁹

The fourth response to threat of invasion was to improve existing coastal defences and to construct a series of new fieldworks on the south coast. Once again, the army's stovepiped chain of command was to complicate matters. Coastal forts were the responsibility of the Inspector General of Fortifications and Works who came under the Master General of the Ordnance, while Field Fortifications were the responsibility of the Quartermaster General at Horse Guards and this was further complicated by the fact that temporary fortifications were actually the responsibility of the general commanding the military district in which they were being (temporarily) constructed. To cap it all the issue was bedevilled by financial complexities of budget allocation to these departments and Treasury control over funds voted for land purchase and construction.

²⁶ Fortescue, *Army*, vol. 5, p. 206.

²⁷ Knight, *Against Napoleon*, p. 262.

²⁸ Christopher D. Hall, *British Strategy in the Napoleonic War 1803-15* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 6.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

The defensive plans were designed to inflict maximum French casualties prior to landing by a combined use of the Royal Navy's North Sea Fleet as well as a number of floating batteries moored off the more vulnerable beaches. In addition, several bomb-proof towers were constructed. These Martello Towers, or 'Martellos', were inspired by a round fortress at Mortella Point in Corsica (completed 1565) captured in 1794. Fifteen such towers had been constructed in Minorca when the island was recaptured by the British in 1798. However, there was considerable disagreement as to their suitability as defensive structures in Britain. In 1798 Major Thomas Reynolds (Ordnance Survey) had listed 143 suitable sites for these towers between Littlehampton and Great Yarmouth but the plan was shelved later that year when the French began the expedition to Egypt. The plan was dusted off in 1803 and proposed in parliament but the debate continued and was finally concluded in October 1804 during the National Defence Conference in Rochester. The conference, attended by Pitt (now Prime Minister once again), Lord Camden (Secretary of State for War), Lord Chatham, (MGO), the Duke of York and a number of key military and naval officers debated the issue with great enthusiasm before the matter was finally settled. Between 1805 and 1812 a total of 140 Martellos were built around Britain, with 74 being constructed on the Kent and East Sussex coast between Seaford and Folkestone.

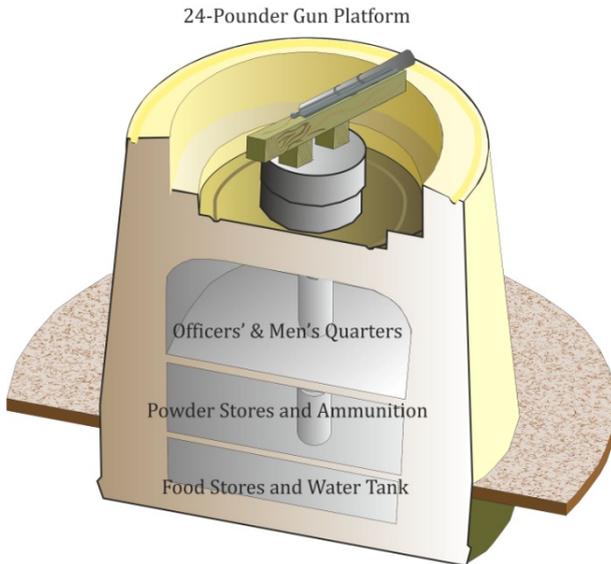


Image 1: A Martello tower³⁰

³⁰ The towers were constructed to a standard plan. A typical tower would be about 45 feet (13.7m) in diameter at base and up to 40 feet (12m) tall. The masonry walls were between 6 and 13 feet thick and built of brick and rendered externally with lime mortar, calculated to withstand bombardment. A flat roof

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In addition, two eleven-gun circular forts were also constructed at Eastbourne and Dymchurch and a major fortress constructed on the western heights above Dover. Work on the Dover fort began in 1804 (although the idea had been approved and funded as early as 1779) and consisted of three independent structures: the citadel, the Drop Redoubt and the Grand Shaft. The citadel was a large fort with bastions and ditches and was not complete by the end of the Napoleonic Wars. The Drop Redoubt was a detached fortification close to the cliff edge from where the defenders could sally to engage any landing force. However, the practicality of the defenders moving from the cliff tops to the beaches (about two kilometres) was recognised and a shaft was incorporated into the plans. The Grand Shaft is 180 feet (55 m) deep and contains a triple staircase lined with London brick. When completed the defences on the Western Heights would house 6,000 men and 139 guns but it was never finished. It was hugely expensive (about half a million pounds) and when the threat of invasion passed the funding dried up. The project was also competing for funding with the enhancements to the forts at Chatham and the largest fortification in the country - Dover Castle. At the latter Lieutenant Colonel William Twiss, the chief engineer for the Southern District, ruthlessly levelled parts of the medieval structure and appliquéd the new outer defences; these included a large horseshoe shaped glacis and wall to the south and three demi-bastions facing east and Constable's bastion facing west. Finally, Lieutenant Colonel John Brown of the Royal Staff Corps submitted plans for a canal with a defensive bank, supported by canon at intervals, which isolated the Romney Marsh from Romney to Dungeness. This had the advantage of being both a barrier to an invading force and hastened the movement of defenders and supplies along its length. The project evoked considerable interest and controversy in government circles but had the blessing of the Duke of York and the monarch and became known as the Royal Military Canal. It, like so many of these hugely expensive projects, was never actually finished but by 1807 the canal stretched nearly 20 miles and it certainly formed a reasonable military barrier.

An elite formation was also stationed in the area. In 1794 the army had bought 229 acres of land at Shorncliffe (which was extended in 1796 and 1806) and it was here that the 'Experimental Corps of Riflemen' were being trained under General Sir John Moore as light-infantry soldiers armed with rifles. The Shorncliffe Experiment began in earnest in 1803. The barracks on the south coast was a training ground and not a permanent home for the Light Division, however, during the years when the invasion threat was heightened (1803-1805) these troops were in and around the area.

carried the 24-pounder gun mounted on a central column and sliding traverse carriage which enabled the gun to fire through 360 degrees. Inside there were two main floors, the lower floor housing supplies and a powder store, and the first floor the men's quarters and officer's quarters. A single Martello housed between 15 and 25 men.

Nevertheless, the defensive plans did not visualise these troops executing a Churchillian style defence of the French invaders on the south coast beaches but rather they were to fall back towards the main forces under General Sir David Dundas (the overall commander in Kent and Sussex) held within the Chatham Lines. These Lines had also been considerably strengthened and enlarged; further bastions and batteries were added, ditches revetted, new underground stores, shelters and magazines constructed along with an elaborate series of communications tunnels. Two additional forts were also built from scratch, Fort Clarence in Rochester and Fort Pitt, between Fort Clarence and Fort Amherst, which formed the focal point of the Chatham Lines. To the north of the Thames another immense fortified camp was constructed at Chelmsford although some officers questioned the cost-effectiveness of the scheme declaring that no enemy would pause to attack it but would merely push on towards London.

Work on the shutter telegraph system had continued, more or less, throughout the early years of the nineteenth century and extensions were approved in 1805 for a line to Plymouth and two years later for an extension to Yarmouth. However, after the Peace of Amiens work on the coastal signal station network, which had commenced in 1794, had all but ceased; once war had been declared the Admiralty set about putting them back into 'a proper state for service'.³¹ Dismantled stations were re-erected and new ones surveyed and constructed. Nevertheless, the system was not using cutting technology, opting instead for the traditional flag-and-ball system held aloft on masts, some of which were erected on church towers for reasons of speed and cost. The army also used a similar system to pass messages within the southern district and this is perhaps the reason that other more scientific options like the Reverend John Gamble's radiated telegraph were not utilised despite performing well at trials. It is interesting that the Royal Navy continued to adopt the so called Popham code for their ship to ship communications only; most likely for the risk of it being too readily compromised if used on land. Most of these signal stations were up and running by 1804 but work continued to improve them until 1815 and, in some cases, beyond.

Pre-emptive strikes against the French invasion flotilla, while making evident sense, were far from successful. The blockades were successful and occasionally the blockading fleet would vary their routine by bombarding the ports but this was more of an attempt to relieve boredom and ring the changes than a serious attempt at disruption. In September 1803, Dieppe, Granville, Le Havre and Calais were all bombarded from the sea with indifferent results. However, as the number of French vessels at Boulogne was three times that of any other French or Belgian port it was decided to execute a plan whereby three ships were to be filled with masonry,

³¹ Mallinson, *Semaphore*, p. 136.

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clamped together and then run aground at the harbour entrance where they would be torched; the intention being that the masonry would sink at the mouth and block it permanently. Most peculiarly, avoiding any form of operational security, the preparations went ahead amidst a blaze of publicity only for the weather to scupper the plan.³² A second attempt in October 1804 was a more scientific affair. Pitt met with a number of inventors to consider novel ways of attacking the French before they could put to sea. Robert Fulton, an American inventor who had failed to raise interest with the French Admiralty over his new submarines, came to Britain and proposed a plan of attack on Boulogne using fireships, torpedoes and mines.³³ His plan was adopted; however, the French lookouts spotted the British force well out to sea and executed a series of well organised contingency plans to counter. When the heavy French guns opened fire, the British crews steered full ahead, set the fuses and abandoned their respective ships. The results were visually spectacular but accomplished little.



Image 2: 16 August 1804, Napoleon reviews the troops and fleet at Boulogne – a far more successful event than that the month prior. (Author's Own – Kind Permission of the Museo Napoleonico, Roma)

Curiously the greatest damage to the Boulogne fleet was inflicted by Napoleon himself some four months earlier when Admiral Étienne Bruix countermanded Napoleon's order to review the fleet in the face of a brewing storm. Napoleon and Bruix nearly came to blows and the unfortunate admiral was dismissed and exiled to

³² Fortescue, *Army*, vol. V., p. 235.

³³ For an interesting account of Fulton's inventions and his dealings with the French/Bonaparte see Wheeler & Broadley, *Terror*, pp. 245-255.

Holland. His deputy, Vice Admiral Charles Magnon, endeavoured to execute the order just as the storm broke with inevitable consequences,

Meanwhile the Emperor was anxiously pacing up and down the beach, with folded arms and bent head, when suddenly terrible cries were heard. Over twenty gunboats, manned with soldiers and sailors, had gone ashore, and the unfortunate men were struggling against heavy seas, and shouting for help which no one ventured to give. The Emperor, deeply distressed at the sight, and moved by the lamentations of the crowd that had collected on the beach, was the first to give the example of devotion and courage; in spite of the efforts made to detain him, he stepped into a lifeboat, exclaiming "Let me alone – let me alone! We must get them out of that!" In an instant the boat was filled with water; huge breakers surged over it, one of which very nearly swept His Majesty overboard, and washed away his hat. Then the officers, soldiers, sailors, and towns-people, inspired by the Emperor's example, jumped into the water, or manned boats, to try and save the drowning men. But few alas! of the unfortunate crews were saved, and on the following day over two hundred corpses were washed up on the beach, together with the hat of the victor of Marengo.³⁴

The final challenge to the British government in 1803 was to rebuild a viable coalition against the French. There were quintessentially two reasons for Britain's Continental failure in the 1790s. Firstly, there was no substitute for a powerful and ably administered army. Secondly, mere sea power, regardless of strength and capacity, was no substitute for 'boots on the ground'. A naval war unsupported by a Continental ally would not further the nation's aims. Both Britain and Russia continued to seek coalition but Austria's position was pivotal. The hinge was the Holy Roman Empire; a multi ethnic conglomeration of territories in central Europe which was paradoxically in Voltaire's words: 'neither holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire'.³⁵ In 1512 the name had been changed (but not universally adopted) to the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, a correspondingly ambiguous title but one which, nevertheless, gives a geographical anchor to this multifarious amalgamation. The French had been hacking away at the periphery of the Empire intermittently since 1792 and the invasion of Hanover in 1803 was another affront to the Holy Roman Emperor, Francis II, who happened coincidentally to be Francis I of Austria. These attacks and incursions left the Holy Roman Empire and the Austrians on the brink. Napoleon's decision to crown himself Emperor in May 1804 was bad enough but his decision the following year to proclaim himself King of Italy was more

³⁴ Fernand Nicolay, *Napoleon at the Boulogne Camp* (New York: Lane, 1907), p. 178.

³⁵ 'N'était en aucune manière ni saint, ni romain, ni empire'. Voltaire, *Essai sur l'histoire générale et sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations, Chapter 70* (Edition 1756).

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than Francis and the Austrians could bear. The attack on Genoa was a formality, in August 1805 Britain, Austria, Russia and Sweden established the Third Coalition against the Corsican upstart.

In consequence, Napoleon decided to place the invasion on hold while the armies on the Channel coast were mobilised and propelled eastwards to meet the emergent allied threat. It was a brilliantly conducted campaign which culminated in Napoleon's greatest military victory over the combined Austro-Russian armies at Austerlitz in December 1805. It broke the Coalition, Napoleon was at the zenith of his power and he was once again free to pursue his obsession of invading England. However, in the interim, a naval battle had taken place which was to alter British geopolitical strategy and destroy Napoleon's ambitions of bringing England to her knees militarily. The naval battle off Cape Trafalgar in October 1805 was not, contrary to popular opinion, a decisive blow but rather a *coup de grace* which capped a process of naval domination in the great fleet battles since the 1780s. The battle did not render the French fleet ineffective, the Royal Navy destroyed more ships after the battle than they did during it, but the battle destroyed French naval morale and with it Napoleon's confidence in the arm. Britannia's struggle to rule the waves continued after 1805 but their ascendancy was never again threatened by the French. Napoleon had to satisfy himself with trying to bring Britain to her knees through financial ruin and his Continental System.³⁶ It was a long shot, it was not his style and it failed.

Boney will come and get you!

During (and after) the period of 'Great Terror' the caricaturists James Gillray, Thomas Rowlandson, Isaac Cruickshank and George Murgatroyd Woodward had a field day.³⁷ The English newspapers were full of articles and cartoons about 'Buonaparte' who was belittled and demonised. 'He was described as an assassin, ogre, renegade, toad, spider, and devil; as a minute, swarthy brigand with a squint and jaundice; as a pervert who seduced his sisters'.³⁸ He was no longer a man but a monster and British mothers would tell their children at night, 'If you don't say your prayers, Boney will come and get you'. Invasion panic seized the nation and in London it reached fever pitch. Yet it engendered, not for the first or last time, a 'backs to the wall' spirit in which every member of the country was united in their resolve to resist.

The effectiveness of the defensive preparations undertaken by Britain can only be speculated. However, there can be no doubt that the arming of the auxiliary forces, the unrelenting building of fortifications and the introduction of telegraph systems

³⁶ An economic blockade to bring pressure to bear on Great Britain was first introduced in 1793 and taken up again by Napoleon in late 1806 in response to the British maritime blockade of 16 May 1806.

³⁷ As many as 300 caricatures covering the subject are purported to have been produced.

³⁸ Bryant, *Victory*, p. 53.

had made the nation more difficult to invade and consequently made Britain a safer place. Nevertheless, so long as the country was at war with France, the threat of invasion remained. In January 1806 William Pitt died; he had been the greatest figure in Britain for 23 years and his passing left a political and emotional void. His death was only a matter of weeks after the euphoria of the naval victory at Trafalgar; at about this time Pitt had given an audience to a young general who had just returned from India. His name was Arthur Wellesley. When the French and Russian navies combined following the Treaty of Tilsit in July 1807 Britain responded with a pre-emptive strike on the Danish fleet at Copenhagen and put measures into place to ensure the Portuguese fleet was out of reach. The young Arthur Wellesley was sent with a small force to Portugal; he emerged triumphant in 1814 as the Duke of Wellington, having driven the *Grande Armée* back over the Pyrenees after six long years of war in the Iberian Peninsula. He returned the following year to lead the allies to victory over Napoleon at Waterloo, ending French domination and with it the threat to Britain's sovereignty.