

The impact of the Napoleonic Wars on the Romney Marsh

By Colonel Anthony TB Kimber¹

Two weeks after the order by the revolutionary government in Paris to execute King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette in 1793, the French Republic declared war on Britain. For 12 years Britain braced itself for invasion, but although there were several limited and unsuccessful landings from 1796 to 98 in Ireland and Wales, French threats were never translated into full scale invasion. (Wheeler & Broadley 2007). This essay considers the reasons for this and explains the lasting impacts on the Romney Marsh.

In October 1797, the newly appointed commander of an invasion army at Boulogne, Napoleon Bonaparte threatened, "Our government must destroy the British monarchy, or it will have only to wait for its own destruction by the corruption and intrigue of these insular plotters. Let us concentrate all our attention on the navy and destroy England...."



These words signalled a dual strategy of neutralising the Royal Navy to allow an invasion across the Channel and a strike against London. Napoleon started on the second strand of the strategy: the creation of an invasion army; the first strand would prove more problematic. (Terrain 1976).

Napoleon ordered the building of a fleet of invasion craft, drawing on resources as far south as Toulon and Corfu. (Wheeler & Broadley 2007). An English spy reported, "On the road to Lisle (Lille) every useful tree cut down, and sawyers at work, cutting plank and other scantling, and carts transporting it to the coast in great numbers." Initially, the army was planned at around 50,000, with artillery in the same calibres as British to ease re-supply. By the end of 1797, Napoleon concluded that he needed more time, "With all our efforts, we shall not for many years obtain command of the seas. An invasion of England is a most difficult and perilous

undertaking....our fleet is today as little prepared for battle as it was four months ago".... He then turned his attention to Italy and Egypt, leaving General Kilmaine to continue the invasion preparations. (Keegan 2004)

In early 1798 the British could raise almost 250,000 men comprising regular, militia, fencible cavalry and infantry and yeomanry. There was an early warning system of beacons, watch-houses and semaphore telegraphs (Wheeler & Broadley 2007). But although these preparations were vital, it was the projection of force using British naval power which remained a priority. One man was dominating this form of warfare. In spring 1801, Horatio Nelson returned ennobled from the Battle of Copenhagen. He was sickly, but was appointed to command the Downs Fleet of small attack vessels based between Deal and Dungeness. As a subset of the Channel Fleet, he was responsible for carrying the fight to the French and for rallying the "Sea Fencibles", an auxiliary force established to reinforce coastal defence.

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(James 1948). Nelson surveyed Boulogne to plan a series of daring attacks, which took place in summer 1801. Little was achieved and Nelson received a bad Press in London. Pressure only eased when Britain and France, both tired of war, agreed to the Treaty of Amiens (signed in March 1802). (Lee 2005). There followed an uneasy peace, regarded by many, including Nelson, as a lull in hostilities. After just 14 months, in May 1803, the terms of



the Treaty were breached and the British declared war against France. Nelson was appointed to the Mediterranean fleet and went on to successfully destroy the French Navy off the Nile. Meanwhile, Napoleon, having had his own success in Italy, was bogged down in Egypt. Taking flight, he was soon back in Paris and then on to the Channel, redirecting his

energy into his invasion flotilla. He planned to invade Britain in the winter of 1803/4, perhaps during fog or a lull in weather. Around Boulogne, he had mustered, restructured and trained a multi-national army of some 200,000, which would be transported in around 1500 small craft from ports between Etaples and Flushing (Terraine 1976). These ports had been improved and protected, which can be seen today. Boredom among the waiting troops was allayed by training manoeuvres and ceremonial parades, during which, in his elevated status, first as Consul and then Emperor, Bonaparte awarded the newly created Legion d'honneur (Vine 1972). But, all did not go well, as seaborne exercises showed the invasion craft to be of poor design and many men perished as a result. Other innovative approaches were considered but not adopted, such as troop carrying balloons; huge rafts and even a channel tunnel (Wheeler & Broadley 2007).

If there were difficulties with the army, the other strand of the strategy, the need to secure naval superiority remained completely elusive. The Royal Navy, since resumption of the war, had taken every opportunity to blockade and attack the French fleet (Gardiner 1996). During his visits to Boulogne, Bonaparte reflected in his extravagant pavilion above the town, that 'Eight hours of favourable weather will decide the fate of the universe.' In Britain, from the end of 1803 to 1805, the invasion was anxiously anticipated, with thousands of military volunteers being placed on military alert. Georgian satirists portrayed the time as "The Great Terror". (Wheeler and Broadley 2007).

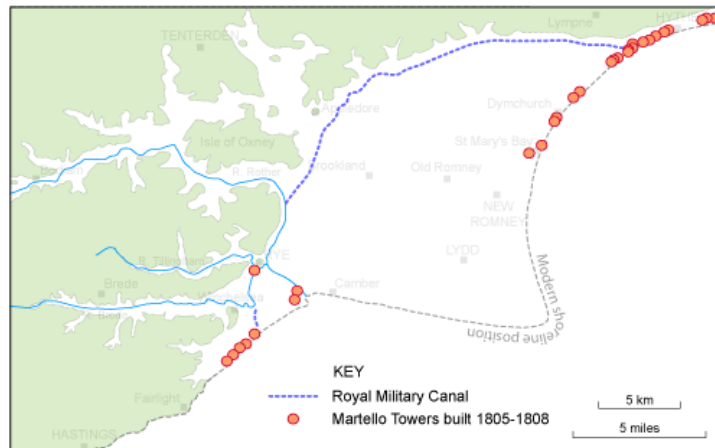
Napoleon planned to attack around Chatham and Dover and then strike at London. His view was that this would lead quickly to both military and political defeat. On the British side, the Duke of York sought threat assessments from the coast. These indicated that the low lying sandy beaches either side of Dover were the most likely places for a landing. (Pocock 2002). Hythe beach and Dungeness point were specifically identified. Since 1798, the British had adopted a defensive "scorched-earth" policy, known as "driving the country". Napoleon's army travelled light (Forrest 2002) and relied on taking resources from the land, rather than

carrying supplies in heavy wagon trains, therefore the British planned to evacuate the local population and destroy food-stuffs and the means of transport (Muir 2000). To this policy was added three defence tiers (George 2004):

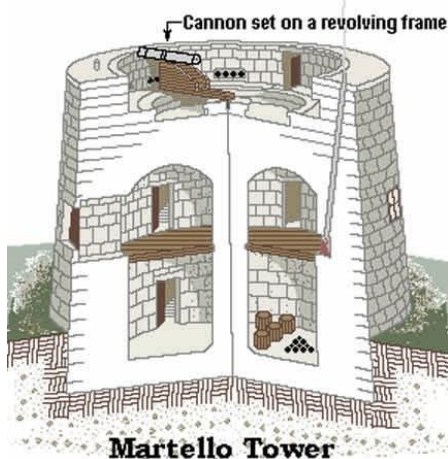
- Proactive naval operations in the Channel for early intervention;
- A line of gun towers along the coast to provide inter-locking canon fire in support of deployed regular troops and militia.
- A canal at the rear of the Romney Marsh to provide an obstacle in depth and the means to aid lateral troop movement by barge.

Another element of the plan was eventually deemed unworkable. This involved the flooding of the Marsh by opening the sluices at Dymchurch, Scots Float, East Guldeford and Pett Level, and by breaching the walls along the rivers Brede and Rother (Collard 1978).

In London, the negotiations for the building of towers and the canal were protracted and acrimonious. But, despite the expense, by late 1803, the Privy Council agreed that the Army would build Martello towers from East Anglia to Sussex.



The name 'Martello' taken from a tower on "Mortella" Point in Corsica, which in February 1794 held off an attack by two Royal Navy ships, inflicting heavy damage on one of them. Mortella became corrupted to Martello. (Sutcliffe 1972). Each Martello accommodated one officer and 24 men who manned the roof mounted canon. As smuggling continued at a pace throughout this period, the towers would also be seen as contributing to counter measures. The building of some 74 Martellos between Folkestone and Seaford started in Spring 1805.

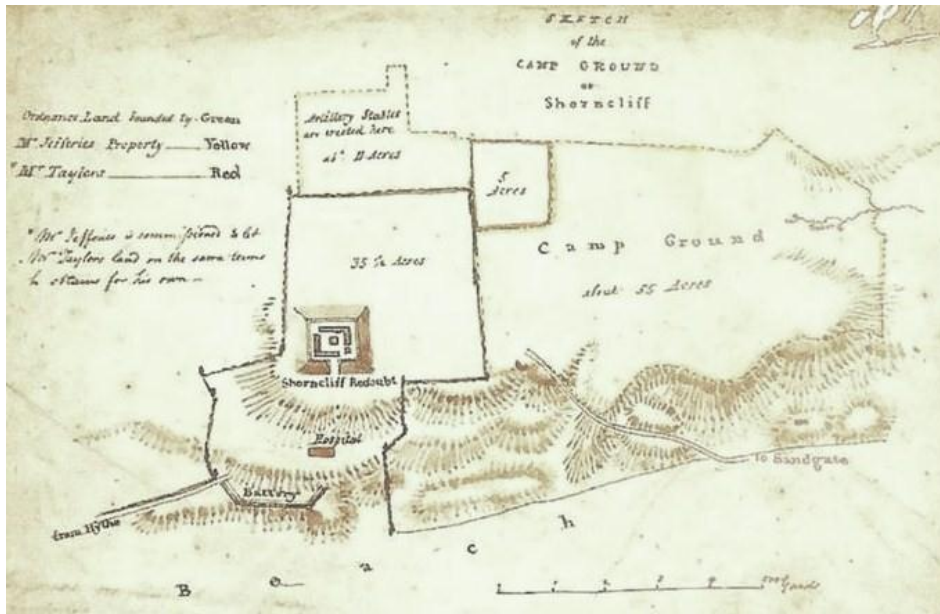


Earlier, in September 1804 it had been agreed to build the Royal Military Canal to run from Hythe to the cliff end beyond Rye Harbour (Vine 1972). This was dug with 500 yard offset lengths to enable enfilade fire from guns placed at the bends. On the inshore side there was a parapet, military road and a drain; on the shore side, a tow path for troop barges. Key crossing points had guard houses for soldiers. The 28 miles of canal can be walked today between Seabrook sluice at Hythe to Pett Level beyond Rye. (Royal Military Canal 2010)



Despite the elaborate plans, had the French invaded between late 1802 and 1805, they would

have encountered little of this defence system because the canal was not fully completed until 1809 and the Martellos by 1810. (Pocock 2002). At the height of the threat In 1803/1804, there were only some ad hoc forts and minor gun batteries in place, except for the Shorncliffe defences at the end of Hythe Bay. Here there was a battery of a dozen 24 pound cannons covering the beach, with a Redoubt above. It was to this key point that in 1802, Sir John Moore had arrived to take responsibility for the defence of Kent, including most of Romney Marsh. Although he is better known for the formation and training of the Light Infantry Brigade, he had the Shorncliffe Redoubt improved and used it to practice defence and attack. Moore's skirmishing tactics and ethos survive today in the Rifle Brigade of the British Army.



Moore rented a house in Sandgate below the Redoubt, from where he could look towards the French Army camped above Boulogne. He was determined that his troops would defend forward on the beaches, rather than be "driven" and this brought him into conflict with his superiors over the

approved military strategy. Today his redoubt is much overgrown and affected by later building additions, but the prominent square formation on the 1801 plan can be determined in the scrub and trees about the Shorncliffe Military cemetery.

During 1804 and 1805, both sides continued preparations on land and skirmished in the Channel (Gardiner 1996). By October 1805, the Royal Navy was manoeuvring in the Atlantic with the combined French and Spanish fleets. They came together off Cadiz. (Terraine 1976). Just weeks before, Bonaparte had perceived fresh threats from the Austrians and had suddenly moved his Grand Army from Boulogne to southern Germany. It was at Ulm that he received the news of his fleet's defeat by Nelson at Trafalgar. With no chance of naval superiority, the invasion of Britain was put on hold, but French and British naval skirmishing continued in the Channel until around 1811. The threat of invasion only receded after Bonaparte's defeat at Waterloo in 1815. (Glover 2003).

Today, much of the defence works remain from this period and there is some evidence of the naval operations. In New Romney there is the grave of Lieutenant Charles Cobb of HMS Castellan, who was killed by a canon shot in action off Boulogne 21 September 1811; in Rye, on the Ship Inn sign, the cutter Viper is listed. This was also involved in the operations.

Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion did not materialise primarily because he failed to secure naval superiority, however the English Channel had also proved to be a formidable natural obstacle. The result was that the Napoleonic coastal defences of Romney Marsh – Martellos and Royal Military Canal - were never tested. It would be in later wars, when they found a small role.

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