

# **THE NAPOLEONIC WARS, 1803-1814: THE DEFENCES OF S.E. ENGLAND**

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26 November 1998

The wars of France at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries, in particular the years of the Napoleonic wars between 1803 and 1814 could be fairly described as the first World War although this term is normally applied to the contest of 1914-1918. During this earlier period the fighting ranged eastwards to the Indian sub-continent, southwards to the South African Cape and westwards to the Americas and the Caribbean. Closer to home the contest between the great powers raged across the length and breadth of Western Europe and Scandinavia to the toe of Italy and from the Straits of Gibraltar to Egypt and the countries of the eastern Mediterranean.

Throughout the fighting, as has happened so often in our history, Britain stood firm, frequently without friends, blockading occupied Europe. She saw it as her task to obstruct the will of the French dictator, sometimes by skilful diplomacy, frequently by military intervention and occasionally by the application of hard cash to stimulate resistance by the crowned heads of Europe to the driving thrust of French republicanism. The nation's fortress position astride the Western Approaches, combined with her command of the seas, provided her with a position of economic and military power not possessed by any of her friends. During these times, Wordsworth wrote:

Another year, another deadly blow  
Another mighty empire overthrown  
And we are left, or shall be left alone  
The last that dare to struggle with the foe!

France, during her wars with England in the second part of the 18th century had already amply demonstrated her ability to land troops on British soil. In general terms her purpose had been to destabilise Britain by supporting subversion within the still fragile union.

Napoleon, on the other hand, had bigger game in mind. His aim was the occupation of London and hence the conquest of England. To this end, he brought together, on the cliffs above Boulogne, a Grand Army of some 167,000 troops. He spent 20 million francs in developing the roads from Paris to his naval bases at Brest, Cherbourg and Boulogne. Additionally, he developed embarkation facilities at Boulogne, Etaples, Wimereux and Ambleteuse,

amongst other harbours, into which he crammed transports and light craft of every variety, a preponderance of which were equipped with guns and mortars to provide covering fire for his invading troops. His plan, which was over ambitious, was to set forth on one tide as soon as his fleet was in place. "Sail up the Channel with all the ships you have" he wrote from Boulogne Camp in August 1805, to Villeneuve, Admiral of the French fleet at Brest. "England is ours, we are all ready. Every man is on board. Appear for 24 hours and the thing is done". But the unfortunate Admiral had already sailed away in a totally different direction before the message arrived.

The French Emperor, at once recognising that his opportunity had been missed, turned his Grand Army about and marched eastwards to invade Austria, whilst vowing that this had been his intention throughout and that everything else had been a distraction.

Briefly then, that was the threat, and even after Napoleon's departure, it still remained hanging in the air. How did Britain respond to it? Almost inevitably, and despite the hostile demonstrations by France during the Seven Years War and the remaining part of the 18th century, she was unprepared. Her politicians had taken the opportunity of the peace treaties, signed at Camp Formion with the Directorate of France in 1797, and with Napoleon at Amiens in 1801, to cut back on defence expenditure and reduce taxation. Many of the militia and volunteer associations had been disbanded. Arms were in such short supply for the units now being resuscitated that the Home Secretary, Charles Yorke, felt it necessary to advise the Lords Lieutenant of the maritime counties that a "good fowling piece, with a bullet mould properly adapted to it, a powder flask and a ball bag, together with a dagger or bayonet contrived to screw on to the muzzle upon occasion, will prove a very efficient equipment to brave and zealous men determined to defend their country".

Nevertheless, despite these obvious moves, it was not until late in 1803, that an appreciation of the situation and its impact upon the national interest, was presented to the Secretary of State by the Commander-in-Chief. This pointed out that the enemy held a considerable stretch of continental coastline, from Brest to Texel, in Holland. France was thus enabled to threaten the English coast from Land's End to John O'Groats; but the strength of the regular army, combined with that of the militia, totalled only 130,000 men. It advised, therefore, that apart from strong outlying garrisons posted at Plymouth, Portsmouth, Yarmouth, Hull and Edinburgh to guard against a coup-de-main, active defence consideration should be restricted to a reach on the east coast, north of the Thames estuary, between Clacton Beach and Hollesly Bay and, on the south coast, to a stretch between East Wear Bay and Beachy Head.

A descent by Napoleon upon the east coast was considered unlikely but the construction of defences against the possibility was pursued nevertheless. A vast fortified camp was built upon the heights above Chelmsford, with a purpose of providing flank protection for the east coast army. Behind these advanced positions, further entrenchments were constructed to protect London itself. A letter despatched from the Horse Guards, dated 25 August 1803, provides details of their line; up the north bank of the river Lea as far as Stamford Hill, thence through Highgate and Hampstead; from there it passed near Willesden Green and turning, came to Holland House, before descending to the Thames at Little Chelsea. The eastern face of the capital's defences was further enhanced by a variety of works; notably, arrangements were set in hand to flood the Lea Valley should need arise; to block the river Thames by the construction of a dam and floating gate at Bow; and to provide a ferry at Blackwall Stairs, manned by the River Fencibles, to be used as a communicating link between the north and south banks.

The defences of London south of the Thames were constructed with two purposes in mind, one general, and one specific. In general terms they were designed to provide depth to the line of southern coastal defences. Specifically, it was their task to defend the royal dockyards and arsenals at Chatham. It was rightly argued by the staff planners that the enemy's choice of direction would inevitably be influenced by the availability of a port. It was not visualised that he would head for Dover, for this was too well fortified. On the other hand it was judged that were he to land on the Isle of Thanet, the ports "on that district of the coast" would prove an easy target. It was agreed that this was his most likely option, and the Medway crossing was thus important to defend. Notwithstanding, it was felt that other sectors of the Kentish-Sussex coastline were equally vulnerable to landings, and it was appreciated that the whole spread would make a costly area to defend in terms of manpower.

In order to narrow these demands, the staff submitted a plan for the flooding of the Romney Marshes. The marshes were only such in name: they had long been drained to make good farming land and the government was aware that, to allow the sea to flood back would contaminate 28,000 acres of excellent pasture for a decade or more. They were reluctant to take such a decision unless invasion was clearly imminent. The staff agreed to the construction of a canal, the Royal Military Canal, 19 miles long, 60 feet wide and 9 feet deep, to run at the foot of the high ground which overlooked the Romney Marshes and rose immediately to its rear. The spoil extracted from it was cast on the north bank of the canal and shaped to construct a rampart. This, in its initial conception, was to have been provided every quarter of a mile with a fortified gun position, served along its entire length by a newly constructed military road.

The road was constructed but the guns did not arrive. They were still awaited in 1805 and, in the following year, when it became clear the French were not coming, the waters of the canal were stocked with tench. Ultimately, it gained a laudable reputation for the roach, rudd, perch, carp, pike and eels it offered to anglers.

Down on the coast, arrangements were made for the enemy to be engaged as he came ashore on the beaches. A screen of blockhouses, or Martello Towers, was erected in likely landing places, each protected by walls 5 feet thick, impregnable to troops without proper battering guns and carrying on its top a 25 pounder and two carronades, all mounted on traversing platforms. In total, 29 of these fortifications were constructed at intervals on the east coast between Suffolk and Essex. A further 73 were provided in the southern district, 27 in Kent and 46 in Sussex. They were sited every 5/600 yards and were designed to be self-contained, stocks of food, water and ammunition being stored in the belly of the building.

A single round of a 25 pounder, firing light case-shot, possessed double the killing power of a company of infantry. Since the towers were sited so as to be mutually supporting and each gun was capable of firing some six rounds a minute, this for its day was a formidable defensive arrangement.

Whether or not it was truly the intention of the Emperor Napoleon to invade England is debatable. The English Government obviously believed it to be so. It could not, in any event, have ignored the great army of French veterans assembled upon the clifftops at Boulogne nor the vast numbers of invasion barges accumulated in the French ports of the Pas de Calais. On the other hand, Napoleon's private secretary, de Bourrienne, relates that the emperor had no intention of coming. He claims to have taxed his master about it and to have received the following reprimand:-

“Those who believe (such an invasion) would have been possible are blockheads. I can doubtless land with 100,000 men. A great battle will be fought which I shall gain but I must calculate upon 30,000 killed, wounded or taken prisoners. If I march on London, a second battle will be fought. I shall suppose myself still victorious; but what shall I do in London with an army reduced three-fourths and without hope of reinforcements? It would be madness”.

Of one thing we can be certain: the defences of south-east England, together with her mastery of the seas, guaranteed for England a place on the battlefields of Waterloo.