

HMS The Royal George

The Royal George was the flagship of the Royal Navy's Western Squadron on the outbreak of the Seven Years War in 1756. When completed ten years earlier she was the largest ship yet built in Britain, with an armament of 100 guns arranged in three decks. After a number of failures, three-deckers as a type had fallen out of favour, to be replaced by two-deckers. The Royal George was thus an experimental – and, as it transpired, highly successful – revival of an earlier type. Her armament comprised bronze cannon instead of the usual cast iron – a sign of the status she was accorded. She was built from 3,840 oak and elm trees, and was 200ft (61m) long and 50ft (15.24m) wide. She could reach 11 knots in a gale.



The Royal George at Deptford, showing the launch of The Cambridge

The Seven Years War

Called by Winston Churchill The First World War, the Seven Years War saw Britain allied with Prussia against France and Austria. France was the ascendant continental power, and a bitter rival of Britain. By 1759, after earlier reverses, the tide had swung in Britain's favour; Guadaloupe was captured, General Wolfe had stormed Quebec, and Clive continued to triumph in India. France decided that she could solve all her problems at a stroke – by invading Britain. The plan was to land 20,000 men at Glasgow and a further 20,000 in Essex, ready to march on London.

The Battle of Quiberon Bay

The French assembled their invasion army at Vannes, in Quiberon Bay, where a fleet of transports had been prepared to carry them across the Channel. The difficulty for the army was that the French main battle fleet, essential for escorting the transports, was blockaded at Brest, in Brittany, 150 miles to the north. The blockading British ships, under the command of Sir Edward Hawke, had remained at sea throughout the summer of 1759, successfully maintaining the morale and health of their crews in an unequalled feat of seamanship and provisioning. However, in November the British fleet was hit by a succession of gales, culminating on the 9th in a wind so strong that it was forced to shelter in Torbay. The French, under their commander Hubert de Brienne, comte de Conflans, seized this opportunity to sail for Vannes to pick up the invasion army – on the same day that Hawke left Torbay. On November 20 the French were close to their destination, closely followed by the British fleet. In the fading light of a wintry afternoon, in an increasing north-westerly gale, and though lacking knowledge of the dangerous reefs and sandbanks dotting the approach to Vannes, Hawke signalled the attack, intending the destruction of the French fleet. The Royal George headed straight for the 80-gun French flagship, the Soleil Royal. The

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French Superbe (70-guns) bravely came to the aid of the Soleil Royal, and was sunk by a single broadside from the Royal George. Trying to open her lower-deck gunports, the French Thesee flooded and went down. Both fleets then anchored as night fell. In the morning the Soleil Royal found herself close to the Royal George, and in attempting to escape ran aground. Conflans then ordered his ship to be burnt, and escaped ashore with his crew. A British boarding party arrived on board in time to carry off the Soleil Royal's figurehead. The outcome of the battle was that Hawke's fleet of 23 ships had defeated the French fleet of 21 ships, with the loss of 7 French ships and over 2,500 men. Hawke lost 2 ships, but their crews were rescued. The invasion threat was over, and the British gained naval supremacy for the remainder of the war. No British admiral ever ran such navigational risks or gained so dramatic a victory.

The Moonlight Battle

In 1779 Lord North's Cabinet devised a plan to concentrate operations in the West Indies, and a fleet of eighteen ships of the line, including the Royal George, was despatched under Admiral Sir George Rodney. On the way to the West Indies the intention was to raise the siege of Gibraltar. Rounding Cape St Vincent on 16 January 1780, Rodney encountered a Spanish squadron under Don Juan de Langara, which he pursued into the night. As a result of this action six of the eleven Spanish ships were wrecked or captured, and Gibraltar and Minorca were relieved. It is interesting to note that Rodney's fleet included ships with coppered bottoms. For more than thirty years the Navy had been experimenting with sheathing their wooden hulls with copper, as a protection against the destructive effects of shipworm. It was found that coppering not only kept out shipworms, but also repelled fouling. Copper remained naturally clean and bright, and coppered ships were reckoned to be at least one knot faster – a huge tactical advantage. (In nearby Berrington Hall there is an enlarged version of an oil painting by Richard Paton which depicts the blowing up of the Spanish 70-gun Santo Domingo in this battle).

The Loss of the Royal George

Accounts differ, but what seems to have happened is as follows. In 1782, after an extensive overhaul in Plymouth, the Royal George was anchored at Spithead, ready to sail for Gibraltar - again under siege by Spanish forces. Accompanying her were over 50 men-of-war and 300 merchant ships. Aboard the Royal George were Rear Admiral Kempenfeldt, Captain Waghorn, most of the 820 crew, and also many women and children, who had been allowed on board to say their farewells. A minor repair to a water cock below the water line was needed. The method ordered by Captain Waghorn was to move the cannon from one side of the ship to the other, causing the ship to heel and allow access to the faulty water cock. The lower gun ports, normally closed when a ship was being heeled, on Waghorn's orders remained open. This was to allow supplies to be loaded through them, rather than having to be hauled up to the deck. At 9am a cutter arrived alongside and began unloading rum through the gun ports, which were only one foot above the water. The ship's carpenter, seeing the danger, tried to warn the officer of the watch, Lieutenant Holingbery, but was disregarded. The weight of the rum soon began to take the gunsills below the water line, and at 9.18am the ship began to

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capsize. Frantic efforts were made to right the ship by returning the guns to their proper positions, but the slope of the deck was too great. Only 255 of the 1200 on board survived. Admiral Kempenfeldt and the carpenter drowned; Captain Waghorn survived, to be exonerated at court-martial and retired on half-pay until he died; Lieutenant Holingbery survived and was later promoted to captain.

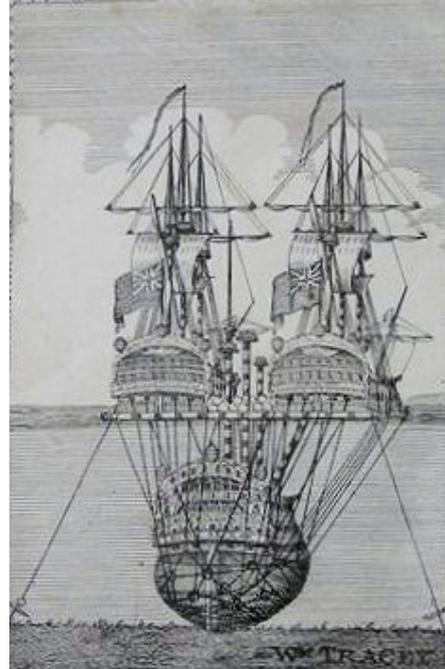
Salvage Attempts

Several attempts were made to raise the hull of the Royal George.

In 1783 William Tracey harnessed the hull and tried to raise her with the tide, but was forced to abandon his efforts after moving her 30ft (9m). (See picture, right).

Between 1836 and 1839 John and Charles Deane raised 29 cannon, but reported that the hull was beyond salvage.

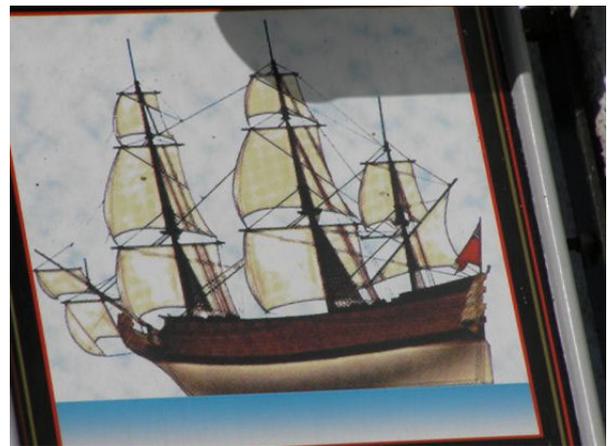
Finally, in 1839, a Colonel Palsey raised the remaining cannon. The cannon were melted down and used to form the base of Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square.



A representation of the plan used in trying to raise The Royal George by Wm. Tracey in 1783.

The Inn Sign

At first sight the sign outside Lyonshall's Royal George may appear to be a simple, rather naïve, image of a generic sailing ship. However, a closer inspection, and a comparison with surviving paintings, shows that all the main details are correct. The hull, though riding alarmingly high in the water (grounded?), is well proportioned, and shows the low fo'c'sle and high quarter-deck of the original. No cannon are visible, but vestiges of three gun-decks can be faintly made out. The sail plan and the general appearance match depictions of the ship at the battle of Quiberon Bay.



The Royal George Inn Sign

Further study

A search for *Royal George* on the internet will disclose several references, and at least one oil painting. NAM Rodger's book *The Command of the Ocean* is recommended for a full account of the naval history of this period.

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