



*The Exile's Departure* by Thomas Luny, courtesy of Torre Abbey Historic House and Art Gallery Copyright Torbay Council.

# Napoleon in Torbay

## Torbay Local History Series



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## The Battle of Waterloo - a near run thing



**Lithographic print of Bonaparte and signature**  
Courtesy of Torquay Museum

On Sunday 18th June 1815, the final, decisive battle in the Napoleonic wars was fought at the small town of Waterloo, just south of Brussels in Belgium.

A French army under the command of Napoleon Bonaparte was defeated by the forces of a coalition arrayed against him, consisting of a British army (with many foreign auxiliary units) under the command of the Duke of Wellington and an army of the Kingdom of Prussia. According to Wellington, the battle was "the nearest-run thing you ever saw in your life".

The Allied victory immediately marked the end of the French Empire and 23 years of almost continuous war in Europe. Many believe that had Napoleon won, his empire might have been fully restored and he would have regained his former power. For this, the Battle of Waterloo is considered by many to

be one of the most important and critical battles in history.

Forced to abdicate his reign in France, and hiding out in the port of Rochefort, Napoleon considered attempting to escape directly to North America. However, the Royal Navy was blockading French ports to forestall such a move and he finally surrendered to Captain Frederick Maitland of HMS *Bellerophon* on 15<sup>th</sup> July. Maitland's orders from the Admiralty were to take Napoleon to the nearest port in England, pending a formal decision on the French warlord's fate.

Thus, the *Bellerophon* set sail for Torbay.

## Napoleon in Torbay

*Royal Highness,*

*Exposed to the factions which divide my country, and to the enmity of the great powers of Europe, I have terminated my political career, and I come, like Themistocles, to throw myself on the hospitality of the British Nation. I place myself under the protection of its laws, which I claim from your Royal Highness as the most powerful, the most constant and the most generous of my enemies.*

*Napoleon*

*Letter to the Prince Regent written by Napoleon Bonaparte on 13<sup>th</sup> July 1815 as translated and printed in 'The News'*

Quite why Napoleon, the 'Disturber of the World', imagined that his request would be granted is unclear, but anticipating that the Prince Regent would accede to his wishes, he summarised his needs as follows:

*If H.R.H. sees no objection to granting me passports to go to the United States, it would be my intention to go there. But I do not desire to go to any other colony. If I cannot go to America, I wish to stay in England, assuming the name of Muiron or Duroc... I would need a house large enough for my*

*staff....If the Government intends to provide me with a superintendent, he must not be jailer but a man of quality and honour.*

Things were not, however, to go the way Napoleon had expected. In his mind, within an hour of anchoring at Torbay he would be able to disembark. Instead, the British Government, having already decided on exile, kept him aboard the HMS *Bellerophon*.

*Bellerophon* arrived in Torbay early in the morning of 24<sup>th</sup> July. On viewing the Torbay coastline, Napoleon reportedly could scarcely contain his delight at the beauty of the scenery, exclaiming in French, “What a beautiful country!” and remarking that it reminded him of the Bay of Ferrajo in the island of Elba, where he had spent his first period of exile. No-one now is actually sure where in the Bay the *Bellerophon* dropped anchor, with London Bridge and Berry Head both being mentioned in accounts, but Ellis places the ship firmly off Torquay. “They reached Torbay on 24th, where Maitland took up position near the Orestone whence his masts could be seen from Teignmouth Den over Hope’s Nose. In reply to his signals he was ordered to prohibit communication with the shore and await Admiralty orders three leagues out at sea.” However, John Smart’s story, as quoted in Roy and Lesley Adkins’ ‘The War For All the Oceans’ shows the *Bellerophon* dropped anchor off Brixham, where a number of local victuallers sailed out in the hope of selling produce to the crew.

Very soon, the man who once waged war across Europe soon became a must-see tourist attraction. He often walked the ship’s decks, and was soon receiving gifts of flowers and fruit from well-wishers. *At six o’clock the bell rang, dinner was announced, and he went below, followed by his attendants,* ran an extract from A Letter From Torbay published in ‘The News’. *Our jolly tars, with their usual good humour, put out a board chalked ‘he’s gone to dine’.*

## John Smart’s bottle

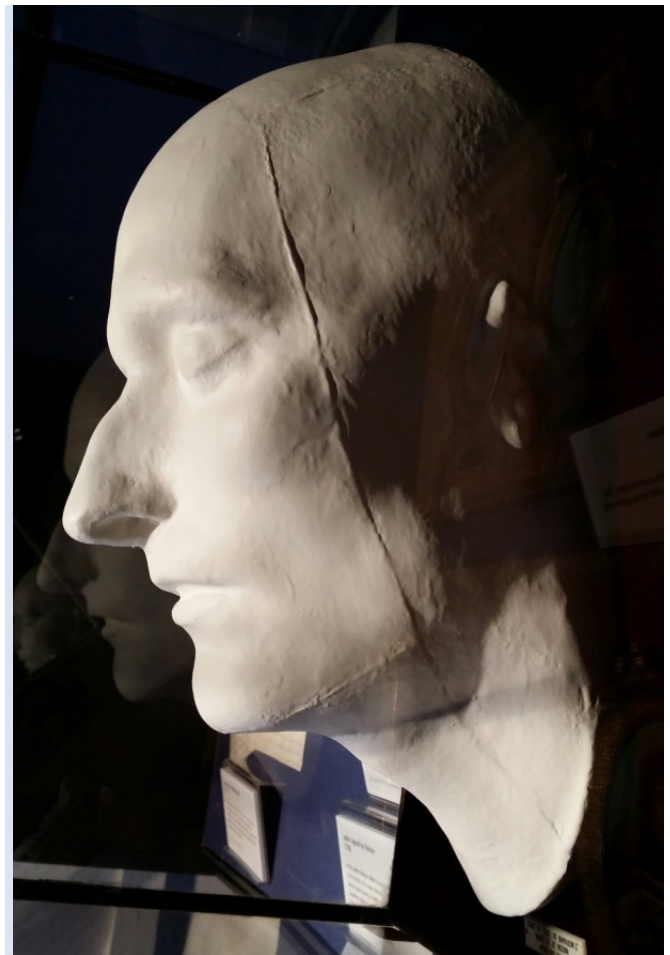
One of the locals rowing out to the *Bellerophon* and the accompanying *Myrmidon* was a Brixham baker named Michelmore, accompanied by three schoolboys who were enjoying an extra week’s holiday awarded to celebrate Wellington’s victory at Waterloo. Naval vessels were always a good market for local producers, but on this occasion they were perplexed at finding themselves being forcibly kept at a distance. Having come close enough to grab a lower-deck port-sill with his boat hook Michelmore shouted that he’d brought bread. “If we want bread we’ll come ashore and fetch it,” an officer shouted back, “and if you don’t let go we’ll sink you.” To emphasise the point, Smart recalled that a sentry put down his musket and seized “a large cannon ball, which he held exactly over my head... To my great relief Michelmore let go and we were soon out of harm’s way.”

But Smart noticed “at one of the lower-deck ports a man nodding violently to us... His eyes caught mine for an instant as he put his fingers to his lips with a warning gesture.” The boy saw him drop something into the water. “We dared not approach, but kept it in view as it drifted along.” The boy dragged his hand carelessly through the water and once Michelmore felt they were out of danger he changed course and Smart fished what was a small black bottle out of the water. The bottle contained a rolled up piece of paper, on which was written: “We have got Bonaparte on board.” As Smart recounted, “in five minutes after we reached shore there was not a soul in Brixham, except babies, ignorant of the news.” And so it was that Brixham – and the rest of the nation – was first informed by a schoolboy that the ‘Disturber Of the World’ was in Torbay.

But despite being offered all the courtesies afforded to a man of his rank – rather than being treated as a prisoner-of-war – Napoleon was denied the one thing he wanted most: to come ashore. A letter from Napoleon’s guardian Lord Keith to the First Lord of the Admiralty informed him: “You cannot imagine what a crowd we have here. The inns are full and the sea covered with swarms of small boats. I conceive that I must be particularly vigilant, for the ‘General’ and his suite are convinced that once they set foot on shore, no power on earth can bring them back again. They are determined to disembark. It is all they talk of and they are becoming very aggressive.”

The reply from Lord Melville was unequivocal. “On no account,” was Lord Keith “to permit Bonaparte to come on shore.” He had been cited in a writ to give evidence in the case of Cochrane versus McKenrot while he was still in France, and this now took on added significance. Had the writ been served, the Royal Navy would have had to deliver him to the authorities ashore, and, given his new-found celebrity status, the consequences of this would certainly have thrown the Government’s plans for Napoleon’s exile into disarray. As the writ had to be served on Napoleon personally or, failing that, his guardian, there followed several days of high farce as Lord Keith did his best to outmanoeuvre McKenrot.

Until the details of Napoleon’s exile could be finalised, *Bellerophon* sailed for Plymouth, whose more secure harbour within the vicinity of the Plymouth naval base afforded a more escape-proof location. However, the change of location had the drawback of attracting even more attention than in Torbay. They came in yachts, fishing vessels and any row boat that could be had, with one contemporary estimate calculating ten thousand sightseers gathered around *Bellerophon*, including naval officers and fashionable ladies dressed in their Sunday best.



***Death Mask of Napoleon***

Before photography, a death mask was often made to capture a true likeness of someone, usually famous, so it could be used by artists for painting or sculptures.

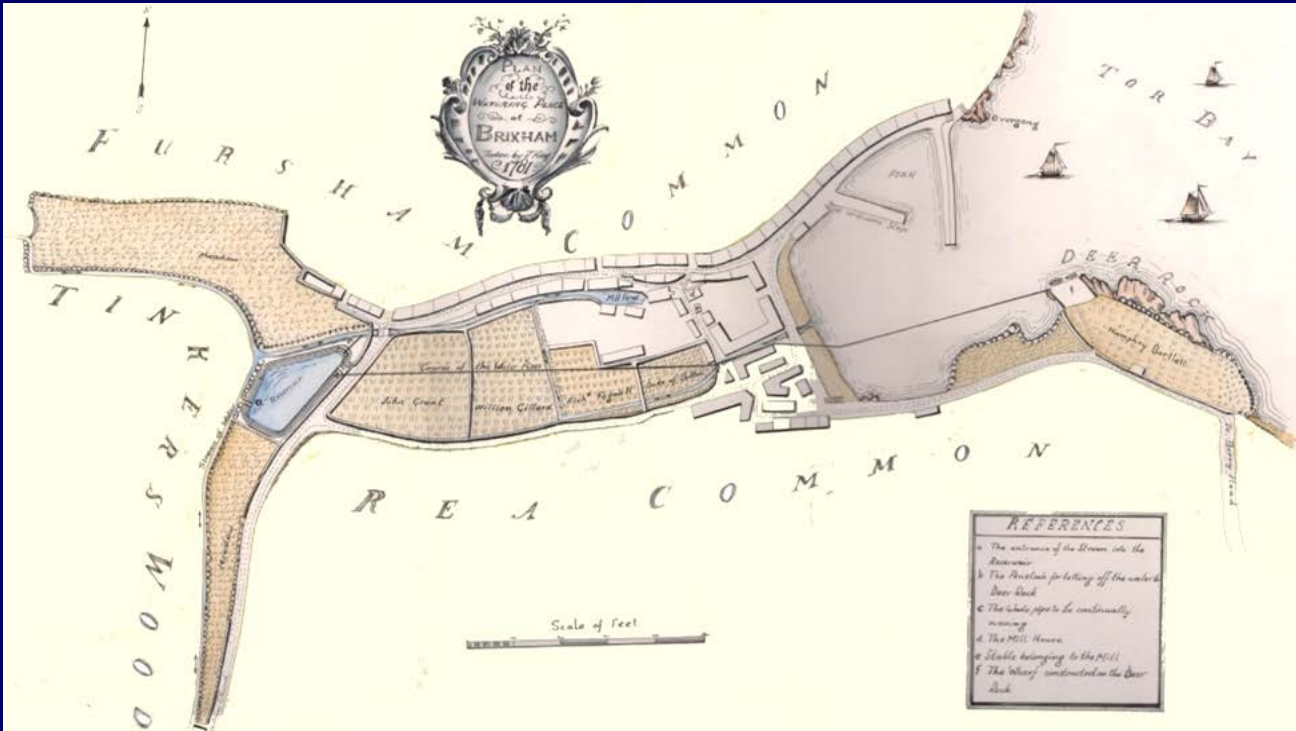
Courtesy of Torre Abbey, on loan from Devon Heritage Centre

Below: ***Emperor Napoleon***

A medal struck contemporary to his reign in France. Courtesy of Torquay Museum



## Brixham in Napoleonic times The Naval Reservoir at Bolton Cross



Above: A 1781 map detailing the location of the reservoir. Courtesy of Brixham Heritage Museum.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the port of Brixham had two distinct areas: Lower Brixham (or Brixham Quay), a fishing community clustered around the harbour area, and Higher Brixham, the original farming settlement.

The Royal Navy used Torbay as a strategic anchorage. The Admiralty built King's Quay opposite the fish quays in 1804 and piped water from a large stone reservoir further inland to provision its ships. This development was essential as the Channel Fleet under Admiral the Hon. Sir William Cornwallis was operating on a wartime footing in the wake of European instability following the terror of the French Revolution and Napoleon Bonaparte's seizure of power. During this period, the port was used regularly for Fleet watering and also saw urgent progress to complete the building of headland fortresses in response to the increasing threat. Despite the grave situation, the fishing community flourished as competing Dutch vessels were

engaged in conflict, while Turnpike Trusts had improved land transportation of fish and catches were sent to markets at Exeter, Bath, Portsmouth and London.

The Board of Ordnance had ordered the construction of coastal defences for Torbay following the French Revolutionary Wars and the French Republic's declaration of hostilities in 1793. These provided military cover and protected British ships-of-war on each side of the bay as they lay at anchor. A garrison with gun batteries, store rooms and magazine was established on Berry Head; two redoubts were built, one containing the battery with the other to defend it, reaching completion in 1809 with further barracks and a hospital.

A smaller battery was built at Fishcombe Point on the other side of the port. Brixham had been ready to repel invasion for some years and the town was equal to the arrival of Napoleon in 1815.



### **The Exile's Departure**

This detail of Thomas Luny's painting shows Napoleon being transferred from the *Bellerophon* to the *Northumberland*  
Courtesy of Torre Abbey

## **Into Exile**

On 30th July Captain Maitland was ordered to informally break the news of Napoleon's impending fate to him to lessen the shock of the official announcement the following day. With the British Government finally agreeing terms for the administration of Napoleon's exile with its allies on 2nd August everything appeared pretty much set. Napoleon's supporters, such as the eminent barrister Capell Lofft, rallied to his cause, Lofft writing a lengthy letter to *The Morning Chronicle* expressing his doubts as to the legality of the process. But it was too late. The *Bellerophon* returned to Torbay where she moored off Berry Head until she was joined by the *Northumberland*, fresh from dry dock in Southampton. On 7th August, Napoleon and his retinue were transferred to the faster ship and Napoleon travelled to his exile again, this time never to return.

## **The birth of Torbay tourism**

Torbay's reputation as a fashionable seaside holiday resort could be said to have begun during the Napoleonic Wars. With France blockaded by the Royal Navy, the wealthy could no longer travel abroad. Instead they began to discover places in which to holiday across the British Isles, and with its agreeable climate and sweeping views Torquay became one such destination. Torbay was ideal as a large sheltered anchorage for ships and was frequently used by the Channel Fleet which protected England against invasion by Napoleon and due to this, wives and relatives of officers often visited Torquay to be near their loved ones in the fleet.

An early visitor to Torquay in 1794 is recorded as saying "Instead of the poor uncomfortable village we had expected, how great was our surprise at seeing a pretty range of neat new buildings, fitted up for summer visitors. Visitors here can enjoy carriage rides, bathing, retirement and a most romantic situation." Another early visitor exclaimed "It is not England, but a bit of sunny Italy taken bodily from its rugged coast and placed here amid the green places and the pleasant pastoral lanes of beautiful Devon."



### **Bellerophon in Torbay**

A contemporary watercolour (artist unknown) recorded Torquay residents boarding boats to venture into the bay to see *Bellerophon*  
Courtesy of Torquay Museum

## Napoleonic Signal Mast reconstruction at Berry Head

Torbay Coast and Countryside Trust (TCCT) in association with Brixham Heritage Museum erected a full-size replica of a Napoleonic-era naval signalling mast at Berry Head to mark Napoleon's arrival in Torbay on board *HMS Bellerophon*, 200 years ago on 24th July 1815.



*Photo courtesy Keith Choules*

The project used traditional methods and local craftsmen to build the replica signal mast, which replaces the lookout mast that was removed from Berry Head in 2013. The wood for the mast was sourced from three larch trees in The Grove woodlands at Churston, with the felled trees being extracted from the woods by traditional horse logging, then floated and towed by boat from Churston Cove to Galampton, where Brixham trawler mast makers carved the wood to form the replica Napoleonic mast.

The mast stands 36 feet tall, with a base diameter of 10 inches, narrowing to 6 inches at the top.

## History surrounding the signalling mast

In 1794, a year after Britain and France were at war, a chain of signalling stations was established by the Admiralty along the Channel Coast from Land's End to Poole Harbour - which was later (by 1811) extended along the east coast as far as Calton Hill (Edinburgh). Berry Head station (designated as Station Number 14) was manned by a half-pay Naval Lieutenant, a midshipman and two able seaman who were tasked with

observing and reporting on movements of any enemy (French) warships or merchant vessels off the coast and to be on the lookout for an invasion force. Messages were communicated from the Berry Head station to the neighbouring stations at Coleton and Dawlish Head by means of combinations of coloured flags, pennants and four black signal balls displayed at the signalling mast.

This system would have allowed the Berry Head

station to alert the neighbouring stations of any enemy force landing (for example) westwards of Torbay, by means of flying a pennant between two black balls in vertical alignment. Warning of an imminent enemy invasion would also be sent on horseback by Dragoon Guards (serving as despatch riders attached to the Berry Head station) to the nearest military defence forces: the Brixham Quay Militia, Brixham Sea Fencibles and Brixham Artillery Volunteers.

Fortunately no invasion force materialised and messages sent between the coastal stations (including that at Berry Head) all concerned observations of passing enemy ships.

## Further reading and research

### Torre Abbey, TQ2 5JE

01803 293593

Since its foundation in 1196, Torre Abbey has witnessed, survived and even played a role in some epic moments of history. It hosts a permanent art collection, Learning Lab and interactive exhibits telling the entire history of the abbey.

[www.torre-abbey.org.uk](http://www.torre-abbey.org.uk)

### Brixham Heritage Museum, TQ5 8LZ

01803 856267

Brixham Heritage Museum records, preserves and promotes the story of historic Brixham and its people with a host of exhibits, education programmes and archive resources.

[www.brixhamheritage.org.uk](http://www.brixhamheritage.org.uk)

### Torquay Museum, TQ1 1HG

01803 293975

Find out about local wildlife, famous people and Torquay through the ages. The museum houses a variety of temporary exhibitions throughout the year. The Agatha Christie Memorial Room documents the history behind the famous crime writer.

[www.torquaymuseum.org](http://www.torquaymuseum.org)

### Torbay Civic Society

The Society promotes and stimulates public consciousness and appreciation of the beauty, history and character of Torbay and its surroundings and is responsible for researching and installing the blue plaques in our area.

[www.torbaycivicsociety.co.uk](http://www.torbaycivicsociety.co.uk)

Further reading about Napoleon in Torbay available at Torbay Libraries includes:

Adkins, Roy & Lesley, *The War For All The Oceans*

Cordingly, David, *Billy Ruffian: The Bellerophon And The Downfall Of Napoleon*

Cornwell, B, *Waterloo – The History Of Four Days, Three Armies and Three Battles*

Duhamel, Jean, *The Fifty Days – Napoleon in England*

Kershaw, R, *24 Hours At Waterloo – 18th June 1815*

Mackenzie, Norman, *The Fall And Flight Of Napoleon*

O'Keefe, P, *Waterloo – The Aftermath*

Roberts, Andrew, *Napoleon And Wellington*

Roberts, Andrew, *Napoleon The Great*

Further reference material is available at Torquay Local Studies Library.

Check out the library web pages at [www.torbay.gov.uk/libraries](http://www.torbay.gov.uk/libraries) or go straight to the library catalogue at: <https://libraries.torbay.gov.uk>

*Napoleon in Torbay* was written and researched by Local Studies staff of **Torbay Libraries**. Napoleonic Signal Mast Reconstruction feature written by **Dr Philip Armitage**, Brixham Heritage Museum. Material on Brixham in Napoleonic Times was written and researched by **Samantha Little**, Brixham Heritage Museum