

**WILLIAM
JAMES
WHARTON**

A SHORT HISTORY OF
H.M.S. VICTORY

William James Lloyd Wharton
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W. J. L. Wharton

A Short History of H.M.S. Victory

History of H.M.S. “Victory.”



The “Salvador del Mundo” striking to the “Victory” at St. Vincent.

EVERY Englishman, we imagine, knows that the “**Victory**” was the ship which bore Lord Nelson’s flag, and on board of which he received his death wound in the moment of triumph over the combined fleets of France and Spain, off Cape Trafalgar; but as very few are aware of her numerous and distinguished services, extending over many years, and preceding that sad yet glorious climax, this memoir of her career has been drawn up, with the hope of making her history from her launch to the present time better known; and that the hundreds who yearly visit her may carry away a record of their visit, to remind them of the classic ground they have been treading, and recall to their recollections some of the splendid deeds of the past, which gained for England the proud title of “Mistress of the Seas.”

There have been “**Victory**’s” in the English navy ever since the year 1570, and as each successive ship, from old age or misfortune, has disappeared from the list, another has soon after appeared to take her place.

The ship immediately preceding the existing “**Victory**,” was, like her, a first-rate three-decker, carrying 110 guns, and was accounted the finest ship in the service. In 1744 she was the flagship of Admiral Sir J. Balchen, a venerable officer of 75 years of age, who had been called from the honourable retirement of Greenwich Hospital to command a fleet destined to relieve Sir Charles Hardy, then blockaded in Lisbon by a superior French force, under the Count de Rochambault. On returning from the successful performance of this service, the fleet was dispersed in the chops of the Channel by a tremendous gale, on October 4th. The rest of the ships, though much shattered, gained the anchorage of Spithead in safety, but the “**Victory**” was never more heard of, though from the evidence of fishermen of the island of Alderney, she was believed to have run on to the Caskets, some dangerous rocks lying off that island, where her gallant crew of about a thousand perished to a man.

In 1765, on the 7th May, was launched from Chatham Dockyard the present “**Victory**” which had been built from designs of Sir Thomas Slade, then surveyor of the navy.

Her principal dimensions are as follows:—

	feet.	ins.
Length from figure head to taffrail	226	6
Length of keel	151	3
Length of gun-deck	186	0
Extreme beam	52	0
Depth of hold	21	6
Tonnage	2162	tons.

Her armament was in 1778—

Lower deck	30	long 32-pounders.
Middle deck	30	long 24-pounders.
Main deck	32	long 12-pounders.
Upper deck	12	short 12-pounders.
	104	Guns.

In 1793 she had four 32-pr. carronades substituted on upper deck, and six 18-pr. carronades added on the poop, making her total number of guns at this time 110. The six last were subsequently removed, as at Trafalgar she had no guns on the poop. In 1803, two 68-pr. carronades were placed on the forecastle, instead of two 32-pr., when the weight of her broadside fired from 52 guns was 1160 pounds. It may here be mentioned, for the sake of comparison, that the weight of the broadside of the *Monarch*, a modern ironclad, carrying but six guns,¹ is 2515 lbs., or more than twice that of the “**Victory**.”

As it happened, in 1765 England was at peace with all the world, so the “**Victory**” lay quietly at her moorings at Chatham for 13 years, but in 1778, when war with France became imminent, she was commissioned by Captain Sir J. Lindsey on 15th March, and on Admiral Hon. Augustus Keppel being appointed to the command of the Channel Fleet he selected her as his flagship, and she was sent round to Portsmouth, where, on May 16th, she hoisted his flag. On the 7th June Keppel sailed from St. Helen’s, with 21 sail of the line, 3 frigates, and 3 sloops, having Sir Robert Harland and Sir Hugh Palliser as his Vice-Admirals. His position was a peculiar and delicate one, as war was not yet declared, though all chance of peace being maintained was at an end, but it was known that large and rich fleets of merchantmen from our East and West Indian possessions were on their way home, and it was unadvisable to allow any French frigates to cruise at large and carry intelligence of their whereabouts to Brest; besides this, Admiral Byron with a small squadron was on the point of sailing to reinforce our fleet on the American coast, and Keppel was expected to cover his path. Under these circumstances, when two French frigates hove in sight on the 17th June, Keppel determined to detain them; one, the *Licorne*, submitted after firing one broadside, but the other, the *Belle-Poule*, attempted to escape, was pursued, and after a long chase, brought to action by the *Arethusa*, Captain Marshall. The two frigates were nearly equal in force, and after one of the most desperate contests on record, the fight terminated by the *Belle-Poule* drifting amongst the rocks of her own coast, leaving the *Arethusa* a dismantled hulk, to be found by the *Valiant*, and towed home. This action is perpetuated in the well-known sea song, the “Saucy *Arethusa*.”

From the *Licorne*, Keppel learnt the unexpected and unpleasant intelligence that the French fleet in Brest amounted to 32 sail of the line and 12 frigates; as his own only numbered 21, prudence dictated a return for reinforcement, and he very unwillingly turned his back on France, anchoring at St. Helen’s on the 27th of June, and detaining another French frigate, the *Pallas*, on his way.

On the 10th of July, war being now declared, he again sailed, with 25 sail of the line, and was joined off Plymouth by 5 more, making his total force 30 of the line and 4 frigates; with these he now proceeded in search of the French Admiral D’Orvilliers, who, with 32 ships of the line and many frigates, had left Brest a few days before, hearing that the expected British merchant fleets were at hand. The object of the French was, of course, the capture of these rich prizes, and they naturally wished to avoid a meeting with the British men-of-war before this was accomplished. On the other hand, the English longed for the battle, as the shortest and safest mode of saving their convoys. So when the two fleets sighted one another on the 23rd, the French, being to windward, did their best to avoid an engagement, and held their wind; on which Keppel finding he had no chance of overtaking them if he kept his line of battle, hoisted the signal for a general chase, and kept it flying.

¹ Not including one that only fires aft.

Thus for four days were both fleets working to windward, during which, two French line of battle ships were cut off, but from their superior sailing escaped capture. Keppel hoped that D'Orvilliers would bear up to their rescue, but the wily Frenchman knew that if he did, he would have to give up all hopes of his prize, and preferred that his stray vessels should trust to their heels, which as we have seen, bore them in good stead on this occasion. However, this made the two fleets numerically equal, and, on the forenoon of July 27th, being then some 100 miles west of Ushant, the joy in the British fleet was excessive, when they found that a shift of wind brought them into such a position that an engagement was inevitable. The French still tried to evade the fight, and put about on the other tack, bringing the heads of the two lines pointed in nearly opposite directions, and in this way the British van, commanded by Sir R. Harland, came in action with the French centre, and standing on until close to their line, ran along it to leeward. The rest of the fleet followed, taking their positions in the line as quickly as they could, the "**Victory**" being in about the centre.

It will be seen by this, that the fleets, after once meeting, were parting each moment, and at the end of about two hours, their respective rears were clear of one another. Keppel then did his best to renew the battle, but from the French practice of aiming at the spars, his ships were so crippled that the "**Victory**," and some four others, were alone able to wear after the enemy. Under these circumstances, and hoping to bring the enemy to action again next day, as they also were much scattered and disabled, the English Admiral got his ships together and repaired damages. Unfortunately, the wind came fair for Brest in the night, and the French, having succeeded in concealing their movements, by stationing their frigates to show misleading lights, ran for, and gained that port. Their mast heads only were visible in the morning, and Keppel, after chasing for two hours, found it hopeless and gave up the pursuit.

Thus, for want of the manœuvre of "breaking the line," which Rodney, under precisely similar circumstances, so successfully practised four years later, this engagement had no results beyond that of saving the convoys, one of which passed the scene of action the very next day. The "**Victory**" had, at one time, six enemy's ships on her, and was much cut up in hull and rigging; her loss was 11 killed and 24 wounded, being the largest number rendered *hors de combat* in any one ship of the British fleet, save one, the *Formidable*. The total loss was 113 killed and 373 wounded. The French loss was never correctly ascertained, but, as it was the English custom to fire at the hulls, it was probably much more severe. Keppel returned to port, and after refitting, again sailed from Plymouth on the 23rd August, but never again met the enemy, and eventually arrived at Portsmouth on the 28th of October.

This is the history of a ship, and not of the times, so we have strictly nothing to do with subsequent events that arose out of this engagement; but, as they created great excitement, perhaps a short account of the sequel may not be altogether out of place. At this period of our history, the British public expected some tangible proofs of our naval superiority whenever our fleets met an equal enemy, in the shape of ships captured or destroyed; and the indecisive results of the action of the 27th July, gave rise to a multitude of paragraphs in the newspapers, commenting on the conduct of the different Admirals, especially that of the Commander-in-Chief, and Sir Hugh Palliser, and attributing blame to one or the other, as their fancy, or rather their politics dictated: the principals themselves (who were both members of the House of Commons, but of opposite parties), in exculpating themselves, became involved in mutual recriminations, and finally Sir Hugh Palliser preferred charges against Admiral Keppel, for, in a few words not doing his best to "burn, sink, and destroy." Suffice it to say, that a Court Martial to try Admiral Keppel met at Portsmouth on January 7th, 1779, and sat at the Governor's house, by special Act of Parliament, on account of the bad health of the accused, until February 11th, when it honourably acquitted him, and declared the charges "malicious and ill-founded." Keppel, by his former victories and frank condescending manners, had long rendered himself the idol of the navy and people, and the first disappointment felt at the meagre results of his engagement had been succeeded by a strong popular reaction in his favour, when it was understood that he would be placed on his trial. The news of his acquittal was received throughout

the country with an extraordinary burst of joy. On the sentence being made known, a signal gun was fired at Portsmouth, upon which the ships at Spithead immediately cheered and saluted, and a fleet of Indiamen, lying at the Mother Bank, fired 19 vollies. Nor were they behind hand on shore in manifesting their delight; the bells of Portsmouth church rang for the day, the late prisoner was escorted from the court by a vast crowd, attended by some of the most illustrious in the land; and such was his popularity, that not only Portsmouth, but other towns were illuminated, and the inhabitants rejoiced in the most frantic way, as if for a great national deliverance.

Admiral Keppel was requested to retain the command of the fleet, but refused, and was succeeded by Sir Charles Hardy, who hoisted his flag in the “**Victory**,” on the 19th March, 1779. Sir Charles found himself with 37 ships of the line, which seems a large force, but the accounts of the day state that a number of them were very badly manned; however that may be, after sailing on June 16th, he was cruising off Ushant on August 20th, when intelligence reached him that the French and Spanish fleets had effected a junction at Cadiz, and were then off Plymouth; he learnt also that they consisted of 67 sail of the line, besides more than 30 frigates, and smaller vessels. Sir Charles made sail after them, and sighted them on 1st September, off Scilly, when finding that his information as to their force was correct, and reflecting that the safety of the country would in a great measure depend on him should the enemy attempt a landing, he retired to Spithead. This is, we believe, the only time that the “**Victory**” was ever forced to show her stern to an enemy.

The combined fleets, after making a great show, and indulging in a parade off Plymouth, quitted the Channel without attempting any enterprise. The British Admiral cruised till the end of the year, when the “**Victory**” returned to Portsmouth with her division, and, being placed in dock, was coppered for the first time. In the spring, whilst preparing to take the sea again, Sir C. Hardy was seized with an apoplectic fit, and died on 14th May, 1780.

Admiral Geary then hoisted his flag in the “**Victory**,” on 24th May, on succeeding to the command of the Channel fleet, and sailed early in June, with 29 line-of-battle ships, 14 of them three-deckers. He stationed himself off Brest, which he watched for three months, his object being to prevent the French from getting out, and joining the Spaniards fitting in Cadiz; when, having over 2500 sick on board his fleet, he returned to Spithead on the 18th August. He captured a valuable convoy of merchantmen during his cruise, but did not have a chance of measuring his strength with the enemy. Feeling his health failing, Admiral Geary resigned his command, and the “**Victory**” struck his flag on the 28th August.

Vice-Admiral Darby, who was on board the *Britannia*, then took command of the Channel fleet, and the “**Victory**” flew the flag of Rear-Admiral Drake, the 3rd in seniority, but only for one cruise, as being afflicted with severe attacks of gout, this officer resigned his post on 29th December.

The “**Victory**” was next destined to be the flagship of a squadron fitting for service in the North Sea, under Vice-Admiral Hyde Parker, who hoisted his flag in her on March 20th, 1781, at Portsmouth. On May 20th, she sailed for the Downs, with five other ships; but a few days after her arrival at that anchorage, Admiral Parker shifted his flag to the *Fortitude*, a 74, as being better adapted for cruising in the narrow seas to which he was bound, and the “**Victory**,” returning to Spithead, hoisted the broad pendant of Commodore Elliott, and bore it for one cruise with the fleet, in which nothing of importance took place.

In September of the same year, Rear-Admiral Kempenfelt, hoisted his flag as fourth Admiral of Channel fleet and cruised with it for two months; but in December he was detached in command of a squadron of 12 sail of the line and 5 frigates, to attempt to intercept M. de Guichen, who had sailed from Brest, with a convoy, carrying troops and laden with warlike stores intended for the Count de Grasse in the West Indies.

Early on the 12th December, when 40 leagues west of Ushant, the look out frigate, *Tisiphone*, Captain James Saumarez, made the signal for an enemy’s fleet, and boldly crowded all sail to close them. In a short time, when the day was fully broke, Kempenfelt found to his disgust, that the enemy

was much stronger than he had been led to expect, as he could count 19 line of battle ships amongst the crowd of ships to leeward of him; he therefore decided to watch his opportunity before attacking; and, after sailing along with, and to windward of the French fleet for a few hours, his patience was rewarded by perceiving that the van and centre, with most of the men-of-war, were separated by a slight gap from the rear. He at once made a dash for the opening, and, while with the “**Victory**” and some others, he engaged the rear of the French centre, and prevented their returning to the rescue, his other vessels passed to leeward and captured the whole of that division of the convoy—15 ships—sinking four frigates that rashly, but most gallantly, endeavoured to protect them.

As the wind was now fair for England, he formed his fleet round the prizes, and keeping up a running fire, carried the whole of the captured ships into Plymouth in the face of the enemy, and despite their utmost endeavours to prevent him.

Kempenfelt then returned to Spithead with his squadron, of which he retained command till the month of March next year, when he struck his flag in the “**Victory**,” and hoisted it on board the *Royal George*. In this ship he was unhappily drowned on the 29th August, on her capsizing at Spithead, when over 900 persons perished in a few minutes. The “**Victory**” was a witness of the melancholy catastrophe, and her boats saved many of the survivors.

Lord Howe next hoisted his flag in the “**Victory**” on assuming command of the Channel Fleet, and cruised in the course of the summer of 1782, but without any meetings with the enemy or incidents worth recording.

At this time, the attention of England, and indeed her enemies, was almost entirely fixed on the defence of Gibraltar by General Elliot, and the probable fate of that fortress, which though it had been besieged by both sea and land for more than three years, had never been so hardly pressed as now. Admiral Darby with a powerful fleet had relieved the garrison from the greatest possible distress the year before, but the supplies he then landed were now nearly exhausted, the garrison were again commencing to feel the pangs of hunger, and it was well known that the Spaniards had been for months making preparations for an attack of a new kind, and on a grand scale, which they trusted would compel the proud stronghold to lower its colours. The new feature in the attack was the construction of ten large floating batteries, so covered and protected as to be considered practically invulnerable; these were armed with 154 pieces of the heaviest ordnance, and backed up as they were by 48 French and Spanish sail of the line, and 40,000 troops, the expected assault was enough to make England tremble for the result. It was accordingly resolved to make a great effort to relieve Gibraltar, and in such a manner that it should be not only a temporary but a permanent relief and to this end a fleet of 36 sail of the line was got together, which was to convoy a large number of merchantmen, laden with every description of supplies, and carrying troops to reinforce the garrison.

This fleet sailed on September 11th, with Lord Howe in the “**Victory**,” as Commander-in-Chief, and as Juniors, Vice-Admirals Barrington and Millbank; and Rear-Admirals Alexander Hood and Hughes.

Before this succour could arrive, the grand attack on Gibraltar had taken place. On September 9th the enemy’s batteries, after a temporary silence while preparing for the struggle, re-opened, and continued a rain of shot and shell, with scarcely any intermission, to the 13th, when the fleet and floating batteries being brought into their assigned positions, joined in the bombardment.

It is not our province to relate the details of that memorable day—enough to state that the arrangements which General Elliot’s energy had made were equal to the occasion; the invulnerable floating batteries were set on fire, the fleet repulsed, the land attack took no effect, and the baffled enemy, with enormous losses, withdrew from active attack, to wait the results of the famine with which they well knew the besieged were threatened, and which they hoped would effect the capitulation their arms had failed to force.

But Howe was approaching, not rapidly, for foul winds detained him, but surely, and the combined fleets lying off Algeciras were on the *qui vive* to prevent his landing any supplies, when

on October 10th, a terrific gale assailed them, which dismasted one, and drove five of their number from their anchors; two of these got away into the Mediterranean, but the other three went on shore in the bay, one of them under our forts, where the crew were made prisoners.

The very next day, while the enemy was thus thrown into disorder, the British fleet made its appearance in the Straits; and in the evening, four of the transports succeeded in getting safe under the guns of Gibraltar, without any attempt on the part of the combined fleets to hinder them, much to the astonishment of Howe, who on learning some days before of the failure of the grand attack, had also learnt the avowed intention of the enemy to give him battle, and had called all the Admirals on board the "**Victory**," and made known to them his determination to force his way through at all hazards. The rest of the convoy from light winds and bad management were swept past the Rock by the current, and lost this favourable opportunity of accomplishing their errand, a most fatal mischance, as ships once driven to the eastward of Gibraltar, are sometimes weeks before they can gain their anchorage on the western side. The men-of-war followed, and spent next day in endeavouring to work up with the transport against the strong easterly current, in hopes of getting them in, before the enemy, whose misfortunes they had now heard of were enabled to interfere; but on the morning of the 13th the combined fleets, having completed their refitting, weighed, and sailed out of the bay, apparently intending to engage the English ships, which were then but a few miles to the eastward of Europa point, and in full sight of the garrison. Although the gale of the 10th had reduced the enemy's force by six, yet they still far out-numbered Howe's, as they mustered 80 sail of men-of-war, forty-four of which were of the line, while Howe had but thirty-six with which to protect his charge; nevertheless, he waited the advance with impatience and confidence, having sent the merchant ships to the Zaffarin Islands, as a rendezvous, until they should hear of the result of the battle. But the enemy suddenly altered his course and running past the British ships, disappeared in the dusk of evening. Next day, neither of the fleets were to be seen from the Rock, but some of the transports that had slipped back, arrived, filling the garrison with joy. Thus several days passed, when on the 18th, the remainder of the convoy, who had heard of no engagement and ventured to leave their retreat at Zaffarin, arrived in safety, completing the primary object of their mission. Next morning both fleets were again in sight from Gibraltar, with an easterly wind, the British nearest. Howe had been following the enemy, who was searching in vain for the missing convoy; but now, hearing that his charge were all safely at anchor, and not wishing to fight in the narrow space of the Straits, the British Admiral, after landing a further supply of powder, collected from his ships as he passed, under sail for the open sea, and having gained it, awaited a second time the enemy's attack.

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