

Information sheet no 110

HMS *Pickle*

The schooner *Sting* was purchased by the Admiralty in the early nineteenth century, fitted with 10 guns and renamed HMS *Pickle*.

In 1803, HMS *Pickle* was attached to the Inshore Squadron, commanded by Admiral Cornwallis and used for close reconnaissance of enemy harbours during the blockade of Brest, Rochefort and L'Orient. *Pickle* captured a small coaster and supplied valuable information on enemy warships at L'Orient. On 25 March 1804, along with three other British ships of the Squadron, *Pickle* rescued the crew of HMS *Magnificent* after the ship had struck a shoal off the Black Rocks.

On October 9th 1805, HMS *Pickle*, along with HMS *Weazle*, assisted Captain Blackwood in monitoring the enemy coastline off Cadiz to provide intelligence for the British fleet. HMS *Pickle* captured a Portuguese settee from Tangier carrying fresh meat. The cargo was used to replenish the British fleet. Additionally, *Pickle* managed to sail close enough to the coast to report an exact count of enemy warships – 33 in Cadiz harbour.

On 21 October, during the battle of Trafalgar, the small vessels, such as *Pickle*, were kept well back from the fighting. HMS *Pickle* was stationed to the north-west of the weather line, where Nelson was leading HMS *Victory* into battle. In the latter stages of the battle, *Pickle* and three other vessels went to the rescue of the crew of the French ship, *Achille*, which was ablaze. One of the survivors picked up by the *Pickle* was a Frenchwoman found clinging to an oar. She was the wife of one of the crew.

After the battle and death of the Commander in Chief, it fell to Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood to write the dispatch for the Admiralty. He selected HMS *Pickle* to take the news back to Britain. Lieutenant John Lapenotiere had been in command of the vessel since 1802 and had previously served with Admiral John Jervis, Earl St Vincent. The schooner set off on the 26 October and took 9 days to reach Britain, enduring a gale off Cape Finisterre, blowing the ship off course. Lapenotiere ordered that 4 carronades to be cast overboard to lighten the load.

At 9.45am on November 4, HMS *Pickle* anchored in Falmouth Bay. By midday, Lapenotiere was on his way to London in a hired post-chaise coach, displaying a Union Flag and a tattered Tricolour on a broomstick as a flagpole. The normal journey took a week, but within 37 hours, after 19 horse changes, Lapenotiere arrived at the Admiralty at 1am on 6 November. He was shown through to the First Secretary of the Admiralty, Mr Marsden. Lord Barham, First Lord of the Admiralty was raised from his sleep to receive the news. The Prime Minister, William Pitt received the news at 3am and King George III and Queen Charlotte heard at 7am. As the news was being broadcast across the city with saluting guns from the Tower of London, the news was also received by a hysterical Emma Hamilton. Lapenotiere was later given an audience with the King and Queen and was presented with a silver cruet, the first thing the King could find to hand. He was also promoted to Commander.



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After the excitement of the battle, the vessel returned to normal service and on 3rd January 1807, captured a French privateer of 18 guns off the Lizard. Eighteen months later, on 28th July 1808, HMS *Pickle*, carrying Lieutenant Moses Cannadey bearing dispatches, was grounded on a shoal while entering Cadiz harbour and was wrecked.

John Lapenotiere continued his naval service on the Baltic blockade. After suffering a severe injury from an accidental explosion, he took up a desk job in Plymouth. He died in 1834.

HMS *Pickle*'s journey bearing of the news from Trafalgar is commemorated by Warrant Officers of the Royal Navy on November 5th, known as Pickle Night, in a similar celebration to that of Trafalgar Night celebrated by Commissioned Officers. In 2005, a re-enactment of the journey was undertaken as part of the bi-centenary celebrations of the battle. The route has been officially named the Trafalgar Way and plaques commemorating events, such as horse changes, have been placed at various towns along the route. A map detailing the route can be obtained through the Ordnance Survey