



## *Account of Purley on Thames*

### Project Purley Meetings 2005

*January*

*February*

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*The Battle of Trafalgar*

Talk given to Project Purley 21st October 2005 by John Gurnett Report by David Downs

The Battle of Trafalgar took place on October 21st 1805, and exactly two hundred years later to the day, Project Purley members attended a talk by John Gurnett, a Trafalgar enthusiast. John was a society member before moving out to Burghfield and explained that he first became interested in the life of Horatio Nelson whilst living near the Maritime Museum in Greenwich and studying the diorama of the battle.

John began by detailing some aspects of Nelson's personal life. He joined the Navy at the age of 12 and, despite being vulnerable to seasickness, was quickly promoted, advancing from Lieutenant to Post Captain in three years. He was popular with his men, for whom he showed great care and compassion and, at the time of Trafalgar, was already a national hero due to his success at the Battle of the Nile. His weakness was his affair with Emma Hamilton. Both were married when they first met, but they fell in love, moved into a house in Langham Place, London and the union produced a daughter named Horatia.

Thoughts of home were far from Nelson's mind on the morning of October 21st, however. The combined French and Spanish fleet, commanded by Admiral Villeneuve, had been sighted at 05.30 hours off Cadiz, despite Napoleon's decision that he preferred to invade Russia. Nelson was already on board his flagship, H.M.S. Victory, with his crew of 800 men when the enemy was spotted and he spent the hours before the battle began walking round his ship encouraging his crew and making sure they enjoyed a hearty meal. The sailors were well paid, knew they had the chance of prize money

and respected their captain. They were spoiling for the fight.

Nelson's fleet had two other advantages. The English ships had been at sea for some time, so the men were well trained, especially in the vital art of gunnery, and Nelson himself was a far better and more fearless tactician than the cautious Villeneuve. The advantages offset the combined fleet's superiority in numbers of guns – 2,568 to Nelson's 2,148 and in sailors – Villeneuve's 30,000 to the Navy's 17,000.

At 1100 hours the two fleets were on a collision course, just three miles apart. Nelson sent his famous battle signal, "England expects that every man will do his duty," with "expects" replacing "confides" on the advice of Signal Lieutenant Pasco as it was quicker to send. Nelson's final signal to his fleet was "Engage the enemy more closely," and the battle began with the home fleet making a two-pronged attack on Villeneuve's ships. The two attacks, one led by Nelson and one led by his deputy, Admiral Collingwood, sliced through the combined fleet, who in the confusion, began to fire on each other. H.M.S. Victory, leading one attack, was hit by seven or eight broadsides and the poop deck became a slaughterhouse with 50 sailors killed or wounded before Victory could retaliate.

The battle lasted little more than an hour. Nelson's strategy of splitting and dividing the enemy worked perfectly. No British ships were lost, whilst Villeneuve lost 17 of his original fleet of 33. Nelson lost 1500 men, but 14,000 men from the French and Spanish navy were killed. Tragically, at the height of the battle, Nelson was mortally wounded, shot through the shoulder, lung and spine by a musket ball fired by a sharp shooter in the rigging of the Redoubtable. He was attended by Surgeon Beattie and Captain Hardy, but did not die before he knew his fleet had won a glorious victory.

The British crews would have liked to claim prize money, but a fierce storm caused many of the battered enemy ships to sink. The majority of Nelson's fleet made it safely back to their base in Gibraltar, where those who died on the journey back were buried. Nelson's body was stored in brandy and eventually returned to England to be carried down the Thames before the funeral service in St. Paul's Cathedral on January 8th 1806. Sailors in the burial party tore scraps from H.M.S. Victory's White Ensign, used during the service, as keepsakes.

Nelson's Will asked the nation "to take care of Emma Hamilton and Horatia," but nothing happened, possibly because of public disapproval of their liaison. By contrast Nelson's brother was created an Earl, awarded a pension of £5,000 and given by the state, £90,000 to buy a house.

Emma moved to Calais and died in 1815 before Napoleon could imprison her. Horatia married the Reverend Philip Ward, had nine children and moved to Pinner to live in a house which in recent times has been owned by Ronnie Barker, then David Suchet. She always denied being Nelson's natural daughter and it was only some years after her death that the wording on her gravestone was changed from "Adopted Daughter" to "Beloved Daughter."

Of the survivors of the battle, Admiral Villeneuve, who had been taken prisoner, was brought to Reading on January 6th 1806 and allowed to stay in the town on parole. When he returned to France, he was stabbed in the chest and assassinated on the orders of Napoleon. Survivors of Victory's crew transferred to H.M.S. Ocean, having been given carved pieces of wood from Nelson's flagship as a memento of the epic battle which changed the course of British history.

Although John's voice was rather quiet which made it difficult for those at the back of the audience to hear, the content of his talk was absorbing, as he covered a lot of detail in just sixty minutes, about the same amount of time as the duration of the battle itself. There was one more surprise to come, however, as during the discussion which followed, one of our members, Rita Denman, produced a fascinating memento. It was an invitation card, signed by Horatio Nelson when he hosted a formal dinner for friends at Merton, his country house, in 1805.

## November

### THE HISTORY OF WILSON ROAD SCHOOL

*A talk to Project Purley 18th November 2005 by Liz Woodhouse - Report by David Downs  
ex R000072*

Liz Woodhouse, the guest speaker at Project Purley's meeting on November 18th, was the perfect person to talk about the history of Wilson School. Not only was she a pupil there from 1969 to 1975, her son Sam attended Wilson in recent years and Liz was a Parent Governor and member of the Parent-Staff Association.

Liz began by explaining that she was pleased to send Sam to Wilson, her catchment area school, even though it was in Special Measures at the time as a result of an Ofsted inspection. As an elected Parent Governor, she wanted to help raise the school's profile, and did so by organising a series of events to celebrate its centenary in 2005. This would have the advantage of involving the community as well as former pupils and, as an introduction to the centenary, a tea-party was held in Battle Library in September 2003. This was attended by more than 40 former pupils as well as the Reading West M.P., Martin Salter.

From that enjoyable occasion came enough reminiscences to provide material for a Centenary History of the school, though Liz also had to research old school logbooks, microfilm copies of the Berkshire Chronicle and make visits to Berkshire Record Office and the Central Library before she was sure she could do justice to all ten decades of the school's life. She also wrote to the Reading Evening Post letters page asking for memorabilia, pictures and memories from past and present staff, pupils and parents. Finally, she formed a five-strong editorial committee of current school bursar, Gill Brown and old pupils Irene Witts, Graham Holt and David Downs, plus herself to take responsibility for publication and marketing.

Other contemporary events taking place included the production of a commemorative centenary mug, a reunion of two hundred people at the school in February 2004, a centenary party for current Wilson Primary pupils in May 2004 and, perhaps most important of all, the school coming out of Special Measures and being recognised nationally as an improving school. The school's involvement was emphasised by the children hosting visitors by acting as waiters and waitresses, conducting guided tours of the building and the school choir providing entertainment.

Material for the publication arrived via fax, e-mail, letter and telephone as well as beautifully written and decorated poems and stories from present pupils. Included in the book will be copies of school reports (some better than others!), sports certificates, photographs of class and team groups, as well as contributions from those who attended Wilson School as far back as the 1930s with their own particular memories of the school as it was in their day. The early part of the twentieth century will be described by reference to logbooks and will cover the First World War period from 1914 to 1919 when the buildings were converted to a War Hospital for wounded and convalescing servicemen.

Liz said that editing had been an enjoyable but difficult task, as some contributors would be disappointed at seeing their entry rejected. Getting funding was a problem too. Main funding would come from pre-sales or pledges, and a few local businesses had promised sponsorship. Ideally 200 copies need to be pre-sold to guarantee publication in the New Year. The scheduled launch date is March 10th 2006 when a reunion of pupils and staff will take place at the school.

Now that the content has been decided, all that remains is for the front and back cover design to be agreed, though this will be chosen from material submitted by present pupils. The editorial

committee is also busy getting quotes from various printers, and a decision has to be taken by Christmas to ensure adherence to the March publication date.

At our meeting, there was an exhibition of artefacts which Liz had brought along for members to view, and an invitation for anyone who wanted to reserve a copy of the book to do so. If you have a suggestion for a title for the centenary history, would like to order a copy, or have any questions or information for Liz, please contact her on 0118 9596817.

