

The Last French Invasion of Fishguard 16th-24th February 1797

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Unrest was growing in France and 1st May 1789 saw the emptying of the Bastille and the arming of the population as they rose in force against the king and the leading aristocracy - with the 'Committee of Public Safety' organising largescale executions - with many Citizens taking the opportunity to inform on rivals and enemies. The Republicans 'nationalised' hundreds of churches and used the wealth to fund their armies and determined to 'export' the Revolution across Europe expeditions targeted:



Galway Bay: caught in storms/ fleet forced to return to France.

Northern England: troops mutinied forced to return to port.

Bristol: (Britain's 2nd port after London): 16th February *Resistance, Vengeance, Constance* and *Vautour* left Brest and by 20th February had reached Porlock when contrary winds forced them off-course so aimed for Cardigan Bay. 22nd February, off North Bishop Rock, they were recognised as French vessels and warnings spread. *Vautour* was fired on from Fishguard Fort and returned to say the town was defended (though the Goodwick side would have been beyond the range of the fort's guns)! The troops landed near Carregwasted Point and camped on the clifftop whilst the officers took over Trehowel Farm as their headquarters (which had been abandoned at their approach). The high ground of Garnwnda and Garn Gelli formed the advanced posts for the French army but cold, hungry and rebellious troops set off in search of food, shelter, booty - and alcohol. 42 farmhouses (and Llanwnda Church) were plundered with the 'troops' liberating food, beer and caches of cash (and probably also smuggled goods). The troops who took shelter in the church set about burning prayer books as bibles (some say to keep warm but possibly because they were considered to be heretic texts - and in Welsh).

Lt Thomas Knox of Tregwnt rallied the Fishguard Fencibles and John Mathias alerted the Lord Lieutenant and Lord Cawdor who then headed for Fishguard, along with Colonel Colby's Militia. By the afternoon of 23rd February most of the French were drunk and by 4.00pm, when the Pembrokeshire troops arrived, the French camp was in total disarray and their force so out of control the officers were forced to raise the Flag of Truce and an envoy was sent to Lord Cawdor in his headquarters set up in the Royal Oak. Major Le Brun claimed they were resigned to the failure of the entire invasion plan and came seeking prisoner exchange so by noon the French troops were marching to Fishguard with emptied muskets.

Having surrendered their arms the French troops were then marched to Haverfordwest (the officers were later taken by coach). One of the memorable responses to the invasion was that of



Jemima who captured 12 French prisoners (possibly found drunk in a field) by rounding them up with pitchforks and delivering them to the local militia - for which she received a lifetime's pension. The story of the women of Fishguard being mistaken by the French for the militia - in their red shawls and stove-pipe hats - marching round and round the hills (to appear to be far more numerous than they were) on the command of Lord Cawdor is likely to be no more than a folk tale. (images - Fishguard Tapestry)