

HMS Trincomalee and The General



Napoleon on board HMS Bellerophon

HMS Trincomalee & 'The General'

After his crushing defeat at Waterloo, Napoleon in a state of shock returned to Paris only to be persuaded to abdicate and then to leave the city. Retiring to Malmaison he was then persuaded by the Provisional Government to leave France via Rochefort. Fouché, his wily former Minister of Police, and head of the government, then applied to Wellington for passports for Napoleon to leave France for the United States. With one letter he had artfully informed the Allies of Napoleon's likely whereabouts. Within days of this letter reaching Wellington, Admiral Lord Keith had all the blockading vessels along the western coast of France warned about Napoleon's movement to the coast. Inexorably Napoleon was being shepherded into the arms of the British.

In Rochefort he was filled with indecision over his flight from France, as he considered first one plan and then another for his escape to America. And whilst he prevaricated, his future was decided, for a small squadron of Royal Navy vessels under Captain Frederick Maitland secured the entrances to the port. He was trapped and about to be caught.

King Louis XVIII meanwhile had re-entered his capital, 'in the baggage train of the Allies'. Across France, towns and cities were declaring for the Bourbons. The provisional government, via the naval telegraph system, urged him to leave France 'at once'. The king was about to

appoint a new government. They would be dismissed and powerless to intercede on his behalf and he would become a prisoner in his own country. He had to act. He had to leave.

On the 14th of July after negotiations between his staff and Maitland Napoleon Bonaparte, former Emperor of France, claimed sanctuary in his famous Themosticles letter where he declared that he had come like the defeated warrior of old to, 'throw himself at the feet of most implacable enemies . . . and to sit at the hearth of the British people.' As he pointed out to his immediate staff, it was better to seek sanctuary than to be arrested as a prisoner.

Early on the morning of the 15th July, a small boat could be seen making for the Bellerophon. As the sun rose the wind and tide began to change impeding its progress. And as Maitland waited, away to the south, coming up fast was the Superb, bearing the flag of Admiral Hotham. Clearly, if the squadron commander arrived before Napoleon's struggling sailors reached the 'Billie Ruffian', then rank would prevail and Maitland would lose his prize. Maitland ordered his first lieutenant to take command of his barge and intercept Napoleon.

Out in the channel, Napoleon and his immediate suite of officers and their wives transferred to the barge and shortly afterwards General Bertrand, Master of the Palace, stepped into her deck removed his hat and announced, 'His Majesty the Emperor Napoleon.' Bellerophon had secured her prize.

Hotham offered to, but did not demand, the transfer of Napoleon to the Superb. Napoleon declined the invitation. On board, Maitland handed over his stern cabins to Napoleon and took over the cabin of his first lieutenant with everyone else moving down to accommodate the French officers and their wives. In other areas of the ship space was found for Napoleon's servants.

As soon as he stepped onto the deck, Napoleon began to deploy his powerful charm to win over the British sailors around him. Many were impressed. Maitland admits that he at times found it difficult to recall that this man had terrorised Europe for over twenty years.

However, in 1815, Napoleon was no longer the man he had once been. In a letter to his wife, Hotham's captain, Senhouse, had commented on how, when Napoleon had visited the Superb he had given him a complete tour of the ship with everyone at their stations,

'... We went through the whole of the Ship even the store rooms etc. but seemed to look with painful sensations as if he were afflicted with gout. I was obliged to assist him up and down the ladders with the Count de Montholon, and his weight was rather more than convenient. What a lesson Napoleon's state afford us? Showing so forcefully the instability of all human greatness!! After Completing the Inspection, he returned to the Quarter Deck, when he made a long Enquiry Respecting the Victualling of the Ship etc. and pleased the Johnny's much by asking "Whether all the Pursers were not great rogues?"'

On the 17th July Maitland sailed for England, carrying Napoleon as if he were a monarch in exile. In his diary he wondered whether his conduct in deferring to Napoleon at the dinner table and in according him the honours due to a former monarch would be approved of at the Admiralty and by government. Hotham, like Maitland, was without orders regarding the treatment of the former emperor of the French. When they had met off Rochefort, Hotham had assured Maitland, that his polite and diplomatic behaviour would be approved of by the Admiralty. Maitland later admitted in his account of the events of 1815 that he was aware of the man's powerful charisma and its effect upon himself:

'It may appear surprising, that a possibility could exist of a British officer being prejudiced in favour of one who had caused so many calamities to his country; but to such an extent did he possess the power of pleasing, that there are few people who could have sat at the same table with him for nearly a month, as I did, without feeling a sensation of pity, allied perhaps to regret, that a man possessed of so many fascinating qualities, and who had held so high a station in life, should be reduced to the situation in which I saw him.'

Napoleon, ever the optimist, began to speculate on his fate on reaching England. He fantasised about assuming a *nom de plume*. He hoped to be housed in a gentlemen's residence outside London – where he might receive guests whilst being denied access to London's political society. What he did not know was that his fate had already been decided. At least one newspaper had talked of putting him in the Tower or in Dumbarton Castle on the Clyde or of sending him off to a distant colony. In fact the government had already decided. It was to be St Helena Island in the South Atlantic. Measuring 8 by 13 miles, it could be easily placed in between the North York Moors and the Yorkshire Wolds with plenty of space to spare. As a private island it was to be leased from the Honourable East India Company for Napoleon's lifetime with ultimate authority resting with a soldier, General Sir Hudson Lowe, appointed by the government and supported by the members of the island Company Council.

At the Congress of Vienna in 1814, after much persuasion by Tsar Alexander, Napoleon had been awarded the status of monarch of the island of Elba for his lifetime, providing he did not interfere in European politics again. However Napoleon had some idea that the Allies were already considering moving him to some outpost of the British Empire to be secured and forgotten. By breaking out of it and invading France the congress declared that he had forfeited those privileges. When the British offered to imprison him on St Helena there was no murmur of dissent.

He could no longer be called the Emperor of France, as His Most Christian Majesty King Louis XVIII now ruled somewhat precariously in that country. In all official British documents he was to be referred to as General Bonaparte (often spelled as Buonaparte) or the General. This was not part of some scheme to humiliate him as an individual but rather an attempt to remove him as a focal point for dissension in Royalist France.

He almost did reach England. Maitland had strict and secret instructions to proceed to Tor Bay but he was not to be landed. Were he allowed ashore the government feared that a few radical Whig politicians might raise a legal case to have him remain. Napoleon living in Britain was again a powerful rallying point for discontented Frenchmen everywhere.

Shortly after they dropped anchor beneath Berry Head Fort off Brixham the news did leak out that he was on board and within days huge crowds sailed or were rowed out to see him in Tor Bay. There were some collisions amongst the boats and armed boats had to be deployed to manage the traffic around the Bellerophon. Napoleon when taking the air on deck and responding to the generally admiring crowds was sure this all augured well for the future. It did not. His destination remained St Helena Island.

On the 31st July in the presence of Admiral Lord Keith and General Bunbury, Napoleon was informed of his fate and shortly afterwards was transferred to HMS Northumberland under the command of that remarkable sailor, Admiral Cockburn for the voyage to Saint Helena island.

From the south the island is very imposing. Whilst the ocean is invariably a bright blue the island's dark volcanic sides seem flat and lifeless as they erupt steeply from the water. This dark image is further enhanced by the clouds which can be seen most mornings gathered over the



James Town from the RMS St Helena

southern half of the island. Even today the island can really only be reached by ship following much the same the route as sailed by Trincomalee, from Cape Town in South Africa.

In 1817 Surgeon Walter Henry, attached to the 66th Foot had also sailed to St Helena from the Cape. He had expected to see a near tropical paradise but instead saw:

‘. . . the ugliest and most dismal rock conceivable, of rugged and abrupt surface, rising like an enormous black wart from the face of the deep. Not a blade of grass or trace of vegetation could be perceived from our ship, as we sailed round to get to leeward of the Island, until we came to our anchorage, when James's Town, the metropolis, and only town, was first descried; sunk in a deep ravine between two steep mountains - with its white church - English looking houses, bristling rocks and batteries, and two or three dozen of trees.’

As part of the leasing arrangement with the Honourable East India Company only Company and Royal Navy vessels had the right to call for water and fresh vegetables. Neutrals were excluded thus minimising any efforts to land correspondence or agents. There were attempts to anchor by neutrals – who invariably claimed they were short of fresh water but these attempts were treated with some suspicion. These vessels were initially intercepted by one of the patrolling sloops, interrogated and then if they were granted permission to anchor would have their barrels towed ashore, filled close to the town wall and then returned without anyone being given an opportunity to go on shore. All the while the James Town batteries would have their guns trained on the newcomer.

When Trincomalee anchored on 24th January 1819 the crew would have seen James Town much as we see it today. They would have recognised the batteries, the town walls, the church (though with a spire) and the barrack buildings beyond the town wall. On passing through the wall they would have found a very small English market town. To their left and right were the



The entrance to Longwood House, Napoleon's chief residence



Longwood House by James Wathen, lithograph produced in 1821

barracks on either side of the parade square. Beyond them the main wide street overshadowed in by the steep sided lava hillsides. At the end of the main street the street forks with the left road rising up to the plateau and Longwood Plain where Napoleon lived and the other leading to the Chinese quarter of the small town.

The guns were manned not by gunners from the Royal Artillery but by the East India Company's, St Helena Artillery Regiment. In 1819, all the likely landing points along the coast were covered by gun batteries or manned outposts. Behind these on vantage points was a system of telegraph stations linked to Government House, the governor's official residence and James Town.

Trincomalee having been intercepted by one of the two sloops which patrolled to the north and south of the island would have exchanged the private signal, and entered the anchorage at James Bay. Then an official from the town would have come on board for the usual medical inspection and also to examine her manifest of civilian passengers – particularly foreigners. There was still a great concern in 1819 that Napoleonic sympathisers might attempt to pass information to Napoleon's staff about either proposals for his escape or about events in Europe that might lead to his considering an escape plan. The double page chart from the register of vessels anchoring at St Helena has a column for passenger names. This document would have enabled the Governor and his staff to cross reference intelligence reports that came in from Europe against the passenger lists of all the vessels which called at the island. These pages are typical of the register. Every two or three weeks new vessels would anchor off James Town. If only one officer from twenty vessels could be persuaded to take a letter to Europe then Napoleon had many opportunities to tell his story of isolation and imprisonment.

That first night, and for the rest of their time at the anchorage, Trincomalee would have been subject to the curfew. No boats, not even local fishing boats were allowed to move at night. This was at times a source of great irritation to the islanders for whom fish provided a very useful supplement to their monotonous and sometimes scarce diet. An armed guard rowed across the anchorage until morning whilst on shore the army mounted guard on the locked sea gate.

The squadron flagship HMS Conqueror (74) would either have been anchored off the town or patrolling between Cape Town and the island as the Cape formed part of the admiral's area of responsibility. In 1819, this was Admiral Plampin.

Had the officers of Trincomalee wanted to go and see where Napoleon lived then they would have applied for a pass to the Governor's office at the Castle – the building immediately behind the town wall to the left of the gateway. A dated pass, for that alone would then have enabled them to enter the cordon around his home – Longwood House. However they would also have needed to apply to General Bertrand, Napoleon's Marshal of the Palace, for an audience with 'The Emperor'.

Napoleon had refused to recognise his new title of 'the General' awarded by the British and instead insisted on operating a miniature imperial household with all of the official ceremony associated with it. In his presence everyone stood at Longwood unless they were invited to sit down, which was a rare occurrence. They also remained bareheaded and did not speak unless they were invited to do so.

Any application to gain an audience had to be addressed, not to 'The General' but to 'The Emperor'. Anyone who wished to be presented was to address him as, 'Your Majesty'. Those who did not accept this rule were simply not considered for an audience.

Ultimately it all depended on whether he thought he could make any use of you. He detested his situation on the island. He was bored and fought ferociously through letters and conversations for the right to be transferred back to Europe. If he wished to hear news from Europe and you could supply it in conversation, then you might be invited to an audience. If you were a diplomat travelling home to London and he felt you might be persuaded to pass on any of his grievances about his treatment, you might be invited but otherwise by the end of 1817 he was becoming increasingly irritated by the number of people who came to gawp at him.

He refused to leave the immediate area around his home and rarely 'paid calls' around the island. He never once revisited James Town, the only centre of population on the island and the place where he had spent his first night on the island on the 17th October 1815. And there were times when he refused to leave Longwood House and had the shutters closed in order to prevent the orderly officer from seeing him on a daily basis, as the governor demanded. It was a miserably petty existence for the man who gave his name to this remarkable era.

And it seems to me that by 1819 none of Trincomalee's junior officers, their wives – nor the frigate's own diarist, Mrs Bunt, have been afforded an audience. They would have spent time walking the simple town high street or they may have taken a ride up into the hills above the town and socialised with their counterparts from the other vessels at anchor off the town - but meet 'Boney'? Very unlikely.

The officers would probably have been invited to the army and navy messes and some of them would have been invited to Government House to provide conversation at dinner. Anyone who wanted to explore the island would have needed a horse. The roads, even now, are narrow and very steep and in 1819 many of them were little more than tracks. Today, driving a car on the island is a daunting experience given the twisting nature of the roads the sudden drops and the blind corners which appear. Moving up into fourth gear is a very novel experience on St Helena.

The island's civilian population at this time consisted of less than 3,000 European, African and a few Chinese craftsmen and labourers. Just under half of the population were slaves with another 400 being free black people. There were also on the island the two small single battalion East India Company regiments totalling approximately 600 soldiers: the St Helena Regiment and the St Helena Artillery. In addition there was also the British Army's 2nd Battalion 66th Regiment of Foot and a small troop of the 21st Light Dragoons. For that short time at anchor Trincomalee lay within four miles of 'the General' but for her passengers he might as well have been living on the moon.

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