

THE SEVERN DISTRICT SEA FENCIBLES 1803 to 1810

A short account the obscure local "Coastal Home Guard" of the Napoleonic War

By John Penny

Although the greatest popular movement in Georgian Britain was probably that formed around military volunteering during the wars against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, historians have written comparatively little on the subject and even when an attempt has been made the maritime volunteers have hardly ever commanded more than a few vague paragraphs. This is unfortunate as an examination of pay lists in the Public Record Office, letters in the Bristol Record Office and the columns of contemporary local newspapers have revealed a useful amount of information on this shadowy corps, put in place to protect the Severn Estuary against possible French naval incursions.

The Sea Fencible organization, the brainchild of Captain Home Riggs Popham R.N. who in 1793 had commanded a small force of longshoremen and naval volunteers in Flanders, was initially developed to defend the shores of the country during the French Revolutionary War of 1793 to 1802, and was made up of seafaring men residing along the East, South and Western Coasts of England who voluntarily enrolled themselves to serve in time of invasion. They were to be trained to use pikes, to man the batteries along the coast, as well as in the operation of any gun-boats that might be available, and were commanded by Royal Navy officers on half pay, men not required for active service with the fleet due to age or partial disability from past wounds. Each unit was commanded by a Captain, with from three to six Lieutenants

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servicing under them according to the number of Fencibles enrolled in the District. Locally the first mention of Sea Fencibles was on February 17th 1798 when *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* stated that "the Admiralty has come to the resolution of employing 15 Post Captains and 75 Masters and Commanders, who are to be stationed along the coast for the purpose of commanding the men enrolled as Sea Fencibles". Royal approval for the official formation of the Corps came on March 14th 1798, after which units were soon operating from Whitby, south to the coasts of Devon and Cornwall and across to Swansea.



Illustration: A typical Severn District Sea Fencible. (Based on a drawing by M.Chappell).

On May 23rd 1798 an offer was made through the Mayor of Bristol and Master of the Society of Merchants, by the pilots and other inhabitants of Pill who for some time had been "concerned at the disgraceful conduct of some of the seamen of H.M. fleet", and had by then resolved "to serve as volunteers on boats in the river and within the Port of Bristol, from the Passage eastward, to the Holmes westward: and on shore in the exercise of great guns in the immediate neighbourhood of Bristol, and on the shores of its river and port within the limits above mentioned". However, the men who had already declared their readiness to support with their lives such measures as might be thought expedient for the protection of King and Country and for the restoration of good order and subordination among the seamen of the Royal Navy, now stipulated that whenever called out they wished to be under the orders of Lieutenant-General James Rook, the man then in command the Bristol garrison and the Severn Military District. On June 6th the name of Lieutenant John Harford R.N. was put forward by the men as a possible commander for the self-titled "Loyal Pill and Port of Bristol Volunteer Association", but no satisfactory reply was ever forthcoming from government, and the leaderless volunteers remained in limbo until the end of the war. As late as August 1801 the Mayor of Bristol had written to Lord Hobart, the then Secretary of War, stating that the gun batteries erected at Portishead and Avonmouth were still not manned by the necessary number of men, and that the 30 or so needed by each battery could easily be provided by the Pill volunteers.

However, Hobart was still unwilling to sanction an official Sea Fencible or Volunteer corps at Pill pointing out that as pilots and watermen "their habits of life may render them unwilling to engage for any service in which there is a probability, however remote, of their being called to any distance from the coast". The armistice signed between Britain and France on October 1st 1801 ensured that the organization was never officially embodied during the Revolutionary War, nevertheless the volunteers continued to make themselves available for military service and their offer was finally taken up two years later.

Following a short uneasy peace the outbreak of the Napoleonic War on May 18th 1803 caused many of the defensive schemes adopted during the Revolutionary War to be re-introduced and expanded. The Sea Fencibles were no exception and by mid-July 1803 the organization had been re-established along the East Coast between Emsworth, near Portsmouth, north to St. Abb's Head, in Scotland, and 48 Port Captains and Commanders, together with an appropriate number of Lieutenants appointed.

With the renewed threat that the French might attempt a landing in Britain, on August 15th 1803 Lord Hobart sent a dispatch to the Earl of Berkeley, the Lord Lieutenant of Gloucestershire and the City and County of Bristol, stating that the Sea Fencible organization on the East Coast was to be extended to other parts of the country. "Already", he wrote, "the East India Company, the Corporation of Trinity House, the Cinque Ports, the proprietors of lighters employed in foreign and domestic commerce of the Thames, and several of the owners of ships employed in the coasting trade, have come to resolutions for carrying the proposed plan into execution." A "Plan of a Voluntary Naval Armament, for the Protection of the Coast", containing a number of proposals, was also included within the correspondence. It recommended that the Lord Lieutenants of the maritime counties co-operate with the Admiralty in obtaining the enrollment as Sea Fencibles of seamen in their areas who were unsuitable for service in the Royal Navy.

It was also hoped that the major ports would equip, at their own expense, armed vessels or hulks to be used for defensive purposes and manned by these men. Colliers and coasting vessels were considered the most suitable for conversion to gun boats, and it was hoped that the owners of these would fit them out as such, at an estimated cost of under £54. The boats were to be provided "with slides between decks, and loop-holes in the combings of their hatchways, for close quarters". Two guns were to be carried forward and two aft to permit firing on either side as well as fore and aft, and rings and eyebolts for these were also to be fitted. In addition, if small vessels were employed as gun boats it was considered advisable to provide them with large oars to permit operation during calm weather.

When these conversions were completed the necessary guns and ammunition would be provided free of charge by the Government, which could also supply suitable vessels if the port was unable to fit out their own gun boats, or if more men than could be put to work were raised. When arriving at, or sailing from port such vessels were subject to inspection by the commander of the local Sea Fencibles, and at all times they were to obey signals and directions from Royal Navy ships or shore signal stations. Finally, when detained they were entitled to demurrage, according to their

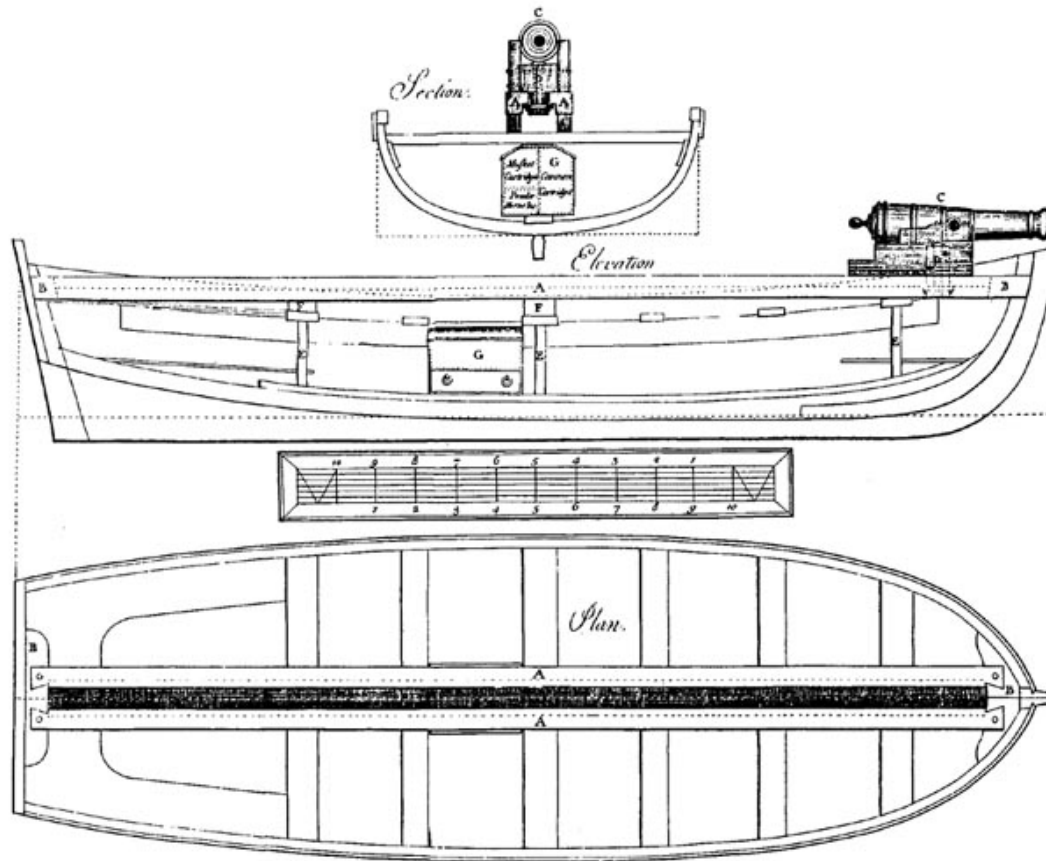


Illustration: Plans of a Gun Boat to be manned by the Sea Fencibles. (Bristol Record Office).

tonnage, at the same rate as "common transports". A reply was sent to Lord Hobart following a special meeting of the Mayor and Aldermen of Bristol on August 24th 1803, in which it was stated that 252 able men had already volunteered at Pill, but still had no commander appointed. There were no large vessels available in the Port of Bristol to act as gun boats, but if the Government would provide them, together with the necessary officers, the Pill volunteers would operate the guns. Neither were there any colliers belonging to the port, but there were a few coasting vessels which the Magistrates would use their influence to get converted. The port's pilot boats would also be inspected and those found suitable to carry a single gun in the bow would be fitted with the necessary ring and eye bolts, and supplied with large oars.

At this time the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty made it clear that all those who volunteered as Sea Fencibles would not be forced to leave their own locality, unless there was the threat of an invasion, and that they were only required to muster and exercise with pikes and cannon once a week, on a day chosen so as to interfere least with their occupations. The men were permitted to leave the district when fishing or carrying goods to market, and most importantly provided with a certificate which exempted them from the unwelcome attentions of the Press Gang! Sea Fencible units were allowed to chose their own Petty Officers, one to every 25 men, subject to approval by their Captain, and if called upon for war service were to be entitled to a "shilling a day plus provisions, or another shilling in lieu of provisions". Under such circumstances no seaman would be exempt from the impress unless enrolled as a Sea Fencible.

With such favourable conditions on offer it did not take long for a local organization to become established, and on September 13th 1803, the Severn District Sea Fencibles, with its headquarters at Bristol, was formed under the command of Captain Thomas Sotheby, a man who was said to have had local connections. Its area covered the coast between Bristol and Gloucester, and from Gloucester to Beachley. The Senior Post Captain of every District of Sea Fencibles also had command of all the armed boats comprising the flotilla for the fencibles of the district, as well as regulating all the Signal Posts within his area, at each of which was to be stationed a Lieutenant.

The Severn District initially contained eleven units of Sea Fencibles, divided into three divisions. The first, the Bristol Division, covered the Port of Bristol; the second the, Gloucester Division, the eastern side of the River Severn up to Gloucester and down the western bank to Westbury on Severn; and the third, known as the Chepstow Division, down from Westbury to Beachley, and up the Gloucestershire side of the River Wye. Those located at Bristol and Pill, were personally led Captain Sotheby, with Lieutenant Rice as second in command; those at Oldbury, Berkeley, Frampton, Minsterworth, and Gloucester were under Captain George Blake; while the Newnham, Lydney, Tidenham, and Brockweir units were commanded by Captain George Christopher Pulling.

Local recruiting started almost immediately with large advertisements appearing in the local newspapers. They requested all seafaring persons such as pilots, fishermen, trowmen, and masters and owners of barges, as well as those in protected occupations in the Customs, Excise, or Post Office to assemble at the Guildhall in Bristol on September 19th, or at the Tolsey in Gloucester on the 26th to be enrolled. In addition, Captains Blake and Pulling announced their intentions of visiting various parishes within their areas to sign up further volunteers. By the end of October this had been completed, with over 700 men having come forward and many offers made of vessels and boats to be put at the disposal of the Government. A notice also appeared in the *Hereford Journal* ordering all volunteers residing between Chepstow and the mouth of the River Severn to rendezvous under Captains Richard and George Jones at Swansea, headquarters of the adjoining formation on the Welsh side of the Bristol Channel.

Captain Sotheby, as Senior Post Captain of the Severn District, was to receive £1.15 per day, paid on a on a monthly basis, Captains Blake and Pulling, the Junior Post Captains, £1.10s, and the Lieutenants, which numbered six by January 1805, 8s.6d each, there was, however, no allowance for lodging, coal or candles. The Petty Officers were paid 2s.6d for each day upon which they assembled and Ordinary Seamen 1s.

In respect of dress, the Sea Fencibles looked very much like the Royal Navy sailors of their day. Officers uniforms were similar in all respects to that of a serving naval officer, while the men wore a tarred sennet hat bearing the painted badge of the corps, a short double breasted jacket, a wool jumper with blue and white horizontal stripes, a pair of white duck trousers and a strong pair of buckled leather shoes. Around the waist was a broad leather belt with brass buckle from which could be suspended a cutlass frog and scabbard. It was in order to assist the Ordinary Seaman that a subscription was opened in Bristol on September 28th, to "defray the expenses of clothing etc. of the Sea Fencibles, enrolled in this City and its neighbourhood". This ran until the end of October, but by that time only £234.3s. had been donated. A similar scheme was started in Gloucester on the same date and on October 27th the *Gloucester Herald* was able to report that £137 8s had been raised.

October also saw the units assemble for the first time, Berkeley with 32 men, Tidenham with 38, and Gloucester with 72 on the 2nd; Frampton (later sometimes referred to as Framilode) 47, Lydney 32, and Newnham 36 on the 9th; Pill, the largest unit with 234 men, and Brockweir with 72 on the 10th; followed by Bristol's 137 on

the 16th; and finally Minsterworth's 26 and Oldbury's 54, on the 31st. The men were then trained to march, wheel and face to the right or left, in the manner of a company of infantry. Pikes, their main weapons, were also issued at this time and the Gloucester Division, who had received theirs on October 23rd, were soon enthusiastically exercising with them in accordance with the recommendations of Captain Blake who considered it essential that each man should be able to take up, shoulder, slope, handle, present, charge, trail, recover and ground the pike, as well as being competent in repulsing a cavalry charge. This they were to accomplish by placing their pike's butt on the ground, supported by the right foot, and adjusting it until it was level with the horse's chest while those men to the rear, who were carrying out the same exercise, positioned their pikes between the gaps in the front rank.

A meeting of those who had subscribed towards the clothing of the Bristol Division of the Sea Fencibles was held at the Council House, Bristol, on November 10th at which it was resolved that a committee be appointed to solicit further subscriptions from their fellow citizens. This group subsequently felt it "a duty incumbent upon them to state, that the number of seafaring men who have enrolled themselves in this most valuable corps, in Bristol and Pill exceeds 500. That they are making rapid progress in the exercise of the Pike and Great Guns, and from their habit of life are fully qualified in every exertion on the water, to which the perilous circumstances of the times may call them. That the N.C.O.'s appointed from among the pilots and others have already equipped themselves with side arms and handsome naval uniforms; and that nothing is wanting to the perfect ordering and discipline of these divisions of the corps, but uniforms for the privates, by much the greater part of whom are, from their situation in life, totally unable to provide such clothing for themselves."

Felix Farley's Bristol Journal reported on December 10th 1803 that "the colours of this truly valuable corps, which we are informed, were the liberal gift of Richard Bryant Esq., were presented to them last week, on which occasion, a very animated address was delivered to them by Sir Abraham Elton". By this time the Bristol Sea Fencibles had "become nearly perfect in the use of the pike and in all the primary evolutions necessary for action", which ensured that the display of their military prowess put on after the presentation ceremony was performed with such dexterity that it greatly impressed Lieutenant General Tarlton, the new commander of the Severn Military District, as well as a number of distinguished officers who were also present. However, in spite of the support of Bristol's leading newspaper the public subscription for clothing for the Sea Fencibles was still not going too well and by the end of the month only £646.19s. had been collected. Despite subsequent donations of 100 guineas from the Corporation of Bristol, and 50 guineas from the Society of Merchant Venturers, by January 18th 1804, the total stood at only £809.14s., far short of the sum required.

On March 29th 1804 the local Sea Fencibles were ordered to hold themselves ready for immediate service, and if called out one of their most important tasks would have been to help man the "Great Guns" in Port of Bristol's fixed defences, which then comprised the two batteries situated near the mouth of the River Avon, originally constructed in 1798, each of which was normally garrisoned only by an NCO and four men from the Invalid Artillery. That on Portishead Point contained four captured French 36 pounder guns mounted on traversing platforms, together with an arched magazine, and a barrack block designed to accommodate an officer and 45 men, while the King Road battery at Avonmouth was armed with four more French 36 pounder guns, again on traversing platforms, as well as being provided with two moveable wooden magazines and a small barrack block.

In addition, so as to provide a quick means of communication between Bristol and the coastal batteries, in 1804 a line of signal posts was constructed, each equipped with a flagstaff, these being situated on Dundry tower, on Hobbs Hill above the Portishead Battery, on Kingsweston Down, and at the Snuff Mill on Clifton Rocks above the

Avon Gorge. These were also the responsibility of the commander of the Bristol Division of the Sea Fencibles.

Elsewhere in the district a number of changes to the Sea Fencible order of battle took place within the next few years, the process starting with Berkeley and Oldbury combining to form a single unit based in the former town on July 3rd 1804. This was followed by Tewkesbury taking over Oldbury's place within Captain Blake's area on January 6th 1805, while finally, in 1806, the Lydney unit disbanded completely its last assembly, made up of just eight men, taking place on December 14th of that year. The organisation of both the Sea Fencibles and the Impress Service was also completely revised, the *Gloucester Herald* announcing on August 3rd 1805 that in future "the duty of the Sea Fencibles and that of procuring men for the fleet shall be carried out under the superintendence of the same officers as far as situations will permit. By the adoption of this plan the expense will be greatly reduced and a considerable number of men procured to serve afloat, which were heretofore exempt from the impress in consequence of being enrolled as Sea Fencibles". This ensured that by August 17th Admiral Berkeley was already busy making a survey of the Sea Fencibles and Impress establishments in the area.

In addition, as a result of his promotion to Rear Admiral, on December 8th 1805 Captain Thomas Sotheby relinquished command of the Severn District Sea Fencibles as well as its Bristol Division, and although he was replaced for a short time by Captain William Albany Otway, on February 25th 1806, he in turn handed over to Captain George Barker, who had also headed the Impress Service in Bristol since the summer of 1803. This gentleman was to remain commander of both services until February 10th 1810 when the threat of a French invasion had disappeared, leading the Admiralty to disband the entire Sea Fencible organisation, which at its peak had some 20,000 men enrolled around the coast of Britain.

So, after an existence of seven years the Severn District Sea Fencibles became no more than a footnote in history, and although having no unbroken lineal connection with the Royal Naval Coast Volunteers, Royal Navy Artillery Volunteers or Royal Naval Reserve Volunteers of later years, it would be nice to think that the traditions of those old Napoleonic coastal defenders are still continued today by the men who meet at HMS Flying Fox, the Bristol home of the Severn Division of the Royal Naval Reserve.

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PRINCIPAL SOURCES

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