

The battle of Cap de La Hague

Flicking through a reference book one day I came across a small piece about a battle of “La Hague”. Interested in the sea and fascinated by Alderney's history, I knew I had found it - that forgotten battle about which one could rave. Unfortunately it seemed to have been a messy battle (It took four to five days to run its course) rather than a heroic Trafalgar. Nevertheless it was a conclusive victory over the traditional foe. Perhaps we might even find physical evidence somewhere on the Cape or even on the island. Alderney must have been involved. Reality came with almost the first book inspected in the library, Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Le Hague must not be confused with La Hougue or La Hogue “.

The battle of Le Hogue or Barfleur, as it is sometimes known, was fought between a combined English and Dutch fleet and the French between May 19th and May 24th, 1692. Louis XIV was supporting the exiled James II of England in an attempt to land an army of invasion in England. So much for an Alderney battle. Barfleur is 45 miles away at least, east of Cherbourg and La Hogue is the area around St Vaast, which is south of Cape Barfleur and even further away. Eight days before the battle nobody was sure on which side half of the English fleet were to fight. The flag officers and captains took an oath of allegiance to William III on board the flagship Britannia on May 19th, then there was a comment about the English commander Edward Russell “it was said that he avoided battle with the French in the previous year so as to aid James.

Heroic battle! Oh no, this bit cannot be true. The English fleet (most sources ignore the Dutch after line one) numbered between 82 and 99 ships of the line, the French 45. Somebody must have got those two figures the wrong way round. No, they were true.

On further reading it seems that the term “battle” might be a bit strong. The two fleets drifted back and forth for three days on the tide, firing at each other through haze and fog. Sometimes they anchored, occasionally they weighed anchor and drifted on again. Eventually half the French fleet escaped to St Malo because the English were too scared to follow them through the Alderney Race with its “boiling waters and treacherous rocks”. At last a mention of the island, and that not in every account as it sometimes referred to under its other name Raz Blanchard. The remainder of the French fleet got into St Vaast. Even here Sir Cloudisley Shovell backed off attacking as he had got a splinter in his thigh and Admiral George Rooke led the attack. None of the records agree but it seems that 16 French ships were destroyed. Add to this number three ships destroyed earlier off Cherbourg and it can scarcely be called a notable victory. It is hardly surprising that parliament sacked both the English commander Russell, and Ashby (who hadn't chased the French through the Race to St Malo) for not taking “proper measures to complete the destruction of the French”.

Personally I blame them all for not getting the dates right for the battle. The English claim May 19th to 24th while the French say it was May 29th.

This article first appeared in the Alderney Society Bulletin in August 1985. I appreciate the reason for the different dates (England kept to the Julian calendar until 1752 whilst the French had changed to the Gregorian in 1582) but why let reason get in the way of an article.