

BILLY RUFFIAN SAILS TO GLORY

In this article Derek Barnard reminds us that Rochester built many ships in bygone times and tells the story of one distinguished warship which first got its bottom wet in the Medway.

Between 1785 and 1814 no fewer than sixty-seven Men of War ranging in armament from 10 to 74 guns were built by the seven private shipyards on the Rochester and Frindsbury shores of Limehouse Reach. The Royal Dockyards were hard pressed during the Napoleonic Wars to keep up with the repairing of ships, so the building of new vessels was contracted-out to these private yards. Strict contracts were placed and each stage of construction had to be inspected by a senior shipwright from a Royal Yard.

The most famous of these ships was the Bellerophon, out of the Greaves and Nicholson yard which operated from the Bridgewardens Quarry Estate at Frindsbury. She was a 74 gun Third Rate, which when launched in 1786 joined over seventy others of her class forming the backbone of the British Navy. The 74's were a popular ship with the Admiralty because they cost half as much to build as a First Rate but were only a quarter smaller in size and armament. Designed by the designer of H.M.S. Victory she took three thousand loads of oak to build, a load being 50 cu ft (about one tree) as well as elm for the keel, fir for deck planking and pine for the masts. She was 186 feet long with an extreme breadth of 46 feet. On the day of her launch the weather deteriorated in the late morning to such an extent that the ship became unsteady on the ways, and Mr Nicholson himself broke a bottle of port on her bows and she slipped with little ceremony into the Medway.

H.M.S. Bellerophon was commissioned in 1790 and fought in a number of engagements with the French before joining Nelson's fleet in the Med and was tenth in line at the Battle of the Nile. It was her misfortune to engage the French flagship L' Orient of 120 guns, opposite which she anchored at 7pm. After an hour's fighting the great three decker had reduced the Bellerophon to a wreck, totally dismasted and with only her bowsprit intact. Fifteen of her guns out of action, 450 hammocks destroyed and with holes in her side, her cable was cut and she drifted away shortly before the flagship blew up. As she drifted along the French line she received a withering broadside from the Tonnant of 80 guns. The 74's were almost impossible to sink and she sailed to Gibraltar, using improvised gear, to be repaired. One hundred and eighty three crewmen had been killed or injured in the engagement.

She was soon back with the fleet and was fifth in line in Collingwood's column at Trafalgar and roughed it up with a number of ships during the action and fought a tremendous duel with L'Aigle. Two Spanish ships were captured by her and a prize crew was put on one of them. One hundred and forty three men were killed or injured including the Captain who was killed by a musket ball. 'Billy Ruffian', as she was affectionately known, had the great honour of escorting home H.M.S. Victory carrying Nelson's body.

Active service in the Baltic followed as the flagship of three successive admirals. On 15 July 1815 while blockading the French coast she received the surrender on board of Napoleon Bonaparte before taking him to Plymouth. Having carried her country's flag with honour, she received the Naval War Medal with five clasps. Bellerophon became a prison hulk at Sheerness and then at Plymouth though her name was changed to Captivity and she was broken up in 1834 having been sold to the breakers for £4030.

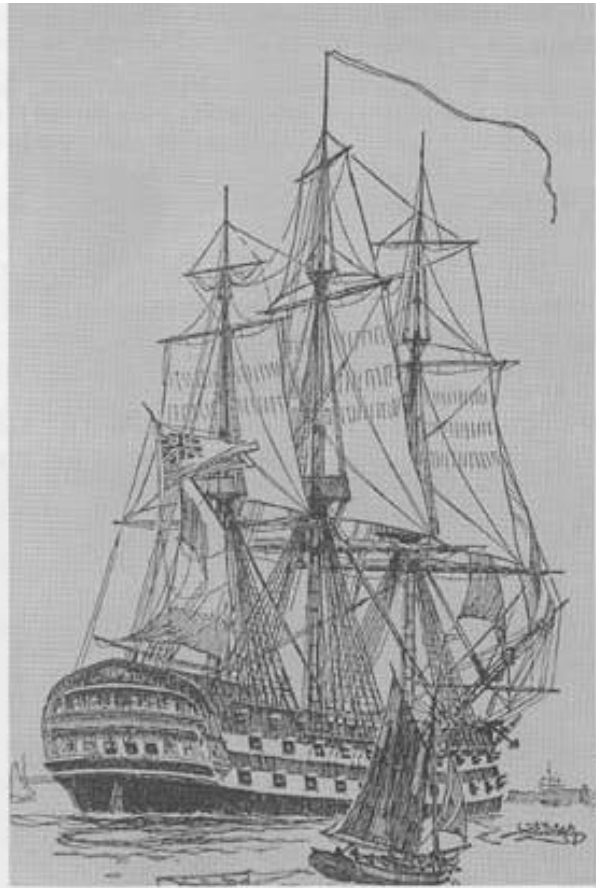


Photo: R. L. Ruxliff

The Bellerophon