In 1803, Napoleon gathered 130,000 troops along the coast of the English Channel. On a clear day, the French soldiers (who had conquered all of Europe) could see England’s white cliffs. Napoleon only needed to control the Channel, which he called ‘a mere ditch’, for a few hours and he could transport his enormous army to England. All that stood between Britain and the first foreign invasion since 1066 was the Royal Navy. So how did Nelson’s navy keep Napoleon at bay? How was the threat from invasion permanently removed? And how did the Battle of Trafalgar affect the rest of British history?

MISSION OBJECTIVES

• To be able to describe how battles were fought at sea in the nineteenth century.
• To explain how Nelson’s tactics helped to win the Battle of Trafalgar.
• To recognize how and why the battle was commemorated in Britain.

HISTORICAL ENQUIRY

BRITAIN AT WAR

WISE-UP

Words

ammunition broadsides chain shot
grape shot powder monkeys raking
magazine sharpshooters
round shot

Nelson’s wind-powered ships could inflict terrible damage on the enemy but were dangerous places to be for the crew!

Guns weighed up to three tons and would fly backwards when fired. They had to be held in place with strong ropes to prevent the crew being crushed by their own guns.

The youngest person in Nelson’s fleet was eight years old. Boys were used as powder monkeys, whose job it was to fetch the gunpowder from the magazine and deliver it to the guns. If the bags of powder were hit by a musket ball, a boy’s arm would ‘disappear in a pink mist’.

Soldiers – or marines – would try to board the enemy ship. While they fought hand-to-hand with cutlasses, tomahawks and pikes, sharpshooters would stay on their own ships and pick off the enemy from a distance.

The only treatment available for limbs smashed by a cannon ball was amputation. Those that survived the ship’s surgeon’s saw often died of infection in the days after.

HISTORICAL ENQUIRY

2: How did Nelson’s touch win the Battle of Trafalgar?

Horatio Nelson

The man given the job of saving England was Vice Admiral Horatio Nelson. Born in Norfolk, England, in 1758, he was the sixth of 11 children and joined the Navy at the age of 12! He soon proved himself a natural leader and was made a captain by the age of 20. He had been fighting in the wars against France since 1793 and had won many famous victories – but lost his right eye and his right arm in the process! Famous for his bravery and bold tactics, he once ignored orders by putting a telescope to his blind eye and claiming he couldn’t see the signal! By 1805 he was a national hero and in charge of the mighty impressive Royal Navy. But to make the country safe from their old enemy – France – he needed to completely destroy the French fleet and gain control of the seas. In October 1805, in the waters off the coast of Cape Trafalgar in Spain, he got his chance!

NATO maritime signal flags alphabet:

Vice Admiral The Viscount Horatio Nelson, Britain’s greatest naval hero.

Nelson communicated with his other ships through a system of flags. As his fleet approached the French and Spanish navies at Trafalgar, he sent this famous message to his captains. See if you can work out what he said.