

Sailing towards a superb Trafalgar finale

As we go to press The Trafalgar Festival, the 'Nelsonian' component of SeaBritain 2005, has just reached its half-way stage. The National Maritime Museum's Director Trafalgar 200, **Colin White**, has already covered many hundreds of miles, keeping up with the wide variety of events. Here are his reflections on how it has gone so far.



It was the look on the face on the little boy in the rain in Dorchester that will sum up *The Trafalgar Festival* for me. Utter, enchanted, uncomplicated delight as the tall, dashing Lieutenant Lapenotière of HMS *Pickle*, resplendent in his full-dress naval uniform, cocked hat and swirling boat cloak, swept him a bow and handed back to him his mother's umbrella, which he had been using as a sword and had then dropped in a puddle, in his excitement at seeing the bright yellow 'New Trafalgar Dispatch' post chaise canter up, drawn by two magnificent horses. Watching him scurry back to his mother, chattering excitedly, I realised that he would never forget that day. Who knows, perhaps another naval history

Below, overleaf and opposite, top: just some of the stirring sights at the International Fleet Review off Spithead on 28 June 2005 © Royal Navy, T200. Opposite, bottom: Lt. Lapenotière rides the recreated post-chaise across the country to deliver The New Trafalgar Dispatch.

enthusiast had been created!

Youngsters have been well to the fore in all the main events of the Festival – just as the Official Nelson Commemorations Committee always intended. Another memorable moment for me was the sight of a line of Sea Cadets, helping to man the side of the Royal Navy's largest warship, HMS *Ocean*, and cheering their hearts out as the Queen went by at the International Fleet Review. Or going into a small gallery in the excellent Norfolk Nelson Museum in Great Yarmouth and seeing a delightful collection of children's paintings of Nelson, inspired by an excellent exhibition there on Nelson Portraits.

My rôle as Chairman of the ONCC has taken me all over southern Britain since the Trafalgar Festival began at the Fleet Review in late June. The Review itself was an unforgettable experience. I started the day on board HMS *Ocean*, giving a string of press and radio interviews, and

to get me out of the way, they sat me on the Flight Controller's chair on the bridge wing. From there, high above the flight deck, I could see the entire fleet laid out before me – a fascinating, eclectic mix of British and foreign warships; of ravishing tall ships and functional commercial vessels. And, all around, the busy yachts and tourist boats, crammed with spectators.

I simply could not understand the point of view of the nit-picking minority who felt this happy splendour was inferior to the great Fleet Reviews of the past. I was at the 1977 Review and I can tell you that the Trafalgar 200 Review knocked its predecessor into an antique cocked hat! Much more variety of vessels to keep the interest going; much less stiffness and formality about the ceremonial; much more opportunity for ordinary people to get involved and, above all, those joyous youngsters popping up everywhere, with their wide eyes and delighted grins.

Some of the journalists interviewing me obviously hoped that I would be a dewlap-wobbling historian, making maundering, negative comparisons with past glories. I must have disappointed them terribly, as I sat there in my eyrie, burbling on, with happy enthusiasm, about the glorious scene laid out before me!

There was the same mix of excitement and fun at Falmouth in early August, when the Jubilee Sailing Trust's hard-working sail training ship *Lord Nelson* arrived with the New Trafalgar Dispatch on board, carried by actor Alex Price. He was playing Lieutenant John Lapenotière, the man who delivered the original dispatch in November 1805, in HM Schooner *Pickle*. I was lucky enough to watch the arrival from the National Maritime Museum Cornwall's newly-acquired motor launch and so I was right in the middle of it all. Carrick Roads was packed with small boats, swirling around the *Lord Nelson*, criss-crossing her bows and wake, in a superb, spontaneous celebration of the sea. In short, just what all of us involved in *SeaBritain 2005* were hoping would happen this year.

Since then, I have been dodging all over the country – tracking the New Trafalgar Dispatch as it has made its way slowly up the road to London, greeted everywhere by huge and happy crowds, and then shooting off to take part in other Festival events. I even ended up at the Three Choirs Festival in Worcester, giving a lecture on Nelson's funeral to a capacity audience. Wherever I have gone, I have found the same mood of excitement and enthusiasm. People are genuinely delighted that the Trafalgar bicentenary is being celebrated in such a spectacular way – far more widely, and with far more imagination, than the rather subdued and disjointed celebrations of the centenary in 1905. And they are keen to join in!

And hasn't the weather been kind to us? The rain and puddles in Dorchester, when the New Trafalgar Dispatch roadshow arrived there, were rarities. The sun has streamed down on most of our events and we have been treated to a classic, story-book English summer. Driving from event to event, I have been revelling in the beautiful countryside, shimmering in the heat haze and spectacular views of the coastline, seen from a variety of craft, large and small.

Back in Greenwich in mid-July, shortly after the opening of *Nelson & Napoleon*, I sat outside the National Maritime Museum's Regatta Café (in the sun!) with author and broadcaster Adam Nicolson,

who has written one of the best recently-published books about Trafalgar, *Men of Honour*. He had come to the NMM to review *N&N* for the *Sunday Telegraph* and, like so many visitors to our remarkable exhibition, he was obviously still slightly dazed and overwhelmed by the stunning collection of ravishing objects he had just seen. We talked about the concept of 'Britishness' and about how one of the unexpected strengths of the exhibition is that it vividly captures the essential cultural differences between France and Britain.

The Trafalgar Festival is turning into a celebration not just of a great seaman and a great naval battle, nor even simply of Britain and the Sea – central though all those themes certainly are to all that we are doing. It is becoming nothing less than a celebration of Britain itself. And, as I have been saying, at every opportunity, and in every one of the 60+ lectures I

have given so far this year – if you do not understand Britain's maritime history, you cannot understand Britain. *The Trafalgar 200 celebrations, part of the SeaBritain 2005 initiative led by the NMM with the Royal Navy, VisitBritain and other important partners, draws to a close over the Trafalgar Weekend: 21–23 October. Major celebrations will be televised from around the country, and many thousands of local events will be held in hundreds of coastal and inland communities. The year will leave a legacy in educational terms, in raised awareness of the importance of the sea in our lives, careers and leisure pursuits. And in the long-term there will also be new woodlands growing in memory of Nelson's finest, and final, hour. Visit www.seabritain2005.com*

