

SAUNDERSFOOT AND DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

At its November meeting the Society welcomed back Richard Davies whose talk, *The Last Invasion of Britain*, had a particular Pembrokeshire resonance.

The French revolution of 1789 was initially welcomed by both radicals, for the overthrow of the old regime, and conservatives for the weakening of a rival nation. Attitudes were to change after the execution of the king in 1793 and the British government began to send arms and uniforms to the remaining royalist forces. In response the revolutionaries planned a three-pronged invasion of Britain. A force of some 15,000 men sailed to Ireland but inclement weather prevented a landing and it returned to France. A second, smaller force attempted to land in north-east England but again poor weather ended the venture.

Rather surprisingly, the third element also sailed, and effected a landing at Carreg Wastad near Fishguard in February 1797. Led by William Tate, an elderly Irish-American, it comprised around 1400 soldiers, of whom 1200 had been recruited from various prisons in France. The alarm was quickly raised but who was to confront the invader? The Pembrokeshire Militia, by a quirk of fate, was away training in England. That left only volunteer Yeomanry, local units formed and funded by the gentry. The Fishguard and Newport Volunteer Infantry, the nearest force, were soon raised; they were commanded by the 28 year old Thomas Knox who owed his position not to any military knowledge but to the fact that his father paid for the men's weapons and uniforms. Other units, such as the Pembroke Volunteers and the Castlemartin Yeomanry Cavalry, were ordered to group at Haverfordwest.

The defence of the county was the responsibility of the lord lieutenant: on the basis of social standing Lord Cawdor was appointed local commander and he was to be advised by Colonel Colby of the Militia fortunately home on leave. Colby rode quickly north to confer with Knox though there appears to have been a disagreement over who was giving and who receiving orders. In the meantime the French forces had begun a looting, drinking and eating spree, and the latter excess seems to have resulted in food poisoning. It had soon become obvious to Tate that the force in his charge was incapable of fighting; certainly he had lost control of them and within days he had written to Cawdor to seek an honourable surrender. Cawdor in turn demanded and received an offer of unconditional surrender.

The local forces, barely numbering 500 men, were lined up along the crests of hills near Fishguard to imply greater numbers to the French assembled on Goodwick sands and it was at this point that Jemima Nicholas and her friends supplemented the Yeomanry by marching around the hill tops in scarlet shawls and black tall hats. The story of the women representing soldiers in this way would have much of the folk tale about it if it was not for contemporary letters confirming the actual events.

Thus ended the last invasion of the British mainland, with the officers sent to London and the men to the hulks.

The chair of the Society, Mrs. Mary Cavell, warmly thanked Richard Davies for an informative and entertaining lecture. Members were reminded that the all-important Christmas Party would take place at the Wiseman's Bridge Inn on 16 December.

