

# The Classical Road Show

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## The Story of *The Battle of Trafalgar*



*The Battle of Trafalgar 21 October 1805*

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Notes by Teresa Collard

# 1. Nelson's Early Life

**Viscount Horatio Nelson**, Duke of Bronte was born at the parsonage in Burnham Thorpe on 29 September 1758. It is no longer there, having been demolished in his lifetime.

## 1.1 His Family

Edmund Nelson, Horatio's father, was rector of the parish. Both his grandfathers were in Holy Orders, so too were eight cousins, two brothers and two great-uncles. His mother, born Catherine Suckling, was Sir Robert Walpole's grandniece.



*The Parsonage at Burnham Thorpe*

## 1.2 Nelson's early training

At the age of twelve Nelson was entered, by his uncle Captain Maurice Suckling, as a midshipman on the *Raisonnable*. Shortly afterwards when Captain Suckling was transferred to the *Triumph* he took his young nephew with him. Later Horatio's uncle sent him to the West Indies on a merchantman and on his return provided boatwork on the River Thames. There the boy sailor learnt how to pilot small vessels amidst rock and sands, an ability which in later years helped him to win two major battles.

In June 1773, the fifteen-year-old Horatio joined an Arctic expedition which had been ordered to find "a passage via the North Pole" to India. The hazardous expedition proved to be a failure but one night during a heavy mist, Nelson together with another midshipman, crept out of the *Carcass* with the aim of shooting a bear. The object was to take home a skin for his father. The shaggy creature proved to be dangerous but a blank shot from the *Carcass* alarmed the bear and it made off. Midshipman Nelson was severely reprimanded by Captain Skeffington Lutwidge for behaving in such a rash manner.

## 1.3 Nelson's naval career



*Admiral Lord Nelson*

On 9 April 1777, aged nineteen, he passed a formidable naval examination to become Lieutenant Nelson, and by 1778 had become a post captain. He always maintained that he owed his rapid rise to his ability to win the affection of his comrades and superiors. In later life he called the captains under his command his *Band of Brothers*. He always treated Ordinary seamen with understanding and humanity which explains why so many volunteers, not press-ganged men, were aboard the *Victory*.

His great victories include the Battle of the Nile in Abū Qīr Bay on 1 August 1798 and Copenhagen, 2 April 1801, where he famously placed a telescope to his blind eye, ignoring orders to withdraw. Soon after Copenhagen he commanded a flotilla of small ships in readiness to combat Napoleon's planned invasion of Britain.

## 1.4 Lady Hamilton

During 1802/3 there was a short period of peace, the *Peace of Amiens*. Nelson went to live on his Merton estate, in Surrey, with Sir William and Lady Hamilton, who was his mistress. The house was full to overflowing with relatives including his daughter Horatia (unaware of her parentage) who happily played with her father calling him *my dear Godpapa*. Sir William Hamilton died on April 6th, 1803, in Emma's arms with Nelson, of whom he was most fond, holding his hands.



**Sir William Hamilton**



**Lady Emma Hamilton**



**Nelson**

## 2. 1803 – Britain at war with France

### 2.1 Nelson commands the Mediterranean Fleet

On 16 April 1803, Britain declared war on France. Nelson hoisted his flag and left immediately to take command of a Mediterranean Fleet with the intention of blockading the greater part of the French Fleet in Toulon. French squadrons in Rochefort, Ferrol and Brest were also blockaded.



**Admiral Villeneuve**

On New Year's Day, 1805, an enemy squadron in Rochefort escaped, and 18 days later the French Fleet based in Toulon under the command of **Admiral Pierre Villeneuve**, also avoiding the trap, escaped to the West Indies. It was a clever strategy designed to draw Nelson's fleet to the West Indies thereby depriving Britain of its defence force.

Once Nelson was in the West Indies, Villeneuve thinking he had achieved his object, sailed back to Europe, unaware that he was being pursued by British ships. Off Finisterre Villeneuve fought an indecisive battle against Sir Robert Calder, a battle which was never given a name.

In thick fog, and disregarding Napoleon's orders, Villeneuve withdrew and made for the safe harbour of Cadiz. (The previous manoeuvres are referred to as *The Trafalgar Campaign*).

### 2.2 Nelson's appointment as Commander of the Fleet

Meantime after two years at sea, and never putting foot on land, Nelson returned to Merton on 20 August 1805, for a well earned rest. By 9.45am the next morning he arrived at the Admiralty expecting to be castigated for his failure to keep the French Fleet pinned down in the Mediterranean.

He was amazed to discover that he was not out of favour with the establishment and had even been chosen to carry out the supreme task of preventing Napoleon from invading Britain. Somehow or other he had to destroy the French Fleet.

## 2.3 War plans

During the 25 days following Nelson's appointment as Commander of the Fleet, his strategy for the forthcoming sea battle gradually evolved. There were many meetings in Downing Street with Prime Minister William Pitt, and Admiral Charles Barham, First Lord of the Admiralty. Meetings too with Lord Castlereagh, Secretary of War and George Canning Treasurer of the Navy.

It was during this period that Wellington and Nelson met for the first and only time. Wellington who had always thought Nelson egotistical, vain and silly entirely revised his opinion during the 45 minutes they were kept waiting by the Secretary of War. Later he said 'I don't know when I ever had such a conversation that interested me more. He really was a very superior man.'

## 2.4 Preparing to do battle



**HMS Victory**

Nelson left England at 8 o'clock in the morning on 15 September 1805 in HMS Victory. On his way to the Portuguese Coast, other ships joined him including the frigate *Euryalus*. This frigate was sent ahead with letters to the British Consul in Lisbon and to Admiral Collingwood (who was standing off Cadiz Harbour) telling them on no account to mention Lord Nelson's approach or acknowledge his arrival.

On 29 September, Nelson's forty-seventh birthday, fifteen of his captains dined aboard the *Victory*, and the same number on the following day.

A week later, the Combined Fleet of French and Spanish ships was still blockaded in Cadiz when on 6 October, Nelson ordered Admiral Louis to Gibraltar with 6 ships of the line, to take on fresh provisions. This left him with only 21 ships against a possible 35.

Nelson waited, fully expecting the Combined Fleet to attack, but Napoleon, furious with Admiral Villeneuve for the way in which he had handled the battle without a name, ordered the Fleet to return to Toulon.

The position appeared to be stalemate so Nelson sailed 50 miles to the west in order to tempt Villeneuve out of his safe harbour, knowing that even with a favourable wind it would take Villeneuve several days to get his ships under way. In Nelson's private memorandum, written on 18 October, he noted *Fine weather, wind easterly. The Combined Fleet have fine weather to put to sea.*

By 20 October the Combined Fleet were finally tempted out to sea, hoping to reach Toulon intact, but Admiral Lord Nelson had other ideas.

**On Monday 21 October 1805, the greatest sea battle in history took place off Cape Trafalgar.**



### 3. The Nelson Touch



*the position of the opposing forces shortly after battle commenced*

#### **The Nelson Touch**

This was the name given to Nelson's innovative battle plan which had a totally different approach from any preceding sea battles fought with enemy fleets which were sailing side by side in line ahead. This illustration demonstrates how Nelson sailed through the centre of the enemy fleet and Collingwood through the rear.

## 4. The opposing Navies at The Battle of Trafalgar

(e) = escaped    (t) = taken    (tr) = taken then retaken    (tb) = taken then burnt  
 (b) = burnt    (s) = sunk    (ts) = taken then sunk    (w) = wrecked

BRITISH SHIPS		GUNS	FRENCH SHIPS		GUNS	SPANISH SHIPS		GUNS
A	Victory	100	2	Scipion	(t) 74	1	Neptuno	(trw) 80
B	Temeraire	98	3	Intrepide	(tb) 74	6	Rayo	(tw) 100
C	Neptune	98	4	Formidable	(t) 80	8	S.Francisco	(w) 74
							De Asis	
D	Leviathan	74	5	Mont Blanc	(t) 74	9	S.Augustin	(tb) 74
E	Conqueror	74	7	Duguay-Trouin	(t) 74	11	Santissima Trinidad	(ts) 130
F	Africa	64	10	Heros	(e) 74	15	S. Justo	(e) 74
G	Britannia	100	12	Bucentaure	(trw) 80	19	Sta Anna	(tr) 12
H	Ajax	74	16	S.Leandro	(e) 64	21	Monarca	(tw) 74
J	Agamemnon	64	13	Neptune	(e) 80	23	Bahama	(tw) 74
K	Orion	74	14	Redoubtable	(ts) 74	26	Argonauta	(ts) 80
L	Minotaur	74	17	Indomptable	(w) 80	27	Montanes	(e) 80
M	Spartiate	74	18	Fougueux	(tw) 74	29	S.Ildefonso	(t) 74
N	Prince	98	20	Pluton	(e) 74	31	P. De Asturias	(e) 112
P	Royal Sovrgn.	100	22	Algesiras	(tr) 74	33	S. Juan Nepomuceno	(t) 74
Q	Belleisle	74	24	Aigle	(tw) 74			
R	Mars	74	25	Swiftsure	(t) 74			
S	Tonnant	80	28	Argonaute	(e) 74			
T	Bellerophon	74	30	Achille	(b) 74			
U	Colossus	74	32	Berwick	(tw) 74			
V	Achille	74						
W	Revenge	74						
X	Defiance	74						
Y	Dreadnought	98						
Z	Swiftsure	74						
AA	Polythemus	64						
BB	Thunderer	98						
CC	Defence	74						

## 5. The Battle of Trafalgar

### 5.1 England Expects..

Nelson's last written words before the battle were in the form of a prayer. Then at 11 o'clock he went up on deck saying that he would now amuse the fleet by sending a message. He instructed Lieutenant Pasco, the Signals Officer, to send *England confides that every man will do his duty*. Pasco told the Admiral that if he would agree to substituting 'expects' for 'confides', it would save seven hoists!

### 5.2 The battle and Nelson's death

The battle proceeded as planned, with Nelson's ship, the Victory, leading part of his fleet through the centre of the French fleet whilst Collingwood in Royal Sovereign sailed through their rear. At one time there were seven ships firing at the *Victory*.

In the midst of the battle, at 1.35pm, Nelson was shot in the back by a bullet from a sharpshooter in the rigging of the *Redoubtable*. A sergeant-major in the Marines and two seamen carried him down

to the surgeon's quarters. Nelson covered his face with a handkerchief because he didn't want to alarm the crew.

While he lay dying he learnt that he had won the battle and that fourteen or fifteen enemy ships had been taken as prizes. 'That is well,' he said, 'but I had bargained for twenty.' Prize money was rationed out according to rank and from twenty prizes, the most lowly of crew members would have been amply rewarded.

Nelson knowing that bad weather was imminent, summoned the strength to give Hardy one more order; 'Anchor, Hardy, anchor.' 'Shall we make the signal?' asked the flag officer. 'Yes, if I live, I'll anchor.'

He asked Hardy not to throw him overboard. At 4.30pm, three hours after he had been hit, our greatest admiral died.



Picture by Thomas Davidson

**Nelson's Last Signal at Trafalgar**  
"England expects that every man will do his duty"

### **5.3 The aftermath of battle**

Collingwood, now in charge, ignored the advice to anchor and the gale predicted by Nelson deprived the fleet of the majority of prizes. Eighteen enemy ships were accounted for. Some went down, some were swept on to the shore, some escaped and others destroyed. Only four enemy ships reached Spithead.

On 26 October the storm abated and Collingwood sent off despatches aboard the schooner *Pickle*. It was sixteen days after the battle before the news reached London.

### **5.4 The Commanders' Fates**

Admiral Villeneuve was sent to England then permitted to return to France. On his way to Paris he stopped at Rennes to enquire how the Emperor would receive him. The news was ominous. The following morning he was found dead in bed having stabbed himself to death.

Nelson's body was preserved in brandy and carried to England. It arrived off Sheerness on 21 December and after a procession up the Thames accompanied by hundreds of boats, his coffin was put ashore at Admiralty Steps. From there it was conveyed by coach to the Painted Hall at the Royal Naval College in Greenwich. It lay in state for two weeks visited by thousands of mourners until his funeral service and burial in St Paul's Cathedral on 9 January 2006.

## 6. THE VICTORY

The Victory was "laid down" (commissioned) in 1758, the year of Nelson's birth. She was a First-rater, a 3-decked ship-of-the-line with 100 guns. She was 200 feet long with a displacement of 2,000 tons and carried a crew of 847 men.

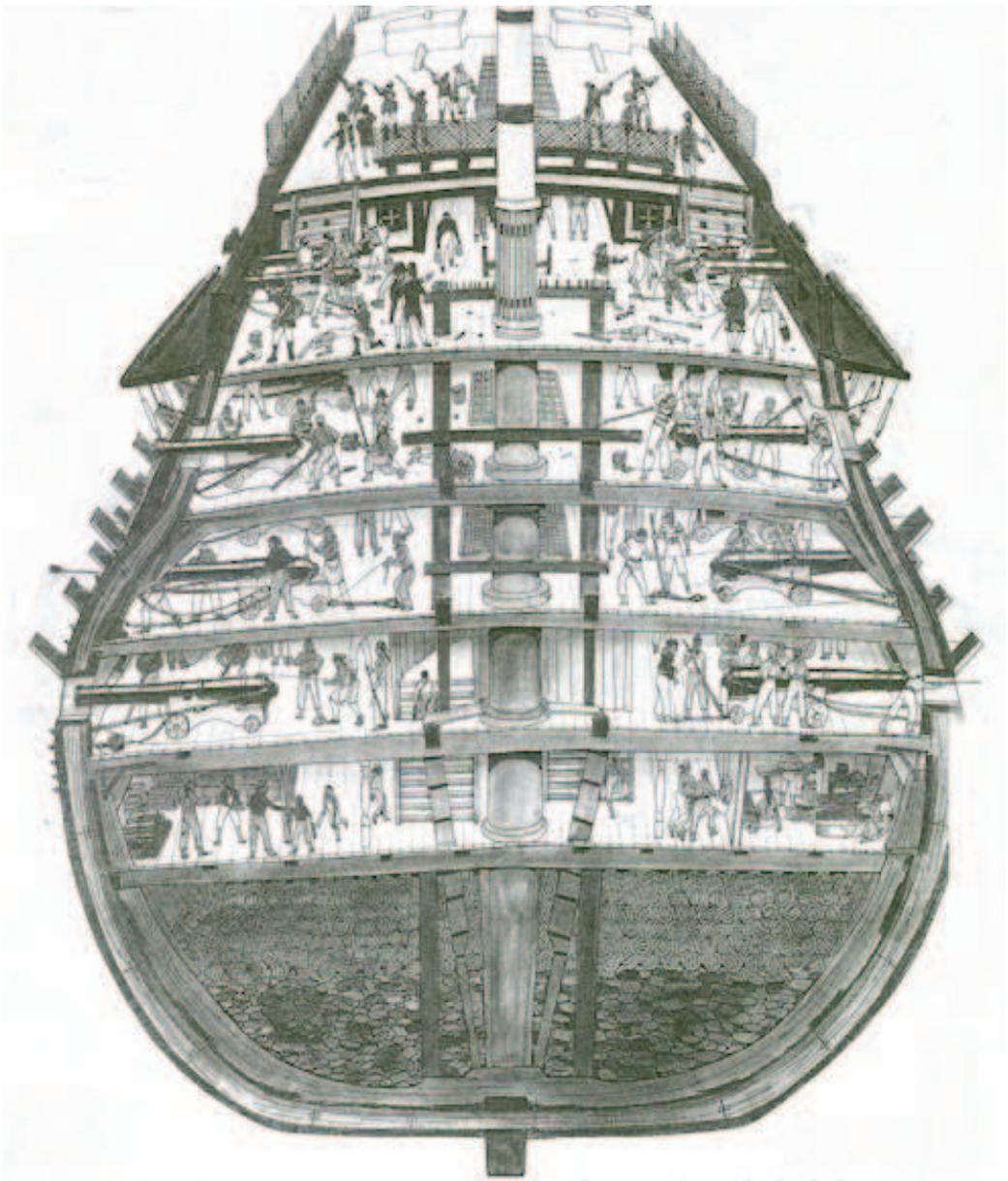
### 6.1 Meals aboard The Victory

Fully replenished, the ship carried four months' supplies for 900 men including live animals to provide fresh meat; fresh fruit and vegetables; blocks of dried soup; salt beef and pork; pickled

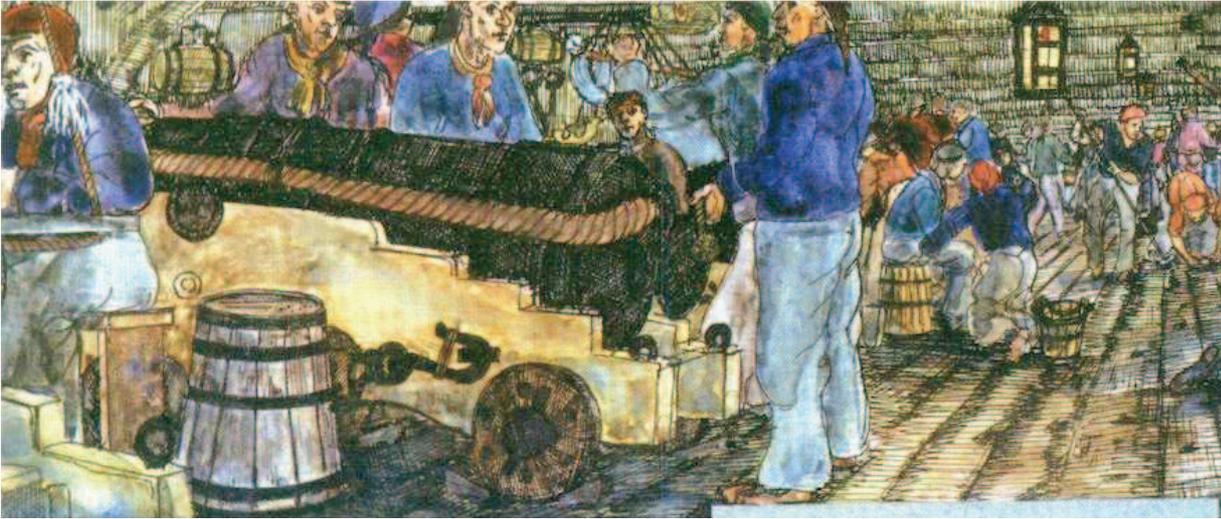
cabbage; bushels of peas; ship's biscuits which often became infested with weevils; bread flour and bread which soon went off because it became alive with black headed maggots. (Sailors always shook their food to make sure the livestock dropped out!) Beer, rum, wine and fresh water were carried, but water quickly became foul. The beer often went off, and because of the stench men had to drink it holding their noses. But the diet obviously kept the men fit because Nelson had only 25 men sick in the entire fleet prior to the battle.

Nelson was insistent that every care was taken to avoid scurvy, a disease caused by lack of vitamin C which resulted in large spots covering the entire body, swollen legs, foul smelling gums and extreme fatigue. One safeguard against the disease was to eat pickled cabbage, better still plenty of oranges and limes.

For breakfast the men would probably have eaten 'burgoo', a mixture of porridge and chopped meat. The officers breakfasted on hot rolls, toast, cold tongue and tea. They would then work through the day until 2.45pm, when the band played *The Roast Beef of Old England* to announce the Admiral's dinner. Dinner lasted an hour and a half. Three courses were served, each accompanied by different wine, and ending with fruit, coffee and liqueurs. (Nelson drank very little.) The band then played again while the diners walked on deck until 6 o'clock when tea was served. The day ended with a rummer of punch and biscuits.



## 6.2 Living conditions on board



**On the mess deck of the Victory**

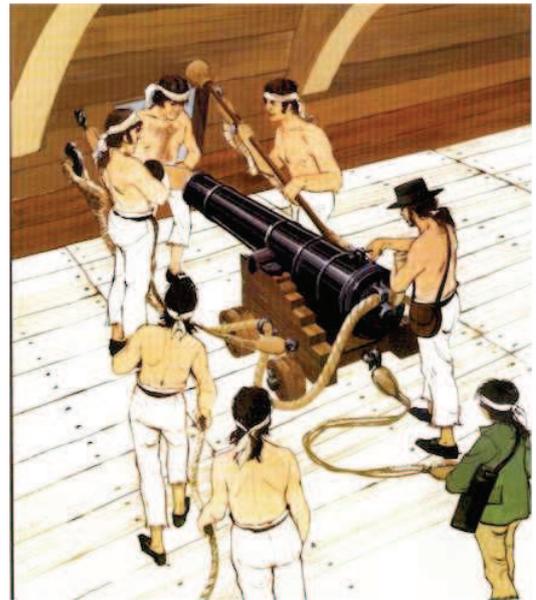
Conditions for men on board were appalling. Hammocks were slung in every available space with only room for half the crew to sleep at any one time. There were no lavatories or washing facilities on board. The men used the scuppers. Soap was not issued until 1810 for which the men had to pay.

The crew lived together in a 'mess,' and were divided into groups working watches, normally four hours on and four off. The men were constantly undergoing arms drill with muskets and cutlasses under the watchful eye of a marine. They cleaned cannons; did boat drill; lowered the ship's lifeboats; scrubbed the decks with pieces of sandstone (holystone) before sanding them down to make them less slippery. On Sundays the Captain inspected the ship's company before taking morning service which included singing hymns which the men knew by heart.

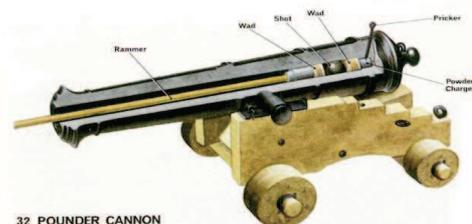
## 6.3 Defending the ship

There were red-coated marines aboard armed with muskets and bayonets. One hundred cannons were attached to the ship's sides by chains and ropes.

### ***Manning a cannon***



The British Fleet had a distinct advantage over the Combined Fleet when it came to operating cannons. Like the British cannon the French one could swivel from side to side but it was impossible to tilt it up and down. Consequently with the movement of the sea the cannons often fired at the sea or into space, missing their objective.



**32 pounder canon**

## 6.4 Navigation



*Using a sextant*

The ship's position was calculated by using a quadrant and measuring the angle between the sun and the horizon. It would then be checked by referring to a book of tables. Longitude, movement east or west, was ascertained by using a chronometer (a clock) which showed the time at 0 degrees which is the Greenwich meridian, an imaginary line which runs at right angles to the equator.

In unknown and dangerous waters, a sailor in the bow of a ship would throw a lead-weighted line out to sea to measure the depth. By using a sextant and a book of tables the captain was always able to work out his exact position.

## 6.5 Leisure time

On some ships there were competitions on board to see who was fastest to trim the sail, fire the cannon or race up the rigging. Sailors would dance the hornpipe to fiddles and drums. Singing sea shanties and story-telling were an essential part of life at sea. On Nelson's birthday, crew members performed a play but neither Greenwich nor the Victory Museum in Portsmouth can give it a title!

Some sailors made scrimshaw which is the art of making models from the teeth and bones of whales or other fish. They also created fanciful designs on shells, and one afternoon a week was devoted to mending their own clothes.

## 6.6 Uniform



*Naval officers*

*The ship's crew*

**Officers'** normal wear, from portraits of the time, appears to have been dark blue cut-away frock coats, with waistcoat, silk shirt, cravat made of cambric or silk, knee length white breeches, white stockings, black shoes with large buckles. Nearly all officers wore a bicorne hat, but a few seemed to favour the tricorne.

**The men** wore a motley selection of striped or plain jerseys, coloured shirts, striped or plain trousers, waistcoats, blue jackets, hats, headscarves. Hair was quite long and often tied back in a single pigtail. During a battle, men manning the cannons would strip to the waist and tie a scarves round their heads to sop up the perspiration.

## **7. EDUCATION in the 19<sup>th</sup> century**

In Roy Hattersley's excellent book on Nelson he tells us how Nelson's formal education began at the Royal Grammar School, in Norwich, followed by a few months at an establishment in Downham Market and finishing at the Paston School, North Waltham, when he was twelve.

Little is known about his school days other than he was lowered by sheets from a dormitory window to enable him to pinch apples. When questioned he insisted that *I only took them because every other boy was afraid.*

In France, the Revolution did much for French education. In 1802 a national system of secondary schools and universities was set up under government control. Primary schools, however, didn't become part of the system until 1833.

Great Britain, in the 1800s was virtually alone in Europe in NOT founding state schools. Churches and charitable institutions promoted schools more extensively than the state, although free grammar schools catered for the bright boys. The few schools which existed were often cold and overcrowded with few books and practically no equipment.

Many thousands of children were still working for low wages in factories or on farms. An act of 1802 safeguarded the interests of poor-law apprentices. Working hours for children were restricted to 12 hours a day. Child labour, however, was universal in agriculture and stayed that way until the enforcement of elementary education in 1870.

## **8. Contemporary Politics**

The Battle of Trafalgar took place during the Regency and Pitt's second short ministry. In 1788 the illness of George III created a situation which could well have terminated Pitt's career because the Prince of Wales, holding no brief for Pitt, supported the Whigs - all due, no doubt, to the fact that Pitt refused to pay the Prince's debts, and drew up an act to restrain the new Regent from creating peers and granting pensions.

Pitt, attempting to balance the books at home, drew up a commercial treaty with France not thinking that the French Revolution would affect Britain. But after the monarchy fell, the French declared war on Austria and Prussia, changing the commercial face of Europe.

The French then threatened Holland, and Britain was bound by treaty to support the Dutch. It soon became evident that Napoleon intended to take the whole of Europe and annexe Britain. Part of Napoleon's *Grand Design* had been to raise havoc among the British possessions in the West Indies enticing the British Fleet into the troubled area thereby depriving Britain of naval protection.

For many months 175,000 French soldiers had been assembled near Boulogne with (according to some reports) at least 2,000 flat-bottomed boats to carry them across the Channel. All Napoleon needed was a period of grace. Two or three days grace would have given him control of the Channel.

Year after year Pitt had managed to sustain coalitions with other European powers but these melted away under the onslaught of Napoleon, an ex-corporal who crowned himself Emperor. Britain's continental allies were powerless and Britain was left, as later in 1939, expecting imminent invasion.

Pitt was insistent that Nelson, whose methods had often been an embarrassment to the establishment, and who from 1789 -1793 had been beached on half pay without a ship, should be brought in to mastermind the destruction of the French Fleet. Pitt's wisdom and Nelson's brilliance in battle saved England.