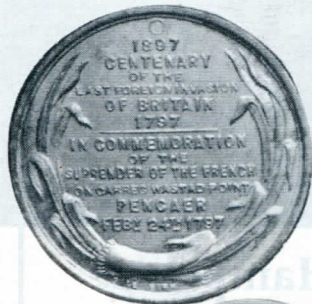


On a recent trip to Fishguard in Pembrokeshire CHARLES RILEY visited an exhibition set up last year to mark the bicentenary of the last foreign invasion of Britain in 1797...

FISHGUARD BICENTENARY 1797-1997



AROUND the walls of the exhibition hall is a remarkable tapestry, modelled on that in Bayeux, which tells the story of the events of two days in February that year. The tapestry itself is 100ft in length and took 70 volunteer embroiderers three years to make. On a continuous frieze above and below the pictorial story is woven a running commentary in Welsh and English. In the exhibition hall are various souvenirs of the event for sale, including the second medal illustrated here. Over 100,000 people have visited the tapestry exhibition already, and it is well worth a visit. However, first some background on the events being celebrated...

The origins of the story lie in the fear of French invasion which pervaded Britain throughout the Napoleonic wars. In December 1795 the republican General Hoche hatched a plan to invade Ireland, hoping to fan the flames of unrest against the English, but bad weather and poor training meant the French fleet returned to port after two weeks in Bantry Bay. In February 1797 Hoche gave command of 1,400 men and four ships to "General" Tate, a septuagenarian American. His mission was to disrupt British trade by harrying Bristol, Chester and Liverpool, as well as to promote rebellion among the poor, who were "the class most prone to insurrection". Tate had a chequered military career during the American war of Independence, and was now resident in France, where he made contact with Irish rebels, many of whom were to become officers under his command. However the bulk of his soldiers were merely ex-convicts, released from gaol on the sole understanding that they would attack England.

This motley crew set sail from Brest on February 16, and ventured up the Bristol Channel. For reasons unknown they abandoned the attack on Bristol, and headed towards Wales, not without attacking and sinking some British vessels en route. An attempt was made to enter Fishguard Harbour, but was deterred by a barrage of artillery fire from the harbour fort (more deterrent than real threat—the rounds were blanks since the fort's commander had only three rounds in his armoury!). The French fleet withdrew to disembark its troops under cover of nightfall at Carreg Wastad on Pencaer point, a bleak and

rugged headland with steep slopes to the south of the town.

Meanwhile the entire region was in a state of great alarm, many countryfolk fleeing to the comparative safety of Haverfordwest. Lord Cawdor, 41, a major local landowner, was approved by the Lord Lieutenant of Pembrokeshire to assume command of local militias against the invaders, and so marched toward Fishguard with some 660 men. He set up his headquarters in the Royal Oak inn on the market place (where COIN NEWS readers can still enjoy an excellent lunch or quiet pint), and locals, on seeing his decisive leadership, took up what arms they could and augmented his numbers. It is said that the local women, in their red shawls and tall black hats (see obverse of 1897 medal), appeared from a distance to the invaders to be a strong reinforcement of regular British soldiers, thereby aiding the delusion that the British force was vastly superior in numbers.



The embroidery features local heroine Jemima Nicholas.

Having disembarked over the course of nine hours until 2 am on the 23rd, Tate's tired, hungry and unruly conscripts set about looting the local farms for food and drink. The latter was in plentiful supply, not least due to the area's profitable sideline in smuggling, and his men soon became drunk. One Jemima Nicholas became something of a local heroine by capturing 14 Frenchmen single-handed with just the aid of her pitchfork.

Tate and his officers had lost control of the unruly mob they had unleashed onto the British mainland. The French fleet which disembarked them had sailed away, and it appeared to them they faced superior numbers.

The aged American sent two senior officers to Cawdor in the Royal Oak to negotiate a surrender, which duly occurred on nearby Goodwick sands on February 24. The prisoners were eventually held in Portsmouth prison ships awaiting exchange for British prisoners of war.

Thus began and ended a brief but fascinating footnote to Britain's fight against republican France: the fatality list was 12 Frenchmen killed (of which 8 drowned) and two Welshmen. This is by necessity a very simplified and foreshortened version of events, and the interested reader will find full accounts elsewhere (there are at least four books currently in print), with all the local oral history relating to these events for which Pembrokeshire is famous.

As well as 1997, the invasion was also commemorated on the occasion of its centenary in 1897. A medal, by Sale, was commissioned for the occasion, and an example can be viewed at leisure on the wall of The Royal Oak.

Diameter 39mm, White metal (Ref. BHM 3608; Eimer 1810):

Obv: Women in traditional costume on coast looking out to sea, A LADDO A LEDDIR 1797 FISHGUARD 1897 around (A laddo a leddir is a traditional saying which means "he who kills will killed be", on a par with "he who lives by the sword dies by the sword");

Rev: 1897 CENTENARY OF THE LAST FOREIGN INVASION OF BRITAIN 1797 IN COMMEMORATION OF THE SURRENDER OF THE FRENCH ON CARREG WASTAD POINT PENCAER FEBY 24TH 1797 in 12 lines, leek border.

The 1997 medal is as follows:

Diameter: 37mm, Silver or Copper gilt:

Obv: Medallions of General Hoche and Lord Cawdor either side of an anchor, upon which FISHGUARD, date 1797 above, PENCAER and GOODWICK at sides, THE LAST INVASION OF BRITAIN at top;

Rev: A mounted messenger imposed upon stylised coastline with men-o'-war at sea, 1797 DAUCANMLWYDDIANT 1997 ABERGWAUN PENCAER WDIG (1797 Bicentenary 1997 Fishguard Pencaer Goodwick) around.

The medal was struck in an edition of 2,500 in copper gilt of which 1,750 were given to local schoolchildren, and 45 in silver. The medal can be obtained for £5 (copper gilt) or £45 (silver) from: The Tapestry Exhibition Shop, St Mary's Church Hall, Fishguard, Pembrokeshire SA65 9HH. Tel: 01348 874997.