

## **Plans to Resist Invasion by Napoleon Meeting in New Hall Dymchurch September 1804**

In the summer of 1804, British defence plans were developing and under critical review during this time.

In a 'Memorandum as to the System of Defence', enclosed in a letter to Prime Minister Pitt in July 1804, the writer advocates the use of fireships (an interesting reversion to English tactics against the Armada in 1588) against the flotillas in Boulogne, Ostend and Le Havre. Significantly, he is not convinced that the navy can prevent a French crossing, unless the blockade is made very close and the enemy are attacked as they come out. He criticises the stationing of so many men — regulars, militia and volunteers — in the north and advises that 16,000 troops march into the Southern District forthwith as the area is deficient in numbers 'thought necessary for its defence' by as many as 19,000 men.

From accounts taken from prisoners the writer has been able to establish the extent and detail of the French invasion preparations. A regular system of embarkation had been laid down and 'of course every general officer is furnished with general plans and maps of England and the general lines of march and operation'. The problem for the British Government, then, was not when would Napoleon come but where would he land and what would be done once he had secured a foothold?

Pitt and his military advisors could but look at the most vulnerable stretches of coast and plan accordingly. One such stretch was that low lying area of Kent called Romney Marsh. It was felt that should the enemy appear in force here then the only way to stop him would be to flood the whole area.

Accordingly, early in September 1804 Pitt, Sir John Moore and Brigadier General Twiss met the Lords, Bailiff and Jurats of Romney Marsh\* at New Hall, Dymchurch, to consider how best to inundate the Marsh if the worst should happen. Their decision was reported in the Kentish Gazette — the meeting agreed that, on the appearance of the enemy off the coast, the sluices should be opened to admit the sea so as to flood the dykes. This, it was said, might be done in one tide; in case of invasion, a further tide would flood the whole Level.

It was in part to facilitate this scheme that the Government took up the idea of building the chain of coastal fortlets called Martellos. A few of these were specifically sited to guard the sluices, although the plan in general was for strong points along the most vulnerable stretches of the coast.

In the late summer of 1804 Twiss conducted a survey from Dover to Beachy Head to determine upon the siting of the Martello Towers and the improvement of fortifications in general! And so the year drew to a close.

Napoleon had a vast force at his disposal with which to strike a decisive blow if he could but cross the Channel. Honed to a pitch of perfection, they could now embark 250,000 men in a mere ten minutes.

The following year was to see the Emperor attempt to bring his plans to fruition by clearing away the first and greatest obstacle: the Royal Navy. In 1805, for the third year running, Britain once more faced the prospect of invasion.

Building of the Martello Towers commenced in the spring 1805, but the guns for them were not landed until September and it was 1808 before the south coast towers were all completed. Work continued upon the Western Heights at Dover and guns were placed there to command the Folkestone Road. Napoleon arrived at his headquarters on 3 August, and on 6th summoned the Imperial Guard. Rumours of invasion now reached their height.

\*The corporate body, under Royal Charter, 1252, responsible for land drainage and sea defence, empowered to levy local rates for this purpose.

*Extract from 'Kent and the Napoleonic Wars' by Peter Bloomfield*