

***ALFRED  
H. MILES***



***FIFTY-TWO STORIES  
OF THE BRITISH  
NAVY, FROM DAMME  
TO TRAFALGAR***

**Alfred H. Miles**

# **Fifty-two Stories of the British Navy, from Damme to Trafalgar**

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# OF THE BRITISH NAVY.

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## THE BEGINNINGS OF THE BRITISH NAVY.

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### A SAXON CHRONICLE.

The founders of the English nation were a maritime people. Before they settled in the British Isles they had to dare the dangers of the deep, and though for nearly four hundred years after their first arrival they were too much occupied with internal strife to think of external enterprise, no sooner had they apparently completed the subjugation of the Britons and effected a settlement of their own differences by uniting the country under one crown, than they were called upon to give vigorous attention to maritime affairs.

Egbert, king of the West Saxons, who, by the conquest of Mercia and Northumbria, became the first overlord of all England, A.D. 828, was soon compelled to deal seriously with the Danes. According to old chroniclers, threatened with invasion in the south, he engaged these formidable foes at Charmouth in Dorsetshire, but sustained defeat. Two years later, however, when they returned and landed on the coast of Wales, uniting with the disaffected Britons in a

powerful armament, Egbert proved equal to the occasion, met them in a general engagement at the Battle of Hengestesdun, routed their entire forces, and compelled the Britons to seek safety in their mountains and the Danes to return to their ships. Desultory warfare supervened for some time with ever-varying success until, according to the Saxon Chronicle, the Danes were defeated off Sandwich in a desperate battle in which nine of their ships were taken by the English, and the rest compelled to seek safety in flight. After this they again returned, this time with a fleet of three hundred and fifty sail, devastated the south country and took Canterbury and London by storm.

Hitherto the English had made the fatal mistake of allowing their enemies to land before attempting to grapple with them, and even the disasters which followed naturally upon such a policy did not arouse them to a sense of the necessity of maintaining an efficient fleet. On the contrary, dispirited by their failures, the English seem to have abandoned all thoughts of naval armament, and to have contented themselves with fortifying their cities and defending them against enemies whom they passively allowed to land. This unhappy condition of things continued through the reigns of Ethelbald, Ethelbert and Ethelred; during which time the Danes conquered Northumbria and East Anglia, and invaded Wessex. In A.D. 867 they took York, and in the following year Nottingham. In 870 they defeated and put to death Edmund, king of East Anglia, whose burial-place was named St. Edmundsbury—Bury St. Edmunds—and during the same year fought no less than nine battles in

Wessex. Abbeys, churches and monasteries were burnt, and the whole country was given up to fire and the sword.

In the year 871 Alfred came to the throne and found himself a monarch without a people, a king without a country. The long-continued struggle with the Danes, who, like locusts, "came without number and devoured the fruits of the land," had reduced the people to a state of despairing servitude. The wealth, strength, and spirits of the English, who had sometimes been compelled to fight as many as ten or twelve battles in the course of a year, had become exhausted, and instead of attempting to defend themselves further, they began everywhere to submit to the Danes; preferring a settled slavery to a precarious freedom. Although the country had been brought to this low condition, the young king did not despair of its restoration, but with equal vigour and prudence applied himself to the prosecution of the war and the conduct of public affairs. Encouraged by his example and inspired by his spirit, the English at length took heart again, and ultimately—led by his skill and wisdom—defeated the Danes at Exeter in 877, and at Edington in the following year, securing the peace of Wedmore, which, while it gave them little more than the kingdom of Wessex as a possession, ensured them what they needed much more than land, a period of rest and repose, which, but for one short interval, lasted for fifteen years. This period Alfred employed in pursuing the arts of peace and preparing himself for the eventualities of war. In the year A.D. 883 he sent envoys to Rome and India; and in 886 he took and re-fortified the city of London. From 893 to 897 he was once more engaged with his old enemies the



Danes. This protracted campaign was by no means a light undertaking. Hasting, the Danish leader, pitched his camp on the hills gently sloping above Benfleet, in Essex, and sent two hundred and fifty Danish ships cruising along the southwest coast of Kent; while he proceeded himself with eighty ships along the Thames estuary. Having formed a camp at Milton, near Sittingbourne, he ventured up the River Lea where he found himself unexpectedly entrapped; for Alfred hit upon the expedient of draining the river, and by this means left the Danish ships high and dry. Retreating to Benfleet, Hasting discovered that in his absence his camp had been attacked and captured by one of Alfred's aldermen. Alfred drove Hasting out of Wessex in 894, and out of Essex in 896, after which the Danish leader appears to have had enough of English hospitality; for he returned to Denmark in the following year.

From 897 to the end of his reign, Alfred devoted much time to the construction of ships and the equipment of a fleet; a purpose which he effected with so much success that he earned for himself the title of "The Father of the British Navy." Alfred seems to have been the first of the English kings to realise that the true principle of insular defence is to meet one's enemies upon the sea, and destroy them before they have time to effect a landing. Once realised, however, he made every effort to carry out this sagacious and far-sighted policy, a policy in which, for a thousand years, he has been followed by the wisest and best of his successors. To do this, the creation and maintenance of a national fleet became an imperative necessity. According to Dr. Campbell, Alfred reflected that,

as the fleets of his enemies were frequently built in a hurry, hastily drawn together, meanly provided with victuals and rigging and overcrowded with men, a few ships of a larger size, built in a new manner of well-seasoned materials, thoroughly supplied with food and arms, and manned by expert seamen must, at first sight, surprise, and, in the course of an engagement destroy many with but little danger to themselves; and with this view he constructed a number of ships in most points twice the size of the largest ships then in use, and furnished with accommodation for double the number of rowers. These vessels were longer, higher, and yet swifter than the vessels in common use among the Danes; so that Alfred was able always to engage his enemies at advantage, and, when necessary, to escape them by flight. As, moreover, these vessels were built upon a new model, they were wholly strange to the enemy, who were a long time learning the way to board them; hence their courage and seamanship did not avail them much.

Alfred was not long in finding employment for his infant navy. Soon after the earlier of these ships were built, six large pirate ships of unusual size appeared off the Isle of Wight and the coast of Devonshire. The king immediately despatched nine of his new vessels in quest of them, with orders to get, if possible, between them and the shore, and to give and take no quarter. On sighting the king's ships three of the pirates ran aground, while the others stood out to sea and boldly offered battle. Of these, two were taken and the whole of their crews destroyed, while the third escaped with five men only. Turning their attention to the ships that had grounded, the king's men destroyed the

greater part of their crews, and when the tide floated them, brought the ships to the coast of the South Saxons, where the remainder of their crews endeavoured to escape. They were, however, captured and carried to Winchester, where they were hanged by order of the king. This may be regarded as one of the first engagements of the British navy—that is, of ships built on purpose for defensive warfare; though of course there were many famous sea fights of earlier dates. "If," says Dr. Campbell, "it should be asked how this superiority at sea was lost, we must observe that it was very late in the king's life before his experience furnished him with light sufficient for this noble design, which very probably his successors wanted skill to prosecute; though, as history shows, they were moved by his example to make great efforts for preserving their territories on shore by maintaining the sovereignty of the sea."

Alfred the Great died in the year 901, and was succeeded by Edward the Elder. Opposed by his cousin Ethelwald, who laid claim to the crown and who invited the Danes over to help him in securing it, Edward was unable to prevent the Northmen from landing; but marching into Kent he engaged the united forces of his enemies in a desperate battle in which his cousin Ethelwald and Eric, the King of the Danes, were slain. Still troubled by successive hordes of Northmen, who—like the heads of the fabled giants—seemed to multiply as they were destroyed, Edward had recourse to his fleet, and gathering a hundred ships upon the coast of Kent, totally defeated the invaders; forcing most of their ships upon the shore, and destroying their commanders on the

spot. Athelstan, who succeeded his brother in 925, was also a wise and powerful ruler. Called upon to defend himself against a confederacy which included Constantine, King of the Scots, Anlaff, a Danish prince, settled in Ireland, and a host of disaffected Britons, he attacked them both by sea and land at the same time with equal valour and success. In this battle, fought in 938, there fell five kings and seven Danish chiefs. It is said to have been the bloodiest engagement which up to that time had ever taken place in England; and, as a result, Athelstan became the most absolute monarch that had ever reigned in Britain. Edmund, Edred, and Edwy followed in lineal succession, but without adding anything of importance to our naval annals.

In Edgar, who came to the throne in 958, Alfred had a successor who proved himself worthy of carrying on his great traditions. He thoroughly understood and successfully pursued the maxims of his great ancestor, and applied himself from the beginning of his reign to the raising of an efficient maritime force. It is said that his fleet was far superior to those of any of his predecessors, as well as much more powerful than those of all the other European princes put together. This navy—variously estimated by the monkish chroniclers to number from three thousand to four thousand ships—he is said to have divided into three fleets each of twelve hundred sail, which he stationed respectively on the north, the east, and the west coasts of England. Not content with making these provisions, it is said that "every year after Easter, he went on board the fleet stationed on the eastern coast, and, sailing west, scoured all the channels, looked into every creek and bay, from the Thames

mouth to Land's End in Cornwall; there, quitting these ships, he went on board the western fleet, with which, steering his course northward, he did the like not only on the English and Scotch coasts, but also on those of Ireland and the Hebrides—which lie between them and Britain; then meeting the northern fleet, he sailed in it to the mouth of the Thames. Thus surrounding the island every summer, he rendered invasion impracticable, kept his sailors in continual exercise, and effectually asserted his sovereignty over the sea."

In the winter, Edgar is said to have travelled by land through all parts of his dominion to see that justice was duly administered, to prevent his nobles from becoming oppressors, and to protect the meanest people from suffering wrong. By these arts he secured tranquillity at home while he engendered respect abroad. By being always ready for war he avoided it, so that in his whole reign there happened but one disturbance, and that through the Britons, who, while he was in the north, committed disorder in the west. It is further said of this prince that "he reigned sixteen years without a thief being found in his dominions on land, or a pirate being heard of at sea."

Edgar died in 975, and was succeeded by Edward the Martyr, who reigned three years, and then gave place to Ethelred the Unready. Then followed the period of decadence which prepared the way for Danish supremacy. Ethelred adopted the fatal plan of buying off his invaders, the effect of which policy was to increase the numbers and the demands of his enemies. Accordingly, in 994, Sweyn, son of the King of Denmark, and Olaf, King of Norway, made

a descent upon London and devastated Kent, Sussex, and Hampshire. Olaf was bought off with a payment of £16,000, but the Danes were insatiable. A truce, purchased by Ethelred in 1002, was brought to an abrupt conclusion by his own weakness and cruelty; for in that year he planned and effected the massacre of all the Danes in his dominions, on St. Brice's day. Among the victims was a sister of Sweyn of Denmark, and Sweyn's revenge was sharp and swift. In 1003 he laid Exeter waste, and in 1004 destroyed Norwich; and when two years later the "great fleet" of the Danes arrived off Sandwich, Ethelred was obliged to purchase peace with a supply of provisions and a sum of thirty thousand pounds.

Great efforts were made during this truce to reconstruct the navy. The king commanded ships to be built throughout the country and levied taxes to pay for them. Within a year it is said that eight hundred ships, equipped with thirty thousand men, were ready for the national defence. But no armament can be strong that is directed by weak hands, and the want of a wise and vigorous leader led to internal quarrels, which effectually destroyed Ethelred's chances of successfully resisting the Danes. In 1013 Sweyn was practically king of England, and Ethelred fled to Normandy. In 1016 the death of Ethelred left Edmund Ironside his son, and Canute, the son of Sweyn of Denmark, rival candidates for the throne. After fighting two battles, they agreed to divide the kingdom between them; but the death of Edmund the same year left Canute the master of the whole. Under Canute, peace prevailed and commerce began to thrive. "Men from the Rhineland and from Normandy moored their

vessels along the Thames, on whose rude wharves were piled a strange medley of goods: pepper and spices from the far East, crates of gloves and gay cloths, it may be from the Lombard looms, sacks of wool; ironwork, from Liège, butts of French wine and vinegar, and with them the rural products of the country itself—cheese, butter, lard and eggs, with live swine and fowls." Such was Canute's influence that it became unnecessary to maintain more than forty ships for the protection of the coast, and this number was afterwards reduced to sixteen. With the death of Canute the Danish rule began to collapse, and with the accession of Edward the Confessor the Danes resumed their aggressive expeditions, though with but little success. William of Normandy found England without a fleet, for Harold had been compelled to disband the navy from want of supplies; and, as he destroyed his own ships after he had effected a landing, he began his reign without means of maritime defence.

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## **THE STORY OF THE CINQUE PORTS.**

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THE BATTLE OF DAMME.—THE BATTLE OF DOVER.—THE BATTLE OF SLUYS.—THE BATTLE OF LESPAGNOLS-SUR-MER.—THE VICTORIES OF THE EARL OF ARUNDEL, THE DUKE OF BEDFORD, THE EARL OF HUNTINGDON, AND WARWICK, THE KING MAKER.

The history of the English navy from the Conquest to the fifteenth century is, in effect, the history of the great and powerful corporation known as "The five

Cinque Ports and two Ancient Towns"—Hastings, Sandwich, Dover, Romney, Hythe, Winchelsea, and Rye. In the Domesday Book only three such ports are mentioned—Sandwich, Dover, and Romney—but in the charters and royal writs mention is always made of, and precedence assigned to, Hastings. Winchelsea and Rye were added to the first five soon after the Conquest, but the title of "Cinque" Ports was retained. In addition to the seven head ports there were eight "corporate members"—Deal, Faversham, Folkestone, Fordwich, Lydd, Pevensey, Seaford, and Tenterden—and twenty-four non-corporate members, which included Birchington, Brightlingsea, Bulverhithe, Grange, Kingsdown, Margate, Ramsgate, Reculver, Sarre, and Walmer, all of which were called Cinque Ports.

Some writers have endeavoured to connect the Cinque Ports with the five Roman fortresses which guarded the south-eastern shores of Britain, and the Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports with the *Comes Littoris Saxonici*—the count of the Saxon Shore, but it seems sufficiently clear that the confederation of the ports was of Teutonic origin. Originally, trading communities banded together to protect and control the herring-fishery, the principal industry and food-supply of the people; the regular descents of the Danes supplied the motive for the military character the union afterwards assumed.

The Danish invasion, which ended in Canute's supremacy, raged most fiercely round Sandwich, which was



the head-quarters of the Danish fleet, and acquired the title of "the most famous of all the English ports."

As far back as the year 460, Hengist the Saxon conferred the office of Warden of the Cinque Ports upon his brother Horsa, and since the time of Godwin, Earl of Kent, who died in the year 1053, nearly one hundred and fifty persons have held that distinguished office. These include many whose names are illustrious in English history, amongst them being Odo, Bishop of Bayeux, Eustace, Earl of Boulogne, William Longchamps, Hubert de Burgh, Sir Stephen de Pencester, Edmund Plantagenet, King Henry V., Simon de Montfort, Richard III., Prince Henry, afterwards Henry VIII., James II., and Prince George of Denmark. William Pitt was Lord Warden in 1792, and from that date until the year 1896 the holders of the office have been the Earl of Liverpool, the Duke of Wellington, the Marquis of Dalhousie, Lord Palmerston, Earl Granville, Mr. W. H. Smith, the Marquis of Dufferin and the Marquis of Salisbury. The privileges and distinctions of the inhabitants of the ports in those days were of a very substantial character. Amongst other things "pains and penalties" were imposed on any one entering or quitting the kingdom from or for the Continent except by way of Dover. The Grand Court of Shepway, at which the Lord Warden takes the oath of office, in the presence of the "barons," was formerly held in the open air at Lympne, a Roman port, the remains of which are now several miles inland, in the neighbourhood of Hythe, but the site of the court was removed to Dover as a more convenient place in 1693.

To Edward the Confessor may be attributed the incorporation of the Cinque Ports in the form of a Royal Navy bound to stated service. To attach them to the throne he granted them lands and franchises, in return for which they undertook, on a stated notice, to provide ships for fighting purposes for a specified time. The Domesday Book, for instance, records that "Dover, in the time of King Edward, rendered eighteen pounds, of which moneys King Edward had two parts, and Earl Godwin the third. The burgesses gave the king twenty ships once a year for fifteen days, and in each ship were twenty men. This they did in return for his having endowed them with sac and soc"—the right of independent jurisdiction and free courts.

Soon after the Norman conquest, the Danes once more threatened invasion with a powerful fleet, and Dover, Sandwich, and Romney were called upon to provide, at their own expense, twenty vessels equipped for sea, each with a crew of twenty-one men and provisions for fifteen days. Rye and Winchelsea rendered similar assistance, and in return received privileges similar to those enjoyed by the older ports. The fleet thus provided was so fully maintained by William Rufus that England's maritime supremacy may be dated from that early period. But, for more than a century after the Conquest, English ships seldom ventured beyond the Bay of Biscay or the entrance to the Baltic.

The reign of Henry I. was marked by the tragic death of Prince William in the year 1120 while crossing from Normandy to England in *The White Ship*. The rowers, hilarious with wine, ran *The White Ship*—probably an undecked or only partially decked vessel, of not more than

fifty tons burden steered by two paddles over the quarter—violently on to a ledge of rocks, now called Ras de Catteville. The sea rushed in, and all on board, except two men, were lost. As soon as his ship struck, the prince and a few others got into a small boat and pushed off, but, returning to the aid of his sister, many persons jumped in the boat and all were drowned. The prince's body was carried away by the current and never recovered. Fitzstephen, the captain, whose father had carried William the Conqueror to England, and who held his office by virtue of providing a passage for his sovereign, rose once to the surface and asked, "What has become of the king's son?" Being answered, "We have not seen him, nor his brother, nor his sister, nor any of their companions," he exclaimed, "Woe is me!" and sank back into the sea. For three days no one ventured to break the news to Henry who, the old chroniclers say, was so stricken with the tidings that he fainted away and was never seen to smile again.

Not until the time of the Crusades, however, did maritime commerce undergo any marked development, and England take her place among sea-faring peoples. Whatever the Crusades may have done for the Cross, they gave the first impetus to English maritime enterprise, and European industry progressed with the conquests of the Crusaders. On ascending the throne Richard Cœur de Lion made vast levies to equip an expedition to the Holy Land. The fleet numbered one hundred vessels, the most of which had been collected from the south and west of England, and from the continental ports of the House of Anjou, Richard's own ship being named "Trenche-le-mer," presumably because it was

a swift sailer. It was from Messina, on March 27th, 1190, that Richard dated his charter to the Cinque Ports.

The reign of Richard marked another epoch in the naval history of Britain, for he issued the first articles for the government of an English fleet. If any man slew another on board a ship, he was to be fastened to the dead body and thrown with it into the sea; if the murder was committed on shore, he was to be bound to the corpse, and buried with it. If any one was convicted by legal testimony of drawing his knife upon another, or of drawing blood in any manner, he was to lose his hand. For giving a blow with the hand without producing blood, the offender was to be plunged three times into the sea. If any one reviled or insulted another, he was on every occasion to pay to the offended party an ounce of silver. A thief was to have his head shaven, boiling pitch poured upon it, and feathers shaken over him, as a mark by which he might be known; and he was to be put ashore at the first land at which the ship might touch.

In the reign of John a close approach was made to a regular naval establishment, and a kind of dockyard appears to have existed at Portsmouth, for the Sheriff of Southampton was commanded to cause the docks at Portsmouth to be enclosed with a strong wall to preserve the king's ships and galleys, and to cause pent-houses to be erected for their stores and tackle. The king had galleys, long ships, and great ships; all allusions to which, however, make it clear that the largest vessels had only one mast and sail. But no admiral or commander of the fleets appears to have been created, and the chief management of the navy

was for many years entrusted to William de Wrotham, Archdeacon of Taunton, who was designated "Keeper of the King's Ships," and also "Keeper of the Seaports."

The expulsion of John from his dominions in Normandy in 1203 opened a new chapter in English history and brought the Cinque Ports prominently into notice, as frequently repeated orders were issued to the barons of the ports to "guard the seas." By their vigilant guard, it is alleged, the excommunication which followed the Pope's Interdict in 1208 was so long prevented from making its way across the Channel, and they were certainly the moving spirits in the great maritime exploit which help to redeem the gloom of John's reign.

Philip of France, obeying the exhortation of the Pope to assist in dethroning John, had made extensive preparations for the invasion of England, and when in 1213 John became the Pope's vassal Philip did not like the idea of giving up the project. John, therefore, found it necessary to adopt retaliatory measures. All men capable of bearing arms were ordered to assemble at Dover "for the defence of the king's and their own heads, and the land of England," and the bailiffs of all the ports were forbidden to suffer any ship to sail without the king's express authority. The French king entered Flanders to punish the count, who had refused to join the expedition against John, and despatched all the ships which he had collected to the port of Damme, the harbour of which, though of "wonderful size," could not contain all the French ships, which are said to have numbered one thousand seven hundred sail. Thither the English fleet, of five hundred sail the greater portion

consisting of ships from the Cinque Ports, under William Longsword, proceeded at the urgent summons of the count. On the arrival of the English they found that the French had landed and were ravaging the surrounding country, whereupon they attacked the fleet in the harbour, and three hundred vessels laden with corn, wine, and arms, fell into English hands. The cables of the captured vessels were cut, and the wind being off the land, they were soon on the passage to England. About a hundred others were burnt, and the first great naval victory recorded in English annals was complete.

The attitude of the Cinque Ports during the period immediately preceding the granting of the Great Charter of English Liberties is obscure. They are mentioned as guaranteed in their franchises when the Charter took its final shape under Henry III., and it is clear that, when the baronage invited Louis of France to depose the faithless King of England, the ports resolved to stand by the House of Plantagenet. John's unexpected death in 1216, at a time when London and a great part of Kent were in the power of Louis, found the Cinque Ports—though Sandwich had been burnt by the French—staunch to the loyal Earl of Pembroke—marshal of the kingdom, and supporters of the boy-king, Henry III.

The following year, however, was destined to become memorable in the history of naval warfare, for in August, 1217, the French fleet of one hundred vessels put to sea with a view to a descent upon the Thames. Hubert de Burgh, with the seamen of the Cinque Port ships, assembled in Dover Harbour, and as the hostile fleet was descried from

Dover Cliffs, on the 24th forty ships dashed out of the harbour to challenge French supremacy in England by engaging in the first regular sea-fight of modern history. "It appears," says Sir W. H. Nicholas, "that the wind was southerly, blowing fresh; and the French were going large steering round the North Foreland, little expecting any opposition. The English squadron, instead of directly approaching the enemy, kept their wind as if going to Calais, which made Eustace, the French commander, exclaim, 'I know that those wretches think to invade Calais like thieves; but that is useless, for it is well defended!' As soon as the English had gained the wind of the French fleet, they bore down in the most gallant manner upon the enemy's rear; and the moment they came close to the sterns of the French ships they threw grapnels into them, and, thus fastening the vessels together, prevented the enemy from escaping—an early instance of that love of close fighting for which English sailors have ever since been distinguished. The action commenced by the English cross-bowmen and archers pouring volleys of arrows into the enemy's ships with deadly effect; and to increase their dismay, the English threw unslaked lime, reduced to a powder, on board their opponents, which being blown by the wind into their eyes, completely blinded them. The English then rushed on board; and cutting away the rigging and halyards with axes, the sails fell over the French 'like a net over ensnared small birds.' ... Thus hampered, the enemy could make but a feeble resistance; and after an immense slaughter were completely defeated. Though the French fought with great bravery, very few among them were

accustomed to naval tactics; and they fell rapidly under the lances, axes, and swords of their assailants. In the meantime, many of their vessels had been sunk by the galleys, which, running their own prows into them, stove their sides.

"Of the whole French fleet, fifteen vessels only escaped; and as soon as the principal persons had been secured, the English taking the captured ships in tow, proceeded in triumph to Dover, 'victoriously ploughing the waves,' and returning thanks to God for their success.... The battle was seen with exultation by the garrison of Dover Castle, and the conquerors were received by the bishops and clergy in full sacerdotal habits, bearing crosses and banners in procession." Though the ships, compared with those of the present age were small, yet the mode of attack, the bravery displayed, and the great superiority of the enemy render the event worthy of an honourable place in the list of our naval victories. It was actually a hand-to-hand fight against double the number of ships, and probably four times the number of men. The political effect of the battle was that Louis relinquished all hopes of the English crown. England was saved. "The courage of the sailors who manned the rude boats of the Cinque Ports first made the flag of England terrible on the seas." For this celebrated action, which saved England from the domination of France, the Cinque Ports obtained further privileges, amongst which was liberty to "annoy the subjects of France"—in other words, to plunder as they pleased the merchant vessels of that country.

Few naval events of any importance occurred for many years after the signal victory off Dover. The Cinque Ports



were at their highest tide of prosperity during the reign of Edward I., who, in 1300, took thirty of their ships with him in his expedition against Scotland. During the reign of Edward II. the ports did not lack employment on the king's service, though they acted merely as coast-guards. The sovereignty of the Channel was gradually challenged in this reign by the French, who were encouraged by the revolutions and disorders of the time, and Edward III. had not been many years on the throne before it became evident that the nation must bestir itself in view of the increasing power of the French fleet. A formal proclamation declaring England's sovereignty of the seas was issued. A new spirit at once declared itself, but not a moment before it was necessary; for in 1339 the French fleet burnt Portsmouth, inflicted severe disaster upon Southampton, threatened Sandwich, and, diverging to Rye, landed and ravaged the immediate neighbourhood. On the approach of the English fleet the French took to flight and were chased into Boulogne. The English gallantly entered the harbour, captured several French vessels, hanged twelve of their captains, burnt part of the town, and returned with their prizes to England.

Towards the end of 1339 a new invasion was planned. The French ships and galleys assembled off the town of Sluys, in Flanders, and their crews solemnly vowed not to return to their own ports till they had taken one hundred English ships and five hundred English towns. In view of this invasion parliament was summoned in January 1340 "to adopt various measures relating to the navy." The sailors of the Cinque Ports undertook to have their ships ready, and in due course a fleet of two hundred vessels was formed, and

more soldiers and archers assembled than could be employed. On his arrival on the coast of Flanders, Edward found that the various sections of his fleet had met, and discovered the French fleet of one hundred and ninety ships, manned by thirty-five thousand Normans and Genoese, lying at anchor off Sluys. The French fleet was in four divisions, their ships being fastened to each other by iron chains and cables. To the masts a small boat was suspended, filled with stones, which were to be hurled by the soldiers stationed on the tops. Trumpets and other martial instruments resounded from the French ships. The fight was long and fierce, for "the enemy defended themselves all that day and the night after." In one French ship alone four hundred dead bodies were found, the survivors leaping headlong into the sea. Only twenty-four of the French ships escaped, and no less than twenty-five thousand French and Genoese perished. The English loss was, perhaps, four thousand men, and all writers agree that it was one of the most sanguinary and desperate sea-fights recorded in the pages of history. Edward's modest letter regarding this victory is the earliest naval despatch in existence. Though the annihilation of the French fleet at Sluys did not surpass in importance the victory off Dover in the preceding century, it established the maritime supremacy of England.

To supply a covering force for the army which was besieging Calais in 1347 and to guard the Channel, England made a general demand for ships and seamen. The total number of ships mustered was seven hundred and ten; these were equipped with a full complement of fighting

men. The "five Cinque Ports and two Ancient Towns," together with Seaford, Faversham, and Margate, contributed one hundred and five ships; London sent twenty-five ships, Fowey forty-seven, and Dunwich six. Three years later on August 29th, 1350, the battle known as "Lespagnols-sur-mer" was fought off Winchelsea, when Edward defeated a Spanish squadron of forty sail which had plundered several English ships, capturing twenty-six large vessels, the crews of which were put to death. This action firmly established the reputation of Edward III. as the King of England, whose name is more identified with the naval glory of England than that of any other sovereign up to the sixteenth century.

But reverses of fortune clouded the end of what had promised to be a glorious reign. In 1371 an engagement with the Flemings resulted in the capture of twenty-five ships by the English, but in June, 1372, the Spaniards completely defeated the English fleet of forty sail under the Earl of Pembroke off La Rochelle; the Spaniards not only having the advantage of size and numbers in their ships, but also in being provided with cannon, said to have been first used at sea in this battle. Immediately upon Edward's death an overwhelming fleet of French and Spanish ships swept the Channel, and Winchelsea, Rye, Hastings, Plymouth, Portsmouth and other ports suffered from the fury of the invaders.

The reign of Richard II. was redeemed from absolute barrenness in naval affairs by the victory of the Earl of Arundel in 1387. Taking advantage of the absence from England of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, who had sailed the year before to enforce his claim upon the crown of

Spain, the French raised a powerful armament with a view to invading the British Isles. These preparations were made upon a most extensive scale, and were said to have included an army of a hundred thousand men and a fleet of ships which, if laid side by side, would have reached from Calais to Dover. The news of this terrible armament caused great excitement in England, and various preparations were made to receive it. The Earl of Arundel was made high admiral and was dispatched to sea with instructions to destroy the ships of the enemy as they disembarked; while the people on shore laid waste the country, and dealt with them as opportunity served. The winds and the waves, however, fought on England's side, and under stress of weather the army was disbanded and the enterprise abandoned. The Earl of Arundel, taking advantage of the situation, attacked the French fleet with great vigour, captured a hundred and sixty vessels, and proceeding to the Port of Sluys, destroyed the ships that had taken refuge there, and laid waste the country for ten leagues round.

The reign of Henry IV. was likewise characterised by abortive invasions on the part of the French. In 1403-4, La Marche, a young French prince, made a descent upon Falmouth with a view to helping Owen Glendower, the leader of the Welsh rebellion; but the attempt was an entire failure. In the spring of 1405, however, a second French fleet, consisting of a hundred and twenty sail and carrying large numbers of cavalry, bore down upon our southern coast. Once more our old allies, the winds and the waves, did us good service; for most of the horses fell victims to the rigours of the journey, and no sooner were the ships moored

off Milford Haven than they were attacked by the squadron of the Cinque Ports, which burnt fifteen ships, captured six transports laden with food and ammunition, and cut off all supplies at sea. The French were rather more successful on land, but before the end of the year they were glad of an excuse for sailing back to France.

But the corporation of the Cinque Ports had practically fulfilled its purpose, and was now to give way to other organisations better adapted to the requirements of the times. Even at this early date some of the ports had begun to suffer from "the sea change," which eventually caused the majority of them to be deserted by the routes of commerce; and Henry V., finding that their harbours were no longer capable of building or sheltering the large ships which were required in his time, determined to establish a King's Royal Navy. So successful was he, that in his fleet which invaded France in 1415, and which consisted of one thousand four hundred vessels, carrying about six thousand men-at-arms and twenty-four thousand archers, were twenty-seven royal ships, some perhaps of the size of five hundred tons. After the return of Henry V. from the Battle of Agincourt, and during the negotiations which were to settle the relationships of England and France for the future, the Count of Armagnac, who had succeeded D'Albret, slain at Agincourt, as Constable of France, determined to attempt the recapture of Harfleur, held for the king by the Earl of Dorset, and with this view laid siege to the town by land, and sent the French fleet with a number of Genoese caracks and Spanish ships hired for the occasion to blockade the port from the sea. Henry V. in a great rage dispatched his

brother, the Duke of Bedford, to deal with this formidable armament. The Duke assembled his ships at Rye in August 1416, and on the 14th of the same month reached the mouth of the Seine, at the head of a fleet said to number four hundred sail and to carry twenty thousand men. He found the Genoese galleys so tall that the largest of his ships could not reach to their upper decks by a spar's length, while the Spanish ships far out-matched his own for size and for the number of their crews. Notwithstanding the disparity of the forces the duke determined to attack the enemy on the following day; and on the morning of August 15th, 1416, taking advantage of the wind, he engaged the combined fleets with such vigour that he succeeded in capturing or destroying nearly five hundred ships, his men clambering up the Genoese galleys like so many squirrels and boarding them in gallant style. Having destroyed the fleet, the duke joined his forces with those of the garrison in repelling the attacks on land and sea, and compelled the Count of Armagnac to raise the siege and retire. The duke remained long enough to see the town placed in a state of defence and then returned to England.

In 1417 the Earl of Huntingdon being sent to sea with a strong squadron, met with the united fleets of France and Genoa, which he fought and defeated, though they were much superior to his—not only in number, but in the strength and size of their ships—taking the French admiral prisoner, and capturing four large Genoese ships, containing a quarter's pay for the whole navy.

The reign of Henry VI. added but little to the naval glory of England. In August 1457 a fleet fitted out in Normandy