1667

The Dutch Raid on the Medway

Why did it start ?

In the seventeenth century, intensive political and commercial rivalry between the English and the Dutch spilled over repeatedly into war. This was an age of empire. Both powers were determined to grow at the expense of the other and maintain access to the market for the foreign luxury goods that sold so well at home. Maritime security and control of the sea were absolutely paramount.

The young Dutch nation had quickly developed with Europe's most up-to-date fleet of merchant shipping. This enabled them to exploit their military presence in Asia and become a leading commercial power. In contrast, England's capabilities in the early seventeenth century were in decline. Peace with Spain meant that the navy was run down and money saved. A shortage of available vessels meant that English traders used Dutch ships instead.

In 1651 the English government put a stop to this practice and passed the first of a series of Navigation Acts, which stated that all goods bound for England had to be carried in English ships. The navy was encouraged to police the law by attacking and boarding all Dutch vessels. The first Anglo-Dutch War was the result.

It lasted two years. An uneasy peace followed, broken by isolated clashes in West Africa and North America.

In 1665, a second war began promisingly for the English, with victory at the Battle of Lowestoft. The following year, a controversial action known as 'Holmes's Bonfire' raised the stakes considerably. A small English force under Rear Admiral Robert Holmes destroyed a large Dutch merchant fleet where it lay at anchor and then landed and burnt the town of West-Terschelling. The Dutch saw the Fire of London-which erupted just a few weeks later-as divine retribution for this action. It was no doubt also in their minds as they sailed up the Medway in 1667.

Who was involved?

During the Anglo-Dutch wars, almost all military action was designed to disrupt and destroy commercial operations. The prime target was always shipping. Large ships were expensive to build and costly to maintain. Each one required a well-trained crew who expected to be paid. The poor morale that affected seamen who were owed wages was a significant factor in many engagements, especially on the Medway in 1667. The English in particular were always short of money and pay arrears in the navy were notorious.

War increased the number of ships built, but also affected their quality. Navies became more standardised. New tactics demanded new kinds of ships. From the mid-1650s onwards, 'ships-of-the-line' were needed from the dockyards of both nations. These engaged the enemy in single-file formation, exchanging a massive weight of iron shot with each broadside.

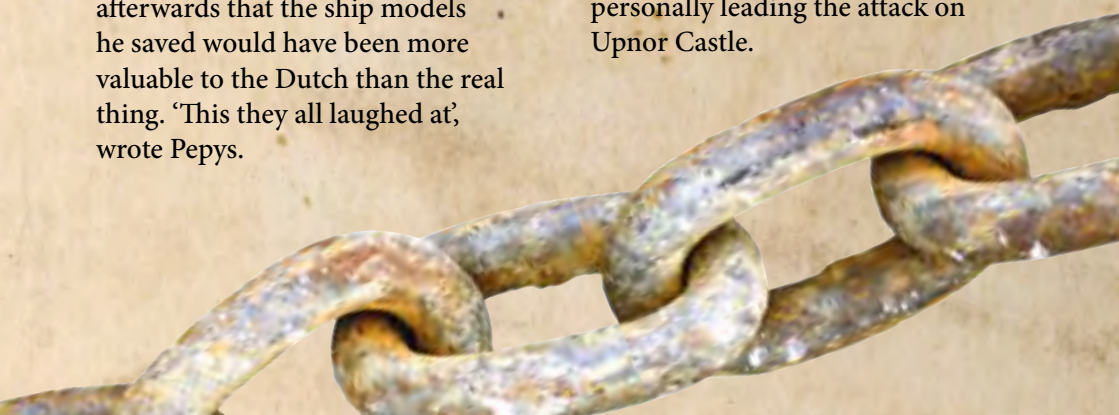
Naval personnel were also subjected to new discipline. In 1653 the English published the Sailing and Fighting Instructions, sometimes known as the Articles of War. These outlined the responsibilities of naval captains, and the punishments that were due in case of failure or neglect.

Peter Pett

Pett was Commissioner of the Dockyard and therefore at the heart of events on the English side in 1667. He made a convenient scapegoat. Diarist Samuel Pepys was with him as he attempted to claim before a Committee of Enquiry afterwards that the ship models he saved would have been more valuable to the Dutch than the real thing. 'This they all laughed at', wrote Pepys.

Michiel de Ruyter

In overall charge in 1667, de Ruyter was a Dutch hero who had served in a lifetime of spectacular engagements all round the world. During the attack he remained within the Thames estuary during the first phase of the action, before personally leading the attack on Upnor Castle.



What happened?

On 7 June 1667, a large Dutch fleet anchored in the Thames estuary. This created considerable alarm. A brief attack up the Thames came to nothing, and the English began to look to the defences of the River Medway. These consisted of an unfinished fort at Sheerness, and a great chain stretched across the river as a physical barrier between Gillingham and Hoo Ness. Far upstream lay Upnor Castle.

Charles II appointed the Duke of Albemarle to the overall English command. He gave several orders. He wanted to move English ships further upstream to safety; to sink other vessels in order to block the river; and to find ammunition for Upnor Castle, the guard ships by the chain, and new batteries on the shore. In all this he was hampered by a lack of money and great confusion in the lines of command below him.

The Dutch attacked the Sheerness fortification and took it easily as the garrison deserted. They then turned their attention upstream. A Dutch squadron approached the chain at Gillingham in line astern at about 10am on 12 June. They engaged the guard ships, and, with fireships blazing, bore down upon the chain. It broke. There was a rush for the English flagship, the Royal Charles. Despite Albemarle's orders, she remained at her station with a skeleton crew who melted away at the first approach of the Dutch.

On the evening of the 12 June the Dutch agreed a new phase of their plan. The main thrust would be to engage Upnor Castle while fireships could be positioned alongside the English men-of-war. In Upnor Reach the next day, the fighting was much more intense. The Dutch nevertheless achieved their objectives and must have been tempted to remain and push on for the ultimate prize of the Chatham Dockyard. But the narrow width of the river, increased casualties, and a lack of remaining fireships, meant that instead they decided to withdraw with the ebb tide on the following day.

What came next?

The English were taken aback by the skill with which the Dutch managed their escape. Samuel Pepys noted the seamanship with which they removed the Royal Charles, heeling her over to reduce her draught, so that she cleared the mud. In fact, she proved too large for use in the shallow waters of the Low Countries. The Dutch scrapped her in 1673. The coat of arms from her stern was saved. It remains on display in Amsterdam to this very day.

The Coat of Arms from the stern of the Royal Charles

Once the Dutch were gone, the English began to salvage their ships - and their reputations. Peter Pett was sent to the Tower. At the subsequent enquiry, accusations of treason were in the air, but, in the end, Pett was removed from office and allowed to disappear. The charges were dropped. Reform, however, was essential. The English would never again allow such a toxic mix of corruption, incompetence and lack of money to undermine their naval capabilities.

It was the end, however, of the Medway anchorage, although the continued growth of the Chatham Dockyard ensured a strong nautical presence locally for many years to come. With the departure of the fleet, Upnor Castle became suddenly redundant. Its geographical position saved it from demolition, and it turned into the largest gunpowder store in the country. Access by water enabled the delivery and distribution of the vast amounts of powder required by the ships-of-the-line, and the building's construction permitted a certain amount of security for such a valuable and dangerous commodity.

The English of course were in no condition to continue the war. A peace treaty was signed at Breda in July. Tensions remained however, and amid considerable political turmoil at home, the Dutch found themselves fighting a new war, this time against both England and France, by 1672. A lasting peace was achieved only with the establishment of a Dutchman, William of Orange, and his English wife Mary, as joint monarchs on the throne of England in 1688.

Upnor Castle
High Street, Upper Upnor,
Rochester ME2 4XG
Phone: 01634 718742
visitmedway.org

G10457

Enjoy Medway

heritage lottery fund
LOTTERY FUNDED

Medway Council
Serving You

This guide has been produced as part of Medway Council's 350th anniversary commemorations of the Battle of Medway, kindly supported through a generous grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund.