



### Life in Nelson's navy

For a nation that prided itself on its seapower, the British seemed to have taken remarkably little care of their seamen. The harsh conditions on board His Majesty's ships were notorious, from the poor food and late pay to the floggings with the cat o'nine tails – a nine-thonged leather whip, often with spikes, used on the naked back. Never mind mutiny on the *Bounty* – in 1797 the whole fleet rose in mutiny against their conditions. However, no navy can win battles by

terrorising its men, and more recently historians have pointed out that although conditions might horrify us, they were often a lot easier than conditions on land – there was regular food, and the pay was adequate, and most captains were nothing like Captain Bligh. Nelson himself was universally admired for the care he took to ensure his men were well looked after, and they fought all the better under him.

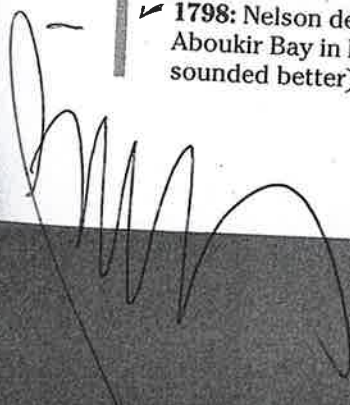
Not content with suspending the freedoms he was supposed to be fighting to defend, Pitt went on to pass the Combination Laws, which made combinations (Trade or Labour Unions to you and me) illegal. So any workmen who complained about their wages or the conditions in factories stood the risk of being sent to prison. No wonder some workers declared they sympathised with the French. (See Chapter 16 to find out why they had something to complain about.)

### Cruising for a bruising – Nelson

Badly needing a success story, the British milked the Nelson story for all it was worth, making him one of the first media war heroes. Don't get me wrong: Nelson was without question a very fine commander, and he was very, very lucky – no bad thing to be (ask Napoleon) – but he wasn't exactly a good role model for aspiring young officers. One of his most famous actions was to put his telescope deliberately to his blind eye so as not to "see" a signal from his superior officer telling him to disengage. For anyone else that would have meant a court martial. Nelson often neglected his duty to spend time with his mistress Emma Hamilton (with whom he enjoyed a curious *ménage à trois* with her husband, the British ambassador in Naples).

If you're going to be that sort of an officer, you had better win (the British had shot Admiral John Byng in 1757 for losing a battle), and fortunately for Nelson, he did:

✓ **1798:** Nelson destroyed almost the entire French fleet at anchor in Aboukir Bay in Egypt (it became known as the Battle of the Nile, which sounded better), stranding Napoleon and his army in Egypt.



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