

## A Cholesbury Hero at the Battle of Trafalgar

Cholesbury is a small Buckinghamshire village located in the Chiltern Hills between Chesham and Wendover. For 55 years it was the home of David Newton, a Royal Marine who fought at the Battle of Trafalgar.



David (or Davey) Newton was one of at least six children born to William and Rebecca Newton at The Lee – a nearby village to Cholesbury. David's baptism took place on 26 February 1786. In 1802 David was working as an agricultural labourer in Chenies. He joined the Royal Marines, Company 130 at Chatham, as a private on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1805. He was one of 50 men from Buckinghamshire who fought at Trafalgar. From his naval records we know his height was 5' 4", only just below the average for the time, with light brown hair, a fresh complexion, and grey eyes. Although as a very old man Newton would sometimes talk of being assigned to the *Bellerophon* or the '*Billyruffian*' as he would call it, research has confirmed that at Trafalgar he served on the *Revenge* and his memorial card reports that during the engagement he was knocked down and had three ribs broken.

After the battle Newton was entitled to a share of prize money, but in the violent storm that followed most of the 'prize' was lost and his share of what

was salvaged was only £1.17s.6d. He failed to claim this and it was duly assigned to Greenwich Hospital. Later, after a public outcry over the miserly level of reward, the dues were topped up by the Government and Newton's 'mark' indicates he eventually received a Parliamentary Award of £4.12s.6d. A letter from the Royal Marines Museum written in 1976 indicates that his name does not appear on the rolls because he did not claim his Naval General Service Medal with bar Trafalgar, apparently not unusual since the notices for claiming were not published until 1848.

David left the marines when his Company was disbanded on 12<sup>th</sup> January 1816. On 14<sup>th</sup> May that year he married Phillis Carter, the widow of a brickmaker from Chesham. Interestingly though, the wedding took place not in Buckinghamshire but at St Andrew's Church Holborn, and David's brother James was a witness. By 1818 David and Phillis had come to live at Cholesbury where the birth of Charlotte is recorded. She was the first of seven children and one of only two that survived into adulthood. In 1852 Phillis died and by 1861 David was living at the Old Manor House in Cholesbury. In the 1871 Census he is recorded as having been 'blind for twenty years' and was being looked after by his son James.

Apart from being in possession of this rare photograph of a Trafalgar veteran we are also very lucky to have two brief personal accounts of David Newton's experiences on board ship.

In October 1872 the Rev Henry Jeston, the vicar of Cholesbury, concerned about Newton not having been awarded a pension, wrote to The Times. He describes David as "*a thoroughly good devout old man aged 85, almost stone blind, without a pension and supported in part by parish allowance*" and enquired whether any surviving officers might send "*a trifle for my hero*". However, the most interesting part of his letter was the following account of David Newton's own experiences on the day of the Battle of Trafalgar:-

*Asking him one day how soon they knew of Nelson's death, 'Ah Sir,' was the reply, ' we were lying pretty close to the Victory, and about 4 or 5 o'clock, I think, in the evening, we saw the Admiral's flag half-mast high, and we knew only too well what had happened; besides, soon after the action we had a batch*

*of French prisoners sent on board of us, and as they passed along the deck, they mocked and jeered, and pointing with their thumbs over their shoulder to the Admiral's flag exclaimed "Ah, where is your Nelson? Where is your Nelson?"*

Rev Jeston's request for help was a great success. In a further letter to The Times on 6 January 1873, Jeston could report that as much as £5.10s.7d had been sent in small sums but also that he had been advised to put David's case to the Board of Admiralty. As a result Newton had been awarded a special Greenwich pension of 1s. 6d. a day for the rest of his life. It was thought by Jeston to be *"the most liberal pension ever granted to a man of Newton's standing in the Navy"*.

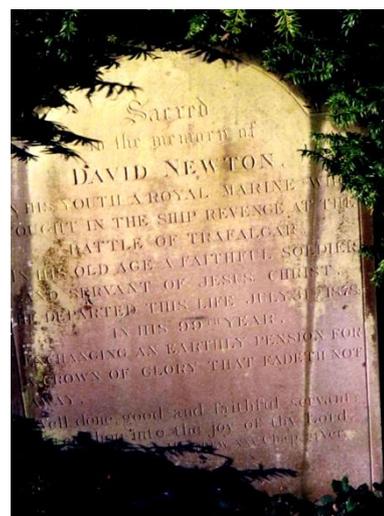
Yet again Jeston's letter includes a fascinating insight into the events witnessed by David Newton on board the *Revenge*. (NB. As mentioned above the reference to the *Bellerophon* in this letter was incorrect presumably brought about by David's failing memory in old age.):-

*In one of our chats I happened to ask in what way his ship went into action at Trafalgar. His reply was, 'You see, Sir the enemy was drawn up in a kind of half moon shape, two deep, and close together; so we went spank into them' - the old man's countenance brightened at the thought - 'and broke their line. But just as we had done so and were getting into position, our tiller rope was shot away, and four ships at once set upon us, two taking us fore and aft. It was very hot work, Sir' he added, 'while it lasted, and our second lieutenant, Mr. Little, came down between decks and ordered all the men to lie down flat on the decks. Fortunately the 'Billyruffian,' (the old sailor will persist in so styling her; he knows the Bellerophon by no other name) and another ship came to our aid, and it ended in two or three-I forget which-of the captains that had attacked us having to deliver up their swords on our deck to Captain Moresom'. On my asking how it happened that two ships came to their relief, he explained that a few days after battle an old comrade from the Victory came on board the Revenge and told him that during the action he heard Lord Nelson say to Captain Hardy, 'Hardy, where is Revenge?', "To leeward my lord" was the reply, "and four ships upon her." "Signal two ships to go to her assistance" said Lord Nelson, and so that is how they came to help us.' On my further inquiring what could it have been that induced Nelson at such a*

*moment to think about the Revenge, he said he could not tell, except that the Revenge being quite a young ship, just fresh from the docks, and with all strange hands aboard, perhaps that made the Admiral feel anxious to know how she was behaving herself.*

David Newton died on 30<sup>th</sup> July 1878. It is well worth a visit to St Lawrence's Church at Cholesbury where he is buried. His headstone is inscribed:-

*Sacred to the memory of David Newton in his youth a Royal Marine who fought in the ship Revenge at the Battle of Trafalgar, in his old age a faithful soldier and servant of Jesus Christ. He departed this life 31 July 1878 in his 99<sup>th</sup> year changing an earthly pension for a crown of glory that fadeth not away. "Well done good and faithful servant enter thou into the joy of the Lord."*



There are, as is often the case in documents, some intriguing discrepancies in dates. Newton is described on his headstone and his memorial card as being in his 99<sup>th</sup> year. In contrast Jeston's letter to the Times in 1872, Newton's baptismal record, and census returns would place his age anywhere between 92 and 96 when he died. Whatever age David Newton was on that July day in Cholesbury, it seems most fitting that Rev Henry Jeston, himself now very old, was able to preside over the funeral. This was the final service he could do for the man he had helped and once described as his "hero". A few days later a short notice appeared in the Times entitled 'A Trafalgar Veteran' reporting the recent death of David Newton and paying tribute to his service as a marine at the Battle of Trafalgar at which he was wounded in action. We suspect this was also the work of David's venerable friend.

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