

Memories of Nelson

Dick Henrywood looks at 200 years of collectables commemorating Lord Nelson and the Battle of Trafalgar

On Monday 21st October 1805 at around 1:15pm, a lowly French sailor perched in the rigging of the French 74-gun man o' war Redoubtable fired his musket at a group of figures on the quarter-deck of HMS Victory. His shot made history. Admiral Viscount Lord Nelson died from his wound more than three hours later although the battle of Trafalgar was won. Of the 33 French and Spanish vessels involved, 18 were destroyed and an estimated 14,000 enemy sailors were killed. England did not lose a single vessel and casualties numbered only 1,587.

Having previously lost an arm and an eye Nelson finally lost his life in the service of his country. His body was preserved in a barrel of brandy and taken back to England where he was given a state funeral and laid to rest in St. Paul's Cathedral. Two incidents from the battle have passed into folklore: his famous signal "England expects that every man will do his duty" sent to the fleet before the battle commenced, and his dying words "Kiss me Hardy" to his friend and colleague Captain Thomas Hardy, commander of the Victory. The ship itself lies preserved in Portsmouth dockyard.

Nelson was a remarkable man and one of England's great heroes. His life, death and exploits have been commemorated now for more than 200 years and there is little sign that interest in him is abating. It seems such a shame that political correctness led to the recent re-enactment of the battle to be devoid of English winners and French losers. We remember Trafalgar as a great victory; the French remember that they killed the English commander!

In this bicentenary year, interest in Nelson collectables has flourished and auctions up and down the country have unearthed material to tempt the collector. Items can generally be divided into three categories – those issued in his lifetime or to mark his death; those made in the years following Trafalgar while his memory was still current; and those which have been issued to coincide with the various anniversaries, particularly 1905 but also 1955 and now also 2005.

The first group includes mostly ceramics, made to commemorate the Battle of the Nile in 1798, Copenhagen in 1801 (very rare), and the Peace of Amiens in 1802, but these are all eclipsed by the huge number made following Trafalgar and Nelson's death.

This group is represented here by Matthew Boulton's Trafalgar medal and a fine blue-printed jug. These would both have been made shortly after the battle so can be

Continued overleaf



Two sides of Matthew Boulton's Trafalgar medal of 1805



A Doulton & Watts moulded brown stoneware jug in the form of a bust of Nelson from the 1830s



A dish depicting the "Death of Lord Nelson" from a "British History" dinner service of circa 1826-8



A fine blue-printed jug with rare 1806 inscription*



Top: A British & Foreign Sailors' Society embossed copper plaque from 1905

Centre: A modern Lynton Porcelain Derby mug decorated by Stephan Nowacki with a scene of HMS Victory.

Right: Two sides of a Spink 150th anniversary Trafalgar medal of 1955



considered true commemoratives of the event. The pewter or white metal medal was designed by C. Kuchler and this example had been pierced and fitted into a silver frame which was engraved with the name of George Wilson, a quarter-gunner on the Revenge at Trafalgar. Despite the modifications, the historic nature of the inscription must have helped produce the eventual sale price of £2,350.

The blue-printed jug is fascinating. The pattern is well known on both mugs and jugs but this dated example provides evidence that the pieces are contemporary to Trafalgar, not a decade later as has sometimes been suggested. The jug had not been sold at the time of writing but it was estimated at £300 to £500 despite significant damage. A mug with the same design but without any dated inscription and also suffering from significant damage sold recently for £153.

Following his death, interest in Nelson remained strong for two or three decades, and this period is represented here by a blue-printed dish and by a Doulton & Watts brown stoneware jug. The dish depicts the "Death of Lord Nelson" from a dinner service of "British History" scenes made by a short-lived Staffordshire firm named Jones & Son in the mid-1820s. The service features 15 different scenes, the two most desirable being a large dish with the "Death of General Wolfe", eagerly sought by Canadian collectors, and this medium-size Nelson dish. The attraction of the Nelson association to collectors was emphatically demonstrated when the dish sold in a Nelson-related sale for £2,350. In a normal ceramics sale I doubt whether it would have exceeded half that figure. The Doulton & Watts jug moulded as a bust of the Admiral wearing his decorations, including the Bath Star and the Nile Medal, dates from about 1830 and must have been popular in its day, judging by the number that have survived. This example sold for £353, again despite condition problems.

The centenary of 1905 is represented by an embossed shield containing copper taken from the Victory. These were issued by the British and Foreign Sailors' Society to schools which had raised five guineas for their funds, and were intended to be used as academic school prizes. The inscription includes Nelson's famous "England Expects" signal and refers to the approval of the Lords of the Admiralty. The later date inevitably places this piece in a lower value category compared to earlier items, but it still fetched £206.

The anniversary of 1955 is represented by a silver commemorative medal featuring Nelson on one side and Neptune rising from the sea with a victor's wreath on the reverse.



A Royal Doulton Nelson commemorative jug from 1905

It was designed by P. Vincze for the medalists Spink, and this copy, in its original fitted case, sold for £106, providing a graphic comparison with the value of the contemporary 1805 Matthew Boulton medal.

The final piece is a Lynton Porcelain porter mug with a scene of HMS Victory lying at anchor in the roads, finely painted and extensively gilt by Stephan Nowacki. Nowacki joined Royal Crown Derby as an apprentice in 1969 but eventually left in 1980 to set up his own studio. This developed into the Lynton Porcelain Company in 1982. As such, this late porcelain mug is not a commemorative piece, but the HMS Victory subject placed it firmly in the Nelson market, and it sold in a Nelson-related sale for £329, a fair price but how would that compare with the cost to buy such a fine artist-decorated piece new?

It can be seen that Nelson collectables vary hugely in price and provide scope for buyers with all pockets. The excitement of this bicentenary year may have produced some exceptional auction prices and it will be interesting to see if they are maintained in the months and years to come. But if you would like a less expensive memento, what about a small piece of Goss china with Nelson's crest for about £15?

All but one of the illustrations for this article have been supplied by the auctioneers Dreweatt Neate of Newbury and Bristol. The illustration of the 1806 Nelson jug has been made available by Special Auction Services of Midgham, near Reading.

Dick Henrywood is a specialist consultant in collectors' items and blue and white printed pottery.