



Information sheet no 036

Battle of Flamborough Head

In 1779, the American War of Independence was at its height and Spain and France had joined forces with the Americans against Britain. Britain had to rely even more heavily on its trade with the Baltic States to maintain vital naval supplies of timber and hemp.

On 23 September 1779, a large Baltic convoy of forty-one ships, escorted by the frigate HMS *Serapis* and the sloop HMS *Countess of Scarborough*, was sailing along the Yorkshire coast. They were intercepted off Flamborough Head by an American and French squadron led by John Paul Jones. The squadron had sailed from Lorient on 14 August with the frigates *Bonhomme Richard*, *Alliance*, *Pallas* and two smaller ships. They had cruised along the Irish and Scottish coasts taking several prizes before meeting the convoy off Flamborough Head.

The action began at 7.20pm and was watched by crowds on the shore. HMS *Countess of Scarborough* was soon captured by *Pallas* but the major event of the action was the battle between the *Bonhomme Richard* and HMS *Serapis*. The engagement lasted over three hours until 10.20pm when Jones finally succeeded in forcing the British ship to surrender, overcoming a more powerful adversary. Unfortunately, *Bonhomme Richard* sank the next morning as it had been badly damaged by the action. Jones succeeded in getting his prizes back to the Texel and finally to France.

The Battle of Flamborough Head was the first major success of the new American navy.

Note: The use of the abbreviations HMS in this information sheet is to clearly define the ships of Royal Navy. The abbreviation did not come into common use until c.1790s.