



## Information sheet no 067

### Loss of *Royal George*

The *Royal George*, a 100 gun first rate ship of the line, was built at Woolwich Dockyard and launched on 18 February 1756. In 1759 the ship saw action at the battle of Quiberon Bay with Admiral Hawke and at the 1780 Battle of Cape St Vincent under Admiral Rodney (known as the 'Moonlight battle').

In August 1782, *Royal George* was the flagship of Rear-Admiral Richard Kempenfelt and the Captain was Martin Waghorn. On 29 August, the ship lay off Spithead Anchorage, near Portsmouth, awaiting stores. At 7am, the tenders carrying dockyard plumbers and shipwrights arrived to begin work on a cistern pipe for the provision of water for the washing decks. To carry out this work, a hole needed to be bored into the side. The carpenter requested the ship to be "heeled" (leant slightly to one side) and orders were given for the lower deck larboard guns to be run out and the starboard guns pulled back to the combings. This did not give a sufficient heel, so the upper deck and three of the middle deck guns were also run across and shot rolled to larboard.

After breakfast, Captain Waghorn was on the upper deck when the carpenter announced the ship appeared to be settling into the water. Immediately, the guns were ordered to be run in and the weather side guns were run out in order to right the ship. Drummers were ordered to beat to quarters. Minutes later, with no warning, the ship sank without heeling over at all.

No accurate number is available for the amount of people drowned in the disaster. There were many extra dockyard workers and visitors to the ship at the time, such as women and children visiting the men. It is claimed that over 300 people survived, but figures for those lost range from 900 - 1200. Admiral Kempenfelt was among those lost although Captain Waghorn survived and was rescued.

At the court-martial that took place after the loss of the ship, a ship's survey revealed that several beams and timbers were rotten. It was judged that part of the ship's frame gave way under the stress of the heel and caused the ship to sink.

Some of the ship was salvaged later, including the bell which hung in the cupola of the church in Portsmouth Dockyard (now St Anns.)