

Information sheet no 037

Battle of Quiberon Bay

Quiberon Bay is located on the west coast of France, 100 miles south-east of Brest. It was the location for a battle fought in November 1759 during the Seven Years War between the British fleet, under the command of Admiral Sir Edward Hawke, and the French fleet, commanded by Admiral Comte de Conflans.

For most of that year, the British fleet had been blockading the port of Brest to prevent the French from mounting an invasion of Ireland. A French invasion force was awaiting embarkation at Vannes, protected by the rocky entrance to Quiberon Bay. The British had been successfully preventing any move by the force until the winter weather began setting in. A severe gale forced the British fleet to return to England for shelter on 9 November and on the same day, a French squadron returned from the West Indies and was able to enter port unopposed. With the British fleet no longer blockading, Admiral de Conflans knew that he could, at long last, embark the invasion troops.

With calmer weather, the British fleet returned to continue the blockade on 14 November but before they could reach their station off Ushant, Conflans had already sailed from Brest with 21 ships, heading for Vannes. Admiral Hawke discovered the route that the French fleet was taking and gave chase. The French were delayed by severe gales west of Belle Isle.

At 8.30am on 20 November, the British ship HMS *Magnamine* sighted the French fleet off Belle Isle, and by noon Hawke's leading ships were close to their rear division. As weather conditions worsened, Conflans led his fleet towards the narrow southern entrance into Quiberon Bay. The bay was strewn with rocks and it was necessary for Conflans to use local pilots who knew the area well to guide the French fleet in. He was sure that the British fleet would not attack in such a confined and treacherous area and in weather that was increasing in severity.

Hawke did, indeed, decide to engage the French fleet, although warned about the dangerous territory by the Master (officer in charge of navigation) of his flagship, HMS *Royal George*. At about 2.30pm, the French rear division was engaged in action. After a fierce battle, the division's flagship, *Formidable*, struck their colours and three other ships, *Thesee*, *Superbe* and *Heros* were lost. Admiral de Conflans decided to try and get back into the open sea but was driven back by Admiral Hawke's fleet at the entrance to the bay. Although the fighting continued until nightfall, a complete victory had been secured.

As night fell and the weather continued to be severe, the British fleet anchored off Dumet Island. During the night, some of the French ships made a bid to escape and head for Rochefort and the Viliane estuary, but most of them broke their backs on the bars at the river mouths and were rendered unfit for service. The following day, Admiral de Conflans's flagship, *Soleil Royal* was wrecked on the Rouelle shoal and was burnt. Out of the twenty one ships Conflans had brought out of Brest, seven ships had been lost and over 2500 men had been killed or died through drowning.



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The British casualties were less severe. HMSs *Essex* and *Resolution* ran aground on the Le Four rocks on 21 November and were both wrecked. Otherwise, Hawke's fleet remained intact.

The British victory was significant in that the planned invasion of Ireland was prevented and a large French fleet had been destroyed on its own doorstep. Hawke's leadership and seamanship had led to a great victory in spite of the very severe weather conditions.

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