

A KIDWELLY MAN AT TRAFALGAR



THE STORY OF
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OF HMS VICTORY

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Amid the long sweep of Kidwelly's 900-year history marked by princes, castle garrisons, Flemish settlers, industrial workers, farmers, and miners—there stands one voice that links the town directly to one of the defining moments in British naval history. That voice belonged to **Thomas Johns**, a young sailor from Kidwelly who served aboard **HMS Victory** under Admiral Lord Nelson at the **Battle of Trafalgar** on 21 October 1805.

His remarkable letter, addressed to his parents **David and Mrs. Johns of Kidwelly**, survives today through the Alwyn Evans Collection. Few Welsh towns can claim such a vivid, personal account from a native son who not only witnessed Trafalgar but stood in the very heart of its fury.

A Kidwelly Seaman on the Most Famous Warship in British History

That a Kidwelly man should find himself on *Victory* Nelson's flagship and now the most iconic ship in the Royal Navy places Thomas in a uniquely distinguished position. Of all the thousands of seamen who fought at Trafalgar, only a handful left detailed first-hand accounts. Fewer still were Welsh. Rarer again are those who wrote home to small towns and villages like Kidwelly.

Thomas begins his letter with relief and gratitude, aware how close he came to death. His description of the battle is not second-hand romanticism, but the direct testimony of a man who stood on Nelson's deck as broadsides from Spanish and French ships tore into the *Victory's* hull:

"We was so involved in smoke and fire, not to be seen... having no less than 5 ships on us at a time."

This is not the language of an officer safely on the quarterdeck, but of a lower-deck seaman—one of the men who loaded the guns, carried powder, fought fires, and hauled away the dead. Kidwelly's contribution to Trafalgar was not from afar: **it was lived through the hands, sweat, and courage of one of its own sons.**

Bearing Witness to the Death of Nelson

Thomas gives one of the most direct and human descriptions of Nelson's mortal wounding:

"Our brave and gallant commander, Lord Nelson, was wounded early in the action... His death will be ever lamented."

He even notes the cheering of the crew as more enemy ships struck their colours—cheering Nelson could hear as he died.

Very few ordinary sailors wrote about the death of Nelson while serving on *Victory* itself. That makes Thomas's letter not just a Kidwelly treasure, but a nationally significant historical document.

Life and Family Connections

Thomas signs the letter:

“Your dutiful and affectionate son, THOS. JOHNS.”

He mentions seeing his brother **George**, and refers to **John Evans**, likely another Kidwelly man also serving in the Navy. This suggests a small but notable maritime tradition within the town during the Napoleonic period one easily overlooked in favour of Kidwelly’s agricultural and industrial narratives.

Even though later censuses do not list the Johns family, the surname remains present in the Kidwelly area, raising the possibility that descendants of this Trafalgar family still walk the same streets today.

A Hard Life at Sea – and a Human Ending

Thomas’s naval service did not end in triumph. Records reveal that he **“ran from the service”** at Plymouth in 1809, a fate shared by many sailors of the era. This does not diminish his bravery; if anything, it rounds out his story. The Royal Navy of the early 19th century was harsh, often brutal, and many men especially those pressed into service eventually fled when opportunity allowed.

His desertion transforms him from a faceless historical name into a real human being: a Kidwelly lad who endured battle, danger, hardship, and exhaustion, and who, like many, simply wanted his freedom back.

A Kidwelly Legacy Worth Celebrating

The tale of Thomas Johns deserves recognition within Kidwelly’s 900-year story. It connects the town directly to the greatest naval battle in British history and places one of its own on the deck of *Victory* at the very hour Britain’s fate was being decided.

His letter is not only a military account—it is a voice from Kidwelly carried across the centuries:

- A local man in the most famous battle of the Royal Navy
- A witness to the fall of Nelson
- A survivor of the fiercest action of Trafalgar
- A son writing home to reassure his parents.
- A Kidwelly sailor whose words still speak today.

In celebrating 900 years of Kidwelly, the story of **Thomas Johns of HMS *Victory*** deserves a proud and permanent place. His courage and his letter stand as a reminder that even in the greatest events of world history, people from small towns like Kidwelly played their part—and sometimes stood at the very centre of it.