

Captain Conway Shipley, Royal Navy or *O Inglês Morto do Paço de Arcos*

By Rui Ribolhos

On 21 September 2017, a group of civilians, Royal Naval and Army officers, Portuguese and British, all of them Peninsular War enthusiasts, remembered the memory of a long dead British Royal Naval officer, Captain Conway Shipley.

This was the culmination of two years of intense work, seeking support and funds to honour the memory of Conway Shipley who was killed in the River Tagus estuary, near to Lisbon. He was the first British officer killed in action in the Peninsular War¹. This article is a tribute to the life of this young and brave naval officer.

“The ships commanded by captain Shipley were always remarkable for their high state of discipline: the management of the great guns was a part of the service he particularly exercised his men in; he never inflicted punishment until he had consulted his pillow; nor omitted any opportunity, if the weather was favourable, of reading prayers on the Sabbath to his people. He was himself an excellent practical sailor and navigator; he read and spoke French fluently, and was well versed in history. Such were his natural acquirements, that had he followed any other profession, he must have distinguished himself in it. What might not his country have expected from captain Conway Shipley.”²

¹ Traditionally the first causality of the Peninsular War was Ralph Bunbury of the 95th Rifles on 15th August 1808 in the action of Óbidos.

² John Marshal, *Royal Naval Biography, Supplement – Part 1* (London, 1827), p401.

The man and his life

Conway Shipley was born in 1782 at Llannerch Park in Denbighshire. Like many young gentlemen, at the age of eleven he enlisted in the Royal Navy. On the recommendation of Earl Spencer he was placed under the care of Captain Pakenham of the *Invincible* (74). While serving aboard her Shipley saw his first major action at the Battle of the Glorious First of June. In this action, because of his age, he was ordered to stay below deck, only to emerge back on deck, even after being knocked down by the headless body of a man falling upon him³.

In 1796 he went to serve in the *Phoebe* (36) under the command of Sir Robert Barlow. He saw many actions in this ship, and as midshipman he participated in the chase and capture of the French *Néréide* (36). So important was this action that in 1847 the Admiralty awarded the Naval General Service Medal to the surviving crew members.

In 1800 he was commissioned as a Lieutenant and he was appointed first to the *Endymion* (40) and later to the *Vanguard* (74). In the next year he departed to the West Indies aboard the *Saturn* (74), becoming junior lieutenant of that ship in 1802. In 1804, only 3 days after taking command of the *Hippomenes* (14), Shipley captured the French *Egyptienne* (36) with a crew of 290 men⁴.

After sailing in the West Indies, cruising the Atlantic, the Barbados and Spanish Coast, Shipley returned to England in July 1807, where the Admiralty gave him the command of the *Nymphe* (38). After seeing action during the siege and bombardment of Copenhagen and the capture of the Danish fleet, Shipley sailed to Portugal.

This naval expedition, under the orders of Vice-Admiral Sir Charles Cotton, had the mission of blockading the Tagus and harassing the French occupying forces of General Jean-Andoche Junot.

³ John Marshal, op cit. p389.

⁴ The London Gazette n°15735; 15 May 1804, p620.



The Glorious First of June or La Victoire de Lord Howe by Philip James de Loutherbourg in 1795. *National Maritime Museum*

Three Fleets “guarding” the Tagus

Portugal’s Prince Regent, Dom João, could not avoid a direct conflict with Napoleon Bonaparte after he ordered the Continental Blockage, aimed at stopping commerce between Continental Europe and England. As England’s oldest ally, Portugal could not accept such an impossible imposition. Having exhausted all diplomatic solutions the Portuguese court and government prepared for a certain French Invasion.

In November 1807 a combined French and Spanish Army invaded Portugal from Spain under the command of General Junot. His main objectives were to capture the Royal Family⁵, cease Portugal-England relations, capture as many Portuguese Royal Navy ships as possible and disarm the Royal Army. The plan was not successful.

⁵ As Napoleon did in Spain.

The Prince Regent Dom João escaped, taking with him his family, courtiers, state papers and treasures aboard the fleet⁶. This had been a combined effort from the Portuguese and British governments. The Royal family would not be “puppets” in Junot’s hands, sailing to the colony of Brazil. With them sailed 16 ships-of-the-line, several transports and a British escort⁷, leaving the Tagus with around 13 ships in various stages of repair, many in “no sail” conditions⁸.

The French put great efforts into repairing and arming this Portuguese squadron. In various letters from Junot to Napoleon he had identified the major priority as elevating the Navy to a state of readiness⁹. The great concern was the lack of sailors to equip the ships, as many had departed in the Royal fleet to Brazil, and the rest had most likely left to avoid having to work for the French. At the end of December 1807, being aware of an imminent British action in the Tagus, Captain Jean-Jacques Magendie¹⁰ reported great progress in the repairs, but he had not managed to solve the crew problem¹¹.

After the treaty of Tilsit in July 1807, France and Russia were officially allies against England. A Squadron commanded by Admiral Dimitri Séniavine, consisting of nine ships-of-the-line and two frigates entered the Tagus between 10 and 13 November 1807. These were the victorious ships from the Battle of Athos (June 1807) that even in a state of war with England had avoided any confrontation when cruising the Mediterranean.

When Junot arrived at the end of November he was pleased to see the potential of having an allied fleet at his disposal, but he soon

⁶ A number of 15,000 to 20,000 personnel.

⁷ A Squadron in the command of Admiral Sidney Smith.

⁸ Jean-Andoche Junot, *Diário da 1ª Invasão Francesa*, (Lisboa, 2008), Introdução de António Ventura p102.

⁹ Jean-Andoche Junot, op cit. pp160-164.

¹⁰ He famously captained the flagship *Bucentaure* (80) at the Battle of Trafalgar.

¹¹ Natalia Griffon de Pleineville, *La Première Invasion du Portugal par L'Armée Napoléonienne (1807-1808)*, (Mayenne, 2017), p75.

realized that Séniavine was a *demi-allié*¹². The Russians refused any actions against the Portuguese or the British, giving all sorts of excuses. This fleet would be a new burden to the French during the occupation. Not only could Junot not count on them to execute any plan, he also had to daily feed a complement of 6,500 sailors and Russian marines! Séniavine had no intention of fighting the British as the Russian government had not given him direct orders to do so.

This was the situation in the Tagus when Captain Conway Shipley arrived in January 1808, where Sir Charles Cotton was already blockading access to Lisbon.



Belém Castle, Lisbon, around 1830. Location of the action of 22nd and 23rd April. Vasco da Gama also sailed from this location in 1497, as did the Armada of 1588. Drawn by Clarkson Stanfield engraved by E. Finden, London, 1832. *Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal*

¹² Natalia Griffon de Pleineville, op cit. p78.

Actions in the Tagus

The British fleet had no intention of remaining only as a blockade force, preventing ships sailing in or out and accessing Lisbon. In the early morning of 14 February, around 0300 am, a force of 40 men¹³ disguised as fisherman from the *Confidence* (18), rowed her cutter and a jolly boat near São José de Ribamar¹⁴. The British spotted a Portuguese gunboat with a French garrison of 50, which was armed with one 24-pounder gun and two 6-pounder carronades. After a fierce fight the gunboat was captured, as were the surviving soldiers¹⁵. The wounded French sergeant who commanded the garrison jumped into the waters and drowned¹⁶. In 1847 the Admiralty issued the Naval General Service Medal with clasp *13 Feb. Boat Service 1808* to the two surviving participants.

On 3 March there was an attempt to capture Fort Bugio, built in the middle of the mouth of the river¹⁷. This round fort was of great strategic importance because it guarded the narrow entrance to the Tagus with crossfire from the powerful fortress of São Julião da Barra. At 2100, two cutters tried to disembark at Bugio, but were repulsed by the cannonade¹⁸. This was not the first attempt on this place, Admiral Sydney having made an attempt to conquer it five months earlier which failed on account of bad weather¹⁹.

The simple presence of the British Navy meant that the French had to remain with a powerful garrison manning the river forts, ships and in the city of Lisbon. The rumour of an imminent disembarkation of

¹³ The number varies from different sources: 15 to 40 men.

¹⁴ West from Belém, near Algés.

¹⁵ The French had 12 men from the 32nd *Léger* and sailors killed or wounded. The English had five wounded.

¹⁶ Natalia Griffon de Pleineville, op cit. p75.

¹⁷ Near which, 12 years before the *Bombay Castle* (74) was lost.

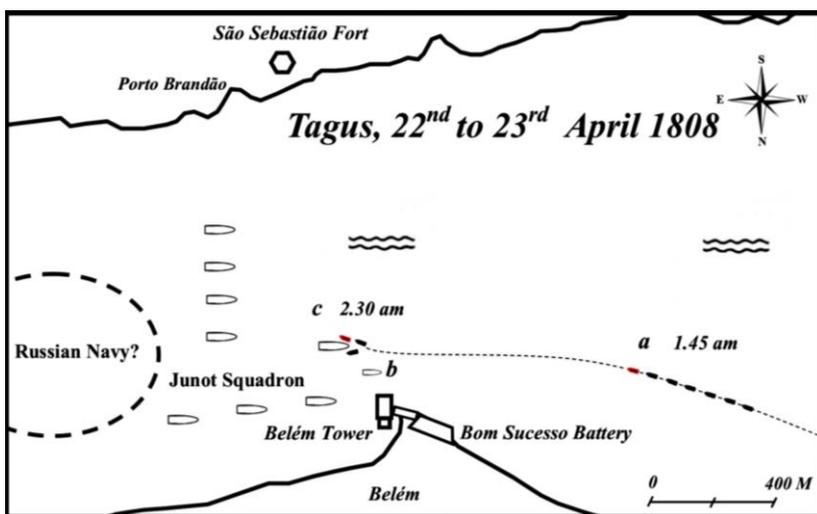
¹⁸ Natalia Griffon de Pleineville, op cit. p76.

¹⁹ António Ferrão, *A 1ª Invasão Francesa*, (Coimbra, 1925), p107.

English troops kept Junot's mind continuously worried. This was reflected later, at the Battles of Roliça and Vimeiro²⁰.

Other problems resulting from the blockade were the shortage of food and goods for the Lisbon population and occupying forces, which was the result of many ships being intercepted.

The French also took all possible measures to better defend the Tagus, by reinforcing the different forts with men and artillery, and to reconnoitre the English by ship. The river between Belém Castle and São Sebastião Fort was reinforced by the *Vasco da Gama* (74), *Princesa Carlota* (54), *Gaivota do Mar* (24), *Benjamim* (8) and others²¹. As already noted these ships were in no state of preparation for sailing and were used by Junot to seal the river.



**The attempt on the *Gaivota do Mar*, April, 1808 – Author's proposal:
 a: The British approach Belém; b: Shipley manages to avoid instant alarm by a gunboat; c: attempt on the *Gaivota*.**

²⁰ A garrison of 4,000 men was left in Lisbon, and could not participate in both decisive actions.

²¹ António Ferrão, op cit. p202.

Upriver towards the *Torre de Belém*

Whilst at anchor on the bar of the estuary, Shipley spent much of his time in administering to the comfort of the Portuguese emigrants who had escaped from the shores. The French tried all possible means to police the docks and beaches to stop people escaping, but up to 400 people found shelter within the British²². Shipley, as a gentleman, offered his own cabin and afforded them any accommodation in his power²³. Along with this service he was in charge of the inshore squadron covering the estuary and watching the movements of the Russians²⁴.

During his reconnaissance he had the idea of seizing a prize from the French. Watching Junot's Portuguese Squadron, he selected as his target the *Princesa Carlota*²⁵, anchored above Belém Castle²⁶. The plan was to capture the ship, man it, and take her back down the Tagus. In planning the operation, and not being satisfied with secondary reports, he personally twice rowed up the river to reconnoitre all aspects of the frigate. He then decided that the operation would take place on 22 April under the cover of the night.

The operation involved 150 officers, marines and sailors, all volunteers from Shipley's *Nymphe* and Captain George Pigot's *Blossom* (18). Around 2100 on the night of the 22nd, Shipley and Pigot set out to capture the *Carlota*. To distinguish friends and foes in the dark, each men had sewed a piece of white cloth in the form of a crescent upon the right sleeve of the jacket. To distinguish himself as an officer Shipley had a white handkerchief bound around his arm²⁷.

²² José Rodrigues Pereira, *Campanhas Navais 1807-1823* (Lisboa, 2005) Volume II.

²³ John Marshal, op cit. p389.

²⁴ George Lind-Guimarães, *A Royal Navy "Special Operation" in the Tagus During the Peninsular War* (Carcavelos, 2009), The British Historical Society Annual Report, p94.

²⁵ British sources give her an armament of 44 guns.

²⁶ It was from this place that Vasco da Gama sailed in 1497 and later the *Armada* Expedition of 1588.

²⁷ John Marshal, op cit. p397.

Shipley, in the company of his brother, Charles Shipley²⁸, rowed aboard a six-oared gig, followed by seven boats towing each other to ensure that no boat was dispersed with the tide. He had synchronised the operation with the tides, taking advantage of the slack water between tides and the fresh east wind²⁹. But because the wind died on approach to Belém and the “window” of slack water was altered by the heavy rains in the interior, the force could no longer get to the *Carlota*.

After consultation with Pigot, they decided not to abandon the enterprise, but to board a nearby, more accessible brig: the *Gaivota do Mar* (24)³⁰. This was not without calculated risks, as she protected by the guns of Bom Sucesso Fort, a Torre de Belém, a floating battery, gunboats, and in theory, also part of Junot’s Portuguese squadron.

It was agreed that Captain Shipley’s and Captain Pigot’s gigs would lead the attack arriving first to the target, keeping the night guard in check until the remainder of the boats arrived. Pigot’s *Blossom* gig and boats would attack on the starboard, while Shipley’s *Nymph* units attacked on the port side. Within two or three hundred yards of target Shipley was hailed by the enemy in a gunboat. He responded in French and an instant alert was prevented.

As they approached the *Gaivota do Mar*³¹, a heavy fire of musketry and then cannon started to harass Shipley’s gig. The surprise element was now lost, and all French hands were probably on deck in arms. However, as agreed with Pigot, Shipley was able to reach the *Gaivota* larboard bow and started the assault. She was surrounded by boarding nets and as he started to cut them, climbing to the deck, he was shot in the head³² and fell backwards into the river³³.

²⁸ Accompanied Conway for health reasons.

²⁹ John Marshal, op cit. p397.

³⁰ This Portuguese brig was more known as Gaivota translated to English as Seagull. Number of guns by Marques Esparteiro, *Catálogo dos Navios Brigantinos 1640-1910* (Lisboa, 1976).

³¹ Around 0230 am on the 23rd.

³² Later was known that he also sustained a blade wound to the body.

³³ Anthony Midgley, Captain Conway Shipley Royal Navy, (Estoril, 1973) in The

On seeing his brother disappearing in the water, Charles Shipley started shouting “*Save your Captain*”, which led the boarding party into confusion. As the men tried to find Shipley the gig pushed off and collided with one of the arriving boats. Captain Pigot, rowing towards starboard, on seeing this, thought that Shipley had cancelled the attack and was retreating. The men could not fight the tide and under heavy fire, already sustaining casualties, they started to retire.

The *Gaivota do Mar* was commanded by Lieutenant Pierre Le Blond-Plassan who, having given the fatal shot and blade wound which killed Conway Shipley, kept his hat and pistol as trophies³⁴. This meant that Shipley reached the deck of the ship before being killed and falling into the water. The French lost one man and eight wounded and recorded forty enemy killed, exaggerated by the number of casualties given by British sources. General Junot wrote about the incident:

*“The English wanted to celebrate S. Jorge day but were wrong. This is not the way that the Armée celebrates the anniversary of his Emperor and the Battle of Marengo. Lisbon Headquarters, 24 April 1808”*³⁵

Captain Shipley’s brother later took full responsibility for the unsuccessful action. Not being a soldier, he was naturally more concerned with his brother’s life, leading to the consequent mission being aborted. On hearing the news of his death, the whole of the *Nymphe*’s crew shed tears³⁶. All who knew him missed deeply the loss of such an excellent Navy officer.

In September 1808 after being defeated by Sir Arthur Wellesley at Vimeiro, General Junot signed the Convention of Sintra and was transported from Portugal back to France by the British Navy.

Anglo Portuguese News, p1.

³⁴ A Gazeta de Lisboa 26 de Abril de 1808.

³⁵ Idem.

³⁶ John Marshal, op cit. p400.



The last breath – Captain Shipley’s attempt on the *Gaivota*, Tagus, 23rd of April 1808. By Rita Rodrigues, 2018

A “migrant monument”

One day after the death of Shipley, his brother wrote to Junot asking for help in recovering the captain’s body, but there was no reply from the General. He wrote another one to Séniavine asking for the same and the Admiral replied promising to meet his wishes if possible, without any practical success. Shipley’s body was washed up on the Paço de Arcos³⁷ beach days later³⁸. He was buried there, not in the sand, but immediately above the rocks in a wooded plateau near a stream that

³⁷ With his sword still hanging to the wrist and the white handkerchief around his right arm.

³⁸ John Marshal, op cit. p401.

flowed into the Tagus. There is little information about the practicalities of his burial. The body was found at the beach and was buried, most likely by the military authorities from the nearby Fort of São Pedro de Paço de Arcos. During 1808 Captain George Berkeley³⁹ was moved to command the squadron on the coast of Portugal, in the hope that he could organise the chaotic supply system for Wellington's army. From January of 1809 to 1812 he had the important task of commanding Lisbon harbour, a most important strategic harbour for all actions during the war in Portugal and in Spain.

Already knowing of Conway Shipley's actions and his death, or taking knowledge of it during his stay at Lisbon, Berkeley was moved to pay homage to his *brother-in-arms*⁴⁰. Under his directions, a monument was erected at the grave during 1809-1812⁴¹. This was a period of great building activity around the city and harbour of Lisbon, in particular of the defences of Lisbon, better known as the Lines of Torres Vedras.

The monument, a square limestone monolith with inscription, being difficult to access was almost forgotten by history, but not by the population of Paço de Arcos and the different garrisons of Fort São Pedro. The monument site was near a stream which was used by local women who washed clothes in it and was also a passage point for fishermen. For that reason the place gained the name of "*praia*" or "*sítio do Inglês morto*" meaning "*beach*" or "*place of the dead Englishman*"⁴². The local women paid tribute to Shipley, taking care of the monument by planting flowers around it⁴³. In 1879 the Fort and its wooded terrains to the west, in which laid the monument, were adapted for the School of Torpedoes for a modern defence of the Tagus. Such

³⁹ Promoted to Admiral both by the Admiralty and later by the Portuguese Navy, for all the good conduct in Portugal.

⁴⁰ John Marshal, op cit. p402.

⁴¹ A similar situation happened with Colonel Lake at Roliça. In the beginning of the XXth century his Regiment had a monument built on top of the grave site.

⁴² This beach is known by *Fontainhas*, *Praia Nova de Paço de Arcos* or *Praia de Paço de Arcos*.

⁴³ This one is of the many local stories about the monument.

was the importance for the local civilians that the military had to rearrange a new path to give access to the locals⁴⁴.



Original location of Conway Shipley's grave and Monument in 1879.
The São Pedro Fort is located on the right side of the map. *Projeto Geral de Escola de Torpedos - PT-GEAEM-10905/1. °-3-46-61 (DIE)*

In 1919 a Lisbon newspaper writing about monuments from the Peninsular War reported the existence of Shipley's monument, which had been well kept by the army personnel from the Military School of Torpedoes. In January 1932 a Royal Naval Squadron was in Lisbon, commanded by Admiral Edward Oliver Osborne. Taking knowledge of the existence of the monument, he sent two Naval officers to represent him to the site, who, with Portuguese officers, could see "*the kind way the Portuguese officers have being looking after the mausoleum*"⁴⁵.

⁴⁴ Documents concerning Fort São Pedro, Oeiras in Direção de Infraestruturas (DIE), Portuguese Army.

⁴⁵ AHM-3° DIV-14° Secção-Pasta n°1-Processo n°7.

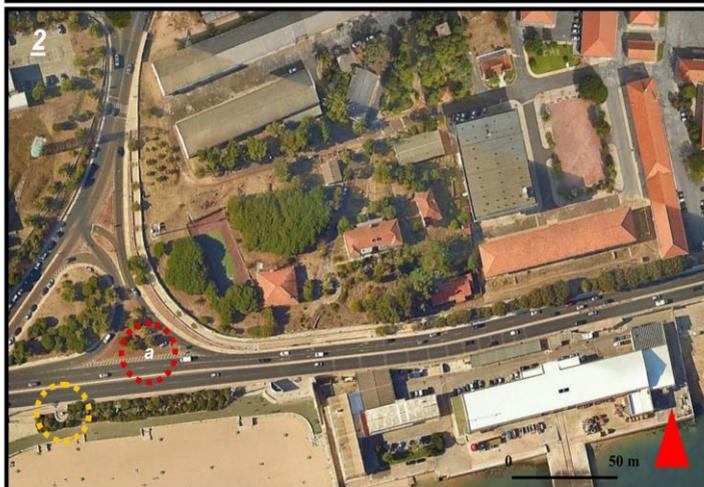
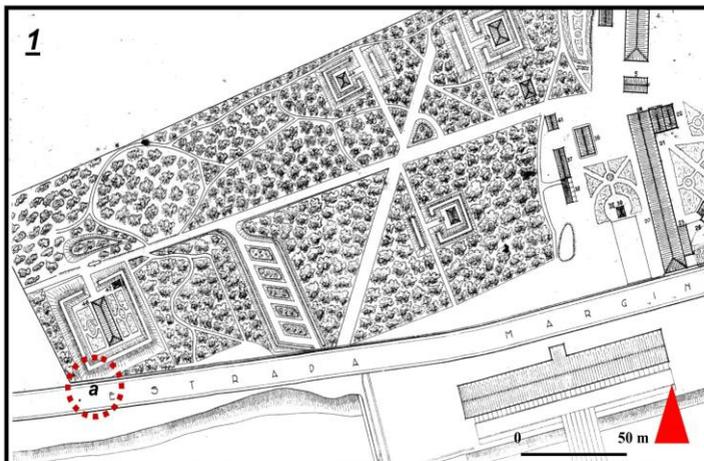
In 1933, the project for a new and first touristic road from Lisbon - Cascais, running alongside the river – the Estrada Marginal was started. This important project meant that the Fort São Pedro of Paço de Arcos had to be in part demolished and much of the surrounding area was affected. In the correspondence between the military authorities about the lands to be occupied by the Marginal, the Portuguese Lieutenant of the Engineers José da Cunha Lamas wrote:

*“A small detail - this Direction remembers the existence, on the Estrada Marginal, at the extreme edge of the wooded area of the Unit of Coastal Submarine Defence, of a mausoleum with the body of an English officer killed in action in the Tagus during the French Invasions; the mausoleum is in part affected by the Marginal Layout. This Direction recommends its transfer to the land between the new Marginal and the beach rocks, where it will be a touristic curiosity.”*⁴⁶

This explains the current location of the monument. The transfer of the monument occurred between 1939 and 1942, the year of the conclusion of the Marginal. It has not been possible to identify any information about the actual removal of the stone works and also if any human remains were found during the removal/construction. It is possible that Shipley was buried there and the monument built immediately above. Another possibility is that his remains were unearthed or cremated at the time of the monument’s relocation and are now resting inside the monument itself⁴⁷.

⁴⁶ Documents concerning Fort São Pedro; 1939; Oeiras in Direção de Infraestruturas (DIE), Portuguese Army.

⁴⁷ George Lind-Guimarães, op cit. p98.



The Estrada Marginal: original and later location of the Monument.
Map 1 - project of Marginal beginning of 1940's.
Map 2 - a contemporary aerial photo with the approximated original location (a) and the actual implantation (b)



Four images of Conway Shipley monument: 1919 and 1932 in the original site. Note that the monument was enclosed with metal fence and rimmed with flowers. The last two images from 2015 and 2017, before and after the rededication. The 1919 and 1932 images from AHM-3° Divisão-14ª Secção-pasta 1-Processo nº7- Monumentos Militares. Images taken in 2015 and 2018 from Selwyn & Jackie Kennard archive.

Remembering the Captain

Today, in the Drawing Room at Bodrhyddan Hall, the Rowley-Conwy's family house, it is possible to find relics that remind us of Conway Shipley's 'Age-of-Sails' great actions: two swords, a ceremonial one awarded by the Lloyds Patriotic Fund and a battle sword, the same one found on his body, tied to his wrist. Hanging on the wall is a small picture of his famous capture of the *Egyptienne* (36).

The British community living in Portugal and the British Historical Society of Portugal brought Shipley's memory back on several occasions with the publication of articles in local newspapers and books. It was only in the 1980's that we have documented celebrations: for the bi-centenary of Conway Shipley's birth at the morning service held in St Asaph's Cathedral, North Wales on 22 August 1982 and the 175th anniversary of his death at the Memorial at Paço de Arcos, Lisbon on 23 April 1983.

In 2015 Jackie & Selwyn Kennard and David Wright, who are members of the British community living in Portugal, were made aware of the poor condition which the monument was in at the time and started

to organise its restoration. They were able to bring together the different branches of the Portuguese, the British military and the civil authorities for this noble purpose.

Financial support was provided from different sources: The Hon. O G Rowley-Conwy (Trustees of Bodrhyddan Hall); the 1805 Club, London; Cavan S.A.; Prefabe S.A.; The British Historical Society of Portugal; Robert James; Michael Allaway; Jonathan Elms; Claire Banazol; Carole Beranek, Samuel Andrade, and Christine Vandenberghe. Other support came from the Município de Oeiras and Infraestruturas de Portugal.

A specialised team of conservationists-restorers was appointed to restore the monument, which involved cleaning it, filling the stone cracks, reinforcing the stone base and repainting the lettering. In September 2017, two years after the start of the project, the monument was restored and it was time for the rededication of the Monument to the life of Captain Conway Shipley, Royal Navy, 1782-808. The evening before the rededication ceremony a Monument Rededication Dinner was held on the 20 September at the São Julião da Barra Fort. On the 21st the formal rededication ceremony of the monument was held, followed by a lunch, hosted by the Oeiras Camara at the *Adega Marquês de Pombal* Palace.

Present at the ceremony were: Shipley's descendant, The Hon. Owain and Mrs Rowley-Conwy; Her Britannic Majesty's Ambassador, Mrs Kirsty Hayes; the Presidente da Câmara Municipal de Oeiras, Dr. Paulo César Sanches Casinhas da Silva Vistas; and the Presidente Infraestruturas de Portugal, António Laranjo. The service was conducted by The Right Reverend Dr Barry Morgan, Archbishop of Wales (2003-2017).

The monument will continue to look over the Tagus entrance, as an eternal memory to Captain Conway Shipley:

*Sacred to the Memory of CONWAY SHIPLY,
Late Captain of His Britannic Majesty's Ship La Nymphe,
Who was killed in an attempt to cut an enemy's vessel out of the Tagus,
On the 22d of April, 1808, aged 25 years.
Circumstances, which human wisdom could not foresee,
Nor any exertion of human courage obviate,
Rendered the attempt unsuccessful,
And closed the short but distinguished career of the gallant leader of it.
While his name will long live in the records of Fame,
And the remembrance of his country,
The brave and good of every nation will venerate his tomb,
And contemplate, with respect, the last mansion of a Hero.*

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