

Dennis Manning - a sentinel of Rye Harbour

By Peter Manning.

My great-great-grandfather **Dennis Manning** was born of a poor, Irish-Catholic tenant, land-farming family in the year 1798 in the parish of Kilbride, County Roscommon, Ireland. Kilbride, a large scattered parish of some 7,122 acres with a population of about three and a half thousand persons, was situated some three to five miles north of the county town of Roscommon.

Dennis's family probably lived in a one roomed cabin built of mud and earth sods, the first two or three feet being made of stone without mortar, the roof, constructed of branches and potato stalks covered with turf, was then laid with straw and rushes, which were held down by large stones. The family's main diet would have been potatoes, which they grew on a small plot of poor quality land adjoining the cabin, this occasionally supplemented with buttermilk.

Dennis's early childhood would have been spent in the almost bare cabin with very little furniture, possibly a table and a few stools. An open turf fire, situated in the middle of the room, would have been used for cooking and heating, with a hole in the roof for ventilation, what bedding was available was made with dried straw and rushes laid on the bare earth floor, all this being shared with other members of a usually large family.

The outside environment of this part of Kilbride in the early nineteenth century was sparsely covered with trees and had little landscape to see except very large tracts of undulated wild bog with an un-broken view of the distant hill of Slievebawn. Nearby, belonging to other poor tenants, were similar small garden patches for growing potatoes, and their poor cabins of the same type and condition.

His education, if any, would have been received at a local hedge school, this, when given to the poor native Irish, was usually in the open air. When old enough to work, and able to find it, he would have spent his days labouring for the local Protestant landlord.

During the early nineteenth century, from about 1816, the Province of Connaught began to suffer from widespread potato crop failures, this caused by heavy flooding of the river's Shannon and Suck, both bordering County Roscommon. Further crop failures in the following years of 1817 and 1819 occurred during which small pox and typhus fever became rampant causing many deaths among the poor.

In 1822 Ireland suffered one of the worst famines caused by a serious potato blight, this, followed by a typhus epidemic, resulted in much poverty, starvation and death. Those who were able, fled to the towns in search of food, while many, of which Dennis may have been one, made their way to the coastal ports in the hope of obtaining passage to another country.

As was the custom of the labouring classes at this time, Dennis would probably have walked the almost one hundred miles from Roscommon to Dublin from where he would have sought passage on a cargo boat sailing for England. Many Irish farm labourers who came to England made their way southwards to work in the harvesting of hay and corn in the southern counties and market gardens around London.

By late 1824, Dennis was probably in lodgings among the impoverished Irish in East London, around the slum district of Shadwell by the River Thames, working as a Labourer; here Irish immigrants were being taken on for the digging of the London and St. Katherine's Docks. After a hard day's labouring what time remaining would have been spent in local public houses where their wages were usually handed out, to be spent on cheap beer.

On Thursday the 28th April 1825, Dennis Manning was recruited as a 'volunteer' into the Royal Navy on board H.M.S. Perseus, a 552 tons, sixth rate sailing ship of twenty- two guns.

H.M.S. Perseus, for several years, had been lying in the River Thames, off the Tower of London, as a receiving ship, daily sending out recruiting parties of able seamen, into the Stepney area, to raise new men for the Royal

Navy. Many 'recruits' were picked up after a night of heavy drinking. Dennis was mustered on board Perseus at six-thirty the same evening, being inspected by Captain James Couch. He remained here for several days with other recruits, being taught basic seamanship by the ship's Boatswain. Dennis was also entered into the ship's muster list as a 'supernumerary' seaman for the Coast Blockade. It was here in the muster lists that the ship's naval clerk probably anglicised his name to Manning, from the Irish Belgic surname of O'Mainnin, the 'O' having been dropped many years earlier. (This surname in an Irish brogue tongue was pronounced as "Mawnyeen"). On the evening of Tuesday the 3rd May 1825, Dennis with thirty-one other supernumerary seamen mustered for inspection before being discharged to H.M.S. Prince Regent, via her tender the Star.

On leaving the Perseus, the Star, a forty-eight foot tender of forty-one tons, proceeded down the River Thames to the Nore, where she had reached by the following day. The Star continued into the River Medway where H.M.S. Prince Regent, a 2940 tons, first-rate sailing ship with 120 guns, had been lying at anchor near Folly Point. Prince Regent received the seamen from the Star on the afternoon of the 4th May, where the naval cutter Surly had also arrived with stores for the ship.

On the 8th May, Dennis was discharged with sixty other supernumerary seamen into the cutter Surly, for continued service with H.M.S. Hyperion, a fifth rate wooden sailing frigate of 1100 tons carrying forty-two guns. She was moored in Newhaven Harbour, Sussex as part of the Eastern Division of the Sussex Coast Blockade. Dennis joined HMS Hyperion, his third ship, on the 10th May 1825 as a 'Landsman', the lowest rank in the navy. For the Coast Blockade, H.M.S Hyperion had some twelve hundred men on her muster lists; these supernumerary seamen came under the command of Captain William James Mingaye.

The purpose of the Coast Blockade was to prevent smugglers landing and disposing of contraband goods on the south coast of England. Seamen from the ship were detailed into groups of between twelve and thirty men, with a lieutenant in command, each officer being issued with a pistol and a cutlass, and stationed along the Sussex coast in the Martello Towers, which were built during the Napoleonic period, and barrack quarters erected for the men. Occasionally an old ships hulk was used for quarters, from where a party of seamen would launch a long boat to pursue the smugglers.

On the 17th May 1825, Dennis was part of a detachment from Hyperion posted for three years to the eastern district station of Rye, situated at the mouth of the River Rother on the Sussex coast. This district contained the Camber watch-house, the old hulk Enchantress, beached inside Rye Harbour and the Martello Towers nearby. Billeted here Dennis's job, with other seamen, was to daily search the six miles of beaches and shore line of Rye and Camber for illegal cargoes being landed.

An incident in which Dennis would probably have been involved was on Thursday the 27th April 1826, when a galley with illegal spirits on board, beached on the east hills at the entrance to Rye Harbour, when a large body of armed smugglers came over the sand hills for the purpose of running the goods, upon which an affray commenced between the smugglers and a party of Blockade men, of which one of the latter was killed and several wounded. The Blockade party ultimately seized the galley and fifteen tubs, but the smugglers escaped. Just a month later on the 22nd May, Dennis was promoted from Landsman to Ordinary Seaman at the Rye station, his daily earnings rising from ten pence to eleven and a half pence.

All through the heat of the summers and freezing cold of the winters of 1826, 1827 and 1828, Dennis with the watch crews, would have spent many hours either trudging through the heavy shingle beaches of Rye and Camber or rowing up and down the coastal waters around Rye Harbour in search of smugglers, undoubtedly taking a toll on his health.

Dennis returned to H.M.S. Hyperion on the 14th August 1828, having served for three years and four months as a sentinel at the eastern district blockade station. He was discharged from the ship on the 23rd August with several other shipmates into the naval cutter Wolf, which proceeded to Portsmouth, from where he collected his back pay from the navy office and proceeded to return to London.