

The Sinking of HMS Royal George – Spithead, 29 August 1782. Sister ship HMS Victory.

The remains of the mighty *Royal George*, without doubt one of the finest ships that ever sailed, lie at the bottom of The Solent.

In 1746 work began on constructing *Royal George* - the largest vessel yet to be built in Britain, and the Royal Navy's largest warship. When completed and launched in 1756 she weighed 3,745 tons and her hull was over 200ft long and 50ft wide. She was built from more than 100,000ft³ of English oak and elm, cut from some 3,840 trees taken from 110 acres of forest. This mighty 100-gun ship had three gun-decks, and her quarterdeck rode 32ft above the waves. She had three masts over 100ft high, and was able to sail at 11 knots in a gale.



A fictitious combination of two events set in Deptford Dockyard in southeast London, England, UK: the launch of the H.M.S. Cambridge (left) in Deptford on 21 October 1755, and the H.M.S. Royal George (right) which was actually launched at Woolwich Dockyard the following year.

The Seven Years War

On the outbreak of the Seven Years War in 1756 *Royal George* took her place as the flagship of the Channel Fleet.

One of the world's more complicated wars, the Seven Years War began with Britain and Prussia fighting as allies against France and Austria. France had taken Spain's place as the leading expansionist power, and had developed a feeling of bitter rivalry towards Britain. France also, fearing a strong Germany, aided Austria in the war against Prussia.

In 1756 the Prussians invaded Saxony (a country which had changed alliances against Prussia during the War of Austrian Succession), only for Austria, France, Russia and Sweden to declare war on Prussia, with Spain later supporting France. Only Britain and Hanover were allied with

Prussia. Britain was concentrating on protecting her colonies in North America (under attack from French troops and Indians) and in Canada. Britain was also gaining victories in India against France, and in Cuba and the Philippines against Spain.

France gradually became more and more involved with the land war in Europe, enabling Britain to achieve victories overseas.

In 1759, known in Britain as the Year Of Victories, Britain went on the offensive despite French plans to invade Britain. Guadeloupe was captured, General Wolfe was able to celebrate success at Quebec, and Clive continued to triumph in India. Yet there was still the threat of invasion. France planned to land 20,000 men at Glasgow and a further 20,000 in Essex, to capture London.

Although in July 1759 Sir George Rodney had destroyed many of the flat-bottomed invasion craft that had assembled at Le Havre, the threat remained until the battle of Quiberon Bay.

The Battle of Quiberon Bay

Throughout the summer of 1759 the Channel Fleet, under the command of Admiral Sir Edward Hawke¹ on board his flagship *Royal George*, blockaded the French port of Brest in Brittany to prevent the French fleet (under the command of Conflans) from leaving without a fight. The French army in Quiberon Bay awaited the arrival of Conflans to transport it to Britain.

By November, the British fleet was hit by a succession of gales in the English Channel, and on 9 November the wind blew in such strength that they were forced to take shelter in Torbay. Although they remained there for less than a week, Conflans had meanwhile been reinforced with a squadron of ships under the command of Bompard, and put to sea on the same day that Hawke left Torbay.

Conflans sailed straight for Quiberon to pick up the invasion army, and by 20 November was near his destination. Conflans used local pilots to guide his way inshore, where he felt safe from Hawke between the Foar Shoal and the rocky Cardinals. On a dark afternoon, with an increasing north-westerly gale, despite the weather conditions, and not knowing where treacherous reefs and sandbanks lay, Hawke chose to follow Conflans. He flew the signal 'Form as you chase'. Hawke intended the destruction of the French fleet.

Hawke's line of ships was led by *Magnanime*, captured from the French in 1748, followed by *Torbay*, *Dorsetshire*, *Resolution*, *Warspite* and *Royal George*. *Royal George* was heading straight for the French flagship, *Soleil Royal*.

The first loss was the French 74-gun *Thésée*, which was in action against *Torbay*. The gale suddenly rocked *Thésée*, and as her gun ports were open, she instantly filled and sank. Only 22 survived out of the crew of more than 600, despite attempts by *Torbay* to save as many as possible by hoisting her boats. The next casualty was *Héros*, which surrendered to Lord Howe of *Magnanime* after sustaining casualties of over 400 of her men from her battle with *Magnanime* and *Royal George*. She was blown ashore.

Around four o'clock *Royal George* closed in on the 80-gun *Soleil Royal*. Bravely, the French 70-gun *Superbe* sailed to protect *Soleil Royal*. Despite the gale preventing her from using her lower gun ports, *Royal George* fired a single broadside, and *Superbe* sank immediately.

The French ship *Formidable* was soon captured. Then night fell, and both fleets anchored. In the morning, *Soleil Royal* found itself within range of *Royal George*. In its attempt to escape it ran upon the Rouelle Shoal, Conflans then ordered his flagship to be burnt, and escaped ashore with the crew. A boarding party arrived in time to carry off her figurehead.

During the night two British ships, *Essex* and *Resolution*, were driven ashore and, after the crew was saved, burnt to prevent capture. The 70-gun *Juste* was also captured.

The result of the Battle of Quiberon Bay was that the British fleet of 23 ships had defeated the French fleet of 21 ships in French waters, causing the loss of seven French ships and over 2,500 men. The British lost two ships, but both of their crews were saved. The result was to defeat the French plans for invasion, and ensured naval supremacy for the British, for the duration of the war. The Battle of Quiberon Bay inspired the well-known chorus:

***Hearts of Oak are our ships,
Hearts of Oak are our men,
We always are ready,
Steady, boys, steady,
We'll fight and we'll conquer again and again.***

After the Seven Years War ended in 1763, *Royal George* was laid up in Plymouth for almost 15 years until 1777. Although the French invasion plans of the Seven Years War had been defeated, a new threat emerged in 1779.

The French-Spanish Armada of 1779

In 1779 the French planned to take advantage of the fact that Britain's Royal Navy was dispersed between America and the West Indies, and in a crippled state due to the political situation, by mounting a full-scale invasion of Britain with the aid of Spain. Forty thousand French troops and their transports were assembled at Le Havre and St Malo. The plan was that, in May, the French fleet under the Comte d'Orvilliers would rendezvous with the Spanish fleet under Don Luis de Cordoba, sail into the English Channel, destroy the British Home Fleet, escort the transports across the Channel, capture **Portsmouth** and the Isle of Wight, and then march on London.

Although the plan had been set for May, d'Orvilliers was unable to sail until June, as his ships were under-manned and under-provisioned. The French did not have enough men for such a fleet, so in order to increase the number of officers many men were promoted regardless of suitability, and many of the seamen had been found in prisons. It was later said that there were ships in which none of the crew or officers knew even how to take a bearing.

The British Situation

The British fleet was also in a state of decay. Lord Sandwich and politics controlled the Admiralty, and able commanders such as Lord Howe were refused commands. The situation had degenerated into a farce, with the situation compared to the two families in *Romeo and Juliet*, since Lord Sandwich's surname was Montagu, and Admiral Keppel was nicknamed 'Capulet'.

Admiral Keppel resigned the command of the Channel fleet in March 1779, with the Government unable to find a successor. Keppel's friends, Lord Howe and Lord Mann, refused to accept out of regard for Keppel, and because they despised Lord Sandwich. The government eventually gave the command to Sir Charles Hardy, the elderly, sick Governor of Greenwich Hospital.

The British fleet, though small, contained the mightiest ships of the day. As well as the mighty HMS *Royal George* the fleet consisted of the 100-gun HMS *Britannia*, the 100-gun HMS *Victory*², and the 90-gun *Prince George*. With 30 ships of the line and eight frigates, Sir Charles Hardy left harbour at the Isle of Wight on 16 June.

The Voyage of the Armada

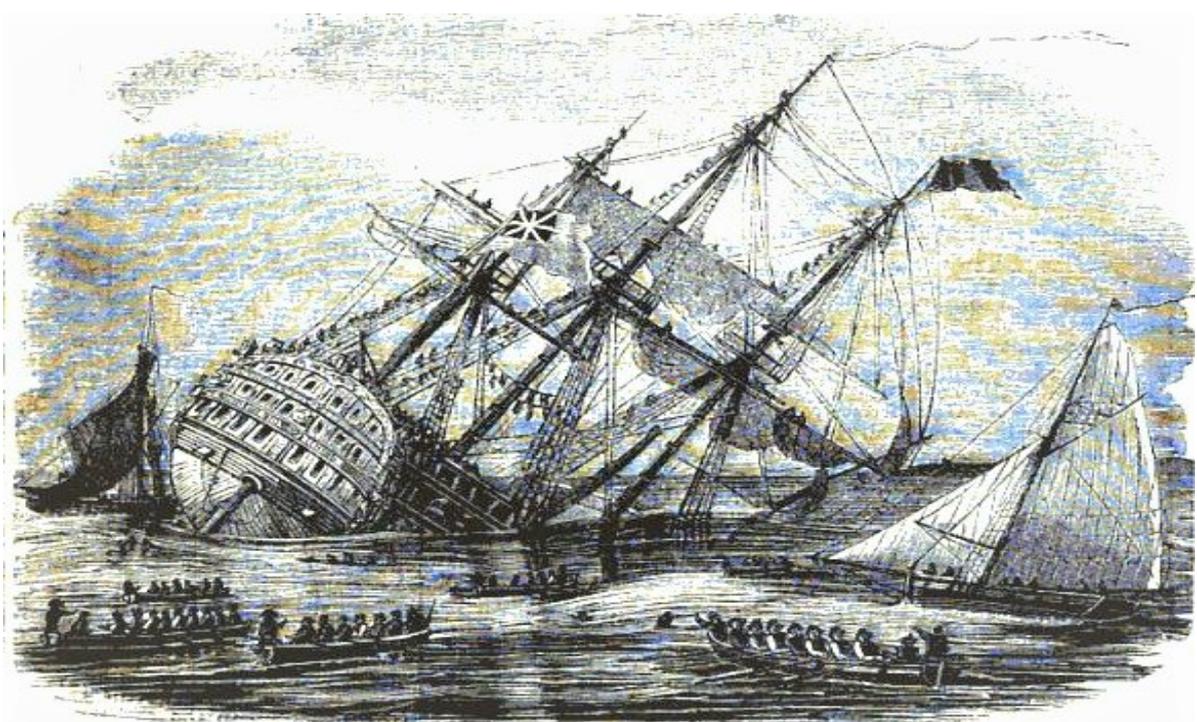
D'Orvilliers sailed to Corunna to rendezvous with the Spanish fleet. The Spanish officers, however, had not been informed of the plan, and took six weeks to organise and rendezvous. The Spanish also refused to follow French orders, and tried to dissuade the French from invading England, insisting that the fleet should attack Gibraltar instead. The fleet set sail, however, completely outnumbering the British Home Fleet. In August the Armada finally entered the English Channel. The three-month delay had meant that the crews of the French fleet, which had set sail in June, had consumed most of their food and water. Smallpox and scurvy were rife throughout the fleet. Even d'Orvillier's son died. So many French sailors were sick that there were often too few men to sail the ships, let alone man the guns in the event of a battle.

The Armada reached Plymouth only to be blown into the Atlantic. The French then abandoned their plan of capturing the Isle of Wight, settling on taking Plymouth and occupying Cornwall. The French Armada again reached Plymouth, only to be blown back into the Atlantic once more. Lord Barham advised Hardy to play for time, allowing disease and lack of food to take their toll on the enemy. Hardy agreed, and avoided engaging the enemy, though monitoring its position. Hardy decided to draw the enemy fleet away from its base at Brest by returning to the Spithead. This tactic proved unpopular with the men on board *Royal George*. They considered it cowardice, and tied their jackets over the figurehead so that it wouldn't 'see' the ship turning its stern to the enemy. This tactic, though unadventurous and a waste of a fleet of many fine ships, was successful, and on 3 September d'Orvilliers abandoned the attempt, returning to Brest with over 8,000 of his men sick. The cost of the expedition helped to push France into bankruptcy; its attempts to recover the cost through taxes led to the French Revolution.

The Last Victory of *Royal George*

Royal George was able to redeem herself in January 1781. While escorting a convoy to Gibraltar she captured two Spanish ships of the line off Portugal. She then began a two-year overhaul in Plymouth, and in August 1782 sailed from Plymouth to join the fleet gathered at Spithead to relieve Gibraltar from the Spanish forces blockading it.

The Sinking of *Royal George*



LOSS OF THE "ROYAL GEORGE," AT SPITHEAD.

In the early hours of 29 August, 1782, the greatest fleet assembled on British shores lay off the Spithead. There were over 50 Men-of-War, including the 100-gun HMS *Victory* and *Royal George*, and over 300 merchant ships. *Royal George* was the flagship of Rear Admiral Kempenfeldt, and under the command of Captain Waghorn. On 29 August *Royal George* was signalling the traditional 'Wedding Garland', and the day had been set aside for the crew to say their farewells. Since desertion was a problem, shore leave was cancelled, and the sailors' wives were allowed on board. As well as the families of the sailors, merchants, money-lenders and even prostitutes came aboard - approximately 400 people, an extra 70 tons of humanity.

Heeling the Ship

While this was going on Captain Waghorn ordered a minor repair to be made below the water-line. A water-cock that provided sea-water for cleaning the gun-decks needed to be replaced. Although William Nicholson, Master Attendant of Portsmouth Dockyard, had warned against making the repair with the ship loaded with the 548 tons of stores and 83 tons of ammunition needed for the Gibraltar expedition, Captain Waghorn ordered the repairs to be made. The proposed method of repair was to heel the ship by moving the cannon from one side of the ship to the other. At 7am the 820-strong crew hauled and pushed the cannon into position to achieve the eight degree list to starboard. The initial heel being insufficient, the ship was twice heeled further.

While this was going on, despite the fleet-wide ban on shore leave, the Master, the Boatswain and the Gunner were in Portsmouth. These were the three officers who would normally oversee such an operation, and whose expertise would have been vital to prevent sinking. No-one was left in charge of the operation below decks. Captain Waghorn had also controversially ordered that the lower gun-decks, normally closed when a ship is being heeled, should remain open. This was so that extra stores could be carried through them, to prevent them having to be hauled up to the deck. Captain Waghorn was perhaps fooled by the lack of wind, forgetting that The Solent's unique double tide makes the waters of Spithead choppy even without wind. The gun ports were only a foot above sea-level, and water was already beginning to splash inside in increasing amounts



Sinking of the Royal George

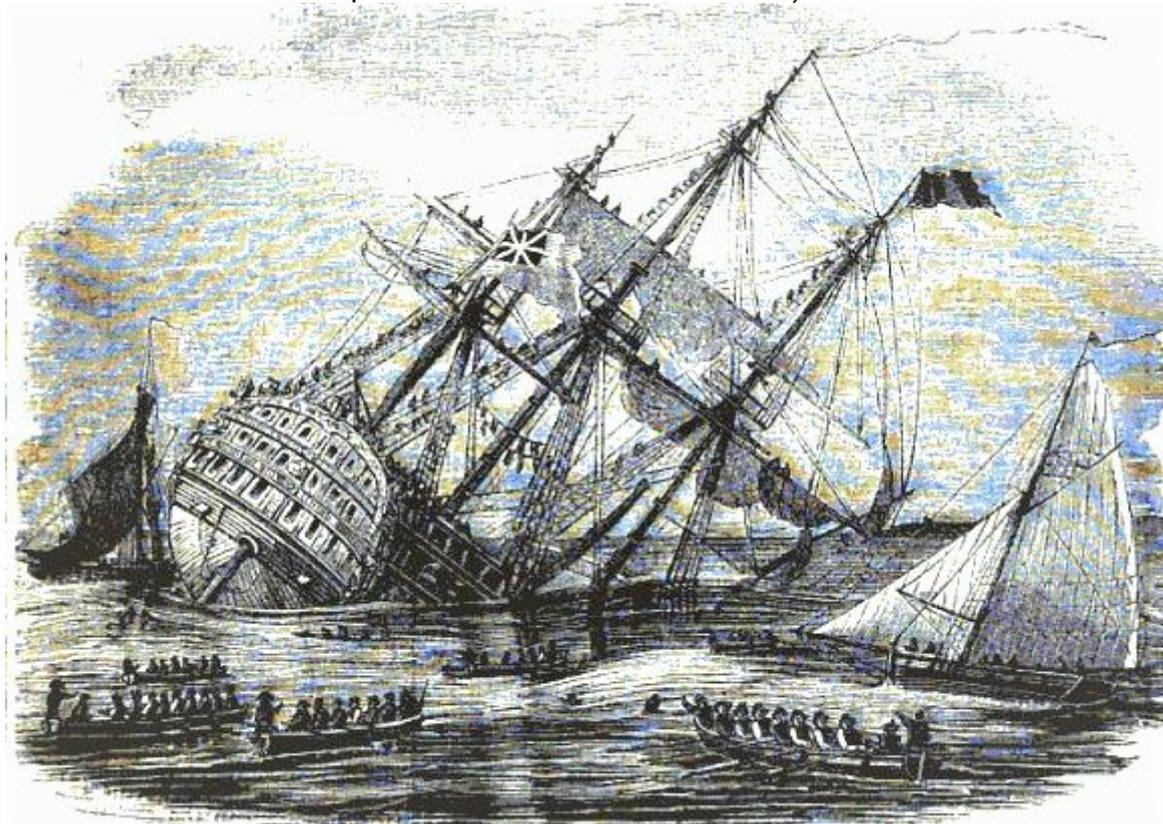
At 9am the 50-ton cutter *Lark* came alongside and began loading rum through the gun ports. Ominously, rats and mice were reported to be leaving the ship, jumping aboard *Lark*. The weight of the rum began to tip the gun-sills below the water-line. The ship's carpenter hurried to the deck to tell the officer of the watch, Lieutenant Monins Hollingbery, to give the order to 'Right Ship'. Hollingbery refused to listen and dismissed him, ordering him below. Returning to the lower decks, the carpenter saw that the situation had got worse, and returned to Hollingbery and repeated his request. Hollingbery replied, 'Damme, Sir! If you can manage the ship better than I can you had better take command'.

The carpenter then went to warn Captain Waghorn, who sent the First Lieutenant to investigate. At 9.18am Waghorn finally gave the order to 'Right Ship', almost 20 minutes after the ship had begun sinking. Before the drummer could comply, the ship began to capsize. Hundreds of men ran down hatchways to get to the guns to right the ship, but the slope was now so steep that not even 18 men could move a single gun.

The water ran into all the gun ports on the starboard side of the lower gun-decks. Of the hundreds of men below decks only three survived, by escaping through the gun ports. Captain Waghorn ran to the Admiral's cabin to warn Rear Admiral Kempenfeldt, but the door was jammed. At that point the masts began to fall, disaster quickly struck. Rolling suddenly over and then back, the ship sank upright to the bottom, her upper masts protruding above the water.

Captain Waghorn jumped overboard but his son drowned. Among those who drowned were admiral Kempenfeldt, many crew, and women, children and other civilians visiting aboard for various reasons. The nation was stunned. Only 255 of the 1,200 people on board survived.

The end happened so quickly that it was reported that a local lady, writing a letter, looked up and saw the ship, with its pennant barely touched by the wind; yet after completing her sentence looked up again to see that the ship had gone. The carpenter drowned, yet Lieutenant Hollingbery survived, and was later promoted to Captain. For several days, bodies were washed ashore at Ryde (where Earl Mountbatten opened a new memorial in 1965) and Portsmouth.



LOSS OF THE "ROYAL GEORGE," AT SPITHEAD.

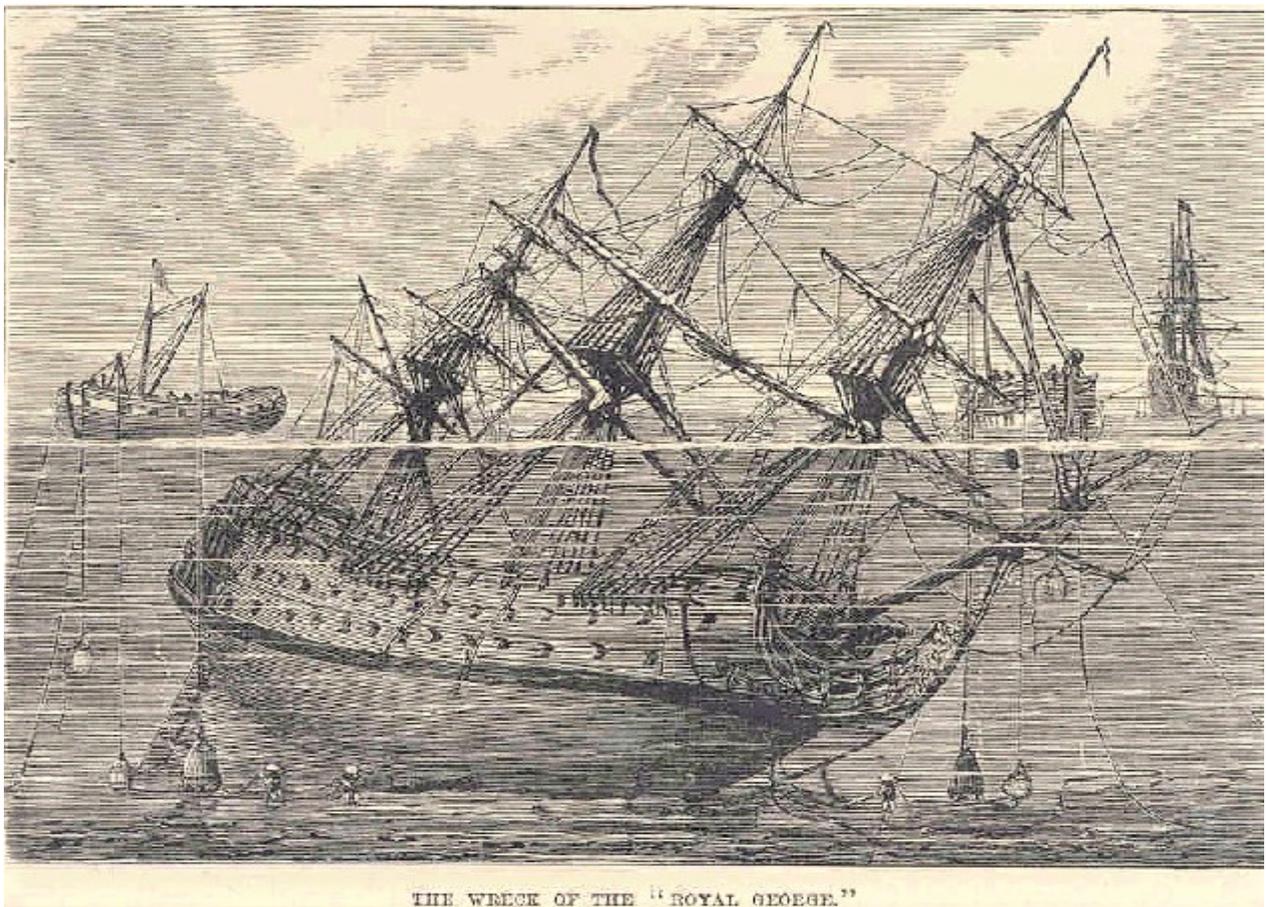
The Court Martial

The Court Martial was held on board HMS *Warspite*, with five Admirals sitting in judgement. Court decided to clear Kempenfeldt and Waghorn and the officers and crew were “acquitted of all blame,” and the loss of the ship was due to the “decay of her timbers.” They blamed the disaster on the dockyard authority, the Navy Board, claiming that the disaster was caused by the bottom of the ship falling out through rot. Only two witnesses supported the verdict: a shipwright, who said that some of the timbers were rotten, which was to be expected in a 26-year-old ship; and a Gunners' Yeoman, who said that he heard a crack below the water-line.

The Navy Board was framed as the culprit, since the funds given by the Government and Admiralty to the Board for ship repair were often embezzled by the Board, meaning that ships often went to sea in desperate need of repairs which had been paid for, but not started. 83 naval ships had been sunk through decay during the American War of Independence. The Navy Board believed the verdict, and as a result sabotaged every attempt to salvage the warship.

Salvage Attempts

Royal George sat in the middle of the Navy's main anchorage, and could have been saved. William Tracey in 1783 suggested that the hull could be harnessed and raised with the tide. The Navy Board tried everything within its power to prevent this, and even supplied Tracey with ships that sank. Tracey was forced to abandon his attempt after moving *Royal George* 30 yards: he had been bankrupted by the Navy Board's refusal to pay for his services.



In 1832 the Navy Board was abolished, and work was begun on *Royal George*. Between 1836 and 1839 John and Charles Deane, inventors of the deep sea diving suit, raised 29 cannon but

reported that the hull was beyond salvage. In 1839 Colonel Palsey, a pioneer of marine demolition, raised the remaining cannon by using gunpowder.

The cannon were melted down and were used to make the bronze and iron capital for Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square, London, celebrating the triumph of *Royal George's* sister ship HMS *Victory*.

Sauce:

<http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>

Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia.

[Catastrophe at Spithead: The Sinking of the Royal George | Naval Historical Foundation \(navyhistory.org\)](#)