

# Broseley Biscuit

## Exclusive Broseley Biscuit for Trafalgar 200 HMS Victory Celebrations



This photo is of the now-famous Broseley Biscuit sold for £212 on eBay to raise funds for tree planting by Broseley Local History Society. Application has been made to Guinness World Records for recognition as a world record price for a biscuit.

On the 22nd October 2005, six Scots Pine trees were planted at 'The Firs' in the Town of Broseley. There was a need to replace those in place since the original celebrations of the Battle of Trafalgar 200 years ago. Only two survive now.

This is biscuit No. 2 of a very limited edition of five that were produced to celebrate again the contribution that Broseley made to the battle. It was made to an original ship's biscuit recipe and is similar to those on display in HMS Victory in the Historic Dockyard at Portsmouth. At the time of Trafalgar, each man was entitled to 1lb of ship's biscuit (or bread) per day. This one is approximately 80mm (3¼") in diameter, approx 18mm (¾") thick and weighs approximately 74g (2½ oz). If kept dry, it should be still in good condition for the next centenary celebration!

Of the other biscuits, No. 1 is retained in the Society's museum collection and Nos. 3, 4 and 5 were presented to Lady Forester, Philip Dunne, M.P. and The Mayor of Broseley at the ceremony. Only No 2 was offered for auction and is therefore unique.

The contribution of this Shropshire town to the success of the Navy was tremendous. From his home at 'The Lawns' in Broseley, Ironmaster John Wilkinson had improved out of all recognition the casting and machining techniques for the production of naval ordinance. Metallurgical quality was ensured by casting the barrels solid instead of hollow. He designed and manufactured a lathe that would bore the barrels truly and accurately. The improvements were so successful that the government refused to grant a patent so that other manufacturers across the river in Coalbrookdale, Ironbridge and elsewhere could use the processes. During the battle, the firing rate of the French navy was only half of that of our ships. This may have been significantly affected by the fact that the French crew thought that their cannon might explode when fired.

The Society incorporates the Wilkinson Society and will also be celebrating the bicentenary of the death of John Wilkinson in 2008.

Samuel Pepys had improved the rations issued from naval stores but the cooking method was due to another Broseley resident ironmaster, Alexander Brodie. His design for safe, reliable galley stoves provided hot food for the 800 crew and officers of every three-decker and for the other ships. It must have improved morale tremendously and been another vital factor ensuring the fitness of British crews. The galley stove on the Victory has been modelled in 1/12th scale for display at our exhibition at Broseley Library.

What else did Broseley provide? Situated on the River Severn in the heart of Shropshire, it had easy water communications down river and around the coast to Portsmouth and Chatham. Besides the iron guns, galley and fittings, HMS Victory carried 50 tons of coal for the stove and needed plenty of tar for waterproofing hull and rigging. Local meat could easily be preserved with salt from nearby Cheshire. Grain and vegetables were plentifully available for food and hemp and flax grown to help make the ropes and sails. Broseley pipes were available for those who wanted to smoke their issue of tobacco.

Men and money were essential of course. The River Severn boatmen provided strong seasoned sailors for the navy. The taxes levied nationally to pay for the building, fitting out and provisioning were paid here as everywhere.

Could the battle have been won without the efforts of Broseley? All these topics were covered in the Library exhibition, Trafalgar Dinner and Tree planting events. This biscuit is a unique celebration of a proud history. It came with certification and supporting literature from the celebrations ready for framing.

The auction, eBay No. 6566652162, ended on the 6th October with a final flurry of bids from enthusiastic supporters of the history of Broseley. It was won by Mr. Laurence Ball who had moved from Broseley about fourteen years previously. He had not gone far and was able to return with his wife for the evening of the Trafalgar Day Dinner for a formal presentation of the biscuit.

### **Broseley Biscuit History**

Prior to the anniversary celebrations there was a reconnaissance visit to 'HMS Victory' for general information and to see if any of the cannon made by John Wilkinson's ironworks had survived. It was noticed that there were on display examples of biscuits that would have been issued as rations to navy crews 200 years ago. Typical recipes were found on websites and a start made on making a few biscuits that might be used during Broseley's celebrations. Strong wholemeal flour, salt and water were all that were needed. Eventually, the cooking technique was to make the dough stiff and roll to about 20mm (3/4") thick, cut to circles and prick out the pattern using a drilled master template. After

overnight drying the biscuits were baked for 30min at 220C. At first they were edible, albeit an acquired taste. After drying further for a few days they were so hard that only dunking made them edible.

Being satisfied with the method, it then seemed a good idea to make a batch especially for presentation to the dignitaries coming to the tree planting. With an extra biscuit made within a limited edition of five, it would be possible to raise money by auctioning off just one biscuit.

The listing on eBay was made on Sunday 2nd October and there was a quick flurry of bids, mainly from kind friends who had been sent notification of the listing. A press release was emailed out to the local papers, radio and television on the following day, the 3rd. By then there were ten bids to be seen, convincing the media that the auction was bound to succeed. There was good coverage from 'The Shropshire Star' and 'Radio Saga FM 105.7'.

On Tuesday 4th a bid appeared from an eBay member now living in Colorado, USA. Fifty years previously we had worked together in London. This made it possible to send out another press release on the topic 'Save the Broseley Biscuit from going to America' which got more good coverage in 'The Shropshire Star', 'Bridgnorth Journal' 'BBC Radio Shropshire' and 'Radio Saga FM 105.7'. This coverage raised awareness of the auction and was linked to excellent pre-publicity for the Exhibition, Trafalgar Day Dinner and Tree Planting Ceremonies. Over the weekend more bids came from Shropshire folk with a fondness for Broseley. The auction ended after 26 bids, reaching the excellent total of £212.00 which meets a good part of the cost of the trees and their strong protective fencing.

The buyer, Laurence Ball, was happy to be photographed for the press and interviewed on Radio Shropshire. Interestingly, he has subsequently received a much higher offer from someone in USA but is keen to keep it in England for his grandchildren. There was more useful publicity for the Society events when I was invited to visit the Radio Shropshire Shrewsbury studio to cover the very enjoyable time spent on the project instead of writing the new book on domestic copper and brass.

The 'Broseley Biscuit Story' has made a good talking point at the exhibition, the Trafalgar Day Dinner and the Tree Planting. It has helped to highlight the contribution made by Broseley, an early industrial town in landlocked Shropshire, to the survival of Britain as an English-speaking nation.