

The complexities of international reporting are well-illustrated by the news of the Battle of Trafalgar. The battle itself takes place on 21 October 1805 but it is followed by a storm and a considerable life-saving mission. Not until the 26th can Admiral Collingwood spare a ship to take the news to London. He then orders Lieutenant Lapenotière, master of HMS Pickle, to perform the task. Lieutenant Lapenotière duly sets sail and arrives in the English Channel on 4 November only to find the wind hard against him. He decides to land in Falmouth and make his way by land. He hires a whole series of horses and mail coaches in a 267-mile dash to the capital, and covers the distance in 37 hours, arriving at the Admiralty at 1 o'clock in the morning of 6 November. Although mail coaches often exceed ten miles an hour, this sustained speed – 7.2 mph – is pretty good for long-distance travel, beating even Sir Robert Carey's epic ride in 1603, when he covered the first 347 miles of his journey from Richmond to Edinburgh in 51 hours (6.8mph). The news accordingly circulates in London the same day and appears officially in the 7 November edition of *The Times*.

The interesting thing is that people have already heard it. *The Times* published rumours of the victory five days earlier – which it received by letters from Lisbon on the 1st. They don't know that Nelson has been killed but they do know of the destruction of half the combined French and Spanish fleet. How come?

If the earlier news travelled by land, it covered a minimum distance of 1,558 miles – 320 miles from Cape Trafalgar to Lisbon and 1,238 miles from Lisbon to London – in eleven days. If the messenger slept for only five hours per night for the ten nights involved, he travelled even faster than Lieutenant Lapenotière – for nearly six times the distance. And the cost of his horse hire and accommodation would have amounted to the equivalent of several hundred pounds. This can hardly be credited. However, if the news was taken the 320 miles to Lisbon by land on the 22nd-24th and was despatched by ship on the 24th, two days ahead of Lapenotière, it could have reached London in a week, if the winds were favourable. It was apparently possible to sail from Madeira to London – 600 miles further – in just eight days (Pückler-Muskau, *Regency Visitor*, p. 199). So even if it took seven days to sail to London, the letters from Lisbon could still have arrived on the 31st and the editor of *The Times* have been informed on the 1st, in time for the report to be published on the 2nd. And that would explain too why the earlier report did not mention Nelson's death. The Spanish or French informant did not know.

When it comes to international news: you simply can't bank on it arriving promptly. Even something as important as a military victory might take an extra five days to arrive due to a change in the wind.

Ian Mortimer