

England expects, and Sotheby's delivers

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The 'big three' auction houses - Bonhams, Christie's and Sotheby's - have all scheduled themed sales to coincide with the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar. But Sotheby's has already scored a decisive victory over its rivals by securing what is probably the greatest Nelson relic ever to be offered for sale: the actual Joseph Emery pocket watch that Nelson was carrying when he was mortally wounded at Trafalgar. And it could realise up to £350,000.

Joseph Emery's ground-breaking lever escapement watches are rare enough anyway (no more than 22 survive), but to come across one with such an extraordinary provenance as No. 1104 is more than most collectors would dare to dream of. The London maker, who lived from 1725 to 1794, was regarded among the best of his day. As a result, Emery was heavily patronised by royalty and the aristocracy.

Interestingly, it is unlikely that Nelson himself bought the watch brand-new from Emery's Charing Cross shop; when it was made in around 1787, he was still a little-known captain and probably could not have afforded the £100 or more it would have commanded (the equivalent of around £6,000 today).

One theory is that he bought the watch second-hand on returning triumphantly to London in 1797 after the Battle of Cape

St Vincent when he was presented with prize money, made rear-admiral and knighted by the King. A more likely scenario, however, is that he either received it from a grateful admirer or purchased it after his even greater victory the following year at the Battle of the Nile.

Heirloom

Following his death at Trafalgar, Nelson's watch was listed in the inventory of the Admiral's personal belongings removed from *HMS Victory* back in London (with his embalmed body still on board). "No. 7 A gold watch" was duly inherited by brother William, the 1st Earl Nelson.

When Earl Nelson died in 1835, the watch passed to his daughter Charlotte, along with the hero's medals, swords and other property. Charlotte was one of Admiral Nelson's favourite young relatives and was a long-time companion of his

Victory



(Above) A remarkable and affectionate autograph letter (signed "Nelson & Bronte"), to Lady Hamilton ("Fair Emma, good Emma, Great Emma, Virtuous Emma and My own Dear friend Emma"), expressing his frustration that his duties prevent him from seeing her, assuring her that he will be in no danger when he goes to the French Coast the next day, 13th August 1801. Estimate: £20,000-£30,000.

(Left) 'Britannia Triumphant'. A very rare and apparently unrecorded broadsheet (790 x 510 mm), announcing Admiral Lord Nelson's victory at Trafalgar: "The most Glorious Naval Victory...since the Creation of the World." Printed in red ink by J Smeeton, St Martin's Lane, Charing Cross, 1805. Estimated by Sotheby's to sell for £25,000-£35,000.



mistress, Lady Emma Hamilton in the years before Trafalgar. Indeed, so close was the bond between niece and uncle that Charlotte wrote to her mother: "... and my future life in every act and instance shall be to do honour to the near relationship which I have the happiness to bear towards him."

In the event, the watch descended through various branches of the Bridport family until it ended up with the current (anonymous) owner who placed it on long-term loan to the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, where - somewhat strangely, I think - it has been part of the 'reserve' collection for some time.

National treasure

Angela Doane, Head of Collections at the museum, rather drily describes the watch as "an interesting object" and appears unconcerned by its sales and feasible departure from English shores. "It is for the owner to decide what they want to do with it," said Doane.

Martyn Downer, a leading Nelson historian and author of *Nelson's Purse* told QP that he believes it to be "one of the most evocative pieces in the



Admiral Nelson's pocket watch, to be sold at Sotheby's in October, for an estimated price of £250,000-£350,000.

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jigsaw of personal effects that survived Nelson's last hours."

He went on: "Out of the handful of possessions that Nelson had with him when he stepped out on the deck of *Victory* at Trafalgar 200 years ago, the watch was the most important. The lives of his men depended on it and, gazing at it today, knowing that Nelson must have frequently glanced at it as the battle raged around him is strangely affecting. It is impossible to imagine a Nelsonian treasure of similar importance."

If the watch goes to an overseas buyer there should undoubtedly be a campaign to 'save it for the nation'. But with any luck, a British institution (might we suggest the Maritime Museum, Ms Doane?) will fight tooth and nail to own it. After all, Prince Albert made sure to purchase Nelson's bloodstained uniform for the country - now the MM's principal exhibit alongside the Admiral's hair. Even the musket ball that killed him is on show at Windsor Castle.

Surely his watch is of similar importance? ○

Further information: 'Trafalgar: Nelson and The Napoleonic Wars': Sotheby's, 34-35 New Bond Street, London W1, 5th October. It is expected to be on view during the preceding five days, along with many other Trafalgar relics. To check viewing times, call 020 7293 5000.