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Fearing for Merseyside: Liverpool, its Defences and the French Invasion Scare of 1858–1859

James Crossland

Abstract

From the spring of 1858 to the winter of 1859, Britain was gripped by fears of a French invasion. These were prompted by a fraying of Anglo-French relations, following the attempted assassination of the French Emperor Napoleon III by a group of revolutionaries that included British citizens. The fear that Napoleon might take military action against Britain in response first arose in the spring of 1858, whereafter the national feeling intensified over the summer of 1859, when the emperor launched a successful invasion of Italy, raising the spectre of Britain having to deal with a new Bonaparte who could match his famous namesake both ambition and martial ability. The purpose of this article is to re-assess the French invasion scare of 1858–59, focusing on how the fear was both nurtured and responded to, not at a national, but at a local, level. Specifically, the focus here is on one of Britain's key port cities, Liverpool which, as a maritime and commercial centre, seemed to many on Merseyside as a probable target for a waterborne attack. By analysing how the press and public of the greater Merseyside region responded to this perceived threat, this article sheds light on the division between fears and reality in public perceptions, and the understudied, localised reaction of Liverpoolians to this apparent national crisis.¹

The Origins of the French “Threat” to Britain

On the evening of 14 January 1858, three bombs detonated under Emperor Napoleon III of France's carriage as it pulled up to the Paris Opera House. The explosions left 156 casualties, among them 8 dead, mostly onlookers who had lined the pavement of the Rue le Peletier in order to catch a glimpse of Napoleon and his wife, Eugénie. Though shaken, the royal couple were unharmed by the terrorist attack, whose perpetrators were quickly rounded-up by the emperor's notoriously draconian police force.² Amongst the first apprehended was the plot's mastermind, Felice Orsini, an Italian nationalist who

¹ The greater Merseyside region is regarded here as stretching from Liverpool across Wirral and down to Chester, as this region was viewed at the time as being protected – albeit insufficiently – by the same coastal defensive network.

² S.R. David, 'The memory of opposition: the collective identity of Louis-Napoleon's political prisoners', *The Western Society for French History*, 32 (2004), 237–55; F. Bressler, *Napoleon III: A Life* (London, 2000), 145–7.

believed that the murder of Napoleon – the possessor of Europe’s largest army and defender of the Papacy – would lead to a series of spectacular revolutionary events. As Orsini put it in his memoirs, the emperor’s death would not only end his ‘government based upon despotism and treason’, but also engender ‘a war of independence in Italy, a revolution in Paris, a war of principles and republicanism in continental Europe’, out of which a new, united Italy would be born.³

A source of great shock to the Paris police was the fact that Orsini was not alone in his dark thoughts on Napoleon and, indeed, had been aided and abetted in the bombing by like-minded radicals based in Britain. These included the Italian immigrants Giovanni Pierri and Carlo de Rudio, a French immigrant named Simon François Bernard, and two British citizens, Thomas Allsop and Joseph Taylor. The latter, moreover, was instrumental in planning the terrorist attack, assembling the bombs that Orsini would hurl at the emperor. Allsop, for his part, forged a British passport for the Italian.⁴ Given the international flavour of the conspiracy, in the weeks that followed the attack Napoleon’s advisers, as well as the regime’s propaganda newspaper *Le Moniteur Universel*, railed against the unmonitored, border-crossing nature of Europe’s radicals and urged that ‘a discussion now has to arise on what may be called the question of assassins’.⁵ A particular grievance raised was the attitude of Britain to dissident immigrants like Bernard, De Rudio and Pierri who, one of Napoleon’s advisors believed, were ‘allowed, under the very eyes of the police, to hold regular meetings, where regicide is proclaimed as a right and even as a duty’. The fear was that Britain, as a nation with the most liberal immigration policy in Europe, had now become a place where ‘fanatics are provided with arms, and despatched to Paris with full directions’.⁶

Prime Minister Lord Palmerston’s response was to attempt to mollify French concerns over the harbouring of violent radicals, by introducing the Conspiracy to Commit Murder Bill into parliament in February 1858, which would make it illegal for foreigners to plot acts of aggression on British soil. This bill, combined with Bernard being put on trial in London, was supposed to quell Anglo-French tensions. However, the resentment and indignation felt by many Britons over Paris’ accusatory tone led only to escalation. Not only was Palmerston’s bill rejected in the belief that it was little more than an act of placation to Napoleon – in the aftermath of which, the former was forced to resign as Prime Minister – but Bernard was acquitted, on the grounds that to convict him would be akin to the British courts acquiescing to the whims of a foreign despot.⁷ The

³ Quotes from F. Orsini, *Memoirs and Adventures of Felice Orsini* (Edinburgh, 1857), 190; Orsini’s background, motivations, plotting, actions and their aftermath are best explored in M. Packe, *Orsini: The Story of a Conspirator* (Boston, 1958).

⁴ E. Vizetelly, *Court Life of the Second French Empire, 1852–1870* (New York, 1908), 118–19.

⁵ *Le Moniteur Universel*, ‘Affaires Politiques’, 10 May 1858.

⁶ B. Porter, *The Refugee Question in Mid-Victorian Politics* (Cambridge, 1979), ch. 6; Quote from B. D’Ambès, *Intimate Memoirs of Napoleon III: Personal Reminiscences of the Man and the Emperor*, ed. and trans. A.R. Alinson, vol. 2 (London, 1912), 118.

⁷ R. Woodall, ‘Orsini and the Fall of Palmerston’, *History Today*, 26:10 (1976), 636–43.

courtroom was also an arena in which past fears of French aggression towards Britain were stoked to great effect. Bernard's defence lawyer pointed out to the jury that '600,000 French bayonets' lay across the Channel, pointed towards Britain with menace of intent, threatening the freedom of the isles with continental despotism. To these courtroom fears of Napoleon's military might was added concerns expressed in the press and parliament over the laying down at Toulon of an advanced armoured ironclad warship, *La Gloire*, in March 1858. As one newspaper reported, this meant that Napoleon now had the capacity to not only field 'armies capable of conquering Europe, if not of keeping it', but the potential to possess 'a navy which can sustain the trials of good and evil fortune, which may be destroyed but is never defeated'.⁸ A navy, in short, that could match the Channel fleet that protected Britain from a seaborne incursion – a fear that had lingered in British minds ever since the first Napoleonic invasion scares of the early 1800s.⁹

This fear that the emperor was about to execute what his predecessor had planned fifty years earlier as a reprisal, sparked curious instances of panic and paranoia in Britain. When, for example, Baron Denman received private and friendly correspondence from Napoleon on matters unrelated to the bombings in February 1858, he still felt the need to report the letter to the Foreign Office, on the grounds that 'it seems almost treasonable to correspond with France' at such a tense national moment.¹⁰ Certain newspapers also reported over-blown claims that Napoleon had established a new army camp at Châlons in February 1858, fit to house 50,000 men, 'or double that of last year', for purposes that were clearly nefarious.¹¹ Such panic faded as the year wore on and Anglo-French relations stabilised, in no small part on account of the successes enjoyed over the summer by the British and French forces that were fighting side by side against China in the Second Opium War.¹² However, the raw components of this initial fear wave in the early spring of 1858 – Napoleon's posturing as Europe's strongman, his aggressive shipbuilding programme and possession of an army that dwarfed the militia that guarded Britain's home islands – remained to form the basis of the second invasion scare that arose in the summer of 1859. This was prompted by Napoleon's swift and brutally successful invasion of Austrian-held Italy which, like the invasion 1858 scare, was one of the spectacular by-products of Orsini's terrorist attack.¹³ News of Napoleon's victory was followed by

⁸ *Life of Dr. Simon Bernard, with Judgment and Extracts from the Press of his Trial* (London, 1858), 12. *Liverpool Mercury*, 'France', 26 April 1858.

⁹ R. Glover, *Britain at Bay, Defence Against Bonaparte, 1803–1814* (London, 1973).

¹⁰ Liverpool City Council Archives (hereafter LIV), 920:DER 14/111/26/1, Denman letter, 25 February 1858.

¹¹ *Liverpool Mercury*, 'France', 23 February 1858.

¹² J.P. Parry, 'The impact of Napoleon III on British politics, 1851–1880', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 11, sixth series (2001), 147–75. For details on the Anglo-French campaign in China see J. Lovell, *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams and the Making of China* (London, 2011), ch. 15.

¹³ The intricacies of Napoleon's motivations and plans for war, and Orsini's role in prompting these plans, do not concern us here. For further reading see J.A. Berger, *The Life, Trial and Death of Felice Orsini, with his Letter to the Emperor* (London, 1858); M. Walker, *Plombières: Secret Diplomacy and the Re-Birth of Italy* (Oxford, 1968); A. Blumberg, *A Carefully Planned Accident: The Italian War of 1859* (Selinsgrove, 1990).

reports in the British press of the improvements in defences that were being made to the French Channel port of Cherbourg, and Napoleon's order for his navy to lay down two new ironclads, the *Magenta* and *Solferino*, both of which were provocatively named after the emperor's recent victories in Italy.¹⁴

The launching of Napoleon's new ironclads led to a fresh outburst of invasion hysteria in parliament. This was led principally by the MP for Southwark and former commander of the Baltic fleet, Admiral Sir Charles Napier who, in response to a fellow naval officer who argued that Britain had enough soldiers to repulse an invasion, declared 'good god sir! Does the gallant Admiral suppose that these 160,000 men are in the Thames, or at Bristol, or Liverpool? They are scattered all over the world!'.¹⁵ The response from Palmerston – who had once again become Prime Minister in June 1859 – was to call for a Royal Commission into Britain's defences. Testament to the degree of panic, the Royal Commission worked off the findings of a secret committee that had been chaired for the same purpose a month earlier by the Secretary of State for War, John Peel. Utilising the reports of spies at Cherbourg and Toulon, this committee concluded that France's burgeoning ironclad navy was indeed capable of escorting transports safely across the Channel, without fear of being stopped by the wooden-hulled ships of the Royal Navy.¹⁶ Palmerston's more public Royal Commission, comprised of naval officers, generals and an architect with a knowledge of fortifications, went even further in its dire assessment, concluding that 'neither the fleet, our standing army, nor our volunteer forces, nor even the three combined, can be relied on as sufficient in themselves for the security of the kingdom against foreign invasion'. The report, in short, confirmed officially the seemingly hysteric and hyperbolic announcement made at the onset of the invasion scare by *The Morning Chronicle*, that, at best, 'invasion was invited by the defenceless state of England' and, at worst 'France is NOW the mistress of the Channel!'¹⁷

The 'Threat' as Seen from Merseyside

In the Merseyside press, murmurings of both the French threat and Napoleon's bellicose character were present even before the Orsini affair gave rise to the years of invasion panic. In September 1857, the *Daily Post* ran two articles in the same edition on the subject of Napoleon and his intentions towards Britain. The first critically analysed the emperor's foreign policy and adduced him to be a shifty political manipulator with ambitions beyond France's borders. Here was a man who, despite the alliance with Britain in China, could not be counted on long term to remain the 'Napoleon of peace' that he

¹⁴ The National Archives, London (hereafter TNA), FO 881/4151, *Iron-cased vessels of all descriptions built and building in France*, 16 June 1862; A. Lambert, 'Politics, technology and policy-making, 1859–1965: Palmerston, Gladstone and the management of the ironclad naval race', *The Northern Mariner*, 8:3 (1998), 9–38.

¹⁵ *Hansard*, 'Considered in Committee', vol. 154, 11 July 1859, 1001.

¹⁶ TNA, WO 32/6342, *Report of the Committee under Prince George*, 26 May 1858.

¹⁷ TNA, WO 105/41, *Report on Royal Commission on the Defence of the United Kingdom, 1859–1860*; *Morning Chronicle*, 'Invasion Invited by the Defenceless State of England', 12 June 1858.

claimed to be. The second article drove this potential threat home to readers with hard figures in the form of a table, compiled from statistics gathered from a French military report, which detailed the comparative tonnage, firepower and number of ships possessed by Victoria and Napoleon's navies. The fear-inducing purpose of the article was evident in the statistics supplied: The French had a total of 537 steam and sail vessels and 14,152 guns, whilst Britain had 527 ships of both types, and 13,872 guns. Second place – even a close second place – was simply not good enough given the still fresh memory of the struggle Britain faced against the first Napoleon.¹⁸

When those memories resurfaced acutely during the Orsini affair and its aftermath, the *Liverpool Mercury* was quick to follow the thread laid down by *The Post*, declaring that 'excitement prevails in Paris, and the alliance (in China) is considered as broken by all shades of parties'. With Britain and France now at odds, 'the army of France will be reanimated with a warlike spirit ... war may not immediately follow, but rest assured the hand of France has already flown to the hilt of the sword'.¹⁹ Evidence of this belligerence taking shape in a disturbingly naval form came a few weeks later, when a new article on French war-planning declared that 'two floating batteries are about to be laid down, one at Toulon and the other at Brest, both cased in iron and with screw engines of 1000-horse power'. This was a reference to the two ironclads that Napoleon had laid down between the launching of *La Gloire* and the completion of the *Magenta* and the *Solferino*. These ships, the *Normandie* and the *Invincible*, out-classed the best the Royal Navy had to offer in both firepower and armour, just as the improvements at Cherbourg marked 'the realisation of a great Napoleonic idea' for France to assert its dominance in the Channel. The new dockyards and warships were just the start of what, the *Mercury* correctly opined, was a new phase of French shipbuilding, for which Napoleon was prepared to loosen his pursestrings to the tune of 300,000,000Fr. If, as was suspected, Napoleon continued along this trajectory of aggressively building up his navy, the *Mercury* thought it fair to ask the question: 'who could affirm that in a conflict it (the French navy) would not occupy the first rank?'.²⁰ A concerned citizen wrote in to the *Cheshire Observer* to this effect, declaring that in regards to coastal defences, Britain – in particular the North West – was 'not a whit more ready than when we drifted into the Russian war' of 1854, and that the alliance with Napoleon in China was 'but a temporary union of discordant elements'.²¹

As this letter to the editor pointed out, the growing public and parliamentary worry over the penetrability of the "wooden walls" that had long protected Britain's home waters fed into another cause for concern – the parlous state of the nation's coastal defences. Palmerston had been particularly focused on this following his return to power and, off the back of the Royal Commission's sobering recommendations, he appealed to

¹⁸ *Daily Post*, 'Louis Napoleon's policy', 'The navies of France and England', 11 Sept 1857.

¹⁹ *Liverpool Mercury*, "'Confidential" Relations with France – Cherbourg', 26 June 1858.

²⁰ *Liverpool Mercury*, 'Conditions in France', 23 February, 14 April and 26 April, 1858.

²¹ *Cheshire Observer and General Advertiser*, 'The Threatened Invasion', 29 May 1858.

parliament for £12,000,000 to bolster coastal forts and batteries at key strategic points. The plan, interestingly, did not include provision for any significant improvements to fortifications on Merseyside. This was because Palmerston's concern was with preventing a short distance, cross-Channel invasion, for which it was deemed crucial to focus on fortifying batteries, magazines and militia muster-points at Portsmouth, the Isle of Wight, Dover and the Medway. To further bolster these fixed defences, in May and October 1859, Palmerston also ordered the laying down of the *HMS Warrior* and the *HMS Black Prince* – heavily-armed and armoured warship deterrents designed specifically to outclass Napoleon's feared ironclads.²²

Palmerston's concern for strengthening the Channel ports and the home fleet aside, it was curious that Merseyside was seldom mentioned in these plans. Although geographically, the North West was unlikely to be targeted for invasion by an enemy attacking from the across the Channel, at the time of the Orsini affair, Liverpool was the trading hub of the British Empire, and Birkenhead, where there had been a rise in ironclad shipbuilding from the early 1850s onwards, was a major shipyard for the construction of vessels of war and commerce alike. Across the river, at the docks that lined the Liverpool side of the Mersey, the 1850s had also been a transformative decade. Heavy investment in the expansion and development of the docks had underpinned a general trend of growth in the tonnage of goods received, culminating in the handling of 4.4 million tons of cotton, timber and other goods over the course of 1858. Because of this, in that same year, it was deemed necessary to create the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board, a body that was tasked by order of the British government, with taking over the crucial and complex administration of most of Liverpool's ports, which had been in the hands of the local town council since the early eighteenth century. This government recognition of Liverpool's national importance as a trade hub that required oversight and management should have led to investment in its defences. Instead, as Liverpool grew into its status as the second city of the empire, via the commencement of spectacular building projects such as St George's Hall (1854), the William Brown Library and Museum Building (commenced 1857, completed 1860) and the 17-acre squared Canada Dock (1857), a system of coastal fortifications adequate to protect such grand projects – and the capital that funded them – was repeatedly found wanting.²³ As the *Daily Post* put it in one of the more hysterical articles published during the invasion scare, 'the produce of the world is stored here', and yet the city itself was undefended. Moreover, beyond the Mersey itself, 'a landing at the mouth of the Dee if perfectly available for a

²² Forts were also proposed to guard southern Wales, Belfast, the River Clyde and Cork. The North West was all but left out of Palmerston's recommendations – J. Gooch, *The Prospect of War: Studies in British Defence Policy, 1847–1942* (London, 1981), 3–4; S. King-Hall, 'A defence debate ninety years ago', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 5:2 (Jan 1951), 297–304; D. Brown, 'Palmerston and Anglo-French relations, 1846–1865', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 17 (2006), 675–92.

²³ A. Jarvis, *Liverpool: A History of the 'Great Port'* (Liverpool: Liverpool History Press, 2014), 79–81, 93–4; D.J. Douglas, *A History of the Liverpool Waterfront, 1850–1890: The Struggle for Organisation* (Stroud: Fonthill, 2013), 70–2.

small force, and the distance to Parkgate would be not impediment to the transport of guns and mortars', which could then be used to besiege undefended Liverpool proper.²⁴

Defending Liverpool

Its distance from France aside, there was some merit in this Merseyside invasion fantasy. In 1858, the plank of Liverpool's defences consisted of a small fort and battery, which was built upon a bedrock of sandstone that jutted out from the town of New Brighton on the southern bank of the Mersey, just west of Birkenhead. Described unenthusiastically by a contemporary observer to its construction, Fort Perch Rock was an oblong structure 'of irregular construction, built of stone and has all the conveniences suitable to a small garrison' that had been constructed between 1825–1829 at the cost of £27,000. It was a lot to pay for a peacetime fortification, but the upgrade had been deemed necessary during the Napoleonic Wars, when the site was furnished only with a small gun battery. This battery, together with a series of scattered guns on the city side of the river, comprised Merseyside's costal defence system for much of the conflict with France.²⁵ The need to enhance this system remained pressing into the 1820s on account of the fact that, even though Napoleon had been vanquished in 1815, Liverpool was still a town from which tonnes of valuable freight flowed in and out. For the Liverpoolian merchants who advocated for Fort Perch Rock's construction, however, the main post-Napoleonic threat was not a foreign invasion, but smugglers and criminals whose actions disrupted the port's trade and lifted coin from the coffers of the shipping lines. There was particular concern over the luring of ships onto rocks for the purposes of plunder, a practice that had long been common along the Wirral coast yet, with two decades of focus on the French threat, had been left relatively unchecked since the 1790s. By the time it was constructed, therefore, Fort Perch Rock was conceived less as an important link in the chain of Britain's *national* defences, then as an edifice whose purpose was to defend the region and its specific mercantile interests – a base for policing maritime crime, rather than a bulwark against a seaborne military incursion.²⁶

The outfitting of Fort Perch Rock reflected its role as guardian of the Mersey's merchants and their cargo. Although it was built to accommodate a maximum of 100 soldiers, its permanent garrison strength was no more than ten men, the reserves needed to bolster the garrison in times of war having to travel 25 miles across the Wirral countryside from Chester. The fort's armaments were also understrength for the kind of coastal battery that Palmerston envisioned as necessary to defend Britain. Consisting of 16 smoothbore 32-pound guns, Fort Perch Rock's battery had only the range necessary to guard the mouth of the Mersey from Waterloo on the north bank, to Wallasey on the Wirral coast – a radius of about a mile. To these guns were added a pair of 18-pound howitzers,

²⁴ *Daily Post*, 'The Defence of Liverpool', 20 June 1860.

²⁵ Quote from I. Stevenson, 'The Defences of the Mersey', *The Redan*, 71, <<http://www.palmerston-fortssociety.org.uk>>.

²⁶ 'Fort Perch Rock', <<http://www.fortperchrock.org>>.

which were sited within watchtowers to guard the fort proper from landward attacks along the causeway that separated Fort Perch Rock from the town of New Brighton. In 1854, this limited system of defence received a long overdue complement, in the form of the North Fort, a similarly armed structure that replaced the old city side guns of the Napoleonic era. These two forts on opposing sides of the river mouth were further augmented in 1855 by the construction of the Liscard Battery. This small fortification lay inland from the water's edge on the Birkenhead side of the river, about three miles south of Fort Perch Rock, guarding a magazine and boasting a very modest armament of 7 10-inch guns.²⁷

Deterrent it may have been to brigands and smugglers, the combined defence network of Fort Perch Rock, the North Fort and the Liscard Battery was not fit for the purpose of defending the empire's second city from a genuine military incursion from the Irish Sea. The two main forts' 32 pounders could cause damage to seaborne raiders, albeit only once they came within striking distance of the Mersey's mouth. If an enemy ship managed to pass through the field of fire that stretched from Crosby in the north to Wallasey in the south, penetration of the river proper was all-but assured, and with it the capacity for an invading ship to land troops.²⁸ In the context of the 1858–59 invasion scares, this was a significant problem, as the Liscard battery's guns – the last line of the defence in the system – were insufficient both in range and calibre for offering the kind of stout defence needed to prevent such an enemy landing at Liverpool's goods-laden docks. The capacity to repulse a landing was just as weak on the city side of the river, where, owing to some first-class penny pinching on the part of the Board of Ordnance, the North Fort was bereft of short range defences. Early in the 1850s, plans had been drawn up for a line of smaller batteries that would run up the river along the city-side bank. These batteries, it was thought, would add an opposing field of fire to that offered by the Liscard Battery, bolster the short-range defences of the North Fort, and provide muster points for soldiers that could guard Liverpool proper from a landing. In the end, however, the batteries – projected to cost nearly £10,000 – were never constructed. Given that over £20,000 had already been spent on Liverpool's defences by this time, it seemed asinine to some that an additional £10,000 to guard the actual city was deemed to great an expenditure by the Board of Ordnance.²⁹ This decision was lamented in particular, by the merchant G.R. Taylor, who wrote in concern to the Liverpool Underwriters Association in 1854, shortly after Britain had entered the Crimean War. To Taylor's mind, the River Mersey was guarded by 'an inefficient fort on one side of that mouth and another in a half finished state on the other'. This was a totally unacceptable situation for so crucial a port in times of war. Outlining a scenario whereby the Russian fleet broke out of the Baltic and made for British waters, Taylor asked:

²⁷ 'Liscard Battery', <<http://www.palmerstonfortssociety.org.uk>>.

²⁸ For an assessment of Fort Perch Rock, its decades of being sluggishly and the story of its eventual road to decommission in the 1950s, see K. McCaron, *Fort Perch Rock and the Defence of the Mersey* (Liverpool, 1991).

²⁹ Stevenson, 'The Defences of the Mersey'.

What is to prevent a steamer with a light draught of wake, but most destructively armed, capable of throwing shells and possessing furnaces for red hot shot. What is there to prevent her from running in at night time and destroying the shipping, the warehouse and indeed, setting fire to the town!³⁰

Although Taylor's imagined firestorm never happened, the point remained that during the Crimean War and into the late 1850s, Liverpool was reliant on a flawed system of defence to repulse seaborne invaders. Taylor was not the only one to notice this fact and be concerned by it. On the 25 May 1859, a meeting was convened at the Liverpool Town Hall, presided over by the Lord Mayor William Preston and attended by sea captains, merchants and leaders of Royal Lancashire Militia. This body debated a report on Merseyside's defences that had been compiled by a retired general, who, noting the insufficient firepower provided by the forts, raised the fear that Napoleon's 'ships might pass in and out of the port of Liverpool, and might do mischief to the ships and the docks without the prospect of defending the port'. To combat this and provide the short-range fire that the North Fort lacked, the report suggested that cannon should be mounted along the seawalls that spanned much of the length of the docks, and that 'nearly every pier head could be mounted with guns'. Acknowledging the limited range of fire provided by the Liscard Battery, the report even suggested that some of the old steamers that lay idle at Birkenhead shipyards could be outfitted with cannon, thereby ensuring that the Mersey would 'have a most formidable flying flotilla' of floating batteries to block any raider's incursion beyond the river mouth.³¹ The fact that such a range of "do it yourself" plans were put forward in a public forum spoke to a deeper truth of the 1859 invasion scare on Merseyside – with the forts ill-fit for purpose, and Palmerston focused on defending the Channel and the Home Counties primarily, Liverpool had to fend for itself in devising a local defence strategy.

For City and ... Country

To the *Daily Post*, the vulnerability of Liverpool to attack was a tragedy for Britain, given that, 'in a national and strategic sense, Liverpool is no less important than London'. This view of Liverpool's centrality to both nation and empire aside, in practice, the response to the invasion threat in the city itself was both highly localised, and congruent with the geographical reality that, if Napoleon did launch an invasion of Britain, there was a slim-to-none chance that it would land in a west coast region like Merseyside. Accordingly, the form of danger conceptualised in Liverpool was not of a French horde somehow evading the Channel fleet, cutting through the Irish Sea and landing at New Brighton. Rather, as the *Daily Post* put it, although Liverpool was:

³⁰ TNA, HO 45/5881, Taylor to Liverpool Underwriters Association, 31 March 1854.

³¹ Report on Town Hall meeting reproduced in *Liverpool Mercury*, 'Volunteer Rifle and Artillery Corps in Liverpool', 25 May 1859.

Somewhat distant from France, there may be too much reliance on that circumstance! May not a stray steamer or two, while the Channel fleet is guarding the metropolitan coast, get away and surprise Liverpool? It is full time that we should try and realise to our minds the enormity of the danger to which we are exposed.

Continuing the decades of limited expectations placed on Fort Perch Rock, the defence of Liverpool during the invasion scares was conceived as something that had to be tailored to preserving the specific interests of the port and, in scale, far removed from the kind of massive iron and concrete responses that Palmerston envisioned for protecting London and its surrounds. As such, although a motion was passed at the aforementioned Town Hall meeting in May 1859 to petition the government for funds to improve the forts, discussion was focused less on repelling an invasion fleet with cannon, and more on figuring out how to fight off raids on the docks by small parties of saboteurs. To this end, plans were devised for the recruitment of retired army officers to drill volunteer militia, and requests made for shopkeepers to give their younger employees half days off to train in the use of the rifle. Inexpensive human volunteers, not costly fixed guns and forts, would safeguard Liverpool's interests in this time of national crisis.³²

Humble these plans may have been, they nonetheless dovetailed with the wider nationwide volunteer riflemen movement. This movement was born in *The Times* on 9 May 1859, via Lord Alfred Tennyson's evocative poem 'Form, Riflemen, Form', which both warned of the Napoleonic menace and urged ordinary Britons to ready themselves for battle in response. What followed was nothing short of a national phenomenon, in which thousands of ordinary men of various classes, trades and competencies, formed volunteer defence groups for their respective towns.³³ Understandably, enthusiasm for volunteering was most common in the port cities. Portsmouth city council, for example, recruited 50 men in the course of one meeting. In Folkestone, where the mayor feared that his city was the 'most exposed to attack, and most likely to be selected for the landing of an invading force', a series of funding drives were held over the summer of 1859 to purchase uniforms and rifles by the hundreds. This enthusiasm is worth contrasting with the response in inland Rochdale, where at a public meeting in December 1859, a motion was passed for the town's men to abstain from heeding Tennyson's call. This declaration was justified by a depiction of the invasion scare as a 'groundless panic, which has taken the foolish and dangerous form of a mania'. Notably, the *Liverpool Mercury* reported this phenomenon in sympathetic tones, asking sincerely of its readers: 'why should Rochdale feel uncomfortable, seeing that it is so much further off' than Liverpool?³⁴

³² *Daily Post*, 'The Defence of Liverpool', 20 June 1860; *Liverpool Mercury*, 'Volunteer Rifle and Artillery Corps in Liverpool', 25 May 1859.

³³ *The Times*, 'The War', 9 May 1859; For the full history of Tennyson's Riflemen and their evolution into the twentieth century see H. Cunningham, *The Volunteer Force: A Social and Political History, 1859–1908* (Hamden, 1975).

³⁴ *The Times*, 'Volunteer Corps', 21 May 1859; *Liverpool Mercury*, 'Volunteers and Anti-Volunteers', 14 December 1859.

This reaction to the Rochdale meeting was in part owing to the fact that, despite plans for volunteers and fretting over forts, a feeling existed both regionally and in certain quarters of Merseyside, that the invasion threat was more smoke than fire. As the *Cheshire Observer* put it bluntly at the onset of the 1859 scare, ‘we believe there is not the slightest danger of a French or any other invasion’. This sentiment was echoed, albeit more cautiously, in *The Manchester Times*, which was confident that for all Palmerston’s fear-mongering nothing, ultimately, would happen because if Napoleon chose war with Britain, he would ‘know severely the popular discontent (in France), which would spring from popular privation’ to ‘shake his uncertain throne’. The *Liverpool Mercury* echoed this presentation of the invasion as a deadly and unlikely gamble for the emperor, for ‘a war with England would either make Louis Napoleon a more powerful monarch than Louis XIV and the First Napoleon ever were, or it would cost him his throne, if not his life’.³⁵ These sober assessments were replicated in the *Chester Chronicle*, which informed its readers that ‘no one knows better than Napoleon himself’ that ‘war with England could be the most fatal act that he could be guilty of’.³⁶

Critical this article might have been of the threat of French attack, and supportive the *Liverpool Mercury* may have been of Rochdale’s dismissive stance, there was, however, still a perceived need for the people of Liverpool to be on their guard. As the same *Chester Chronicle* article that presented Napoleon’s decision for war as unwise put it, ‘although we are most clear of opinion that the apprehension of invasion is an idle dream, this does not exempt us from the necessity of paying due, although not extravagant attention to our naval and military defences’.³⁷ For obvious reason, this demand that Liverpool prepare its defences was absent in Manchester, Rochdale or even Chester – which, owing to the silting of the Dee Estuary, had long since surrendered its position as a viable commercial port.³⁸ Unlike the aforementioned towns, however, Liverpool was both vulnerable to attack from the sea, and rich enough in goods, treasure and importance to Britain’s economy to be a viable target, irrespective of the acknowledged geographical and strategic factors that made a French raid, let alone an invasion, unlikely. Liverpool’s status as the empire’s trading hub was a crucial aspect of this “prepare for the worst” assessment. As a published report on garrison life at the North Fort put it, Liverpoolian volunteers had to remain on their guard for saboteurs and raiders whose actions might disrupt trade at the ports, in order to protect and ‘extend the vast scheme of civilising commerce’ that Liverpool possessed.³⁹

³⁵ *Cheshire Observer*, ‘Oracle Drummond on the Invasion’, 18 June 1859; *Manchester Times*, ‘The Invasion of England’, 21 August 1858; *Liverpool Mercury*, ‘The Volunteer Rifle and Artillery Movement and the Defence of Liverpool’, 30 November 1859.

³⁶ *Chester Chronicle*, ‘A French Invasion and our Defences’, 16 July 1859.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 16 July 1859.

³⁸ M. Marker, ‘The Dee Estuary: Its Progressive Silting and Salt Marsh Development’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 41 (1967), 65–71.

³⁹ *Manchester Times*, ‘Morning at the North Fort’, 22 February 1862.

It is notable in this respect, that Tennyson's call for citizen-soldiers was pre-empted on Merseyside in a Christmas Day article of 1858, which recalled how during the Anglo-French War of 1778–1783:

The traders of Liverpool alone, in a few weeks, fitted out 120 privateers, armed for the greater part, with 14 to 20 guns, none with less than ten, and it appears from an accurate list, containing the name of each vessel, that this fleet measure 30,787 tons, carried 1,986 guns, and was manned by 8,754 mariners. [...] Thus, the efforts of a single maritime city furnished a force to meet the necessities of the country.⁴⁰

The view from Merseyside of its role in the crisis was clear – let the Home Counties fret about the threat to the nation of a cross-Channel invasion. The merchants, dock workers and general citizenry of Merseyside would do their part for city and country by protecting the port, its goods, and the wealth that had built Liverpool into such a key component of the empire.

This connection between Liverpool's interests and the nation's wealth and prosperity were but one characteristic of the response to the invasion threat on Merseyside. The other key characteristic was that the mobilisation against the French threat reflected the social and political idiosyncrasies that defined a city where mercantile interests reigned supreme. James Walter was typical of dockside authority figures who took the lead in forming the voluntary regiments raised on Merseyside. A respected shipowner, Walter carried the kind of weight and influence in Liverpool that was possessed by the lawyers, bankers and doctors who formed the officer corps of volunteer regiments elsewhere in the country. Having nominated himself as secretary of the newly-minted Liverpool Royal Volunteer Artillery, Walter chaired a meeting of the body at the Cotton Exchange Building on Chapel Street in early November 1859, at which he made clear the connection between patriotic service and the defence of the commerce that was so central to Liverpool's existence.⁴¹ He opened his address by saying that:

I see before me in this room, daily devoted to the disposal of vast amounts of produce drawn from every quarter of the globe, seated on the benches worn thin through long occupancy of anxious dealers, whose united transactions sum up to fabulous amounts, a body of young, ardent, spirited men, drawn hither by motives that should inspire the warmest admiration of every right-minded citizen, and arouse feelings of the heartiest kind in favour of the cause you offer to espouse. I cannot but feel you have done rightly in throwing yourselves into the gap to supply the deficiency of a home artillery force.

⁴⁰ *Cheshire Observer*, 'Our National Defences', 25 Dec 1858.

⁴¹ I.F.W. Beckett, *Rifleman Form: A Study of the Rifle Volunteer Movement, 1859–1908* (Barnsley, 2007), 63.

Walter also characterised the young men before him in a manner that reflected something of the class divide that was present on the docks. His volunteers were not the ‘prominent men’ of ‘the more favoured classes’ who had joined the riflemen corps. Rather, the assembled porters and house clerks of the volunteer artillery were of ‘a class of young men such as cannot be outstripped in their usefulness by any in our Queen’s realm’, whose work in both operating the docks and defending them gave Liverpool ‘just cause for pride’. These were young men who detested the idleness of their social betters, and were resolved instead to tend ‘to advancement and improvement’, the more that ‘the hours of leisure, occasionally devoted to acquiring the knowledge of the use of arms, will have a beneficial effect in giving a bias to your minds, adverse to frivolous and useless amusements’. Devoted, hard-working and willing to labour for the defence and prosperity of Liverpool, Walter’s conception of the artillery volunteers was of a body that represented all that was laudable in the souls of Merseyside’s workingmen.⁴²

Then there was Charles MacIver who, having assumed charge of the Cunard Line in 1854, controlled a third of the shipping that went in and out of Liverpool. Naturally, MacIver was alarmed at the notion that his business could be disrupted by a French raiding party and was amongst the first of Liverpool’s local leaders to raise his own regiment of volunteer soldiers to protect Cunard’s interests during the 1859 invasion scare. The result was a volunteer corps that bore the unmistakable signs of a private militia. The former Mayor of Liverpool, William Forwood, recalled how, throughout the summer of 1859 the now-styled ‘Colonel MacIver’ could be seen of a morning ‘marching down Water St at the head of 1,000 of his men who he had drilled and trained’, leading his volunteers towards the docks where Cunard’s ships lay at anchor.⁴³ Beyond those who formed volunteer groups with the purposes of safeguarding their specific interests, there were also those who sought to demonstrate their sense of belonging in the cause to ‘defend the town and the country’ – espoused in that order. The Liverpool Tradesmen’s Volunteer Rifle Corps was an example of this manifestation of the volunteer movement as both an exercise in national jingoism, and a means of self-identifying at a local level. At its inaugural meeting in June 1860, the chair of the new corps emphasised to those gathered that:

It be the duty of every Englishman to use every effort to forward a cause of such vital national importance, and this acknowledged independence of the trading classes of Liverpool would be ill represented if they were on that occasion content to simply endorse the principles and sentiments expected by others, however true they might be.⁴⁴

The Volunteer Engineer Corps also tapped into this need for class identification, on a massive scale. As the *Daily Post* reported in July 1860, a meeting at St George’s Hall

⁴² Walter speech reproduced in *Daily News*, ‘Liverpool Royal Volunteer Artillery’, 4 November 1859.

⁴³ W.B. Forwood, *Reminiscences of a Liverpool Ship Owner* (Liverpool, 1920), 35.

⁴⁴ *Liverpool Mercury*, ‘The Liverpool Tradesmen’s Volunteer Rifle Corps’, 17 February 1860.

of this new volunteer group had to be moved outside, 'owing to the large number of persons present (the vast majority of whom were members of the working classes)'.⁴⁵ Whether motivated by class pride or commercial interests, the volunteer movement on Merseyside reflected, in more than one way, the character of the docks the volunteers were determined to protect. In this respect, the volunteers were both the product of the sweeping national movement to defend the nation from a Napoleonic-scale invasion, and of the more localised concerns to keep watch for French raiders who might disrupt the livelihoods of all who made their money from the docks.

Conclusion

The French invasion scare began to subside over the course of 1860, during which Anglo-French relations were stabilised by the Cobden-Chevalier Trade Agreement of 23 January, an initiative of the free-trader and pacifist MP Richard Cobden, which was designed specifically to re-direct the money being spent on Palmerston's forts towards more profitable, peace-making trade deals with France.⁴⁶ The threat further ebbed in the years that followed, during which Napoleon's status as a warlord deserving of his name became irrevocably dented by both a slowing down in his ironclad building programme, and a disastrous military adventure in Mexico.⁴⁷ This, however, had little impact on the volunteer riflemen of Merseyside. Indeed, in the autumn of 1862 it was still deemed necessary for the Liverpool rifle and artillery volunteers to stage a war game, which was 'intended to represent the landing of an invading force, and their taking up a position for the purpose of attacking the town of Liverpool'.⁴⁸ This was evidence of the fact that the volunteers were fast becoming permanent fixtures of Britain's defence system, a process that continued gradually through the Cardwell Reforms (1868–1874) and the Childers Reforms (1881) of subsequent decades. As part of this process of amalgamation, the riflemen of Liverpool were absorbed into the King's Liverpool Regiment – a notably unique military formation of the British army, in that it represented a city, rather than an entire county.⁴⁹

Such a local character in the composition of this regiment reflects a deeper history of defence organisation on Merseyside which, as this article has demonstrated, was of a form that was focused on the protection of hearth and home and local commerce. The need for Liverpool to participate in the wider defence of the nation was, nonetheless, acknowledged at the time of the invasion scares. In addition to the leader of the Tradesmen's

⁴⁵ *Daily Post*, 'Proposed Volunteer Engineer Corps for Liverpool', 5 July 1860.

⁴⁶ A.L. Durham, *The Anglo-French Treaty of Commerce of 1860 and the Progress of the Industrial Revolution in France* (Ann Arbor, 1971).

⁴⁷ P.F. Martin, *Maximilian in Mexico: The Story of the French Intervention, 1861–1867* (New York, 1914); M. Cunningham, *Mexico and the Foreign Policy of Napoleon III* (Basingstoke, 2001), ch. 5.

⁴⁸ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 'Volunteer Night Attack on Liverpool', 2 September 1862.

⁴⁹ A.V. Tucker, 'Army and Society in England, 1870–1900: A Reassessment of the Cardwell Reforms', *Journal of British Studies*, 2:2 (1963), 110–41; S. Badsey, *Doctrine and Reform in the British Cavalry, 1880–1918* (London, 2008), ch. 2.

Volunteer Rifle Corps stating that his unit existed 'to defend the town and the country', Walter also made clear that his working class artillery volunteers were 'at the close of the day of usual toil, to proffer to the Sovereign their services'.⁵⁰ Beneath these typical jingoistic expressions of the times, however, Merseyside's reaction to the invasion threat was multi-layered and much attuned to local concerns. Three key factors shaped this reaction: the money, goods and jobs that relied on the port remaining functional, the resignation engendered by years of indifference being paid by the British government to the static defences of the Mersey, and the geographical and strategic unlikelihood of Liverpool having a French attack or, more unrealistically, a full-scale invasion. These factors led to a response on Merseyside that was focused, pragmatic and aligned with preserving local interests on a small scale, with due attention paid to Liverpool's significance as the nation, and the empire's, key commercial port. In this sense, it is fit to conclude with a quotation from a turn of the century assessment of this most idiosyncratic of cities: 'Liverpool, it seems to me, is astonishingly self-absorbed. It is her own problems that chiefly interest her, and she has a habit of solving these problems for herself on self-invented lines'.⁵¹ No truer statement can be made to encapsulate Liverpool's response to the threat of invasion in 1858–1859.

⁵⁰ *Liverpool Mercury*, 'The Liverpool Tradesmen's Volunteers Rifle Corps', 17 February 1860; *Daily News*, 'Liverpool Royal Volunteer Artillery', 4 November 1859.

⁵¹ D. Scott, *Liverpool* (London: 1907), 11.