

Heritage Group

Midshipman F.R. Fletcher



Bombardment of Lagos by British Naval Forces (Photo Credit -The Guardian)

The Backstory

This memorial is dedicated to Midshipman Frederick Robertson Fletcher, aged 20, son of the rector of this church and a Royal Navy Officer who died fighting against the Atlantic slave trade in 1851.

Britain had abolished the slave trade in the British Empire in 1807. The purchase and ownership of slaves in most of the British Empire was ended by the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act.

Following these acts of abolition, it was in Britain's interest to prevent other nation states from continuing the trade in slaves from Africa. The British West Africa Squadron was set up to stop Portuguese, American, French, and Cuban slave ships and to impose anti-slavery treaties on West African coastal chiefs.

Portuguese traders had settled in Lagos in modern-day Nigeria and used it as a port for the slave trade from the 1760s onwards. The profits from the slave trade allowed the local ruler of Lagos, the Oba, to become a powerful regional leader with the support of the Portuguese.

In November 1851 the Oba Kosoko rejected British diplomatic efforts to get him to agree to a friendship agreement which was dependent on Kosoko's renunciation of the slave trade. The decision was made to attack Lagos, expel Kosoko, and install his brother Akitoye as Oba. Akitoye had previously been usurped by Kosoko, and had requested British help to reinstate him. In return, he promised to end the slave trade.

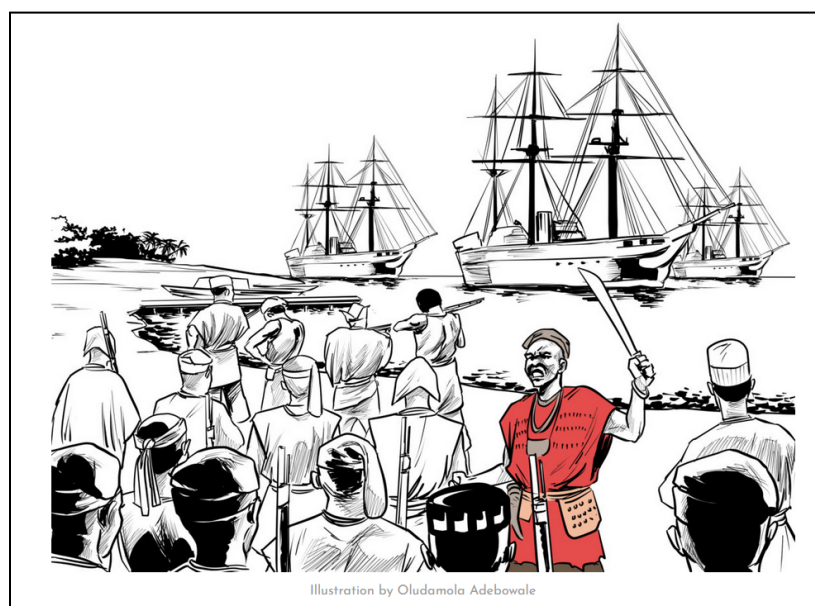
The British naval action against Lagos was in two parts. The first, on November 25 1851 was unsuccessful and ended in a British retreat. The second, on December 26 1851, lasted three days and resulted in the defeat of Kosoko's forces

and the end of the slave trade in Lagos. It also resulted in the death of Midshipman F.R. Fletcher.

There is a vivid description of the fighting in a book by W.H.G. Kingston, published in 1854, titled:

'Blue Jackets; or, Chips of the old block. A narrative of the gallant exploits of British seamen, and of the principal events in the naval service, during the reign of her most gracious majesty Queen Victoria.'

It is clear from this narrative that Kosoko's forces were well organized and well equipped. Kingston mentions that they had at least 5000 muskets and 50 canons. Strong defensive stockades had been constructed of coconut trees. There were also coastal defences made from wooden stakes. Kosoko was also fully aware that an attack was coming, so the element of surprise could not be used to advantage in the second battle.



The British squadron assembled off Lagos on the eve of the battle consisted of HMS Penelope, HMS Sampson, HMS Waterwitch, HMS Volcano, HMS Harlequin, HMS Bloodhound, HMS Teazer, HMS Sealark plus a number of smaller ships, amongst which was a cutter commanded by Midshipman Fletcher.

The fighting began at dawn on 26 December. Heavy fire was exchanged between the British navy and the defending forces. Midshipman Fletcher's cutter was one of a number of the smaller ships drawn up to effect a landing. As they touched the shoreline, they were immediately met with fire from 1500 muskets. This gives us an idea of the ferocity of the fighting. In spite of this, the British forces were able to drive the defenders into the forest and spike their guns. The objective having been accomplished, the British made ready to withdraw from the shore. However, Kosoko's forces returned as the British were trying to withdraw.

Kingston states:

'The enemy, on seeing this, rushed back from their concealment in the woods, by swarms, and poured in a destructive crushing fire on the boats, at pistol range. On this occasion, a gallant young officer, Mr. F.R. Fletcher, midshipman, in command of the second cutter, and who had charge of the boats while on shore, was shot through the head and killed.'

The fighting continued for a third day. At length, with much of Lagos destroyed and on fire, the British offered Kosoko terms, urging him to capitulate. No reply was given, and it became clear that Kosoko and his forces had abandoned Lagos.

Akitoye was installed by the British as the Oba of Lagos. A new treaty was signed between Britain and Lagos which abolished the slave trade, and which paved the way for Britain's annexation of Lagos a decade later in August 1861.





MADEIRA ISLANDS (Portugal)

CANARY ISLANDS (Spain)

MOROCCO: Ceuta (SP), Melilla (SP), Oran, Casablanca, Marrakech, Rabat

ALGERIA: Algiers

TUNISIA: Tunis

LIBYA: Tripoli, Benghazi

EGYPT: Port Said, Alexandria, Giza, Suez, Luxor, Aswan

MAURITANIA: Nouakchott

MALI: Timbuktu

NIGER: Niamey

CHAD: N'Djamena

SUDAN: Khartoum, Omdurman, Port Sudan

ERITREA: Asmara

DJIBOUTI: Djibouti, Berbera

GUINEA-BISSAU: Bissau

GUINEA: Conakry

SIERRA LEONE: Freetown

LIBERIA: Monrovia

CÔTE D'IVOIRE: Yamoussoukro

GHANA: Accra

TOGO: Lomé

BENIN: Porto-Novo

NIGERIA: Abuja, Lagos, Ibadan

CAMEROON: Yaoundé, Douala

GABON: Libreville

SAO TOME AND PRINCIPE: São Tomé

ANGOLA: Luanda, Namibe

REP. OF THE CONGO: Kinshasa

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO: Kinshasa

ANGOLA: Luanda

ZAMBIA: Lusaka

ZIMBABWE: Harare

MOZAMBIQUE: Beira

NAMIBIA: Windhoek, Walvis Bay

BOTSWANA: Gaborone

SOUTH AFRICA: Pretoria, Johannesburg, Durban, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth

LESOTHO: Maseru

ESWATINI: Mbabane

LIGANDA: Kampala

KENYA: Nairobi

TANZANIA: Dodoma, Dar es Salaam

SOUTH SUDAN: Juba

ETHIOPIA: Addis Ababa

SOMALIA: Mogadishu

COMOROS: Moroni, Mayotte

MADAGASCAR: Antananarivo

SEYCHELLES: Seychelles

Other locations: Western Sahara, Laayoune (El Aaiún), Annobon (EQUA. GUL), Ascension (St. Helena), St. Helena, Lake Tanganyika, Lake Nyasa, Mozambique Channel, Gulf of Aden, Red Sea, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean Sea, Tropic of Cancer, Equator, Tropic of Capricorn.