

Salcombe Maritime History Paper No. 3

The Spanish Armada 1588

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The Defeat of the Spanish Armada, off the Start Point near Plymouth.

(Devon County Council)

Defending the Realm

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth, local militia were raised and trained to defend the coast against invasion from Catholic Spain and in 1586 a chain of beacons was set up on prominent hilltops and headlands to provide an early warning system. In April 1588, as the threat of invasion increased, the principal ports in Devon were ordered to furnish ships to join Francis Drake's Western Squadron at Plymouth. Dartmouth with Totnes was required to supply two ships and a pinnace, but actually sent eleven. One of the ships fitted out at Dartmouth, was the *Crescent* of 140 tons. Her part owner was

Leonard Darr, a Totnes merchant, whose splendid alabaster tomb can be seen in the church at South Pool, the parish in which he later resided.¹

A pamphlet on Salcombe and the Armada published by Salcombe Maritime Museum in 1988 claimed that Salcombe with Malborough supplied ten ships, with Kingsbridge, Dodbrooke, Charleton and South Pool together supplying a further six.² However, none of these ships are referred to in the lists compiled by Laughton³, Clowes⁴ and Duro⁵ of the 197 ships and transports that joined the English fleet and it seems unlikely that the small towns and villages of the Estuary had the resources to contribute as many as sixteen ships.

However, judging by the correspondence between Sir Richard Champernowne of Modbury and a deputy-lieutenant of Devon, Sir George Cary of Cockington, it does appear that money was collected from these communities to help furnish ships of war. Champernowne wrote as follows: 'Cousin Cary, and the rest of the Commissioners for the ship causes, I have received some grievous complaints of some poor men who are taxed in Dodbrook more than all their goods are worth....' Cary forwarded the complaint to the Lords of the Council, an action he no doubt regretted after reading their reply: 'The Council to George Cary, J.P....They learn by his late letter that the county is unwilling to contribute the charges imposed upon it for 'setting out ships etc. It is paid cheerfully by other counties, and he is desired to return the names of those persons who are obstinate in refusing payment.'⁶

'The Greatest Navy that ever Swam the Sea'

When King Philip of Spain's Great Armada of 1588 was first sighted off the Lizard in Cornwall, at dawn on 30 July, the fire beacons immediately flashed their warning along the coast. In the South Hams the beacon light passed in a chain through Thurlstone, Bolbery Dolts at Malborough, then across the estuary to South Pool, Chivelstone and Start Point. Their warning was then passed on to London via Dartmouth, Dittisham and Torbay.

In the fading light of the following evening, the local people gathered on the three great headlands near the mouth of the Estuary – Bolt Head, Prawle Point and Start Point – witnessed a spectacle of unsurpassed magnitude as 'the greatest navy that ever swam the sea' sailed by in slow procession.⁷ One hundred and twenty-five Spanish galleons and galleasses (powered by sail and oar) were to be seen spread over seven miles of sea in a mighty crescent formation. The English fleet, commanded by Lord Howard, was two miles astern and by the time it reached Start Point it was nearly dark. Earlier that evening Howard had called a council-of-war aboard his flagship, *Ark Royal*, and granted Sir



Two of a series of engravings commissioned by Lord Admiral Howard charting the early phases of the Channel fighting between the English and Spanish fleets (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich)



Francis Drake the honour of leading the pursuit. Drake was ordered to show, at the stern of his ship *Revenge*, a guiding light for the 'blacked-out' fleet to follow.

The watchers on the coast may have seen that light, but not for long, for after clearing Start Point, Drake extinguished it, an action which was to cause Martin Frobisher, one of the other great 'sea dogs' of the day, to call Drake a coward and a cheat and to threaten that he would 'spend the best blood in Drake's belly'. Drake's failing light caused consternation in the English fleet. Most captains shortened sail. A few, including Howard, held their course and at dawn found themselves, without support, within the crescent formation of the Spanish fleet. When Drake finally rejoined the fleet halfway across Lyme Bay, it was with the news that he had come across the *Nuestra Senora del Rosario*, the crippled flagship of Don Pedro de Valdes and had captured it, having first doused his stern light to avoid confusing the fleet. Few of his fellow captains doubted that Drake, ever the opportunist, had slipped off in the night in search of this rich prize.

The Great Armada sailed on towards Portland Bill but, with much of it later driven onshore by English fireships or blown around the coast of Britain by a 'Protestant wind', only a shattered remnant would return to Spain.⁸

The *San Pedro el Mayor*

One of the Spanish casualties was the 581 ton hospital ship *San Pedro el Mayor*, the only Armada vessel to be wrecked on the English coast. After circumnavigating the British Isles, she came to grief at Hope Cove, five miles west of Salcombe. There were 158 survivors. One of them recounted that 'after they had sailed round the islands of England, Scotland, and Ireland, they were pursued by continual tempests; they were in want of food, and the ship was unseaworthy, and on the 6th November, 1588, was driven ashore and wrecked at a place called Hope, belonging to Sir William Courtenay.'⁹



High Admiral, Charles Howard; Sir Francis Drake; Sir John Hawkins; Martin Frobisher (National Portrait Gallery & National Maritime Museum, Greenwich)

Sir George Cary, the deputy-lieutenant of Devon referred to above, rode to Hope Cove to take charge of the wreck. He later reported to the Privy Council that 'the ship is a hulk, and called *St Peter the Great*, one of those two ships which were appointed for the hospital to the whole navy. The ship is not to be recovered; she lieth on a rock, and full of water to her upper decks'.¹⁰



*The pewter cup,
believed to be a
communion chalice
from the Spanish ship
St. Peter the Great
(SMM)*

Cary also reported that 6,000 ducats had been put aboard the ship and that when the survivors came ashore 'there had been some plate and certain ducats rifled and spoiled at their first landing, both from their persons and out of their chests.'¹¹ Over the years a number of these coins bearing Philip of Spain's coats of arms, have been found on the beach at Inner Hope and in 1990 diver Stephen George found a small pewter cup in a crevice on the Shippen Rock. The battered cup, now in Salcombe Maritime Museum, is believed to be a communion chalice used by priests administering to the sick – an appropriate relic from the ill-fated hospital ship. Another find, a Spanish helmet from the wreck, is held in the Cookworthy Museum in Kingsbridge.

The Spanish Prisoners

Sir George Cary and Anthony Ashley, a clerk sent down by the Privy Council, were given specific instructions for dealing with the Spanish survivors. Those prisoners of 'quality and calling' were to be sent to London to be ransomed and the rest of the soldiers and common people were to be executed. Ten prisoners 'of the best sort' were sent to Kingsbridge and a further eight, were left in the charge of Sir William Courtenay, to be guarded both day and night.¹²

Sir William Courtenay's prisoners were sent to his fortified mansion, Ilton Castle, one and a half miles north of Salcombe. By December the Council had countermanded their order to execute the common prisoners and as some of them were 'greatly diseased', ordered that they should be conveyed to 'certain barns and outhouses, standing apart from dwelling places'. Twelve Spaniards, including the captain of the ship and the army captain, were now being held by Courtenay at Ilton. One of them, Gonzalo Gonzales del Castillo, later reported:

On the 24th November 1589, the Spanish prisoners were liberated by the Queen, with the exception of the twelve men whom she had given to Sir William Courtenay. We

were kept in close confinement by him, and he demanded 5,000 ducats for our ransom, which sum we could not pay, as we were all poor men. On the 11th August 1590 we were informed by Sir William Courtenay that he required 12,000 ducats for our ransom, and as we could see no remedy for our trouble, we wrote to the Queen, praying that, as she had released all the other Spaniards in England, she would order us also to be liberated for a like sum. This letter came into the hands of Sir William Courtenay, who thereupon imprisoned us closely, feeding us only on bread, pottage, and water. Seeing ourselves in these straits and in danger of death, we resolved to break out of prison and to appeal to the justices for redress, but they told us that they were unable to help us, as our owner was too powerful a person for them to meddle with. We were therefore sent back to our prison, where we remained suffering great hardship for seven months'¹³

By 1592 the avaricious Sir William had increased his ransom demand to 25,000 ducats, five times the original sum, and as a result a Spanish envoy informed Lord Burghley, Queen Elizabeth's Secretary of State, that by way of retaliation he had arrested some English merchants as hostages for the release of Courtenay's prisoners. The Spaniards were eventually set free but when and on what terms is not known.¹⁴

Prisoner exchanges took place from time to time during the Anglo-Spanish war of 1585-1604 and on 17 November 1595 twenty-five English prisoners, sent by the King of Spain, landed at Salcombe in the ship *Angel Gabriel*.¹⁵ And, on 15 July 1596, four mariners of Bristol were put ashore at Salcombe by a Flemish ship, from the Anglo-Dutch fleet which took part in the siege of Cadiz. One of the mariners, Matthew Rice was examined before Sir George Cary and reported that 'on 2nd March, being in a ship of Bristol, he was taken by seven galleys in the Straits, and carried from port to port until he came to St. Lucar, when an order being given from the King of Spain, that all English prisoners taken from merchant ships be released, he was set at liberty, and shipped for England'.¹⁶

In March 1603, a 'little bark of Salcombe' arrived at Corunna from Cork. On board was its owner, Robert Listen, of Salcombe carrying a letter and a gift of a horse to Don Juan del Águila from Sir George Carew, President of Munster. Juan del Águila had been the commander of the Spanish forces supporting the Irish rebels and had surrendered to the English forces after being defeated at the Battle of Kinsale on 3 January. It was the last major campaign in the Anglo-Spanish War.¹⁷

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