

Salcombe Maritime History Paper No. 4

Pirates and Privateers in the 17th & 18th Centuries

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The Pirate Henry Muge



Throughout the middle ages, piracy was an ever present threat for people living in the small coastal communities of the South Hams. For greater security, many of their settlements were sited inland of the coast with only fishermen's storage huts or 'cellars' erected near the shore. Severe retribution was meted out to any pirate that was captured. Stokenham Parish Register, for instance, records that 'a pirate of the sea was hanged in chains upon Stert (Start Point) on the 28th day of September, in the year of our Lord 1581. His name was Henry Muge'. An entry, in July and October of that year, in the Stokenham Court Rolls, lists items taken from pirates – possibly from Muge himself: three swords, a dagger, a sharp rapier, money and a silver 'tothepecker and earepeker'.

During Queen Elizabeth's war with Catholic Spain between 1585 and 1603, piracy along the coast largely gave way to privateering – state sanctioned piracy against ships and treasure belonging to an enemy nation – and many of the great Elizabethan 'sea dogs', such as Sir Francis Drake, Sir Richard Grenville and Sir John Hawkins were granted letters of marque to capture Spanish shipping and raid their ports.

Salcombe: A Pirates' Haunt

When James I came to the English throne in 1603 one of his first acts was to make peace with Catholic Spain. As a result, the navy was cut back, letters of marque for English privateers were no longer renewed and hundreds of seaman found themselves

'on the beach' without work. Many turned to piracy and Salcombe 'from its comparatively defenceless condition, and also its isolation, became a harbour of refuge for pirates, who could take up their quarters here with perfect safety, plundering passing ships, and terrorizing the local population'.¹ By 1607 Salcombe had become so infested with pirates that the County Justices wrote to the Government demanding action. The following extracts taken from Hamilton's *Quarter Sessions under James I* show how desperate the situation had become:

A letter was sent to the Council (of King James) representing that the inhabitants of the haven town of Salcombe, in the County of Devon, were sorely oppressed and endangered through the insolence of dissolute seafaring men, who often came into the town in great numbers, two hundred armed men at one time, and threaten, when they are denied such things as they would have, that they will burn the town. It was represented also that they often stripped the country adjoining of sheep and other commodities, and took from poor fishermen their boats and barks. Moreover, they murdered each other, and buried them in the sands by night, and daily committed other outrages. The authorities of the County felt quite unable to suppress them, as they could always take refuge in their ships lying off the harbour. The justices therefore called upon the Council to send down his Majesty's forces to subdue them.²

On 22 April 1607 the Court in Whitehall referred the complaint to the Lord Lieutenant of Devon, the Earl of Bath, informing him, that the matter was a disgrace and he should do something about it, because merchants of other nations, as well as the English, frequently complained. The letter stated that the Council had been credibly informed that the pirates who came ashore at Salcombe 'are so bold as to put themselves in strength to make resistance in case of need, without control or interruption, to his Majesty's great dishonour and to the scandal of the public justice.' His Lordship was, accordingly, required to 'take good order, that all such pirates as are on land... be apprehended, strictly examined and committed to prison. For the better execution of which service an order is given that some of his Majesty's ships shall forthwith repair to those parts...'³ Action was clearly taken on this occasion as a charge of £6 was later made for conducting the 'pyraths' to gaol from Salcombe. It would appear, however, that the pirates were sufficiently 'bold to make resistance', as a payment was made to a surgeon for tending their wounds.⁴

In 1605 Sir Richard Hawkins, who had been appointed Vice-Admiral of Devon two years earlier, seized a French ship, the *Sainte Anne*, when she was brought into Salcombe by an English pirate. Sir Richard brokered a local deal between the many parties

involved, but when the Venetian ambassador later complained that valuables belonging to him, which had been looted out of the ship, had ended up in Sir Richard's possession, he was accused of negligence and corruption and, in August 1606, suspended from office and briefly imprisoned.⁵

In January 1608 pirates seized a French ship the *Jehan Basset* of Oleron with £15,000 of money on board. They brought her into Salcombe where the pirates spent their loot freely and re-victualled their ship. Both ships then returned to sea.⁶

In 1615 Dartmouth's Newfoundland trade suffered when the fishing fleets carrying salt fish to the Mediterranean, or oil and wine back to England, were attacked near the Straits of Gibraltar by Turks (the name given to pirates from the Barbary coast of North West Africa). Dartmouth's mayor complained to the Privy Council that if the ships escaped this threat, they ran the risk of being attacked by English pirates based in Torbay or Salcombe when they reached home.⁷

Salcombe haven continued to be a haunt of pirates during the reign of Charles I, for in March 1627 Sir William Courtenay's castellated mansion at Ilton, near Salcombe, was robbed by pirates who came up the river from Salcombe in boats, and carried away his plate and household goods⁸ – a fitting reward perhaps for the callous treatment he had meted out to the twelve Spaniards kept in captivity there in the 1590s. (*see Maritime History Paper No. 4: The Spanish Armada 1588*). It was also poetic justice for a man who in his younger days had once owned a privateer 'which seems to have sheltered in the snug estuary of Salcombe River' and, in April 1585, captured in the Channel a French ship, returning from Spain with oil, leather, wines, etc. and 12,000 ducats in money.⁹

War with France and Spain between 1625 and 1630 led to attacks on English merchant ships by both French and Dunkirk privateers (known as 'Dunkirkers', the latter were commerce raiders in the service of the Spanish monarchy). In 1628 John Roch, a mariner of Salcombe, was examined before the Mayor of Plymouth following the loss of his ship to French privateers. Roch stated that on 10 May he 'came from Wales in the *Jonas*, of Salcombe, laden with coals, in company with 23 or 24 other small ships, all of which were taken by a French man-of war, part being carried away, and the rest sunk.' The Mayor subsequently complained to a Parliamentary committee that 'merchants are so disheartened they that they dare not set forth...Not a fisher boat can go from port to port, or to fish, but in danger of French or Dunkirk's.'¹⁰

The Barbary Pirates

The complaint that ships 'dare not set forth from their harbours' was not confined to the threat posed by European privateers and pirates. Throughout the first half of the 17th

century a more terrifying threat came from the Barbary pirates of North Africa. By 1605 the Barbary pirates, or 'Turks', had learnt from renegade English and Dutch mariners how to build and handle ocean going ships. In 1617 their lateen-sailed *zebecs* first made their appearance in English waters and, throughout the seventeenth century, they terrorised the coasts of Devon and Cornwall plundering shipping and seizing captives. Todd Gray, in *Devon and the Slave Trade*, states that:

From 1625 the Devon coast was a prime location for these thousands of seizures. Kidnapping took place at sea but not on land in England, unlike Ireland or on the Continent. Some of this took place within sight of the English coast... In the seventeenth century several thousand men, and women, from Devon were enslaved and this number continued to grow over the next two centuries.¹¹

Assaults on the South Devon fishing fleet reached alarming proportions and, although Salcombe's losses were not identified separately from those of Dartmouth, much of its fishing trade must have been destroyed. The Newfoundland trade was particularly badly hit with many ships seized *en route* to the fisheries. 'The Turks appeared to have attacked fishing boats because these vessels were not heavily armed and also because some fishing boats carried large crews.'¹²

In July 1636 three barks of Salcombe, the *Swan*, the *Rose Mary* and the *Catherine* and one of Barnstaple all laden with coal from Wales, were chased around Land's End by a Turkish man-of-war of 100 tons into Mount's Bay. As with John Roch in 1628, one of the Salcombe mariners, John Daniel, the master of the *Swan*, was examined by the Mayor of Plymouth. Daniel reported that two of the barks were forced to run on shore, where they broke up, and the other two cast anchor as near the shore as they could. All the crews managed to get away except one man, who stayed behind and was carried off by the Turks. The pirates also carried off the two anchored barks, but after pillaging them they sunk them within sight of the shore. In his evidence John Daniel also stated that he had been informed at Falmouth that, three weeks previously, seven boats and the 42 fishermen in them had been taken off the Manacles near the Lizard by the Turks.¹³

A common complaint was that the Turks raided the coast whilst 'the King's ships still lie



*The notorious Barbary corsair
Dragut Rais
(National Maritime Museum)*

in harbour, to the charge of the King and the shame of the nation'. However, pirates were captured from time to time. As far back as 1614, three years before Barbary pirates are supposed to have first ventured into English waters, a ship with captive Turks on board put into Salcombe. The details are sketchy but Sir Richard Cowper, the Vice-Admiral of Devon was ordered to send the ship and its captives to Southwark.¹⁴

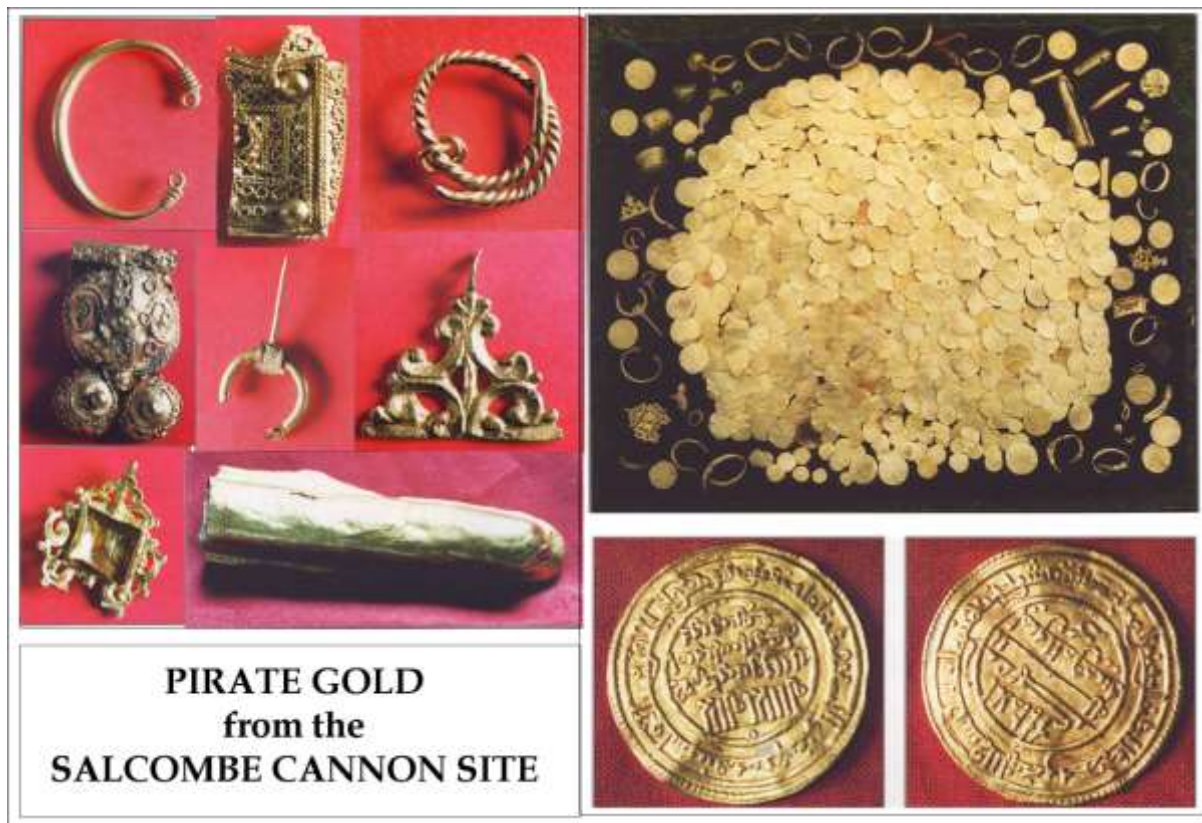
Much later, in October 1636 James Bagg, the then Vice-Admiral, reported that a number of Turks were imprisoned at Winchester for the robbery of a Salcombe ship. This may well have been one of the three barks of Salcombe referred to in John Daniel's account.¹⁴

It is believed that as many as 7,000 English captives – up to half of them from Devon – were taken between 1617 and 1642, most of them to be sold in the slave markets of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. The majority died in captivity but some returned home after a ransom had been paid or as a result of government intervention. In 1637 two men from Salcombe, one of whom was named John Pollard, were released from captivity in Sallee (the port of Rabat in Morocco), and brought away by a naval force that was sent to release English slaves.¹⁵

Money to pay ransoms was often collected by local communities and at East Portlemouth 'betwixt the 27th day of November and the 4th day of December, Anno Dom 1670 there was collected from the benevolence of the parishioners the summe of two pounds one shilling and four pence, being towards the redemption of the English out of the Turkish captivity'. The plight of English captives was a cause that the worthy parishioners of East Portlemouth could identify with, whereas they appear to have had precious little sympathy for the victims of the Great Fire of London: 'The 8th day of December, Anno Dom 1668 – there was read a proclamation from the King touching the collection for the relief of the citizens of London after the fire, and the churchwardens demanded the benevolence of the people, but nothing was collected.'¹⁶

Pirate Gold? The Moor Sands Wreck

In 1995, a group of divers belonging to the South West Maritime Archaeological Group (SWMAG), literally struck gold when they found four coins on the seabed between Gara Rock and Moor Sands. They had been searching the area following an earlier find of four cannon. (The protected site is known as the Salcombe Cannon site). Over the next two years a treasure trove of 447 gold coins, as well as gold jewellery and ingots, pewter and pottery, were brought to the surface. The coins were struck by the Sadian dynasty who ruled in Morocco for one hundred years from the mid sixteenth century.



Gold coins, jewellery and finger ingots found by South West Maritime Archaeological Group divers in 1995 (SWMAG)

The last coins found helped to date the wreck. They were minted by Sharif al Walid who ruled between 1631 and 1636. The pieces of gold jewellery earrings, brooches and bracelets – were all cut in half and are believed to be a cargo of scrap pieces for melting down into finger ingots. Another theory is that the broken pieces represent a division of pirates' loot, with one half for the captain and crew, the other for the ship owners and financial backers. In addition to the North African treasure, the finds included a number of artefacts of Dutch origin, including pewter tableware, stoneware wine decanters, Delft pottery, and an ornate clay pipe made in the Netherlands between 1635 and 1645. The finds, now in the British Museum, represent one of the most important collections of gold ever found in European waters.

Nine cannons, two swivel guns and three anchors as well as bar shot were found on the seabed, but no identification of a vessel has been made as no vessel fixtures, fittings or vessel structure have been recovered. The evidence points to a wreck of around 1640 and one theory is that the vessel was a Dutch

merchantman trading with North Africa. However, some experts believe that she was a Barbary pirate ship sunk whilst raiding the South Devon coast for white slaves to take back to North Africa.¹⁷

Privateering Activity between 1654 and 1763

During the First English Civil War (1642-6), Salcombe was used as a base for Royalist privateers and also a haven for Royalist ships chased in by 'Dunkirkers' and Parliamentary privateers (*see Maritime History Paper No. 5: Salcombe and The Civil War*). After its surrender to Parliamentary forces on 9 May 1646, Fort Charles was abandoned and, by 1660, its fortifications had been slighted. With the loss of its defensive role, Salcombe was to relapse into obscurity for the next hundred years. During the late Stuart and early Georgian periods, the pirates, which had previously infested the Channel, were largely displaced to the Caribbean and elsewhere. Except in time of war, the men of the small town were now able to go about their lawful business of fishing and coastal trading unmolested. However, for many the unlawful but rather more lucrative business of smuggling was to prove more attractive (*see Maritime History Paper No. 8: Salcombe and the Smuggling Trade*).

The few references to the town in written records between 1654 and 1763 relate to the appointment of customs officers to combat smuggling and also to the depredations to local shipping caused by enemy privateers during the many wars against the Dutch, the French and the Spanish. Listed below are examples, gleaned from state papers and newspaper reports, of local ships which were captured by enemy privateers or sought refuge from them in Salcombe haven, as well as reports of captured enemy ships which were sent into the harbour.

The Anglo-Spanish War 1654-60

1655 Nov 8 A Dutch caper (*a privateer*) took a small pilchard vessel, plundered her of all, even to sails and cables, and left her, but she managed to get safe to Salcombe; she saw 18 Dutch men-of-war with the caper.¹⁸

1659 September 12. One of the enemy's men-of-war plying on the coast between Plymouth and Dartmouth, has taken a small boat belonging to Salcombe.¹⁹

The Second Dutch War 1665-7

1666 February 24. Capt. Browne, a privateer, has brought into Salcombe, a small French vessel, called the *All Saints*, with 113 barrels of white oakum on board.²¹

1667 March 1. Capt. Marshall, a privateer, brought into Salcombe a prize with Bordeaux wines which is ordered to be sent to Southampton.²²

The Third Dutch and the Franco-Dutch Wars 1672-8

1672 December 10. Yesterday was taken and sent into Salcombe, by the *Gloucester*, a Dutch caper, the *Phoenix*, of Middleburg, of 18 guns and 86 men, said to have come out from Holland last Friday.²³

1672 December 13. The Dutch caper *Phoenix*, of Middleburg is arrived in Salcombe, having lost her mainmast, being shot.²⁴

1673 January 22. A New England ship, bound from Lisbon to London, was taken off Salcombe by two Dutch capers.²⁵

1675 November. An Ostend caper, having taken a French vessel laden with salt, brought her into Salcombe Road, where a small French man-of-war was riding, which makes no more ado but claps the prize on board and carries her away.²⁶

The War of Austrian Succession 1740-8

1740 March 30. The *Boston Snow*, which sailed from Salcombe for Newfoundland on the 28 March was taken on the 30th by a Spanish privateer and sent for Spain.²⁷

1744 June 13. The *Dispatch*, privateer of Bristol, took two ships and carried them into Salcombe.²⁸

The Seven Years War 1756-63

1756 September 6. The *Hawke*, privateer of Exeter, Capt. Yewson, sent into Salcombe the *African* of Lancaster, a snow of 120 tons, from Antigua for Liverpool laden with sugar, cotton, and rum. She had been taken by three French men of war, and was in custody for sixteen days. The French had taken all the English crew out of her. On the same day a French sloop, took a brigantine and sloop, close in to Prawle Point and drove a brigantine from Lancaster for London into Salcombe.²⁹

1757 January 2. The *Madeira Packet* was chased into Salcombe Harbour by a French privateer of fifteen guns. The privateer continued firing till Capt. Clapp got within the Bar, but he received very little damage.³⁰

1758 January 10. The *Mary, Bell*, from Salcombe to Guernsey, was taken by the French and sent to Cherbourg.³¹

1758 May 9. A French snow privateer of 14 guns and about 90 men, took three merchant vessels, between Salcombe and the Bolt, in full view of the people on shore, and carried them all off. One was a light collier, just sailed out of Dartmouth for Milford, the others were two sloops from Salcombe with malt and cider for Plymouth.³²

1761. The old set of six bells from St. Edmund's church, Kingsbridge, 'having been taken down and shipped for the capital to be new-cast, were captured by a French

privateer and carried off as lawful prize, to the great mortification of the orthodox part of the Kingsbridgians'.³³

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