

LOCAL STUDIES EDUCATION SERIES

# MARITIME HISTORY



The flagship Neustra Senora del Rosario in Torbay, August 1588

## The Spanish Armada



In 1585, Elizabeth I, the Protestant Queen of England, sent an army to Holland to defend the Protestant Dutch against persecution by their Catholic ruler, Philip II, King of Spain. This led to war between England and Spain, two of the most powerful nations in Europe.

Philip sent a massive Armada of 130 ships to invade England and in July 1588 the ships were sighted off Cornwall. Sir Francis Drake, Vice-Admiral of the Fleet, was playing bowls on Plymouth Hoe when a messenger brought the news. He responded with the famous words: 'There is plenty of time to finish the game and beat the Spaniards'.

A year earlier, Drake had 'sing'd the King's beard' when he led a daring raid on the port of Cadiz and delayed the Armada by sinking or capturing thirty-seven of Philip's ships. Drake was known as 'El Draco' (The Dragon) by the Spaniards, who believed he had a magic mirror in his cabin, which enabled him to find and raid their treasure convoys sailing from South America.

Queen Elizabeth's Admiral of the Fleet, Lord Charles Howard, had three of the greatest sea captains of the age under his

command: Francis Drake on the *Revenge*, John Hawkins on the *Victory* and Martin Frobisher on the *Triumph*. Drake knew the Spanish navy preferred combat at close quarters where their soldiers could board and overpower the English ships, so he used long-range guns on ships designed by John Hawkins, which were faster and could change direction more quickly than the Spanish. He also used an old Navy trick to scatter the Spaniards as they sailed in formation.

Eight fire ships - empty but for tar and gunpowder - were set ablaze under full-sail with guns double-loaded to explode in the intense heat and sent into the heart of the Spanish fleet. Mayhem followed as the Spanish ships fled from the path of the burning booby-traps.

Defeat turned into disaster as the Spaniards retreated and were pursued around Scotland and Ireland where many of their ships were wrecked in a violent storm. Two-thirds of the 30,000 task force died on the expedition. It is also estimated that only half of the Armada returned to Spain. In stark contrast, apart from the fire ships, not a single vessel was lost by the English fleet in an historic victory.

## THE GHOST OF THE SPANISH BARN

The richest prize taken from the Armada was the capture of the flagship *Neustra Senora del Rosario* (Our Lady of the Rosary). Laden with treasure-trove including gold coins, diamond-hilted swords, wine and munitions, the galleon was severely damaged when it collided with another Spanish vessel. The commander of the crippled ship, Don Pedro de Valdes, surrendered without a fight when challenged by the feared captain of the *Revenge*. 'El Draco' trained his cannon on the sitting target and delivered a chilling ultimatum, 'I am Francis Drake and my matches are burning'.

Crowds from Brixham, Paignton and Torquay gathered along the coastline as the *Rosario* was towed into Torbay and 397 captive mariners and soldiers brought ashore. They were imprisoned temporarily in the Old Barn at Torre Abbey (now known forever as the Spanish Barn). There were angry demonstrations against the would-be invaders and local people resented sharing their harvest with the enemy.

George Cary of Cockington, who had organised the defence of South Devon, ordered many of the prisoners to be returned to the *Rosario* 'to live upon such victuals as do remain in the said ship, which is very little and bad, their fish unsavoury and bread full of worms'.

The Spanish had believed they were invincible and several officers brought their wives and girlfriends along on the voyage. Although there is no evidence to support the story, it is claimed that one such couple, a lieutenant and his fiancée, were on board the *Rosario*. To avoid being parted by their English captors, the girl disguised herself as a sailor and the couple were imprisoned together in the Spanish Barn.

Sadly, the young woman caught a chill and died. Her sorrowing ghost is said to haunt the barn and roam the grounds of Torre Abbey searching for her lost love.



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### DID YOU KNOW?

The Spanish word 'Armada' means a fleet of ships.

Armada Park, Chelston opened in 1956. Streets in the area also honour famous Elizabethan seafarers including: Howard Close, Drake Avenue, Hawkins Avenue and Frobisher Green.

The *Neustra Senora del Rosario* remained in Torbay for nearly five weeks and was then towed by eight Brixham fishing boats to Dartmouth. The galleon was later broken up at Chatham Naval Dockyard, Kent.

For his part in preparing the defence of South Devon against possible invasion, Queen Elizabeth bestowed a knighthood on George Cary of Cockington (see Local Studies Education Series - Cockington).

Devonians Francis Drake and John Hawkins were cousins. In 1596, they both fell ill and died during a voyage in the Caribbean and were buried at sea.

During his attack on Cadiz in 1587, Drake captured cargoes of hoops and staves used for making barrels

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## DID YOU KNOW *continued*

in which food and drink were stored and preserved onboard ship. This action forced the Spaniards to equip the Armada with casks made with unseasoned wood. The wood dried and split, causing food to rot and making water an undrinkable green slime.

Treasurer of the Navy, John Hawkins, was responsible for raising the pay of ordinary seamen from 33p to 50p a month and providing rations of beer, bread, biscuits, meat, fish, bacon and cheese. The lack of fruit and vegetables in the diet of sailors caused a nutritional disorder called scurvy with unpleasant symptoms of extreme weakness, mental depression, diseased gums, anaemia and haemorrhaging (bleeding under the skin).

Churches collected money for families of naval casualties in large wooden

'Armada chests'. (One is now on display in the entrance to Torquay Museum.)

The sailor's favourite off-duty past time was gambling - playing dice and backgammon. They had no beds and either slept at their posts or in the rat-infested holds. The unsanitary conditions spread killer diseases such as dysentery, fever and plague.

The *Golden Hind* in Brixham Harbour is a replica of the ship in which Francis Drake became the first Englishman to circumnavigate the world. The voyage took three years and was completed when he sailed into Plymouth Sound in 1580. (For more about life at sea in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century log onto the following websites: [www.goldenhind.co.uk](http://www.goldenhind.co.uk) and [www.maryrose.org](http://www.maryrose.org))

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## FURTHER INFORMATION

Books containing information about the Spanish Armada available from Torbay Library Services include:

Devon & The Armada by John Roberts (1988)

The Spanish Armada by Christopher Falkus (1972)

The National Trust Book of The Armada by Mary Connatty (1987)

For more about the history of Torbay - visit the Local History Collection at Torquay Central Library or view the website ([www.torbay.gov.uk](http://www.torbay.gov.uk)) for information on the following subjects:

History of Torquay/Torbay's Heritage/People and Places/Famous People. The site also contains opening times, news of forthcoming events and general information

about the following historic buildings and museums which are well worth a visit:

Torre Abbey Historic House & Gallery, King's Drive, Torquay. Tel: 01803 293593

Torquay Museum, 529 Babbacombe Road, Torquay. Tel: 01803 293975

Oldway Mansion, Paignton. Tel: 01803 201201

Brixham Heritage Museum, Bolton Cross, Brixham. Tel: 01803 856267



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