

Stoke Gabriel and the Pirates of the Maghreb

That Stoke Gabriel was the centre of the River Dart salmon fishing industry for centuries has tended to overshadow the fact that Stoke Gabriel men were also mariners, sailing the seas to discover new worlds, to trade with other nations, and to fish the waters. A unique 17th century insight into the parish's connection with seafaring and the sea fishing industry in particular can be obtained from the parish's Churchwarden Accounts (CWA) from 1611 to 1622, the only such accounts before the 20th century to have survived. It was a period in which, contrary to the popular patriotic anthem, Britannia did not rule the waves and Britons were enslaved.

At the beginning of the 17th century, Dartmouth was one of the principal ports of the South West, eclipsed only by Plymouth and Exeter. A maritime centre which provided safe and deep anchorage for the boats, its wealth was largely derived from fish, especially cod and pilchards, and trade which brought in goods from far and wide. The main fisheries were in the North Atlantic, particularly Newfoundland, and the key markets were in France and Iberia with the best prices reportedly being obtained in the Mediterranean ports of Alicante, Malaga and Marseilles. Having sold their catch, the boats would return with such commodities as iron, wine, salt and fruit. The majority of the mariners who served on board the boats resided outside Dartmouth in neighbouring parishes including Stoke Gabriel. The CWA for 1613 reveal that the men travelled to Dartmouth by boat, as indicated by a payment to:

“...James bickford to the louth of his bott to cary the mariners to Dartmoth.”

More than 50 years later, Stoke Gabriel parish register for 1670 records the burial of William Downing, but unusually also records that he was a sailor who died at Dartmouth having been taken sick at sea on the way back from Newfoundland.

Sea fishing was a dangerous business at the best of times but the journey to the Mediterranean ports, passing through the Straits of Gibraltar, was particularly hazardous because of the pirates who operated off the Barbary Coast. They came from the Maghreb (the present-day countries of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia) and were known as corsairs or colloquially as Turks as a result of their association with the Ottoman Empire. Seizing the boats by force, the corsairs would take the mariners hostage, enslaving them if they were poor, or holding them to ransom if they were rich. The fishing boats would be taken back to the Maghreb, or scuttled or simply left to drift.

Following the peace treaty with Spain in 1604, the country's naval force had been much reduced and, within a decade, was found to be inadequate to the threat presented by the corsairs. The situation was made worse by the decision of the new king, Charles 1, not to deploy his ships in support of the fishermen. In April 1626, according to State Papers, the

Commissioners at Plymouth remarked to the Council that the Turks were “carrying away the subjects and their goods, whilst the King's ships lie still in harbour to the charge of the King and shame of the nation.” These were worrying times for the mariners’ families and their coastal communities, especially knowing that the captives were often tortured, that the conditions of incarceration were poor and that many would never return home. There was also the financial concern. While the merchants suffered the economic loss from the confiscation of ships and cargo, it was the families who bore the distress of ransom demands. Appeals for contributions were made and, although the parish CWA cover a period of only 10 years, they contain numerous entries of donations to people trying to raise the ransom, such as payments to the following:

“...one fisher of foye who had great lose at see by pirates”

“...2 pore marchautes of Jerusalem Robbed & kept in prison by the tourkes”

“...John ollyver of london being in the Turkes gallyes towards his Ransome”

“...a pore man of cownewall & also Wyllyam michell being taken by ward the piratt wth his shipp”

“...mary fford of ffoy towards the Redemyng of hir Husband from argeer”

“...towe pore wimen there husbands beinge in tvrkey”

Many of the captives were local men from Dartmouth and its surrounding parishes. One of the earliest reports was in 1611 with the capture of three Dartmouth ships, fish and crew. Further reports occur in the following years with over 50 mariners being taken hostage in 1619 and 130 in 1622.

The traditional ship of the corsairs was the galley, which although fast and manoeuvrable, was not well suited to the rough waters of the Atlantic, thus limiting their attacks to the Mediterranean. But the extent of their marauding campaigns changed with the privateers, renegade seamen of Europe, notably Dutch and Englishmen who had been laid off after the peace treaty with Spain and had “turned Turk” in search of quick money. Using men-of-war boats, together with their local knowledge and seamanship, the corsairs became more brazen, extending their activities to the Bay of Biscay and further north. By 1625 they were regularly sighted in the English Channel. Ominously, the nature of the threat from the corsairs changed dramatically at this point from being a localised threat to fishermen in the Mediterranean Sea to a more extensive threat to coastal communities throughout the North Atlantic and Southwest England in particular.

Local attacks by corsairs occupy numerous entries in the State Papers of the 17th century. In April 1625 it is reported that a Dartmouth ship bound for the Newfoundland fisheries and three Cornish fishing boats were taken within the waters of Plymouth harbour. The following month there is a further report that “The Turks are upon our coasts. They take ships only to take the men to make slaves of them.” Ever more emboldened and in the absence of an effective naval response, the corsairs began to come ashore to capture the men, women and children for the slave markets of the Ottoman Empire, the men becoming galley slaves or labourers and the women sold into concubines. A raid in Mount’s Bay, Cornwall, in the same year took out the church of Munigesca and resulted in the capture of 60 men, women and children; subsequent attacks also occurred on boats harboured at Looe, St Keverne and elsewhere. In 1627 the Dutch privateer, Jans Janszoon, established a base on Lundy Island from which for the next five years the corsairs attacked and plundered coastal towns and villages of Cornwall and Devon. Comparatively defenceless Salcombe and Torbay became refuge harbours for the pirates, plundering passing ships and triggering alarm among the local population.

In 1635, the Mayor of Dartmouth, reported to the Privy Council that 60 local seamen had been captured “by Turkish pirates within three leagues of the Lizard” and expressed “great fears for the Newfoundland ships unless the mischief likely to ensue is timely prevented.” With the attacks now occurring almost on a daily basis, rumours abounded of some 60 men-of-war sailing close to the shores of Devon and Cornwall. By 1640 there were reportedly 3000 to 5000 English people in captivity in the Maghreb, of which about 400 came from the Dartmouth area. The attacks were now so frequent that the fishermen were reluctant to put to sea while their families remained without protection. In 1642 the Dartmouth community served a petition on Devonshire JP’s to make representations to King and Parliament concerning the activities of the “Turkish pirates from Algiers and Sallee.” Signed by 1100 men from the Dartmouth area, it included 70 men from Stoke Gabriel, among whom were the parish vicar, Rev’d Daniel Getsius, and William Downing, presumably the same person whose burial was later recorded in the parish register.

Raising ransom money to free the captives was a national and local endeavour. The government established a Committee for Algiers to oversee the payment of ransom moneys and in 1645 negotiated the release of some 250 prisoners. Local fishing communities came together to raise funds to liberate their own men and in 1680 the then vicar, Rev’d William Stephens, organised a collection for Stoke Gabriel. The reporting document survives and reads as follows:

“A Collection made in the parish of Stoke Gabriell (according to his Majesties gracious Letters patents for the redemption of Captives as followeth 7o October 1680

Received of Mr Stevens Vicar of Stokegabriell the summe of five pounds and five shillings and one penny for the Collection made within his parish for the redemption of Captives in Turkey.

And two groates which were not Good were returned backe”

The payment of ransom money may have made matters worse, but to the directly affected families it seemed the only way to free their men. Under increasing pressure, the government negotiated a peace with Tunis and Tripoli in 1675 and by the end of the 17th century the corsairs’ activities had diminished. However, the threat was not finally subdued until the early 19th century when the European navies brought Algiers under control. In 1816 more than 4,000 Christian slaves were liberated from Algiers and the power of the corsairs was finally broken.

Records are incomplete but it is estimated that over 1 million Europeans were enslaved by the corsairs of which 20,000 came from this country. Many were sailors from the south west including some 400 from the Dartmouth area and, while no evidence has been found of any Stoke Gabriel mariner being taken hostage, it is unlikely that the parish escaped the experience. At the very least, the activities had an alarming impact on the parish. The failure among those in power to address the threat in the early 17th century was a contributory factor to the emerging split between the king and his subjects and the ensuing civil war.

Mike Stott, May 2021

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