

# Pirates



Today when we think of pirates, we often think of the literary and cinematic characters such as Captain Hook, Long John Silver and of course, Captain Jack Sparrow! In truth, piracy began much earlier than these portrayals.

For as long as man has sailed vessels carrying goods, there have been pirates. In ancient days, the Greeks, Phoenicians, Carthaginians and Romans all sought to further maritime exploration. A complex network of trading posts and shipping routes grew out of those efforts and provided the incentive for adventurers to pursue the lucrative career of piracy. These early pirates sailed from African ports and were known as the Barbary corsairs. In the Early 16<sup>th</sup> Century, the most famous of them were the Barbarossa brothers. The Barbary corsairs continued plundering until the mid 1800's.

Pirates not only attacked other ships, but land settlements as well. The Vikings, or Norsemen, of the 9<sup>th</sup> -11<sup>th</sup> Centuries were notorious for sailing into Scottish, Irish and English waters to sack coastal settlements. They concentrated on monasteries and churches where they knew the richest treasures could be found. Some of these Vikings may have been the first to discover North America!

Eventually, the Vikings continued to raid further and further inland and began to settle down, marry and raise families. Many town names in England and Scotland today reflect this ancestry as do many peoples' surnames, e/g/, Johnson, Erickson, to name but a few.

In the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, trade flourished between European cities. The most commonly used transport of goods took place on the seas. Cities began to band together and negotiate for safe passage of themselves and their goods while at sea. These merchant leagues, as they were known, became targets for English, Scottish and Irish coastal fishing communities as they sailed through the English Channel. It was far more lucrative to catch valuable cargo than fish!

Spanish and Portuguese explorers discovered the New World while looking for a western passage to India and China. Once they stumbled upon the Americas, the face of piracy changed forever. Up until then, pirates had been who acted alone and didn't care what nation's land or ships they attacked. They were enemies to all

maritime trade. But with the discovery of the New World and its riches, a new kind of piracy came into being.

The New World, especially South and Central America was ripe with treasure. Gold, silver, and gem mines abounded. Native peoples of these lands wore their treasure as adornment. When the Spanish Conquistadors saw these riches, they set about capturing and conquering the “savages” and their treasures. The conquistador’s methods were successful and brutal. Aztec, Incan, and Mexican nations were subjugated, their wealth and civilizations stolen from them and replaced with Spanish greed, religion, and customs. They became little more than slaves on their own lands.

The Spanish explorers’ adventures were funded by the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand, Isabella, and their descendants. The treasure needed to cross the ocean and reach Spain. Spanish ships were loaded with treasure and due to weather patterns, they sailed twice a year in groups known as flotillas. While the route to the Americas was kept secret, the fact they would be landing in Spanish ports twice a year couldn’t be kept a secret from the rest of Europe.

In an effort to split the newly discovered lands up amicably, Spain and Portugal asked the Pope to make a ruling on who owned what. Pope Alexander VI split the ocean and lands up in such a way that Portugal’s territory included, all lands east, and as far west as parts of Brazil. Spain’s territories were the Americas. This notably left out England and France who were, to say the least, quite angry.

Consequently, a new breed of pirate, the privateer came into being. According to Azcarrega, privateering was “the naval enterprise of a private individual and enemies of his State, who operates with the approval and subject to the authority of a belligerent power with the exclusive object of causing losses to enemy trade and so to that of other nations allied with the enemy.”

There were two types of privateering. England’s Queen Elizabeth I gave letter patent to several ship’s captains to invoke the right of reprisal, that is attacking ships under the banner of an enemy country no matter where encountered. This allowed Queen Elizabeth to enlarge her treasury by the capture of Spanish treasure. Under the letters patent, the captains of these ships were allowed a share in the booty. England did not have to be at war with a nation for her ships to attack. France practiced privateering solely as an act of war, not of business.

Perhaps the most well known of all England’s privateers was Sir Francis Drake. He was born in a coastal town in the southeast of England and had been around boats all his life. As a young sailor he sailed under John Hawkins who was probably the first English privateer. John Hawkins made his fortune by sailing to Africa, capturing and enslaving native Africans, then sailing to the Americas. Once in the Spanish-held territories he would sell the slaves as mine workers to the local governments. He would then lie in wait for Spanish ships to set sail and capture

them. Through a series of mishaps, John Hawkins made only a few voyages, but remained in the business by owning many ships. Young Francis Drake was given command of one of Hawkin's ships.

Drake was an enterprising young sailor and captured many ships and much treasure for his Queen, He eventually owned several ships of his own and was instrumental in the defeat of the Spanish Armada's attack in 1588. As a reward he was knighted and revered throughout the land.

Men weren't the only pirates to sail the high seas. In the early 14<sup>th</sup> Century a beautiful, young French widow named Jeanne Clisson swore an oath to take revenge on her husband's killers. She became the scourge of the French coast and burned villages and towns. Her two sons sailed with her as she terrorized man and woman alike. Nothing is known of her final fate.

During the 16<sup>th</sup> Century the intrepid and notorious Irish female pirate, Grainne Ni Mhaille (Grace O'Malley) led a band of 200 sea raiders from the west coast of Ireland. She was raised in a seafaring family and as a young girl loved to sail with her father. As was customary, she married and when her husband attempted to "tame" her, she locked him out of the stronghold and never let him back in! She was widowed twice, was twice imprisoned, was condemned for piracy and for fighting for her rights against both the English and the Irish. In 1593 she went to London where she met with Queen Elizabeth herself. In this meeting she requested freedom for her imprisoned son, Elizabeth pardoned her and released her son. She is one of the few pirates who was not killed prematurely, but died in her own bed of old age.

Pirates continued to flourish and thrive throughout the next two centuries. This was the time of the buccaneers and filibusters in the Caribbean, but that's another story for another time!

