

The Battles of Flores: English warships, Privateers and Pirates in the Azores

The island of Flores, westernmost of the Azores, is a tip of the mid-Atlantic ridge that has emerged above the sea. It is a quiet place with a population of fewer than 4,000 and seems isolated and far from the centre of attention of the modern world. But, for a brief period in the last decade of the 16th and first decade of the 17th century, it was a focal point of international conflicts and the scene of naval engagements in which famous admirals battled to determine the fate of empires.

By Curtis Stewart

Introduction

Following the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, the English were in a relatively strong position in terms of sea power. They sought to follow up on their historic naval victory and launched a number of attacks on the Spanish and the Portuguese in the Atlantic. Three naval actions near Flores, which took place in this period, are of particular interest. In one of these battles the heroism of the English commander was the stuff of legends and was later commemorated in a poem by Tennyson. The second battle saw the capture by the English of one of the largest and richest treasure-laden Portuguese ships of the era, which had repercussions in terms of the English attitude towards trading with India. The third was an act of piracy that went unpunished, where the pirate retired with his ill-gotten gains. But a common thread linking all these battles was the quest for treasure from the Americas and Asia and the urgent need for money to finance the wars between European monarchs.

The Anglo-Portuguese alliance has endured for more than 600 years, but in the course of the centuries there were occasions when the alliance, as one source put it, ‘fell into obscurity’¹. Perhaps the most obscure period for the alliance was during the Elizabethan era, when the Spanish and Portuguese crowns were united after 1580 and the Spanish Armada was launched against England. During this era the Azores were a focal point for the maritime contest between England and the Iberian Union. Some of the most prominent Elizabethan English naval commanders, including Raleigh, Drake and Grenville, were active against the Spanish and Portuguese navies in the region of the Azores. Less well known was the English pirate, Peter Easton; little known but one of the most successful pirates of the era.

The English tried repeatedly to capture the Spanish treasure fleet and during the last decade of the 16th century expeditions were organized nearly every year with this objective. Among the best known are the campaigns of 1591, 1592 and 1597.² The economics of the raiding were clear; the Spanish crown depended on the flow of silver and gold from its colonies to finance the wars against England. It has been estimated that during the 1580s, the income from the American mines provided Spain with around 2 million ducats a year.³ The Armada of 1588 had cost around 10 million ducats and its defeat was a financial disaster for Spain. Spanish finances were consistently precarious under Phillip II. He had effectively declared bankruptcy in 1577, when interest payments to the Genoese bankers were suspended, and in 1596 the country again defaulted.⁴ If the English could cut off or reduce the income to the Spanish crown, they would cripple the Spanish ability to carry on war against England. Further, any treasure captured by the English would bolster the English economy and allow the construction of more warships, while avoiding taxation of English citizens or any appeal to Parliament to obtain money. Thus, a successful raid against the treasure fleet would have a twofold advantage to England, it would deprive the Spanish of finance for their military and provide the English crown and nobles with wealth without need for recourse to Parliament.

¹ <https://amp.en.google-info.org/40912019/1/battle-of-flores-1592.html>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islands_Voyage

³ Kennedy, Paul, “The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers”, 1988, William Collins, London, p. 59.

⁴ Ibid, p. 60.

The Azores were a convenient location for the English to try to intercept the treasure-laden vessels, as ships sailing from South America and the Caribbean, as well as ships returning from the Far East, were likely to use the westerly winds at the latitude of the Azores on their return voyage to Europe. The seas around Flores Island were the location for two prominent naval actions by the English, the first in September of 1591 and the second a few months later in May to August 1592. The outcomes of the two battles were quite different, but both were memorable and have been the subject of comments by writers and analysis by historians.



The Battle of Flores 1591⁵

The Battle of Flores, 1591

“*At Flores in the Azores Sir Richard Grenville lay...*” is the opening line of Tennyson’s poem *The Revenge, A Ballad of the Fleet*, written in 1878. The poem relates the heroic battle in 1591 of the English warship *Revenge* under the command of Sir Richard Grenville. The *Revenge* faced a fleet of 53 Spanish ships and battled for 15 hours before finally being captured. As the poem describes it:

*And the sun went down, and the stars came out far over the summer seas,
But never a moment ceased the fight of the one and the fifty-three.
Ship after ship, the whole night long, their high-built galleons came,
Ship after ship, the whole night long, with her battle-thunder and flame;
Ship after ship, the whole night long, drew back with her dead and her shame.
For some were sunk and many were shatter'd, and so could fight us no more--
God of battles, was ever a battle like this in the world before?*

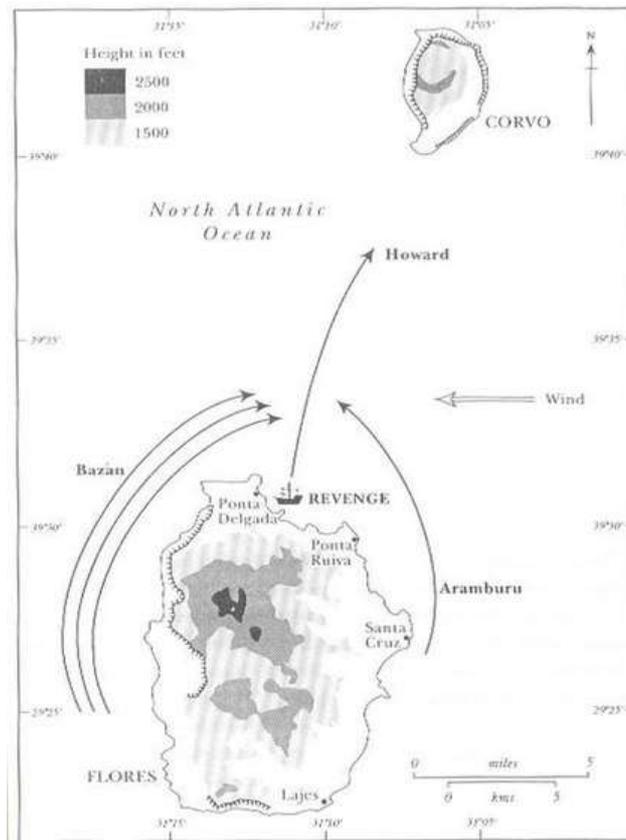
The *Revenge* was part of a squadron patrolling the area around the Azores in an effort to capture the Spanish treasure fleet as it sailed from the Americas. The English had sent a force of 16 ships under the overall command of Lord Thomas Howard to intercept the Spaniards. On September 9, 1591 the English were anchored off the northeast coast of Flores, near the village of Ponta Delgada, repairing and

⁵ A 20th century CE painting by Charles Dixon showing the 1591 battle near Flores between a Spanish fleet battled and the 'Revenge' captured by Sir Richard Grenville.

(source: <https://www.worldhistory.org/uploads/images/12377.jpg?v=1617620404>)

resupplying their ships and caring for crew members who were stricken with fever. The Spanish sent a large force of 53 ships from Spain, led by Alonso de Bazán, to rendezvous with the treasure fleet and escort it from the Azores on to Spain.⁶

Howard received a warning that the Spanish fleet was approaching and the English vessels other than the *Revenge* managed to depart and escape to the north. The *Revenge* remained behind, perhaps because several sick crew members were still ashore. The Spanish launched a two-pronged attack, as shown on the map, and managed to surround the *Revenge*, while Howard and the rest of the squadron sailed toward Corvo.⁷



Map of the Battle of Flores 1591⁸

The battle began in the afternoon and continued for 15 hours, only ending in the early morning hours of September 10th. The Spanish repeatedly attempted to board the *Revenge* but were repelled each time. The English resisted vigorously and managed to damage at least five of the Spanish ships, sinking one, while inflicting considerable casualties.⁹ The tactics of two sides in the contest were different. The Spanish employed their usual battle tactic, coming alongside the enemy, employing grappling hooks to lash the ships together and sending boarding parties of soldiers to take over the *Revenge*. In this sense they sought to fight a battle using soldiers, similar to a battle on land. The English, in contrast, tried to manoeuvre their ship to keep a distance and to use cannon to damage or destroy the enemy ship. The *Revenge* had been designed for this type of warfare. This had also been the tactic the English used in fighting the Spanish Armada a few years previously.¹⁰

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alonso_de_Bazán

⁷ Stibbs, John H. "RALEIGH'S ACCOUNT OF GRENVILLE'S FIGHT AT THE AZORES IN 1591." *The North Carolina Historical Review*, vol. 27, no. 1, 1950, pp. 20–31. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/23516626. Accessed 6 May 2021.

⁸ Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Revenge_last_fight_map.jpg

⁹ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Flores-1591>

¹⁰ McKee, Alexander, *Against the Odds*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, 1991. An interesting YouTube video based on McKee's book is available at:

https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Last+Stand+of+the+Revenge+-+Against+the+Odds+

The *Revenge* had been Drake's flagship in the Spanish Armada. She was built as a warship and incorporated several innovative design features that represented a departure from anything designed before. *Revenge* was built in 1577 for the Queen's Navy Board at a cost of £4,000 at the Royal Dockyard in Deptford by Master Shipwright Mathew Baker. His innovative race-built design was a new style of shipbuilding that would revolutionise naval warfare for the next three hundred years.¹¹ The description 'race-built' derived from the "raced" or razed fore- and aft-castles, which, combined with their greater length in relation to their beam, gave them a sleek look.¹²

Following the English surrender, the Spanish kept the *Revenge's* survivors aboard as crew to help with sailing. Grenville, who had been taken aboard Bazán's flagship, died two days later. The Spanish Treasure Fleet rendezvoused with Bazán soon after, and the combined fleet, numbering around 140 vessels, set off toward Spain. This combined fleet was overtaken by a week-long storm during which *Revenge* and 15 Spanish warships and merchant vessels were lost. *Revenge* sank with her mixed crew of 70 Spaniards and English prisoners, near the island of Terceira.¹³



Sir Richard Grenville (1542-1591)¹⁴

The Second Battle of Flores - Cruising Voyage to the Azores of 1592

A few months after the wreck of the *Revenge*, the English fleet returned to the waters around Flores, once again intent on capturing treasure ships. This time they had better luck and succeeded in capturing a huge Portuguese "nau" or carrack, the *Madre de Deus*, which at the time was one of the largest ships in the world. This expedition came to be known as the Cruising Voyage to the Azores of 1592, a series of naval engagements that took place from 20 May to 19 August 1592. The English fleet was initially led by Sir Walter Raleigh, but later command was taken over by Martin Frobisher and John Burrough. Queen Elizabeth and private investors financed the venture in the hope of making large profits. The expedition was indeed a financial and military success; in addition to capturing the *Madre de Deus* the English were able to take a number of other Portuguese and Spanish ships.

The English captured the *Madre de Deus* after a long naval battle off Flores.¹⁵ Sir John Burrough led the attack, and after a bloody battle managed to board the Portuguese ship. He spared the life of the captain and crew and set them ashore. The English were reportedly so impressed by the size of the

¹¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_ship_Revenge_\(1577\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_ship_Revenge_(1577))

¹² *Herman, Arthur* (2004). *To Rule the Waves: How the British Navy Shaped the Modern World*. HarperCollins. ISBN 978-0-06-053424-0. And <https://www.c-span.org/video/?178061-1/to-rule-waves-british-navy-shaped-modern-world>

¹³ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Flores_\(1591\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Flores_(1591))

¹⁴ Circa 1571. National Portrait Gallery, London

¹⁵ [https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madre_de_Deus_\(nau\)](https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madre_de_Deus_(nau))

Madre de Deus that rather than transship the cargo and burn the ship, as was usual, it was decided to sail her to Dartmouth.



Portuguese carrack, the *Madre de Deus*¹⁶

The scale of the *Madre de Deus* was impressive. Built in Lisbon in 1589, she was 165 feet (50 m) in length, had a beam of 47 feet (14 m), and could carry 900 tons of cargo. She had seven decks, thirty-two guns in addition to other arms, 600 to 700 crew members, and a gilded superstructure. At sea, her helm required the efforts of 12 to 14 men to keep her on course.¹⁷

The riches transported by the *Madre de Deus* included trunks full of pearls and precious jewels, gold and silver coins, amber, rolls of the highest quality cloth, tapestry, 425 tons of pepper, 45 tons of cloves, 35 tons of cinnamon, 25 tons of cochineal, 15 tons of ebony, 3 tons of nutmeg, and 2.5 tons of benjamin (an aromatic resin used in perfumes and medicines). There was also incense, silks, damask, gold cloth, Chinese porcelain, and elephant tusks. But perhaps the greatest treasure that the English acquired was a document printed in Macau in 1590, which contained precious information about Portuguese trade in China and Japan. Richard Hakluyt reported that this document was found locked in a cedar box, wrapped 100 times by a fine Calicut cloth, treated like the most precious of jewels.¹⁸

The total value of the cargo aboard the carrack was astounding, being nearly equal to half the size of the English monarch's annual revenue. The cargo was subject to mass theft by sailors and dock workers when it arrived in Dartmouth. There were also quarrels over the shares of the prize. But even after pilferage, Queen Elizabeth got an excellent return, her share was worth perhaps around £80,000 on her original investment of £3,000. The remaining goods were valued at over £60,000 and divided amongst the investors. The value of those goods looted before being properly inventoried was perhaps a further £650,000.¹⁹ The scale of the relative wealth of England and Portugal in the 16th century was very much in favour of Portugal. At that time, the Anglo-Portuguese alliance was one in which Portugal was the wealthy, powerful partner with an empire spanning the globe from Brazil to Africa, India and China. England was a smaller country with no overseas colonies.

The expedition had formative consequences for the English both financially and regarding the future of English exploration. All of this was revenue diverted from the Spanish treasury and was now at the disposal of the English. The impact of the captured treasure on English culture, both in its influence on

¹⁶ Maritime Museum (Lisbon)

¹⁷ Smith, Roger (1986). "Early Modern Ship-types, 1450-1650". The Newberry Library.

¹⁸ [https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madre_de_Deus_\(nau\)](https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madre_de_Deus_(nau))

¹⁹ <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1572/the-capture-of-the-treasure-ship-madre-de-deus/>

demand for products from Asia as well as focusing attention on India as a trading partner, has also been the topic of research.^{20 21}

The Goanese author Luis Dias provided a perspective of the capture of the *Madre de Deus* from the Indian subcontinent and wrote, "The other result of this incident was that England saw first-hand how staggering were the riches of the East. The Macau document became the template for voyages that would eventually lead to the establishing of the East India Company in 1600. Isn't it ironic? A ship that set sail from Goa gets ambushed by the English off the faraway Azores, and becomes the stimulus for what would eventually be the British rule over the Indian peninsula?"²²

The raids by the English in the Azorean islands other than Flores are outside the scope of this article, but one near miss deserves mention. Expeditions to the Azores were practically annual events in the 1590s. An English raiding party returned to the archipelago in 1594. Inspired by the capture of the *Madre de Deus*, the Earl of Cumberland had fitted out three ships at his own expense and sailed to the Azores. In June 1594 he attacked another huge Portuguese carrack, the *Cinco Chagas*, which had sailed from Goa with an incredibly rich cargo, including quantities of gold, diamonds and other gems.²³ The *Chagas* had tried to land at Flores or Corvo, but winds were not favourable, so the ship continued toward Faial. Cumberland's ships attacked the *Chagas* near Faial, and failed to capture it, but in the course of the battle the *Chagas* caught fire and when the fire reached the power room the ship exploded. Over 500 crew and passengers perished and the entire cargo went to the bottom of the sea. The value of the cargo in 2020 terms is estimated to have been around 15 to 20 billion U.S. dollars, supposedly one of the richest treasure ships ever lost.²⁴

The Pirate Peter Easton and the Attack of 1611

With the death of Elizabeth and the ascent of James to the throne, England and Spain signed a peace treaty in 1604,²⁵ bringing an end to a long and costly conflict. Philip III of Spain (Philip II in Portugal) had to deal with many other conflicts and the war with England was a drain on his treasury. With this treaty the raids by the English navy came to an end, but the Azores continued to be a region where treasure could be sought. In 1611 a naval action took place near Flores involving an English pirate who had previously been a privateer.

The pirate, Peter Easton, made Flores a regular port-of-call, provisioning food, water and kindling for his travels and was supposedly engaged to marry a daughter of the Captain of Flores. Doubly inconvenienced by the damage caused by this pirate's ships and by the complicity of inhabitants of Flores, Philip II of Portugal (Philip III of Spain) ordered, on July 30, 1611, that action be taken to capture Easton. He was never captured, although the local magistrate of Flores and the Captain of the island were arrested.²⁶

²⁰ <https://academic.oup.com/jhc/article-abstract/32/2/207/5479429?redirectedFrom=PDF>

²¹ Van Kessel, Elsje. "The inventories of the *Madre de Deus*: Tracing Asian material culture in early modern England." *Journal of the History of Collections Advance Article* (2004).

²² <https://luisdias.wordpress.com/2018/12/16/madre-de-deus-the-goan-connection/>

²³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Action_of_Faial

²⁴ Horner, Dave (1971). *The Treasure Galleons: Clues to Millions in Sunken Gold and Silver*. Dodd, Mead - University of Texas.

²⁵ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_London_\(1604\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_London_(1604))

²⁶ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flores_Island_\(Azores\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flores_Island_(Azores))



Philip III of Spain and II of Portugal²⁷

The earliest mention of Easton is from 1602, when he received a commission as a privateer from Elizabeth I to protect the English fishing fleet in Newfoundland against Spanish intrusions and operated from Harbour Grace, Newfoundland. In 1604, Elizabeth I died, and James I sought peace with Spain. As a result, Easton's status as a privateer was terminated. Easton, however, had a talent for raiding and continued attacking Spanish ships in the Atlantic, which legally meant he had become a pirate. He ranged from Newfoundland to Ireland and as far south as the coast of West Africa and achieved considerable success. Easton moved his base to the Barbary Coast where he continued to harass the Spanish. There, he built up an army of more than 1500 men. This force enabled him to execute even more daring plans, including his incredible attack on the Spanish treasure fleet in the sea near Flores in the Azores.²⁸ The details of this battle have been lost, but it seems that after the battle Easton arrived at Tunis with four large Spanish galleons in tow.²⁹

He returned from Newfoundland late in 1612 and spent some months on the Moroccan coast before finally making his way to Savoy. He entered Villefranche-sur-Mer on 20 February 1613 with four ships and 900 men and was reported to have eight more vessels waiting to join him. A conservative inventory put the value of his booty at 100,000 crowns. At first Easton was treated with suspicion, but he soon became a favourite with the Duke of Savoy. Easton offered his skill in the use of artillery in Savoy's war with Mantua with such success that he was awarded an annual pension of £4,000 and the duke even went so far as to bestow the title of marquis on him. The Savoyard court was equally amused at the novelty of having a foreign pirate in their midst and christened him 'Il Corsaro Inglese'. He finally set the seal on one of the most successful careers in the history of piracy when he married an heiress and was converted to Catholicism.³⁰

An unusual and brief moment in history

Nearly all the battles around the Azores and the island of Flores described here occurred during the brief period between the defeat of the Great Armada and the accession of James I to the English throne. (Peter Easton's activities falling just outside this period.) This period saw a unique combination of characteristics; the English had gained a strong strategic position in terms of sea power, the Anglo-

²⁷ Painting by Frans Pourbus the Younger

²⁸ Source: <http://www.thewayofthepirates.com/famous-pirates/peter-easton/>

²⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Easton

³⁰ Senior, Clive M., "A Nation Of Pirates", E-book digitised and uploaded by the [Bristol Record Society](#), 1976, p. 69.

Portuguese alliance was in abeyance, the Spanish treasury was dependent on the flow of treasure from the Americas and the treasure-laden ships navigated near the Azores on their return to Europe. This created a strategic chokepoint in the Azores that the English were able to exploit, and the result was a series of almost annual raids by English ships to the seas around Flores. This unique set of circumstances did not recur and so the period of English naval adventures in the Azores was short lived, but it had an important impact on setting the stage for English engagement with India (with the capture of the *Madre de Deus*) and then, later, with Tennyson's writing, helping to confirm and shape the English self-image of heroic naval exploits in 19th century Victorian English literature.

Flores island today is a quiet, bucolic place that is being discovered by tourists looking for a place to escape from the pressures of the modern world. Few of the visitors realize that five hundred years ago the island was destination of admirals in command of fleets of warships and a focus of attention of monarchs in England and Spain.

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Curtis Stewart is a retired American diplomat living in Portugal. He enjoyed overseas assignments with the Department of State in more than a dozen countries, primarily in Africa. His posting in the Azores helped in research for this article. In the course of his career, he worked in the areas of economics, energy, mineral resources and science. He met his wife while serving in the Azores and has lived in Portugal since 2002.