

Pirates of the Solent

Privateers and a Wedge of Gold

Pirates,

5th February 2015 - Roy Underdown Pavilion

At this meeting Cheryl Butler gave an interesting talk about the Pirates of the Solent, entitled 'Pirates, Privateers and a Wedge of Gold'. Privateers were legalised pirates who were licensed by the Crown to undertake attacks on enemy shipping. During the 16th century pirates, privateers and exploration were a source of wealth for countries.

At this time Southampton was an important and wealthy town, having jurisdiction of the waters from Lymington to Portsmouth and held Admiralty Courts on the foreshore at significant maritime places, such as Hamble, to control their activities. Southampton gained its wealth from trading, collecting taxes and fining for illegal acts. It had the right to execute pirates and the town's gallows was on the shoreline as a deterrent to other seafarers.

Revenue started to decline due the loss of trade from foreign ships and Bristol, becoming a more important port due to the discovery of America, so Southampton started to seek other sources of money. The vessel the 'Edward of Hampton' was seized in Hamble as a pirate ship and all the goods and chattels on board were sold off by the mayor of Southampton. He claimed this as part of the town's ancient rights to the goods of thieves and murderers. The money was used to build the Almshouse in Southampton. This interpretation of their ancient rights led to a court case between the town of Southampton and the Lord High Admiral, a dispute which raged for nearly 20 years. The Lord Admiral of England, Howard of Effingham, thought the goods of pirates belonged to him. The case was pursued throughout the threat to the country from the Spanish Armada.

Ironically it was the same pirates and privateers who were to prove themselves useful to the country as their skills were used to protect it against Spanish attacks. The Southampton ship 'The Angel' a former privateering vessel was used as one of the eight fire ships used to break the formation of the Spanish Armada.

This period saw great Elizabethan seadogs such as Drake, Raleigh and Frobisher walking the streets of Southampton and bringing their prize ships to the port. This led men of the area to sail across the Atlantic to the New World in search of gold, precious stones and what they thought would be easy wealth.

After the Elizabethan period when England's allegiances changed, privateers found themselves out of favour. Some transformed themselves into traditional pirates locating to the Barbary Coast to seek new fortunes. One of these pirates was Sir Henry Mainwaring who subsequently reformed and helped the government to control pirate attacks on its ships. He wrote a book 'Discourse of the Beginnings,

Practices and Suppression of Pirates' and was appointed governor of St Andrews Castle at Hamble Common.

These books later inspired other authors such as Daniel Defoe, Walter Scott and Byron to write romantic tales about the life of a swashbuckling pirate.

Cheryl concluded by telling the meeting about pirate goods being hidden at Netley Abbey and of a Hamble River mariner John Webbe who was recorded in the 1572 Admiralty Court Book. To avoid bringing goods into Southampton controlled ports where they would be taxed, seafarers would trade goods off Osborne Bay. When John Webbe entered the Hamble River he had some of his cargo seized as pirate goods which he had received at Stokes Bay.

A very informative and well research talk on a very interesting topic.