

# Sir Francis Drake


Sir Francis Drake was a famous Tudor mariner. His life story is full of contrasts. He was seen as a hero for being the first Englishman to sail right around the world, and he played a major role in defending England from the Spanish Armada. However he was also involved in several slave trading expeditions and as a licensed privateer, he looted and plundered Spanish towns and ships in Europe and throughout their Empire in the Americas.

Francis Drake was born in around 1542, at Crowndale, about 1 mile (2km) south west of here. After his father was accused of robbery and assault, Francis moved with his family to Chatham in Kent. There he learned to become a master mariner. He returned to Devon to work for his relatives, the Hawkins family, who ran a successful merchant fleet.

## Drake and the Slave Trade

Drake's relative, John Hawkins, was the first Englishman to establish a slave trading venture. Drake sailed on three of his expeditions to Guinea and Sierra Leone.

They raided African coastal villages, sometimes kidnapping whole communities. Rival tribal chieftains often joined in the attacks.



The medallion of the British Anti-Slavery Society (1785). The Society was established over 200 years after Drake's involvement in the slave trade.

The captives were shipped in terrible conditions to the West Indies and sold as slaves to the Spanish. They were forced to work on plantations and in the silver mines of South America. Around 1,200 - 1,400 people were enslaved in this way.

In 1568, Hawkins' and Drake's third sailing expedition ended in failure when the Spanish ambushed them. Drake escaped, and was left with a deep hatred of Spain. He was never involved in slave trading again, but instead focused on attacking the Spanish.

## Drake the Privateer

Between 1570 and 1572, Drake sailed as a privateer - a pirate licensed by the government to attack enemy ships and settlements. In two ships, with small crews from Plymouth and Tavistock, he plundered ports and seized ships around the Spanish Main. This was the area of the Spanish Empire which had coastlines around the Caribbean Sea and Gulf of Mexico. From here, enormous wealth - including gold, silver and gunstones - was being shipped back to Spain.

## Diego




Illustration by Chris Pridel

During an attack on a Spanish settlement in Panama, an escaped African slave called Diego sought refuge with Drake's fleet, and warned him of an approaching Spanish attack.

He introduced Drake to the Cimarrons, a band of escaped African slaves. They joined Drake in ambushing Spanish mule trains - helping him to capture huge amounts of silver.

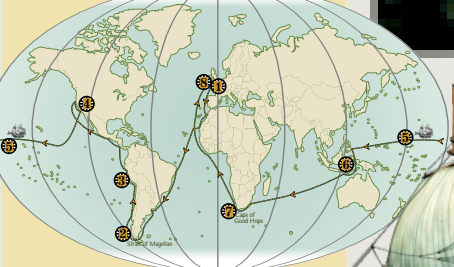
Diego returned to England with Drake and went on to sail with him as a free man, a paid member of the crew and - being fluent in Spanish - an invaluable interpreter.

## Circumnavigation of the Globe

Drake was the first Englishman to lead a voyage right around the world, completing only the second known circumnavigation in history.

Drake was sent to investigate Spanish colonies on the Pacific coast of the Americas. He left Plymouth in 1577 with five ships, but only one, the *Pelican*, safely reached the Pacific, where she was renamed the *Golden Hind*.

Drake sailed up the coast of South America, pillaging Spanish settlements and capturing ships, then continued further north to chart the west coast of North America. He landed in California at 'Nova Albion', claiming the region for England. After resting and restocking, the *Golden Hind* sailed across the Pacific Ocean to the Spice Islands of the East Indies, and home again by way of the Cape of Good Hope.



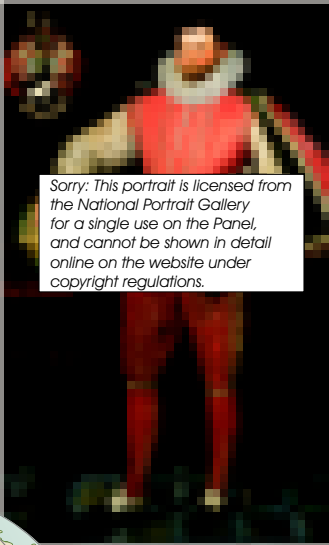
Drake returned to Plymouth in November 1580. In recognition of his achievement - and of the wealth he brought back for her - he was later knighted by Queen Elizabeth I.

## Life Ashore

After his voyage around the world, Sir Francis spent a few years ashore, buying an impressive home at Buckland Abbey, 4 miles (6.5 km) south of Tavistock. *Below - now owned by the National Trust and open to the public*. In 1581 he was elected Mayor of Plymouth and he also served as an MP.

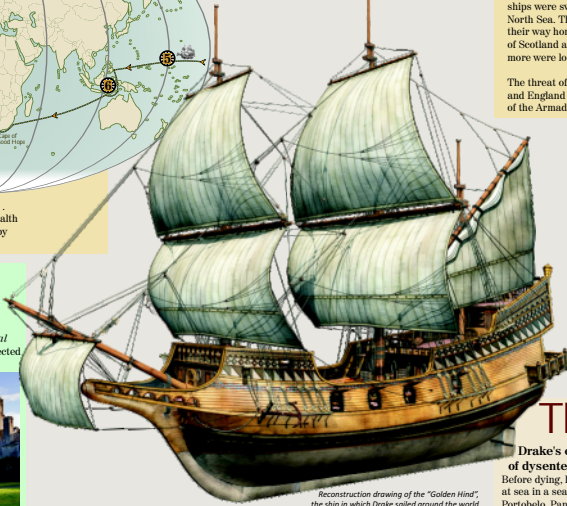


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Portrait of Sir Francis Drake, by an unknown artist: painted c. 1588 (National Portrait Gallery)



Reconstruction drawing of the "Golden Hind", the ship in which Drake sailed around the world (Spanish Council of Aragon House of Lords)

In 2020, following a campaign to remove the statue of Sir Francis Drake, Tavistock Town Council - in partnership with Tavistock Heritage Trust - decided to provide some missing information about his life.

## The Spanish Armada

By 1585, Catholic Spain and Protestant England were officially at war. Drake attacked Vigo in Spain, raided the Cape Verde islands and sacked Spanish ports and cities around the Caribbean. On his voyage home he went to rescue colonists from the failed English settlement at Roanoke, and returned to a hero's welcome at Portsmouth.

The Spanish were calling him "el Drake" - the Dragon. Some Spanish sailors believed he had a magic mirror and could see the position of all the ships at sea.

In 1587 Drake was sent to disrupt the preparations for Spain's planned invasion of England. His expedition became known as "the Singeing of the King of Spain's Beard": he destroyed Spanish ships at Cadiz and raided ports along the Portuguese coast.

In 1588 the 130 ships of the huge Spanish Armada set sail, aiming to carry troops to invade England, and overthrow Queen Elizabeth I.

English ships sailed out from Plymouth to harass the approaching Armada. As the Spanish passed further up the Channel, Drake - now appointed Vice-Admiral of England - captured their flagship, *Nuestra Señora del Rosario*, a valuable prize.

The Armada anchored off Calais, where Drake organised a night-time attack. He set fire to eight of his ships, which drifted among the panicking Spanish fleet. English guns bombarded the Armada, and in adverse winds many Spanish ships were swept away up to the North Sea. They tried to make their way home around the coasts of Scotland and Ireland, but many more were lost.

The threat of invasion had passed and England celebrated the defeat of the Armada.



## Drake's Leat

Back in Plymouth in 1589, Drake was involved in improvements to the city's water supply. An 18½ mile (30 km) leat was built from the River Meavy on Dartmoor, with six water-driven corn mills along its length. Water from the leat and four from his mills supplied the fleets leaving Plymouth.



Drake's Leat today, near to Clearbrook

## The Last Voyage

Drake's expeditions continued until 1596, when he died of dysentery while he was trying to capture the rich port of Panama. Before dying, he asked to be dressed in his full armour. He was buried at sea in a sealed lead-lined coffin, a few miles off the coastline from Portobelo, Panama.

## Drake's Life: A Timeline

- c.1540** Born at Crowndale, Tavistock
- 1567** Involved in one of the first English slave trading expeditions
- 1570/71** Trading in the West Indies
- 1572** Privateering in the Spanish Caribbean. Meets Diego who joins his crew
- 1572-3** Exploring in Panama
- 1575** Sent to help repress rebellion in Ireland
- 1577** The voyage around the globe begins. Drake secretly sent to attack Spanish colonies on American Pacific coast
- 1578** Becomes the first Englishman to navigate the Straits of Magellan
- 1580** Drake returns to England - the first Englishman to circumnavigate the globe - with plundered treasure
- 1581** Knighted by the Queen. Buys Buckland Abbey. Elected Mayor of Plymouth
- 1585** Sails to the Caribbean to sack & plunder Spanish cities. Rescues English colonists of Roanoke Island
- 1587** Destroys 30 Spanish ships in raid on Cadiz - "The Singeing of the King of Spain's beard"
- 1588** The Spanish Armada sails. As Vice-Admiral, Drake helps to thwart the invasion plans
- 1589** Unsuccessful attack on Lisbon
- 1595** Unsuccessful expedition against the Spanish in Panama & the Caribbean
- 1596** Dies of dysentery and buried at sea off the coast of Portobelo, Panama
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# The Statue

In 1882 - as the 300th anniversary of the Spanish Armada approached - a group from Plymouth tried to raise funds in Tavistock for a statue of Drake on the Hoe. People in Tavistock did not want Plymouth to steal the town's famous son, and tried to raise money for their own statue of Drake. The Ninth Duke of Bedford offered to pay for the statue as a gift to the town.



In 1909 Boehm's original plaster model for the statue was found hidden in woods on Haldon Hill, near Exeter. It was taken to Buckland Abbey where it was repaired and is now on permanent display.



Engraving of the unveiling, from The Graphic, 6th Oct. 1883

At a cost of \$5,000, the Duke commissioned an Austrian-born sculptor, Joseph Edgar Boehm, to create the statue. Various sites around the town were considered, but Boehm chose Fitzford to showcase his statue, and be closer to Drake's birthplace at Crowndale.

Five months later, in 1884, a copy of the statue was erected on Plymouth Hoe. Railings were added around the statue in Tavistock in 1885, after vandals broke Drake's sword and drunken railway navvies were found sleeping on the steps below.

On three sides of the Tavistock statue's plinth are bronze bas reliefs depicting key moments in Drake's career.



**4th April 1581:**  
Drake is knighted at Deptford. Five months after his voyage around the world, the *Golden Hind* was brought to Deptford where the Queen met and honoured Drake.

**19th July 1588:**  
Drake's game of bowls on Plymouth Hoe. An unproven story tells that when Drake was told of the approach of the Spanish Armada, he insisted that he still had time to finish his game and then finish the Spanish fleet.



**29th January 1596:**  
Drake's burial at sea. Drake died of dysentery off Panama. His body, dressed in full armour and sealed in a lead coffin, was buried at sea about three miles offshore from the port of Portobelo. The plaque fails to show the coffin!