

## THE GRAVEYARD OF THE ARMADA

This paper discusses some aspects of the Spanish Armada. In particular it discusses the traumatic experience of the Spanish ships on the west coast of Ireland in late 1588.

King Phillip II of Spain was enraged by the execution of Mary Queen of Scots. He decided to send an Armada to enable the huge army of the Duke of Parma to cross in safety from France to England. Having accomplished this, its second objective was to wipe out the English fleet

In what must have been a magnificent display of sea-faring power and might, Phillip sent his 130-strong fleet to Lisbon to pick up his “conquering” army. It was to sail on to London via the English channel and the Thames estuary to seize the capital and the throne.

The Spanish fleet maintained the customary crescent shape at sea. This gave greater protection to the slower and heavier vessels in the middle. However, once that crescent was ruptured, the whole fleet became open prey to a wily enemy.

The Spanish commander-at-sea, the Duke of Medina Sidonia was an amateur when it came to sailing. He took his fleet, without proper provisions or preparations, on what any sailor would have known was going to be a treacherous journey. He tried to land the huge ships at Lisbon where there was no suitable harbour.

From the mouth of the English channel the Armada moved in a tight crescent-shaped formation, defying and puzzling the English. However the English succeeded in breaking the formation by sending in fireships by night, causing panic among the Spaniards. In the subsequent sea battle of Gravelines, the Spanish fleet lost many ships and men, while the English fleet came through unscathed.

### **THE COURSE HOME**

The captain of each Spanish ship received word from their flagship commander to try to escape as best they could by heading north along the east coast of England and Scotland. They were to round the tip between Scotland and the Hebrides and head south along the west coast of Ireland. They should then dash for the safety of their home harbours in Spain.

Though many of the ships had been damaged in the sea battles, there was a chance of a reasonably successful retreat. However the Spanish could not foresee the weather on the west coast of Ireland. Once the struggling remnants of the fleet rounded the tip of Donegal and headed south, they were met with an onslaught of storms that had not been seen before in living memory.

By the time the first set of gales subsided, there were only about 28 ships making their way south along the west coast of Ireland. There were several galleons, but most of the ships were merchantmen converted for battle now leaking heavily. Most of their anchors were missing and masts and rigging were severely damaged.

## **LANDFALL**

The English Crown Administration in Dublin feared that the Spanish would land en masse around Galway, and that they would be joined by the rebellious Irish in areas almost beyond the control of the government. However intelligence was soon received in Waterford and Dublin that the ships were landing in a chaotic manner in the provinces of Ulster, Connacht and Munster, along a coastline of about 300 miles. Lord Deputy Fitzwilliam ordered the arrest and summary execution of all Spaniards. Torture could be used where necessary. Anyone assisting the Spanish would be charged as a traitor to the Crown.

### **Munster**

The first landfall of Armada ships was in Munster which had recently been colonised by the English in the Plantation of Munster. Seven ships anchored safely at the island of Scattery Roads near the mouth of the **River Shannon**. They seem to have had the services of a pilot who knew the coast. Nicolas Cahane (Keane) who owned the castle on the island refused to negotiate with them; however they obtained some supplies whilst repairs were being carried out. One of the ships, the *Annunciada*, was scuttled, with the crew transferring to the *Barco de Danzig*. This ship made it home safely to Spain.

One experienced Armada commander Juan Martinez de Recalde had landed a Papal invasion force in the **Dingle peninsula** eight years earlier. His current squadron consisted of three ships: the *San Juan de Portugal* (1,150 tons, 500 men, 20 guns) the *San Juan de Bautista* (750 tons, 243 men) and a small Scottish fishing smack. As his ships made their way through a storm to the coast of Kerry, the lookouts sighted Mount Brandon on the Dingle peninsula and the Blasket Islands to the west, a complex archipelago

studded with reefs. Recalde steered towards the Blaskets in search of shelter, and chose to ride on a swell through a tight gap at the eastern tip of the Great Blasket Island. The whole squadron managed this very complex manoeuvre and dropped anchor beneath sheer cliffs. Three other ships, the *Santa Maria de la Rosa* (900 tons, 297 men), the *San Juan de Ragusa* (650 tons, 285 men), and another unidentified ship entered the sound in some distress. The Rosa and the Ragusa both sank. A few days later Recalde managed to lead his squadron out of the sound and home to Spain - but he died soon afterwards.

The sloop *Nuestra Senora del Socorro* (75 tons) anchored at **Fenit** in Tralee Bay on the coast of Kerry where it surrendered to crown officers. The men on board were all hanged from a gibbet.

The *Trinidad* (800 tons, 302 men) was wrecked on “the coast of Desmond” probably at **Valentia Island**.

Numerous ships of the fleet were sighted off the coast of **County Clare**. Four were reported at Loop Head. The *San Esteban* (700 tons, 264 men) was wrecked and probably also the heavily damaged *San Marcos* (790 tons, 409 men). All the survivors were put to death. At Liscannor the oar-powered *Zuniga* (290 tons, Naples) anchored off-shore with a broken rudder, having found a gap in the Cliffs of Moher. It found favourable winds and eventually made it back to Naples.

### **Ulster**

*La Trinidad Valencera* (1,000 tons, Levant squadron, 42 guns) was taking on more water than it could pump out as it approached the coast. However it welcomed on board 264 men from the *Barca de Amburgo* which was almost swamped in heavy seas. The *Trinidad* anchored in Glenagivney Bay near Merville on the north coast of modern **County Donegal**, where she listed to such a degree that the order was given to abandon ship. The crew paid for the use of a small boat and 560 men were ferried to shore over a two-day period. During a march inland the survivors met a force of cavalry and were given a pledge of safe conduct. The noblemen and officers were separated out, and 300 of the ordinary men were massacred.

Two further unidentified ships were wrecked on the west Donegal coast, one at Mullaghderg, and the other at Rinn a' Chaislean.

The biggest loss of life was from the galleass *La Girona*, which had docked for repairs to her rudder at **Killybegs**, Donegal. About 800 survivors from two other Spanish shipwrecks were taken aboard there. The *La Girona* set sail for Scotland, but her rudder was damaged again in bad weather. The crew tried to row but she was wrecked off Lacada Point, just west of the Giant's Causeway in Co Antrim. Only ten of the estimated 1,300 people on board survived. This tragedy is commemorated in illustrations on the reverse side of First Trust Bank notes.

### **Connacht**

12 ships were wrecked on the coast of Connacht, and 1,100 survivors were put to death. The *Falco Blanco* (300 tons/103 men/16 guns) and the *Concepcion* of Biscay (225 men, 18 guns) and another unknown ship entered **Galway Bay**. The *Falco Blanco* was grounded at Barna, five kilometres west of Galway city, and most of those on board made it to shore. The *Concepcion* was grounded at Carna 30 kms further west, having been lured to shore by the bonfires of a party of wreckers from the O'Flaherty clan.

Three ships were wrecked on the coast of **Sligo**. About 1,800 men drowned and 100 came ashore. One of the survivors Captain Francisco de Cuellar has given a remarkable account of his experiences in the fleet and on the run in Ireland.

A galleon was wrecked at Tyrawley (modern **County Mayo**). 80 of the men who came ashore were killed on the beach by the axe of a single gallowglass warrior. 72 were taken into Crown custody and put to death at Galway on Fitzwilliam's orders. Two large ships were sighted off the **Aran Islands**. One failed to land a party in bad weather. We do not know what happened to either ship.

### **CONCLUSION**

The landfall of the Spanish Armada on the west coast of Ireland is a blight on both Irish and English history. As discussed above, deceit, murder and, in some cases, uncontrolled massacres took place.

Ironically, Spain soon reasserted her dominance at sea and the Spanish royal treasury was quickly replenished with wealth from the new world.

