

Cowfold's Contribution Towards the Redemption of English Slaves Captured by Barbary Pirates

The Churchwardens' accounts for Cowfold held by West Sussex Record Office for the period 1636- 1718 (Catalogue Number MF 1746 Par 59/9/2) include the following entry for January the third 1670:

*Then received of Mr George Winter Recto[r]
Of the parishe of Cowfold w[i]thin the Rape
of Bramber in the County of Sussex per the
full su[m]me of Seaven pounds and Two
pence collected in the said parrishe
towards the redempt[i]on of the Englishe
Captives from their Turkishe Slavery
I say rec[c]jed? by the Order of the right
Reverend father in God Peter Lord
Bishopp of Chichester*

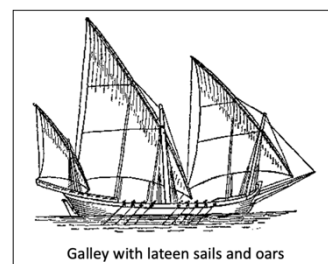
Charles Goodwyne

So, what is the background to this church collection that is now worth approximately £1,250?

Research reveals that the capture and enslaving of English and Continental/other European sailors and fishermen by pirates (also called Corsairs, Moors or Turks) from cities along the Barbary Coast in north Africa - cities such as Tunis and Algiers – was widespread during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries and peaked in the early part of the 17th century. It is estimated that through most of this century, at least 400 English sailors a year (and their ships) were lost to the slavers. (The demand for slaves was such that the pirates also repeatedly raided coastal communities including the West Country and the Isle of Wight.)



Many ships used by the pirates were galleys carrying a hundred or more fighting men armed with cutlasses and small arms. Powered by oars as well as lateen (triangular-shaped) sails, they were fast, highly manoeuvrable and well suited to intercepting and boarding merchant ships but, when they sighted a frigate with much more firepower, they fled. It was only later that they adopted modern square-rigged vessels armed with cannons.



What happened to the unfortunate men, women and children captured by the pirates?

Slaves in Barbary fell into two broad categories. The 'public' slaves belonged to the ruling pasha who could claim an eighth of all Christians captured by the corsairs and buy all the others he wanted at reduced prices. These slaves were housed in large prisons known as baños (baths), often in wretchedly overcrowded conditions. They were mostly used to row the corsair galleys in the pursuit of loot (and more slaves). The pasha also bought most female captives, some of whom were taken into his harem, where they lived out their days in captivity.

Other slaves were purchased by private owners. Their treatment and work varied. Some were well cared for, becoming virtual companions of their owners; others were worked as hard as any 'public' slave, in agricultural labour, or construction work, or selling water or other goods around town on the owner's behalf.

Many slaves captured by the Barbary corsairs were sold eastward into Ottoman territories.



Efforts to release the slaves

Europeans often attempted to buy their people out of slavery and, as public pressure increased, campaigns were launched in England, primarily by the Church, to raise ransom

funds to free slaves. Money was raised during sermons and Churchwardens would also visit households to collect donations. It is noted that slaves that had converted to Islam were excluded from Church charity because religious authorities saw those who 'turned Turk' as a threat to Christianity. (Christian women, for example, who worked in a harem often 'turned Turk' to stay with their children and most never made it home.)

We don't know who benefitted from the collection made in Cowfold in 1670. Records suggest that ransoms of between £30 and £60 could be paid per slave; this corresponds to between £5,000 and £10,000 at current rates and so the amount raised only represents a fraction of the ransom required for the release of just one slave.

The English Slave Trade under King Charles II

The collection in Cowfold was made during the reign of King Charles II (1660 to 1685). He was a controversial figure and Samuel Pepys mentioned in his diaries that he was "chasing a moth", implying that he spent most of his time with mistresses and neglected his wife (who remained childless) and the important affairs of state.

When Charles II married the Portuguese Princess, Catherine of Braganza, in 1662, she brought a valuable dowry that included the seaport of Tangier. He soon discovered that the port was frequently attacked by Moorish tribes and, partly to address the problem, he sold Dunkirk (which had been captured by Cromwell) to his French cousin, King Louis XIV, even though it was strategically more important. This provided funds to build a defensive breakwater, or mole, and freed up troops to protect the port.



While English slaves were being released from captivity in Barbary, non-Christian and non-European slaves were being purchased or captured to either serve on English galleys or work on the construction of the mole at Tangier. Later, many captured pirates were also sold for financial gain in markets throughout the Mediterranean. (It is also worth noting that Britain became officially involved in the transatlantic slave trade following royal approval in 1663 and this was to continue for almost 150 years.)

In 1680, fighting broke out again in Tangier but Parliament refused Charles' petition for more funds to strengthen the garrison. It was, therefore, decided to abandon Tangier altogether and, before the final evacuation in 1683/4, the fortifications and mole were completely demolished.

As public opinion hardened against Charles, Pepys recorded some graffiti left by a mob of unpaid sailors:

"Three sights to be seen: Dunkirk, Tangier and the Barren Queen"

Our thanks to Roberto Prieto-Labrador MA, PCIfA for discovering, transcribing, and sharing the document in the Churchwardens' accounts with us.