



THE SUNDIAL PAGE

By the end of December, the rainy season should have ended — but when Sir Francis Drake's fleet came to anchor in Nombre de Dios bay, on the coast of Panama, in December of the year 1595, the wet weather showed no signs of abating. Drake was a hero of his own time in the Elizabethan age. He had fought for his Queen and country, for the freedom of the high seas from Spanish domination. Nevertheless, in serving his Queen he had also taken the opportunity to serve his own self-interests. Undoubtedly, his greatest achievement was his circumnavigation of the world in the *Golden Hinde* in the years 1577-1580, which brought him fame and fortune. He acquired lands and a fine family home in Buckland Abbey, near Plymouth, in Devon. He was knighted and found favour with Queen Elizabeth at Court. He even became a Member of Parliament and took an interest in providing the people of Plymouth with a fresh water supply, causing an aqueduct to be built for this purpose. He could have retired, if he had wanted to, to live out his days in peace and pleasure, a wealthy and much respected man.

This was not Drake's way of life. He was a man of action, who enjoyed the Queen's esteem. His success, however, had made him enemies at Court, who envied his royal patronage and resented his presence there. During the engagements with the great ships

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of the Spanish Armada in 1588, Drake had been accused of putting his own interests before those of the English fleet. His various exploits did not always pay off and he lost much of his prestige with the Queen.

To recover his position in her eyes and to reimburse himself for his lost 'investments' in foreign enterprises, he was always keen to engage in fresh exploits. This was especially so if they took him into the rich waters of the Spanish Main, along the northern shores of South America, in the Caribbean.

In this, his latest endeavour, he had attempted to capture a crippled Spanish galleon, known to be loaded with gold.

However, the Spanish had been prepared for him and had successfully fought him off, so that he had been obliged to change his plans. He would sail to Nombre de Dios, a favourite haunt of his earlier privateering years, put an army ashore, which would march on Panama, seize the city and hold it to ransom, for payment in gold.

Under blustery grey skies, the ships wallowed in the waters of Nombre de Dios bay as Drake disembarked his army. The venture, so far, had not been a success. Drake just had to 'strike it lucky', if he was going to sail home with flags flying, with

stricken with fever and died like flies.

In three weeks, the fleet had covered barely 18 nautical miles and was still in sight of the coast of Panama, nearly abreast of Porto Bello bay, when Drake himself succumbed to the fever. On the morning of Wednesday, 28th January 1596 (NS), right off the island of Buenaventura, Sir Francis Drake died and was buried at sea, with full military honours 'within the sound of the surf'.

England mourned her dead hero: Spain sighed with relief. Both nations remember his name with respect.

Today the National Trust cares for his property at Buckland Abbey and honours his memory. The 400th anniversary of his death called for a fitting tribute to commemorate the event.

Thus it came about that I was commissioned by the National Trust to design a stained-glass sundial for the west window of the upper gallery in Buckland Abbey. The window, in which the dial is placed, declines from South by 66 degrees towards West. This situation was fundamental to the design of the sundial, as it allowed the dial to be constructed in the format of a 16th century period chart of the Atlantic Ocean, where the hour-lines are represented as *loxodromic* lines, radiating from a compass-rose.

Drake's famous ship, the *Golden Hinde*, is depicted sailing along the evening eight o'clock hour-line, on course from Plymouth towards Porto Bello, where an 'encircled' cross indicates the position of Drake's burial. Drake's heraldic shield is displayed to provide formal identity with the chart. The design was developed and painted by Lord Cardross in the studios of Messrs Goddard & Gibbs Ltd, where the dial was executed in stained and painted glass by Norman Atwood, and manufactured by their craftsmen. The gnomon is fitted to the exterior frame of the window.

The westerly aspect of the sundial means that it benefits from the evening sun. In mid-Summer the eight o'clock hour-line (9pm Summer Time) will receive the gnomon's shadow, enhancing the mythical concept of the *Golden Hinde* sailing out from England towards Sir Francis Drake's last resting place, on the sea-bed, off the entrance to Porto Bello. The sundial, in a sense, links the past to the present. It is, perhaps, a salutary thought to reflect that, had this sundial been installed 400 years ago, it could well have survived the years to indicate the hour in the same way now as it would have done then. ☪

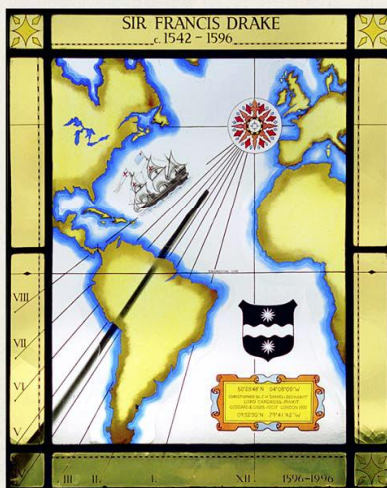


Figure 1. The stained-glass window sundial at Buckland Abbey, commemorating the 400th anniversary of the death of Sir Francis Drake.

rich prizes of treasure aboard, that would please Her Majesty and make it all worthwhile.

Drake's small army marched through the jungle in dreadful weather, in pouring rain, hacking their way through the dense wet vegetation. They never reached Panama. The army was ambushed by the Spanish and the English soldiers were forced to retreat to the waiting ships at Nombre de Dios. The expedition was a disaster.

The fleet set sail in a westerly direction along the coast, but encountered contrary winds, with torrential tropical rain squalls. Below decks, conditions were dank and foul. There had been no opportunity to replenish the fleet with fresh provisions. With poor victuals, in the dark, foetid atmosphere, on wet slippery planking, the weary and hungry men, crew and soldiers alike, were