

British Sea Dogs, Pirates, and Privateers



As explorers returned with boatloads of riches and trade goods that could be sold for a lot of money, a new danger emerged for these daring explorers and this time the danger was human. Pirates and Privateers took advantage of large merchant ships and weakened crews from long voyages by taking what others had worked so hard for. The pirates of legend were not too far from the truth. They were in many cases dangerous and violent robbers of the sea who looked for an easy way to get rich quick.

Perfect Conditions for Piracy

The Golden Age of Piracy is identified by many historians to be the mid-17th to the early 18th centuries, and it came about due in large part to the success the Spanish and Portuguese were having with their trading, particularly in the New World. When Spain sought a western route to India and instead bumped into the Americas, they quickly realized that in the Americas there was lots of gold and silver to be found instead of the spices and silks they were originally looking for. The Spanish set up mining outposts on both the Pacific and the Atlantic side of South America and were doing particularly well; the only problem was the pirates. Gold and silver are heavy metals and the more weight a ship has, the slower it moves in the water. These large heavy merchant ships were easy pickings for light, fast and heavily armed pirate ships and those pirate ships had their eyes on Spanish treasure.

Spain was the largest trading nation at this time, and it used its wealth and power to influence much of Europe. Spain was a Catholic country and it sought to dominate other Protestant countries like England. England was an island nation and relied heavily on its navy, but most of the navy was in private hands, meaning that the Queen didn't own most of the ships, but rich merchants did. The English monarchy needed a way to increase its wealth through trade without spending a lot of its own money. The answer was **Privateers**. Privateers were essentially pirates-for-hire that worked for a particular country. One of the problems with piracy is that nobody liked a pirate and if you were a pirate the easy part was stealing some gold or "**booty**" from a ship, the hard part was where to spend it. Most nations actively sought out, arrested and hanged pirates, but the Queen of England had a great idea; let pirates bring back their "booty" to England, tax what they brought in and let them spend what they wanted there, the only condition was that the pirates could not attack English ships. The Queen would issue an official letter called a "marque" which essentially made piracy legal. Pirates even took a different name, calling themselves Privateers. This was a win-win for England. Not only did she not have to supply her own ships to wage war on the Spanish, but she would also earn money by simply letting the Privateers into her ports.

Privateers - Legal pirates who receive a "letter of marque" from one country which then allows them to pirate or plunder ships of a foreign country.

Booty - a slang term used by pirates to describe treasure or goods stolen from another ship.

Needless to say, Spain (being the main target of English Privateers) was not pleased with these "**letters of marque**" and would plot and plan to overthrow the protestant English monarchy and replace it with a friendly Catholic monarch who would be more friendly to Spain.

British Sea Dogs

There were many famous pirates like William Kidd, Blackbeard, Calico Jack and even the woman pirate Anne Bonny, but it was the group of English Privateers nicknamed the "Sea Dogs" that really ruled the waves. John Hawkins, Martin Frobisher and most importantly Francis Drake made life miserable for Spanish Captains trying to return home with silver and gold from the New World and made England rich in the process. Francis Drake in particular was a devastating pirate, **plundering** the Spanish. Not only did Drake harass and steal from the Spanish in the Atlantic, but he was also the first British Captain to find his way through the super-secret route through the Straights of Magellan. By rounding the Cape Horn and entering into the Pacific, Drake was able to pick and choose his easy targets up and down the west coast of South America, because many of the Spanish ships off of this coast were not heavily defended. The Spanish ships had no fear of pirates in the Pacific because no pirates had ever rounded the Cape. Drake changed all that and led the way for other English privateers to further plunder the Spanish.



Francis Drake was the most famous (and dangerous) of the Sea Dogs.

Spain Fights Back

As piracy reaches its peak, Spain decides that the only way to ensure that the riches that they were taking from the Americas actually made it home was to do something about the English privateers and the English Queen who supported them. Queen Elizabeth was one of King Henry the Eighth's daughters who through a complicated and difficult time, ascended the throne after the death of her elder half-sister Mary. Even though Mary's father King Henry had dramatically cut ties with the Pope and changed the official religion of England from Catholic to **Anglican** (Protestant), Mary was a Catholic and during her reign there was a violent power struggle between Catholics and Protestants. When Queen Elizabeth comes to power, she turns England back to Anglicanism and attempts to build a modern independent nation, free from Catholic interference. To do so, she needs ships and money and that's where Drake and the Sea Dogs came into play.

In 1588, Spain with the wealth taken from the Americas, build the largest naval force in Europe with the aim to take its Armada and attack England. In one of the greatest naval battles in human history, the Spanish Armada would go up against a band of English pirates, privateers and navy ships. Weather played a huge factor by sinking a number of Spanish ships, but the superior fighting force of the English (including the brilliant seamanship of Francis Drake) would save the day for Queen Elizabeth and England. Spain would never fully recover from this fight and it would set into place a new era of English dominance at sea for the next 300+ years.

Letters of Marque - An official document issued by a monarch or a government that allows a Privateer to attack or pirate ships from a foreign country.

Plunder - a term used to describe the act of pirates attacking and stealing.

Anglican - A member of the Protestant Church of England,

British Sea Dogs, Pirates, and Privateers

Directions: READ the handout entitled; "British Sea Dogs, Pirates, and Privateers" and then answer the following questions.

1. Use your handout to provide definitions for the following terms: (1 mark each)

Privateers Booty Letters Marque
Plunder Anglican

2. On a separate piece of paper, answer the following questions using **COMPLETE SENTENCES**.

- a. In your own words, describe when the "Golden Age of Piracy" was. What and who were the pirates after? (2 marks for quality of response and inclusion of details)
- b. In your own words describe the difference between a pirate and a privateer. Why was Queen Elizabeth's idea of giving lots of "letters of marque" to privateers such a brilliant idea? (2 marks for the quality of your response and evidence of thought and effort)
- c. In your own words, describe what the Spanish Armada was, when and why was it launched and what happened to it? (2 marks for quality of response and evidence of insight)

3. Internet Inquiry - Use the internet to research a particular pirate or privateer from the 16th and 17th Centuries. Include a brief description as to why they are famous, an image taken from the internet and a short explanation as to why you find this person interesting or appealing.

You will be marked out of 5 for your description, image, and explanation

Total ___/16