The Voyage of Sir Richard Edgecombe into Ireland in the year 1488

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A Successful Diplomatic Mission

Sir Richard Edgcumbe was sent to Ireland in the summer of 1488 by King Henry VII to offer pardons and take oaths of loyalty from the Earl of Kildare, the Anglo-Irish lords and clergy following the Lambert Simnel rebellion of 1487.

This was a tricky but successful diplomatic mission which left in four ships with five hundred men from Fowey, Cornwall on 23rd June and sailed through a stormy Irish Sea to Kinsale, Waterford and Dublin, returning to Fowey on 8th August.

Richard Edgcumbe's Knighthood and Bosworth Field

So how did Richard Edgcumbe, from a relatively modest Cornish family, come to be the King's diplomat in Ireland in 1488? It would be hard to improve on G.M.Trevelyan's pithy account of the Battle of Bosworth Field, which was fought on 22 August 1485, from which Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, emerged as King Henry VII and from which Richard Edgcumbe gained his knighthood and most of his family's wealth.

> *"The claimants to the reversion of the throne, Yorkist and Lancastrian alike, disappeared so fast in the battles and executions of twenty-five years that, on the death of Edward V, a Welsh gentleman named Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, was able to put up a very respectable case for himself on the Lancastrian side. After the custom of opposition leaders in those brisk times, he had sought refuge abroad, first in the Court of Brittany, then in France. Taking advantage of the unpopularity of Richard III, he landed, with a slender and untrustworthy force, at Milford Haven on the coast of his native Wales. The racial enthusiasm of the Welsh for a descendant of their ancient British Princes marching, as Henry was careful to march, under the red-dragon standard of*
>
> *Cadwallader, broke out into prophecy and song, and enabled him to raise in little more than a week a small army of zealous supporters as he traversed that ever warlike land. They, with the help of a few French and English adventurers, won Bosworth Field against a King for whom the mass of his English subjects were ashamed to fight. Here, indeed, was one of fortune's freaks: on a bare Leicestershire upland, a few thousand men in close conflict foot to foot, while a few thousand more stood aside to watch the issue, sufficed to set on the throne of England in the person of Henry VII the greatest of all her royal lines that should guide her through a century of change down new and larger streams of destiny, undreamt of by any man who plied bill and bow in the old-world quarrel of York and Lancaster."*[1]

Richard Rewarded; the foundation of the Edgcumbes' wealth and influence

In 1483 Richard Edgcumbe had fled to exile in Brittany with other Lancastrians who supported the future Henry VII's cause. After the victory at Bosworth Sir Richard was quickly rewarded for his support of the new King. Over the next few months he was given substantial responsibilities, notably as the Comptroller of the Kings Household, and other rewards including that of Constable of Launceston Castle and Controller of the Kings silver mines in Devon and Cornwall; significantly the lands in St Austell, Cornwall of his longstanding enemy Sir Henry Trenowth of Bodrugan.[2] But Richard had little time to enjoy his new wealth. He spent most of the next four years until his death in 1489 engaged in foreign diplomatic missions first to Calais in 1485 then to Scotland in 1487, next to Ireland in 1488 and then to Rennes. [3]

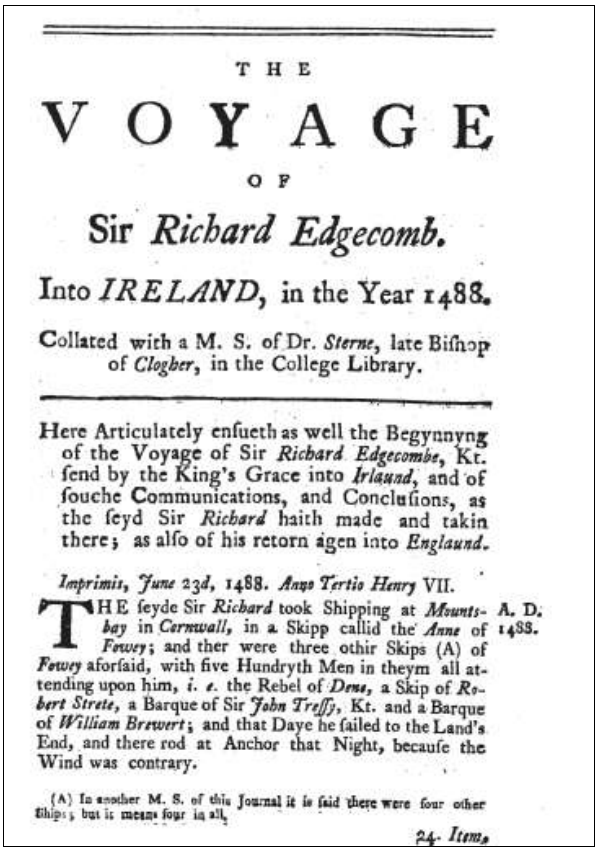
Lambert Simnel and the Irish rebellion

The first major challenge of Henry VII's reign came from a young lad, Lambert Simnel, who was used as a pawn by disaffected Yorkist nobles. Simnel was taken to Ireland as a pretender to the English throne in 1487. There the Earl of Kildare, (Lord Deputy of Ireland), the Archbishop of Dublin and others in power chose to accept him as the rightful king of England and crowned him Edward VI. The Yorkists assembled an army of Irish levies supported by 2000 German mercenaries and crossing to Lancashire in June 1487 marched south. They were met and defeated by Henry VII at Stoke near Newark after a three hour battle which left some 6000 dead.[4]

It was to deal with the aftermath of this rebellion that Sir Richard Edgcumbe was sent to Ireland in the summer of 1488.

The Irish Adventure; A Vivid Diary

Stepping back into the realities of 15th century England is not easy. Normally legal documents and letters give fractured glimpses of the world of kings, priests and warlords and the realities of peasant life. But for Sir Richard's expedition a vivid diary has survived. [5]



THE

VOYAGE

OF

Sir *Richard Edgecomb.*

Into *IRELAND*, in the Year 1488.

Collated with a M. S. of Dr. *Sterne*, late Biſhop of *Clogher*, in the College Library.

Here Articulately enſueth as well the Begynnyng of the Voyage of Sir *Richard Edgecombe*, Kt. ſend by the King's Grace into *Irlaund*, and of ſouche Communications, and Concluſions, as the ſeyd Sir *Richard* haith made and takin there; as alſo of his retorn agen into *Englaund*.

Imprimis, June 23*d*, 1488. *Anno Tertio Henry* VII.

THE ſeyde Sir *Richard* took Shipping at *Mounts-bay* in *Cornwall*, in a Skipp callid the *Anne* of *Fowey*; and ther were three othir Skips (A) of *Fowey* aforſaid, with five Hundryth Men in theym all attending upon him, *i. e.* the Rebel of *Dene*, a Skip of *Robert Strete*, a Barque of Sir *John Treſſy*, Kt. and a Barque of *William Brewert*; and that Daye he ſailed to the Land's End, and there rod at Anchor that Night, becauſe the Wind was contrary. A. D. 1488.

(A) In another M. S. of this Journal it is ſaid there were four other Ships; but it means four in all.

24. *Item*,

This daily journal opens a window into the harsh and indeed yobbish world of the aftermath of the Wars of the Roses and the beginnings of the Tudor dynasty under Henry VII. But as well as recording in great detail the realities of negotiation in Ireland following the rebellion against Henry VII it also gives a very real picture of the perils and problems of sailing into the Irish Sea and seeking out privateers in medieval ships.

Ships, Rovers and Pirates

The expedition Journal begins on 23 June 1488 with a list of ships:-

> *"The said Sir Richard took shipping in Mounts Bay in Cornwall in a ship called the Anne of Fowey; and there were three other ships of Fowey aforesaid with five hundred men in them all attending upon him, i.e. the Rebel of Dene, a ship of Robert Strete, a barque of Sir John Treffry, Kt. and a barque of William Brewer. And that day they sailed to Lands End and there rode at anchor that night because the wind was contrary."*

At this date the two *ships* were almost certainly three masted square rigged caravels, rigged as warships.

St Neot's Church, Cornwall. 15thC Stained glass window: Noah and the returning dove. Showing a three masted ship. Photo by Michael Tisdall.

The two *barques* were probably smaller merchant ships, used in coastal trading. [6] Sir John Treffry was from a well known Fowey family of Lancastrian supporters. Robert Strete and William Brewert (perhaps Brewer) have not so far been identified. Fowey Customs accounts list three caravels in 1461/2 and the type became common in the later 15th century.[7] These ships could not sail close to the wind and the use of the term "contrary" here means unfavourable, being the normal south-westerly wind. Sailing westward would have also involved using the tides and going with the ebb or flood as appropriate.

St Winnow, Lerryn, Cornwall, 15thC bench end showing a three masted ship. Photo by Michael Tisdall.

The fifteenth century was a period of lawlessness on the seas partly encouraged by the breakdown of political authority during the Hundred Years war. The English Channel was infested with predators from England, Flanders, Normandy and Brittany, and included organised West- Country based privateering.[8] Rowse discusses the major part played in piracy at sea by the 'Fowey Gallants' in the 1450's which was to some extent brought under control by Edward IV after 1474. [9]

While Sir Richard Edgcumbe's expedition had high politics as its purpose this early part of the voyage was clearly intended to seek out Rovers and Privateers and, at the very least, frighten them off. On 24th June they sailed to the Scilly Isles where Harleston and other Rovers had departed two days before; then they go on towards the Severn estuary to look for a great Fleming ship of war and other Rovers *"daily taking and spoiling the Kings subjects; which Fleming and Rovers were warned by divers of the Kings subjects of the coming of the said Sir Richard and absented them and fled them hence".*
During 26th and 27th June they sail towards Kinsale and there made search for "*Con Eop.. a Rover upon the sea which daily doth great harm and nuisance to the Kings subjects upon the coast of Ireland".*

In each case Sir Richard's quarry had warning of the expedition and fled. This lack of success is not surprising given that Edgcumbe's four ships would have travelled at about 3 knots, the wind being contrary and that small fishing vessels could easily outpace them and carry news of their arrival.

Weather

Throughout the Edgcumbe journal there is frequent mention of the wind and sailing conditions. Keeping the fleet of four vessels with their five hundred men on board in close contact would have been an important issue; and the hazards of sailing around Lands End and from Scilly into the Irish Sea were and can still be great.

For the first two days the wind is described as "contrary". Leaving the Severn on the 26th June *"the wind being alway contraryous.. all the ships made traverse in the sea.. and with great labour and pain the 27th day.. arrived in the Port of Kinsale".* Sir Richard goes ashore and starts his diplomatic mission in Ireland in Kinsale. Within the day he successfully takes oaths of loyalty from Lord Thomas of Barry and Lord Courcey. He sails on to Waterford "the *wind always being right contraryous"* where he meets the Mayor and Council, is warmly welcomed and accepts their allegiance to Henry VII.

Leaving Waterford on 1st July the ships set off up the Irish Sea towards Dublin. The voyage takes three days and nights. On the 3rd July *" a great contraryous wind and tempest fell upon him and that day with great pain and peril fetched on island called Lambay, upon the coast of Dublin and there came to anchor"*

Sir Richard sends a man ashore to announce his arrival and to find out about the disposition of the country and his safety. The complexity of dealing with the disaffected Earl of Kildare rapidly become apparent but Richard lands at Malahide and is lodged in the Black Friary in Dublin. He meets with lords and churchmen. Eventually after much prevarication and delaying tactics, during which *"Sir Richard gave short answers, with right fell and angry words"* he finally succeeds. The Earl of Kildare makes his oath of allegiance to King Henry VII at mass in All Hallows Priory on 21 July.

"Sir Richard, at the making of the Earls homage, put a collar of the King's livery about the Earl's neck which he wore throughout the City of Dublin both outward and homeward"

The livery collar was probably a gold chain of Esses with a Tudor rose hanging from it.

A Tudor collar of livery

However Sir Richard's work was not over and it took until 30th July to pardon Justice Plunket and the Prior of Kilmainham who were said to be the chief causes of the rebellion in Ireland

Sir Richard was then escorted to Dalkey where his ships lay and went on board to start the journey back to Cornwall. But now he faced serious problems. At first with the wind being against him the ships lay so that *"he could not get them out without peril"* but next day managed to get them as far as Howth where they had to anchor for the night. They set out again on Friday 1st August and sailed until four in the afternoon when *"the wind began to rise being still contraryous so that he was fayne to return again to a road called Lambay ... and there lay all night*." Next day *"such an huge and great tempest rose that day no sail might be made the wind being still contraryous"*

On Sunday 3rd August *"The aforesaid tempest dured still and at afternoon that day the wind began to become large; but it blew so much and the coasts were so jeopardous of sand and rocks that that night the mariners durst not jeoparde to take the sea but lay still at anchor about the said isle, and there he and his company vowed great pilgrimages that God would cease the tempest and send a fair and large wind"*

They tried again the next morning but had to return to Lambay. But in the afternoon of 5th the wind became

"large and incontinent and Sir Richard caused sail to be made and all that afternoon sailed on his way and at night the wind calmed and came again contraryous and therefore came to anchor in the open sea and there lay all night".

Mention of the period of calm overnight followed by the term *large and incontinent* which would seem to mean light and variable in modern parlance and the description matches the pattern of the passage of a deep depression in the Irish Sea.

They sailed on as far as the Tuskar rock where "*the wind blew right sore and was right troublesome weather*". After this the wind became "*reasonably large"* and they went on to within sight of St Ives, but *"because they durst not venture to pass by the great sea and perilous jeopardies at the Lands End"* they stayed at sea overnight. Finally on Friday 8th August they came to Fowey where Sir Richard "*landed and went a pilgrimage to the chapel of Saint Saviour".*

The voyage from Dublin back to Cornwall had taken eight days. Sir Richard was allowed £300 by the King for his costs and expenses, being the equivalent of around £147,000 in today's money.[10]

How far the storms that Richard Edgcumbe experienced in the summer of 1488 in the Irish Sea were abnormal or reflect a particular period of climate change for the late 15th century is uncertain. Another Journal survives from the end of the year 1488 of a diplomatic voyage to Spain by Sir Richard Nanfan. This records an extremely stormy winter with Richard Nanfan delayed in Plymouth for two weeks in January 1488/89 and a further two week delay in Falmouth but then had a fairly quick crossing to Biscay in three days.[11]

These quite obscure medieval diplomatic journals can contribute to present day studies of historic weather records. [12]

Notes

1. Trevelyan, pages 199-200
2. Edgcumbe, p.18, and Polwhele, p.48, Cotehele Guide-book, p 32; see Rowse for Bodrugan, p102-106
3. Edgcumbe, pps.19, 25, 26, 42; Polwhele, pp.48 -51
4. Web refs under Lambert Simnel
5. *Sources for the Journal of the Voyage into Ireland*

   A transcript of the journal is in Polwhele, 1806, pages 49- 51. He used an original manuscript in the British Library, Titus BII, Cotton Library.

   An eighteenth century printed version was published by Walter Harris in *Hibernica or some Antient pieces relating to Ireland, Dublin, 1770. Section III The Voyage of Sir Richard Edgecombe, sent by King Henry VII into Ireland to take new oaths of allegiance from the nobility and others who had declared for the then pretender Lambert Simnel.* Harris used a manuscript in the library of Trinity College, Dublin.

   This volume has been digitised and can be downloaded as a .pdf from *http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=5ws1AAAAMAAJ&dq=hibernica*

   The fourth Earl of Mount Edgcumbe (Edgcumbe 1888) transcribed most of the document but left out the oaths of allegiance and other details. A copy of the 4th Earl's *Records of the Mount Edgcumbe Family* is available in Plymouth Proprietary Library; and a photocopy is held in Mount Edgcumbe House, Cornwall.
6. Rowse gives details of trade in and out of Fowey in 1498-99, pp 73-74.
7. Friel, pp 76, 77.
8. Appleby, p 90
9. Rowse, p108
10. www.national archives.gov.uk/currency
11. Rowse, pp116-11.
12. See web sources under Historic Weather

Web Sources

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