

GLOUCESTER AND THE SPANISH ARMADA, 1588

by John W. Wyatt

(1) The Ships

'A book containing briefly the order of the musters and taxations of money and other service done within the city and county thereof ... during the time of the attempt of the Spanish king and his associates for invading the realm. And of the setting forth of a ship and pinnace upon the charges of the towns of Gloucester and Tewkesbury to encounter the Spanish fleet, of the arming and setting forth of three hundred footmen and five and twenty lance and light horses with petronels within the said city of Gloucester and county of the same city for that service against the forces of the said Spanish king.'

(1)

This book in the Gloucester city records is known as the Musters Book and consists of copies of letters and other documents from 1587 to 1617. These refer particularly to the city of Gloucester and the Inshire, that is the twenty or more villages and hamlets surrounding the city and forming the hundreds of Dudstone and Kingsbarton.

The city council exercised jurisdiction over the Inshire by virtue of the charter granted by Richard III in 1483. This area is variously referred to as 'the liberties' of the city or as 'the county of the city' - which must not be confused with the whole county of Gloucestershire. Generally, and sometimes for good reasons, the gentry of the Inshire resented the city's jurisdiction: Sir William Cook of Highnam wrote to Lord Salisbury in 1609 that the corporation of Gloucester possessed larger liberties than any other city, and abused them (2). Another peculiarity about the local government of Gloucestershire was that it came under the jurisdiction of the Council of the Marches of Wales. This was a matter of some dispute even after a declaration by James I in 1608 to that effect (3).

Though the Musters Book is concerned with the city and Inshire, it gives some information about the whole of Gloucestershire sometimes by direct statement, sometimes by implication, and is of particular value because no documents relating to the military affairs of the county for this period are readily available. The documents copied are not all in strict chronological sequence and some are ambiguous. Notes in a different and later handwriting - though still in early 17th century style - are occasionally added in the margin, and, in a few instances, in the text. Unfortunately there are a number of annoying gaps omitting names or dates, and sometimes longer blanks. Perhaps the scribe who copied the documents into the book could not decipher the writing of the original documents

though sometimes one suspects he decided that it would be diplomatic not to preserve some item of information for posterity.

As it was the navy which defeated the Armada - aided, as Queen Elizabeth stated, by God's wind which scattered it - it is fitting that this account should begin with naval affairs.

The provision of ships for the royal navy had traditionally been the duty of the ports, and early in May 1588 the towns of Gloucester and Tewkesbury were ordered to pay jointly £440 for the arming, provisioning and setting forth to sea for service under the Lord High Admiral of a ship the Bark Sutton of 80 tons, commanded by Captain Nicholas Webb (4).

A conference, evidently unofficial as it was held 'at the house late of Mr Thomas Best' and not at the Tolsey, was held between the Mayor and certain Aldermen of Gloucester and the 'Bailiff with certain others of the discreet inhabitants of Tewkesbury ... where it was agreed as followeth.' This statement is followed by an omission in the manuscript and then continues: 'Upon the end of which conclusions it was agreed that certain for Tewkesbury and certain for Gloucester should repair up to the Privy Council as petitioners for release of part of so great a charge ... being four hundred and forty pounds' provided that the rest of the Tewkesbury council would agree; their answer to be returned the following day. Without making any reply 'those of Tewkesbury subtly as it seemed regarding not the duty and bond of honest neighbourhood' sent Edward Barston and (omitted) Milton to treat with the Privy Council for more favourable terms. Gloucester immediately sent a similar deputation to the Privy Council consisting of Richard Hande, Henry Machin and Jasper Stone 'to (omitted) the proceedings of them of Tewkesbury and seek for the relief and ease of the charge' or to ask the Privy Council to order some neighbouring towns or the Inshire to contribute to the cost. The Privy Council agreed that the Inshire should share in the cost, a decision which the Inshire resented and which is of peculiar interest in view of the furore aroused less than fifty years later when Charles I ordered that ship money should be paid by inland places as well as sea ports (5).

The representatives of Gloucester and Tewkesbury appear to have then resolved their quarrel and agreed to a joint attempt to carry out their obligations at less cost by offering to 'furnish and set forth at their own ... expenses, for the employment of their own men, one good and serviceable ship of the burthen of 75 tons and a pinnace of 25 tons ... by reason they can afford victuals and munition of their own at better price and vessels of greater force to assist her Majesty's navy'. The Privy Council agreed to this suggestion, released the two towns from the charge of supplying the Bark Sutton and ordered them to levy the necessary taxation (6). There is no evidence, nor is it probable, that Gloucester or Tewkesbury did provide any

'victuals and munitions' of their own for the ship and pinnace or that any men from either place, whether pressed or volunteers, served in these ships or in the Bark Sutton.

Hande of Gloucester and Milton of Tewkesbury rode to Bridgwater and made arrangements with William Nicholls, captain of the White Hart of Northam, near Bideford in Devon, (7) to provide that ship and a pinnace of 25 tons at a cost of £260 to the city and Inshire and £42 to the town of Tewkesbury, and entered into bonds with Nicholls and a wealthy merchant of Bridgwater named Bockinge for performance of the service. A tax was levied in the city and Inshire to raise the necessary £260, and further taxation in the city to cover the cost of the appeal to the Privy Council (8).

The taxation in the city was speedily raised but the inhabitants of the Inshire refused at first to pay their share and, to avoid forfeiture of the bonds made between Hande and Milton and Captain Nicholls, Alderman Richard Webb personally lent the sum of £100 (9).

Meanwhile 'certain busy heads of the liberties' held a meeting of about 200 inhabitants of the Inshire at Painswick and sent representatives to the Privy Council in London to claim exemption from the charge, they 'having no use of the port nor using traffic'. Representatives of the city and Tewkesbury followed to 'attend their proceedings and to encounter their dowings the best they might', asserting that it would be hard for the city to raise so great a sum and that the liberties 'in respect that they were annexed to the city enjoyed thereby some great benefit'. The Mayor and Aldermen also appealed to the Council in the Marches of Wales to take action against those of the Inshire who refused to pay the tax, and those called before the council 'were dealt with in very sharp sort'. Then the Privy Council took the controversy out of the hands of the Council of the Marches and referred it to the Mayor and Recorder of Gloucester, and Sir Thomas Porter and Thomas Lucy Esq. of the Inshire, 'praying them ... to order this matter ... as there might be on neither part any occasion given of miscontentment or further recourse unto their lordships' and that the money might be raised as ordered. By this time most of the inhabitants of the Inshire 'seeing the dangers their neighbours were fallen into, drew in a-pace and paid their taxations. And in short time the whole was paid saving some few unpaid whereby further process from the Council compelled to pay' (10).

This, however, was not the end of the affair. On 16 October 1588, some weeks after the defeat of the Armada, the Privy Council sent a letter to the Mayor and Aldermen of Gloucester and the Bailiff of Tewkesbury to say that controversy had arisen between Captain Webb of the Sutton and John Nicholls of the White Hart as to which of them 'should be allowed to have served with their ship ... for Gloucester ... and Tewkesbury and receive of the same satisfaction for their service' and ordered that Webb should

be paid £300. Gloucester replied that they had been released from all charges for the Bark Sutton by providing the White Hart and a pinnace under Captain Nicholls. On 9 December the case was heard before the Privy Council who asserted that Gloucester and Tewkesbury had misinformed them when chartering the White Hart that Captain Webb of the Bark Sutton was not at sea at the appointed time. The Council, however, found that Captain Webb had 'repaid to Her Majesty's Navy ... defraying the expenses of victualling and furnishing the said ship and his company himself for the service of the said city, county and town, and there acquitted and behaved himself the space of five months and ten days with such valour and discretion as thereby he did not only deserve great commendation for his faithful service but also to be rewarded for his careful pains and diligence'. On the other hand Nicholls, 'though he was appointed to serve (upon untrue suggestions that Webb was not in service) did ... not come unto her Majesty's Navy ... in any time of the service ... remained at his own pleasure, and, as their Lordships are informed, committed certain piracies'. They further stated that Webb alleged that £60 or more had been raised by taxation for the ships more than the £260 paid to Nicholls and claimed that this should be paid to him (11).

Meanwhile at the end of September 1588, Nicholls' ship and pinnace had been confiscated and held in the possession of the Mayor of Southampton as they contained 'certain goods unlawfully taken'. The Privy Council ordered that by command of the Lord Admiral the 'ship and pinnace, together with such munition, ordinance, tackling, furniture, etc., with all other things ... belonging to the ships' should be handed over to Nicholls and sold. The letter from the Council does not state who was to receive the proceeds of the sale but it appears reasonable to assume that the money was paid to Captain Webb as reimbursement of his expenses on the Bark Sutton, as the letter from the Privy Council to Gloucester corporation dated 16 October ends 'and whereas they had security from Nicholls to reanswer (to answer to) those sums they had paid unto him for his setting forth to sea, they are for their indemnity to recover and take their satisfaction thereof by virtue of the said security of Nicholls'. This evidently refers to the bond entered into between the representatives of Gloucester and Tewkesbury and Nicholls and the merchant Bockinge of Bridgwater (12).

The Privy Council further ordered that since Webb alleged that more than £60 over and above the £260 paid to Nicholls had been raised by taxation, a commission should be appointed to ascertain the truth, and any taxation raised above the £260 should be paid to Webb. The commissioners William Bassett and William Veale Esquires, held several meetings in Gloucester and Tewkesbury and magistrates and officers of both towns and the Inshire were called to give evidence. Representatives of the Inshire, resentful of having been taxed in the first place and, no doubt, further incensed that the whole of the taxes had not been used for the purposes for which they were levied, sided with Captain Webb. 'The matter grew so intricate that the commissioners were wearied therewith.' 'The very books of the taxations were found out, compared, and cast by the Town

Clerk, whereby it appeared that there was about forty marks (£26 13s. 4d.) taxed over and above that which was paid.' This was handed over to Captain Webb 'and the city by him generally acquitted and the said Webb to be at liberty for his advantage against them of Tewkesbury' (13).

The Musters Book records 'The charges of victualling, munitioning, and manning of the Barque Sutton for three months containing 84 days ... from the 17th day of April last ... with fifty men to join in service with her Majesty's Navy Royal and to attend upon the Lo. High Admiral.

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|--|--------------------|------|-----|------------|
| Imprimis for fifty men's victuals 7d. every man per diem for 84 days | | £122 | 10s | 0d. |
| Item 12 barrels of powder weighing 12c at 12d. per lb. | | £67 | 4s | 0d. |
| Item round shot of all sorts, 10c | | £6 | 13s | 4d. |
| Item fire works, cross bars, langeril shot, chain shot, and other necessaries for the gunners | | £10 | 0s | 0d. |
| Item charges of the surgeon's chest | | £6 | 13s | 4d. |
| Item muskets, calivers, long pikes, short pikes, targets and swords | | £30 | 0s | 0d. |
| Item necessaries for the steward and cook | | £5 | 0s | 0d. |
| Item the ship's wages for 3 months tackled and furnished with 12 pieces of ordnance at £20 per mensem is | | £60 | 0s | 0d. |
| Wages per diem | The Captain | 5s | 0d | |
| | The Lieutenant | 2s | 6d | |
| | The Mr (Master) | 2s | 6d | 3 months |
| | His mate | 1s | 6d | £63 2s 0d. |
| | The Gunner | 1s | 0d | |
| | The Corporal | 1s | 0d | |
| | The Surgeon | 1s | 0d | |
| | The Trumpeter | 1s | 0d | |
| And for 42 men at 10d. per mensem a month in three months to the sum of | | £63 | 0s | 0d. |
| | Summa | £434 | 11s | 8d. |
| And for the press and conduct money | | £5 | 0s | 0d. |
| | (14) Summa totalis | £439 | 11s | 8d.' |

Sadly, the whole affair reflects little credit on the city, and after all the expense of litigation and travel to London to appear before the Privy Council, the cost was almost certainly greater than it would have been had the orders of the Privy Council have been carried out in the first place. Not for the last time had a city council paid dearly in the end for trying to do things 'on the cheap!'

Please note: In all quotations spelling has been modernised and Roman numerals rendered into Arabic.

Glossary

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| BARK or BARQUE | - Usually denotes a three-masted ship |
| PINNACE | - Small, fast sailing ship for reconnaissance |
| CHAIN SHOT | - Two whole or half cannon balls joined by a chain for destroying masts and rigging |
| LANGERIL or LANGRAGE SHOT | - Shot with irregular pieces, also for damaging rigging |
| TARGET | - Shield |

Sources

Musters Book, Glos. Record Office, GBR 1471/1889 B

Calendar of State Papers, Domestic, 1603-10

Acts of the Privy Council, 1588

References

1. Musters Book, f.2.
2. Cal. State Papers, 1603-10, p.564
3. Ibid, p.466
4. Musters Book, f.14v.
5. Musters Book, ff.15, 15v.
6. Acts of Privy Council, 1588, p.99; Musters Book, f.15v.
7. Musters Book, f.16 (footnote)
8. Musters Book, f.15v.
9. Musters Book, f.16
10. Acts of Privy Council, 1588, p.143; Musters Book, ff.16, 16v.
11. Acts of Privy Council, 1588, pp.314, 387, 405
12. Ibid, pp.295, 388, 406-7
13. Ibid. p.388; Musters Book, f.17
14. Musters Book, f.39v.