

## Anson Around the World

In September 1740 George Anson, once of Staffordshire, now of the high seas, set forth on one of the most dramatic voyages in British naval history. Anson and his squadron of six warships were despatched across the Atlantic to harry and loot Spanish ships, and undermine, once and for all, that nation's dominance of the Americas. "You should then return home," said his instructions, "either by way of China or by Cape Horn as you think best." On board were almost 2,000 men.

To round Cape Horn at any time was dangerous enough, but in mid-winter it was positively suicidal. The mainmast of one of the vessels - the *Tryal* - was snapped, whilst another of the fleet was separated from the squadron for almost a month. Two of the ships' captains were buried at sea before any Spanish ship was even sighted.

For those left on board, however, there was plenty to distract them from the raging seas. Scurvy had broken out by the time they were in mid-Atlantic, and wherever they landed, malaria could be added to the menu. Of the mariners on the *Tryal*, less than half survived, and less than a quarter of the sailors on the *Gloucester* came through.

Two more of the ships turned back, unable to round the Cape, and reported back home in England that Anson's vessel - the *Centurion* - had probably gone down. The one scant consolation was that the Spanish fleet, pursuing the intruders around the Cape, had suffered even heavier losses.

George Anson, however, was not dead. With their fresh water almost exhausted, the remaining ships had put into Juan Fernandez. Here, on the island made famous by Robinson Crusoe, the men recovered and the ships were repaired. It was September 1741 - a year since they had first set sail - and there were now just three of the squadron left.

But now at last, refreshed and rejuvenated, Anson could begin to do what he was sent to perform in the first place: to capture Spanish ships and raid their ports. Three Spanish ships, one heavy with silver, were seized before November was out, and the coastal town of Paita raided and burnt.

The capture of enemy ships allowed Anson to replenish his fleet, which was timely, for another of the original squadron - the *Gloucester* - was shipping water, and its crew cut down by scurvy to just 90 of the original 400. Only by sinking the *Gloucester*, and combining the crews on the *Centurion*, was there sufficient manpower to continue.

There was, however, one last Spanish vessel to engage, the seizing of which would turn one of the greatest British naval disasters of all time into one labelled "mission accomplished". The prize was a treasure galleon which made a regular journey between Acapulco and Manila. Capture this, Anson told his weary crew, and they could all go home.

The struggle took an hour and a half, and the lives of some 70 men on both sides. But the *Nuestra Senora de Cobodonga* was taken; on board was more than a million pieces of eight and over 2,000 pounds of silver. In all the prize was worth some £400,000.

The voyage back to England took the *Centurion* to Canton in China, and, as if there had not been enough nautical tales to last a lifetime, there was a chance to rescue the town from a major fire, which threatened to reduce it to ashes. Anson's reward was a specially commissioned dinner service, with views of Canton and Portsmouth, presented him by the grateful Viceroy and European merchants. The service can still be seen at Shugborough today, as can the scant remains of the *Centurion's* figurehead.

And thus George Anson returned to England a hero, more than three years after the circumnavigation began. When fully counted up, the treasure he brought with him amounted to £1,250,000, of which Anson himself was entitled to three eighths. Of the original crew of nearly 2,000 men, though, only about a quarter made it home. For all this they were entitled to around £300 each.

George Anson, now an Admiral, lived on till 1762, the most celebrated naval hero of his age, and the defeat of the French fleet off Cape Finisterre in 1746 only added to his legendary reputation. But he died without heirs, and his vast accumulation of riches was inherited by his brother, Thomas Anson, the owner of Shugborough. That Staffordshire stately home is in many ways a living memorial to George Anson's exploits. There is the famous dinner service, a clock to commemorate Finisterre, and the hall hung with paintings of Anson's triumphs: the Battle of Finisterre, the burning of Paita and the capture of the Spanish treasure galleon.

On the hill overlooking the park, Thomas Anson erected in his brother's honour a copy of the Arch of Hadrian, complete with busts of Lord and Lady Anson, and medallions of Neptune and Minerva. On an island in the River Sow he added a Chinese pavilion, copied from sketches made by Anson's lieutenant, Piercy Brett, whilst at Canton, and originally furnished with the mirrors, paintings and furniture which the Admiral brought back from China.

There is even a monument to Anson's Chinese cat, who joined him for the final leg of the journey.

And thus a grand mansion in the land-locked centre of England remains a permanent tribute to British exploits on the high seas, and an exotic taste of the Orient in heart of Staffordshire.