

George Anson

It's ironic that one of the nation's most celebrated naval heroes hailed from a county with no coastline. It was in Staffordshire that George Anson was born in 1697 and where, 65 eventful years later, they brought him back to be buried. In between, you might have caught up with him in the Azores, the Caribbean, South America or China.

A naval career made Anson an extraordinarily wealthy man, the benefits of which were largely enjoyed by his brother, when he set about rebuilding Shugborough Hall. George Anson remains a powerful hidden presence at Shugborough, despite the fact that he spent hardly any time there, once he relinquished rocking in his cradle for rocking in a hammock.

To say that Anson's wealth came from piracy is perhaps to widen unduly the definition of the term. But the methods and the net results were little different, except that it was performed with the full approval of His Majesty's government, and that the union flag flew from his mast.

It was at the age of 15 years that George first went to sea, effectively as a naval apprentice to learn the ropes, as it were, on a vessel that had plenty of them. From then onwards his progress was swift. By 1716 he was made a lieutenant, and in 1719 the first lieutenant on a ship of the line called the *Barfleur*. Three years after that Anson was given command of his first warship - the *Weazle* - protecting the fisheries of the North Sea, and so progressed to larger ships and greater responsibilities. From 1724 to 1735 he spent most of his time patrolling the coast of Carolina, looking after British interests in contested waters.

The fact was that for the European powers - Spain, France and Britain in particular - the riches of the New World were an irresistible lure, and when they were not fighting to protect their own interests, they were attempting to infringe those of their rivals. It was a good time to be a naval captain.

The government, in turn, maintained the distant loyalty of their troops by allowing them to profit from whatever booty was seized from the enemy. By the time he returned to Blighty in 1735 George Anson had already speculated to the tune of 17,000 acres of land in Carolina, the rent from which left him comfortably off already.

At the heart of the conflict was Spain's jealously guarded monopoly on trade with South and Central America, which provided it with huge quantities of Peruvian and Mexican silver, as well as sugar, tobacco, dyes and spices from the Caribbean. Legally unable to muscle in on this highly lucrative market, the British government nevertheless turned a blind eye to independent merchantmen operating out of Jamaica.

One such privateer was Robert Jenkins, who lost one of his favourite ears attempting to defend his vessel from zealous Spanish coastguards. Holding onto the precious organ, Jenkins dramatically displayed it to Parliament when he returned home. And so began the War of Jenkins' Ear. As a name, it had more of a ring to it (perhaps in it) than any number of Wars of the Austrian Succession.

This was 1739, and the scheme was cooked up to send squadrons of British warships across the Atlantic to raid and loot Spanish possessions in America. The first such attack, headed by Admiral Vernon, successfully captured Portobello on the Caribbean coast in November 1739.

Now was the time for George Anson truly to make his mark. A second squadron of six vessels was commissioned to round Cape Horn, capture Callao and Lima, liberate the Peruvians from Spanish control, seize Panama and pretty well anything else that stood in their way. To call the idea ambitious is to exaggerate the size of the envelope it was scribbled on the back of.

To be fair to the government, it too saw the expedition as ill-conceived, but was rather bounced into it by representatives of the South Sea Company, who stood to gain much from breaking the Spanish monopoly.

Anson, then, was to lead the squadron on his own warship, the *Centurion*. The others were to be the *Gloucester*, the *Severn*, *Pearle*, *Wager* and *Tryall*, plus two storeships. Together, when one added up the officers and their servants, the seamen, marines and marine officers, the full compliment of crew amounted to 1,939 men.

This number easily exceeded the manpower that was actually available, and many Chelsea pensioners found that their retirement agreement included a clause requiring them to re-enter service, albeit for lighter duties, if they were needed. That, they were told, was what the word "invalid" meant.

Those at Chelsea who could afford to buy themselves out of the contract did so, recognizing a disaster in the making. The rest were carried on board, many on stretchers. The rest of the crew was made up of hastily recruited marines, most of whom had never fired a gun in their life.

And so, far too late in the season, Captain Anson and his motley crew of raw recruits, pensioners and seasoned sea-dogs set forth in September 1740. It was to be the most dramatic British sea voyage since Francis Drake circumnavigated the globe. And Anson himself was to be one of very few who ever saw England again.

But you'll have to wait next week for that.