

John Ward. The Prince of Pirates

John Ward was born about 1533 in Faversham. He was also known as Jack Ward and his nicknames were Birdy and Sparrow. A John Ward is recorded as living on the west side of Preston Street on 31 December 1573 and 31 May 1574. By 22 December 1574 this John Ward had moved to Court Street before disappearing from view. Is this the same John Ward as the man who later became the prince of pirates?

As a child John belonged to a poor fishing family. He would have taken part in the family activities of fishing, smuggling and collecting debris and washed up treasure from wrecks. John would have developed into a brave and strong young man. Being a fisherman and sailor on wooden ships in both seas and oceans was neither an easy nor a particularly safe way of life.

It would have been difficult to make enough money by fishing alone, so John worked for Queen Elizabeth I as a privateer. England was at war with Spain and privateers captured Spanish ships and brought home the loot. They would also steal some for themselves and we know that John went to prison for a short time. At this time, John had become rich enough to be captain of his own ship.



When James I came to the throne he wanted peace with Spain. This made it unlawful to steal from Spanish ships. John lost his main means of earning money and so was reduced to poverty.

From 1603 John began working in the Royal Navy but he was under the command of a captain and therefore taking orders and working for very low wages. At 50 years old he must have felt that his life had taken a serious turn for the worse.

With about 30 of his colleagues, John decided to steal a boat known to be full of treasure. However, word had got out of his intentions and all the treasure was removed and two men were left to guard the boat. They fell asleep and John and his crew captured the boat. When they discovered all the treasure gone, they made the best of it - ate all the food on board and drank all the drink and sailed away with the two men as captives.

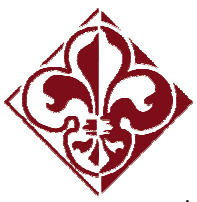
They captured and looted a French ship, putting the French crew and the two sleepers in another boat and sent them back to shore. John then captured two more boats and was now running three boats and was declared a pirate and wanted in England.



He landed at Algiers and went ashore to find out where he could sell his loot. While ashore the crews of all three of his boats were arrested.

John Ward told the pasha (ruler) of Algiers that if he would free his men he would work for him and bring his loot back to the pasha. This was agreed but the pasha put his own men on the boat. This meant that John was now in effect a pirate on a floating prison boat.

John had a very mixed code of ethics: he murdered, stole and enslaved countless people but he



always looked after the welfare of his crews. If he were to choose between betraying his country or his companions, he would betray his country every time (and he often attacked English boats) but this meant that it was very easy for him to get new pirates to join him.

By 1605 John had paid his debt to the Pasha so he went to the pasha of Tunis. At this time he changed his citizenship from British to Ottoman and became a privateer again but this time, working for Tunis. He became famous for being able to take ships much bigger than his own using high set cannon to blast the rigging and then hurling rocks and gun shot at the stationery crew. He was even asked to run a school for pirates to share his techniques. He was now in command of a whole fleet of pirate ships.

He built himself a splendid mansion and lived like a prince, with luxurious food and clothing and plenty of money.

He began making plans to buy a royal pardon from King James to be able to return home to England. This would give the king a lot of money and remove the danger of John from the sea but despite spending all his money he still did not get the pardon and things began to go very wrong for him.



John Ward

One of his boats sank in a storm largely due to the alterations Ward had made to the boat to make it a better pirate ship (very heavy guns and holes cut for them). 350 men died while John was safe on another boat. This caused outrage.

In 1608 he escaped to Munster in Ireland where he stopped being a privateer and became a pirate again and recovered his fortune. He then lost 23 ships and began to be seen as an unlucky person to associate with. An English sailor who saw him in Tunis in 1608 described Ward as *"very short with little hair, and that quite white, bald in front; swarthy face and beard. Speaks little and almost always swearing. Drunk from morn till night...The habits of a thorough salt. A fool and an idiot out of his trade."*

James 1 began a war against the pirates in 1609 and captured and executed any who had sailed with Ward (19 were executed together on 22 December 1609). A reward was offered for John's capture so he went back to Tunis and his mansion. He is described in a ballad as taunting the king of England: "Go, go tell the king of England, go tell him this from me," one song went, "If he reign king of all the land, I will reign at sea." Ballads were written about him because his story was exciting -a poor fisher lad who became a rich pirate, defying kings and defeating the hangman.

In 1610 John became a Muslim, which was celebrated in in a play called A Christian Turn'd Turk by Robert Daborne. John lived the rest of his life peacefully in Tunis enjoying his ill-gotten gains and he rarely went back to sea. He took a new name Yusuf and was also known as Captain Wardiyya. He married an Italian woman (even though he had a wife back in England) and took to raising chickens by incubating them in ovens.

About 1622 he died of the plague but we don't know when or where. The Hollywood series of movies, "Pirates of the Caribbean" is said to be inspired by Jack Ward's adventures.