

SECRET ARMADAS AND INTELLIGENCE- GATHERING OFF COWES INFORMING THE 'GREAT ENTERPRISE' OF 1588

Spanish Wedding Fleet 1554



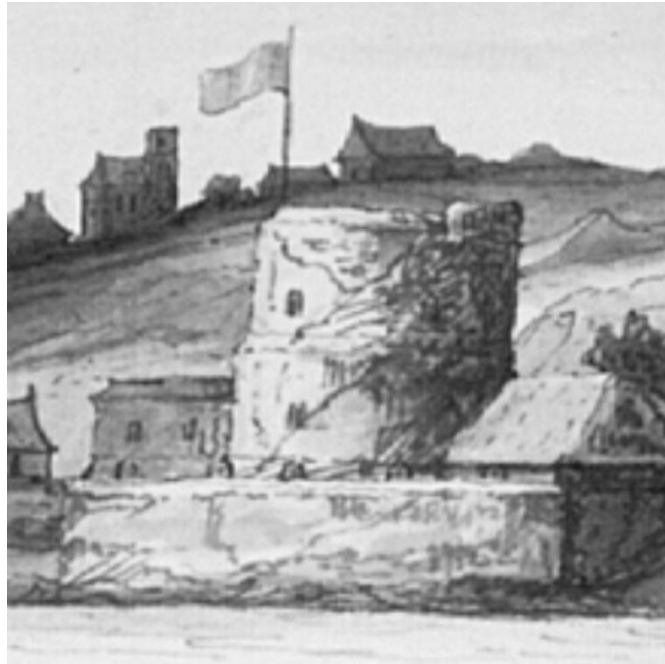
*Philip of Spain and Mary Tudor in London. Lucas de Heere (c.1534–1584)
National Maritime Museum*

Philip of Spain came to Winchester Cathedral to marry Mary Tudor accompanied by a fleet of 150 ships with 12,000 soldiers aboard, sailing from Corunna on the 13th July 1554, eventually anchoring off Cowes in the Solent at 2pm on the Thursday the 19th July 1554.

The contemporary account of Pedro Enriquez noted that “*On Wednesday England came into view, and it was calm and smooth. On Thursday they passed the Needles and entered the channel between Southampton and the Isle of Wight where a great salute was fired from the castles*”.



Calshot Castle 1539



Detail of Cowes Castle in 1645 by Lambert Doomer

Varaona's 1554 manuscript adds that *"On the following Wednesday 18th July in the afternoon we sighted the fleet of Flanders and England, which consisted of thirty-eight galleons well gunned which were on guard at the Channel, so that His Highness might pass through safely, and as they arrived they fired their salute, and His Highness gave order that all the ships of the Spanish fleet should reply each with four pieces: indeed it seemed very fine on both sides. The fleet passed ahead, and at the end of an island we saw a low castle, which the English call the Needles, very strong and very well built; this made its salute and the flagship replied with two pieces. Continuing on their way and at 4 o'clock in the afternoon the whole fleet came to an island two leagues from Southampton, called the Isle of Wight, or to give it another name Amadis the strong isle. In that place there were two low castles well gunned called by the same name as the island: they gave their salute and the flagship replied with eight pieces"*.



Portolan specializing in Spanish and English possessions that Queen Mary herself commissioned from Diogo Homem, the Portuguese cartographer, once accused of murder, and exiled from his native Portugal in 1544 as a personal gift to her husband. She died before presenting it to him. It shows the isle of “Huit” (written upside down in Portolan fashion for practical chart-turning when navigating off shore) with the River Medina obvious as a prominent inlet on its north shoreline.

Andres Munoz recorded: “After these things His Highness remained all afternoon and night on the ship where he was, without going ashore”. Menendes was able to gather intelligence off the Isle of Wight, Southampton Water and Spithead for an entire week. This intelligence was used by King Philip in written advice to Medina Sidonia in 1588 that should occupying the Isle of Wight become necessary, then it must be approached from the East and not the Needles.

Captain Menendes’s was requested by King Philip in June 1555 to cooperate with Queen Mary’s fleet in protecting Queen Mary’s Territory of Calais, ending up making numerous excursions from Dover to Calais and escorting a large merchant fleet from Flanders to Spain via England. Menendes’s contemporary biographer, Solis de Meras, noted that it was King Philip who gave orders to the English as well as the Spanish fleets: “*The Spanish and English going together, a thing which it had been thought was not possible*”.

The Secret Armada of 1575

Queen Mary surrendered Calais in 1558, Queen Elizabeth was excommunicated in 1570 and King Philip honed his schemes to invade England. Turning to Menendez again in 1574 Philip placed him in command of a putative fleet that would gather current intelligence on England's navy and south coast. When Menendez died suddenly in 1574 his charts could not be found and so King Philip had to start all over again with gathering intelligence for a future invasion of England. Intending that Menendez command such a fleet 1574 under the guise of a re-supplying fleet destined for the Spanish Netherlands, King Philip found himself instead having to delay it until 1575, giving command of it instead to Pedro de Valdez.

In preparation for this secret foray King Philip ordered the adoption of a new general cipher for correspondence to be active following the 30th May 1575.

The choice of persons to lead this fleet betrayed its clandestine purpose, for King Philip's letter details that *"The ships will be commanded by Don Pedro de Valdes, but they will be subsequently taken charge of by Juan Martinez de Recalde, and which ever commander may arrive with them in England will receive from you the assistance necessary for the good of my service – Madrid 27th August 1575"*

The sheer size of the Spanish fleet, its direction and arrival was soon described in a letter from Antonio de Guaras to Zayas dated the 8th October 1575: *"Cipres reports that the fleet left Santander on the 25th ultimo, consisting of forty cutters and four great ships, arriving on the 1st at Dartmouth with twenty-two cutters and two great ships, one of which was the flagship with the General on board"*. Guaras goes on to comment: *"The news just brought in is the first intimation that people here had of the coming of our fleet, and it is greatly to be hoped that the rest of the ships and cutters will have*

come by the Isle of Wight, the weather having been recently very bad with a furious ENE wind”.

As for informing the Queen, this became a necessity but deliberately almost after the fact. On the 17th September 1575 Antonio de Guaras wrote to Zayas that he now had King Philip’s personal letter for Queen Elizabeth at Court confirming that *“as soon as news arrives of the appearance of our fleet on the coast, I will at once go to the Queen and Deliver the letter personally”* (Guaras to Zayas, 17th September 1575, State Papers Simancas Archives 421). He adds that *“I will also endeavour to get a letter from her to all the justices of the ports, so that our men may be supplied by purchase with such victuals as they require, and be welcomed as friends”*. That any advanced warning of the fleet was to be suppressed he noted *“In the meantime, not a word shall be issued on the subject”*.

Yet Queen Elizabeth somehow did acquire advanced warning, and took immediate action to protect the Isle of Wight. A letter of Guaras to Zayas just a week earlier, dated the 10th September 1575, confided that *“I wrote on the 10th that the Queen and Council knew of the coming of the fleet, and had consequently raised eight hundred soldiers to send to the Isle of Wight”*.

King Philip deployed the consummate navigator, Juan Martinez de Recalde, to reconnoitre the coast of the isle of Wight for future invasion, instructing Antonio de Guaras from Madrid on the 27th August 1575 *“The ships will be commanded by Don Pedro de Valdes , but they will be subsequently taken charge of by Juan Martinez de Recalde”*.

On the 1st October 1575 Pedro de Valdes is described as *“arriving on the 1st at Dartmouth with twenty-two cutters and two great ships, one of which was the flagship with the General on board... although some of them have put into Plymouth”*. Don Pedro de Valdes subsequently stayed for weeks at Dartmouth to revictual. Francis

Drake is recorded in 1576 as having a business along Notte Street in Plymouth and described as “*merchant*”. So there is no doubt that Francis Drake would have provided victuals for Don Pedro de Valdes’s flagship and others of his Armada that had put into both Plymouth and Dartmouth. They must have met therefore in 1575.

On the 16th November 1575 de Guaras left the Spanish Embassy in London for the Isle of Wight to lend diplomatic weight if things should go wrong. “*Our fleet is anchored before the Castle of Cowes (Cou)*” commented Antonio de Guaras to Zayas on the 22nd November 1575 having travelled initially to Southampton where he found “*some disagreeable demonstrations were made against our people in Southampton and elsewhere*” before sailing to the to the Isle of Wight to support the Spanish fleet. Elizabeth deployed two heavily armed warships, the ‘*Cato*’ and the ‘*Barque of Boulogne*’, to confine the Spanish fleet to their anchorage off Cowes and Portsmouth and also ordered George Carey’s powerful ship, ‘*Castle of Comfort*’, to stay near the Isle of Wight, de Guaras noting in a letter of 29th October 1575: “*When I asked the Council to allow one Carey, with a very powerful ship, to leave Southampton to serve in Flanders, I was told he could not be allowed to sail on account of certain robberies of which he was accused, this, however only being an excuse to prevent his going*” .

Eventually, on the 29th November 1575, De Guaras let Zayas know of the Spanish fleet off Cowes that “*They sailed on the 24th with favourable weather, and arrived safely in Dunkirk on the 26th, accompanied by the armed ships which had left Dunkirk...- sent by way of Plymouth to be forwarded by first opportunity—London, 29th and 30th November 1575*” .

Recalde secretly comes ashore at Cowes in 1575

Da Guaras confides that *"I came because I had heard of the arrival of our fleet here which news was true, and I found it in good order on my arrival. It is still awaiting fair weather as the wind keeps contrary"* but he then also notes on the 22nd November that *"The two ships belonging to the Queen, which I said were being fitted out, have since arrived here, and the commander, as well as the Governor of the Isle of Wight, have sent word that they will, to-morrow, make a communication to Juan Nunez (Martinez) de Recalde, although we do not know what they have to say."*



Juan Martinez de Recalde with his Armada 1588 ship 'San Juan de Portugal'

But Recalde was not to be found. De Guaras recorded of the two Ships of Elizabeth's navy *"when the two ships I have mentioned came to anchor alongside of our flagship, the General being absent on business, a boat from the English ships came to our vessel and asked for the General, who, they were told, was on shore"*. Recalde had evidently sneaked ashore on the Isle of Wight near Cowes. This infuriated the Elizabeth's ships and *"They thereupon told them to haul down the flag, and said if they did not do so they would make them, and our people then did so. As our fleet is anchored before the castle of Cowes (Cou), this and all other discourtesy has been overlooked, our people, so to speak, being their guests and under the*

Queen's protection" wrote De Guaras aboard Recalde's flagship. Recalde spent the day ashore before his meeting with Edward Horsey, the Governor of the Isle of Wight, due for the next day.



Detail of the River Medina from the 'Map of Portsmouth, Spithead and the North-East Isle of Wight', 1585, belonging to Lord Burghley.

If Recalde had rowed or sailed up the River Medina to Newport to see Governor Edward Horsey at Carisbrooke Castle in 1575 for their official meeting (for Horsey did not remove to Hazeley Manor until 1580) then he would have seen the Beacon pole and basket at Nodes Farm atop Northwood used as part of the chain of Beacons to warn Islanders of enemy shipping. An illustration of Carisbrooke Castle from 1567 is extant and this is what Recalde would have seen in 1575:



Carisbrooke Castle in 1567 ('Newport Old Ledger', entry dates 1567/8, folio 5)



Playing Card, 1588



Waynefleet Tower, Esher Palace.

Thirteen years after his 1575 exploit Pedro de Valdez in 1588 was in English waters again but taken prisoner by Sir Francis Drake aboard 'Revenge' while his ship, 'Rosario', was towed into Dartmouth. De Valdez sailed on aboard Drake's 'Revenge' as his prisoner until they reached the cinque port of Rye when he was set ashore and confined to Esher Palace upon Queen Elizabeth's instruction.



*Richard Percyvall 1556-1621
(after Gheerearts)*

Richard Percyvall, publisher and co-author with Pedro de Valdez of the first English/Spanish Dictionary and Phrasebook, the '*Bibliotheca Hispanica*' published in 1591, had association with Cowes as a founding member the Virginia Company whose name appears on the list incorporating the Company on the 23rd May 1609. In 1610 he was a donor of supplies for the voyage of the fleet that comprised the "De La Warr", "Blessing of Plymouth", and "Hercules of Rye", ships that sailed from Cowes on the 11th April for Jamestown, carrying supplies, additional colonists, a doctor, and new Governor, Lord De La Warr. At Jamestown they were joined by the survivors of the '*Sea Venture*' wrecked on the shores of uninhabited Bermuda in 1609 (inspiring Shakespeare's '*Tempest*') but who built two vessels, some from its old timbers, the '*Deliverance*' and the '*Patience*' and sailed to Jamestown to find malnourished colonists. Somers sailed back to collect hogs from Bermuda in 1610 but died there "of a surfeit in eating of a pig!"

"Shall I compare thee to a Summers day ? Thou art more lovely and more temperate: Rough windes do shake the darling buds of Maie, And Sommers leaf hath all too short a date"

Shakespeare in his Sonnet 18 published in 1609 refers directly to this demi-paradise in his Quarto choice in lines 4 and 9 changing the opening spelling of "Summers" to "Sommers" and using the choice of "Maie" to refer to Henry May's description of Bermuda in 1594, published in 1598 with "eternal lines to time" referring to lines of latitude used to discover Bermuda.