



HISTORY MYSTERIES

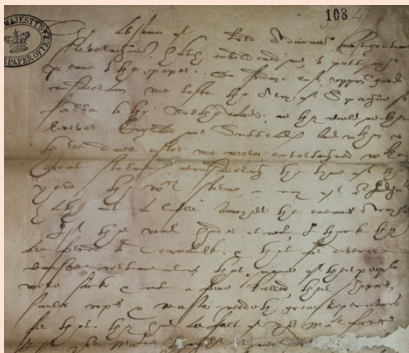
Sir Francis Drake – hero or pirate?

Stone Age	Bronze Age	Iron Age	Romans	Anglo-Saxons	Medieval	Tudors	Stuarts	English Commonwealth	Stuarts (again)	Georgians	Victorians	Edwardians	World War I	Inter-War Period	World War II	Cold War	Modern
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Sir Francis Drake was born in Devon around 1540, the son of a farmer. He joined the household of relative William Hawkins, a sea captain from Plymouth, when he was a boy, and quickly rose through the ranks, becoming captain of his first ship by the time he was 22.

During his life, Drake embarked on many expeditions around the world and even managed to complete a **circumnavigation** of the globe in 1580. He was **knighted** by Elizabeth I in 1581 aboard his ship, *The Golden Hind*. He played a key role in defeating the **Spanish Armada** in 1588, making him a hero in Tudor England.

However, to the Spanish he was known as 'El Draque' (the Dragon) and was branded a pirate. So – which was he? Hero or pirate?



Source A

Letter from Sir Francis Drake to Queen Elizabeth, announcing the defeat of the Spanish Armada, 8 August 1588.

The queen would have rejoiced upon receiving this letter from her most celebrated naval commander, in which he announced the flight of the mighty Spanish Armada. The skill of Elizabeth's **navy**, coupled with some fortuitous weather, had scattered Philip II's ships. Many had been lost, and those that survived were blown so far northwards that they could reach neither England nor Scotland. The defeat of the Spanish Armada catapulted Elizabeth's kingdom onto the world stage. It also secured the queen's reputation as the iconic 'Gloriana' and her reign as the 'Golden Age'. Although Drake was only second in command, he grabbed all of the glory. Even Elizabeth's enemy Pope Sixtus V was fulsome in his praise, exclaiming: 'Have you heard how Drake with his fleet has offered battle to the Armada? With what courage! Do you think he showed any fear? He is a great captain.' The Spanish nicknamed him 'El Draque', the dragon.

From the National Archives: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/elizabeth-monarchy/sir-francis-drake-to-elizabeth/>

Source B

Drake's circumnavigation of the globe was also a secret pirate mission sanctioned by Queen Elizabeth against the Spanish. Drake was a privateer, which meant that he was given permission by the crown to raid enemy ships. Elizabeth commissioned Drake to lead an expedition against the Spanish **colonies** on the Pacific coast of America.

Drake was hated by the Spanish who nicknamed him 'El Draque' or the Dragon

This was due to numerous raids he made against Spanish ships and settlements on his voyages. Some Spanish mariners were so afraid of Drake that they believed he practiced witchcraft. Drake was rumoured to be in league with the devil and to possess a magic mirror that allowed him to see the location of all the ships in the sea.

Royal Museums Greenwich - Sir Francis Drake Facts: <https://www.rmg.co.uk/stories/topics/sir-francis-drake-facts>

Source C

What Is Piracy?

For nearly as long as ships have been on the ocean, there have been pirates. Strictly speaking, a pirate is anyone who **plunders** a ship at sea or who uses a sea vessel to attack coastal ports and towns.

Privateers

Privateers were essentially "legal pirates", engaging in activities that could only be described as piracy but which had the express support and authority of a sovereign nation.

Pirates vs Buccaneers vs Privateers by Glen Nune: <https://owlcation.com/humanities/Pirates-vs-Buccaneers-vs-Privateers>

Source E

Francis Drake became the first European to sail and explore much of the Americas. However, Drake didn't 'discover' these lands, as **indigenous populations** were settled long before Drake landed.

The Straits of Magellan

Drake became the first Englishman to navigate the Straits of Magellan, a sea route at the southern tip of South America linking the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

Tierra del Fuego

He discovered that Tierra del Fuego, the land south of the Magellan Strait, was not another continent as Europeans believed, but instead a group of islands. This meant that ships could sail between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans around the bottom of South America (later known as the Cape Horn route).

America's north coast

Drake also sailed further north along the coast of the Americas than any other European had before. On the way, he landed in what is now California, naming it Nova Albion (New England).

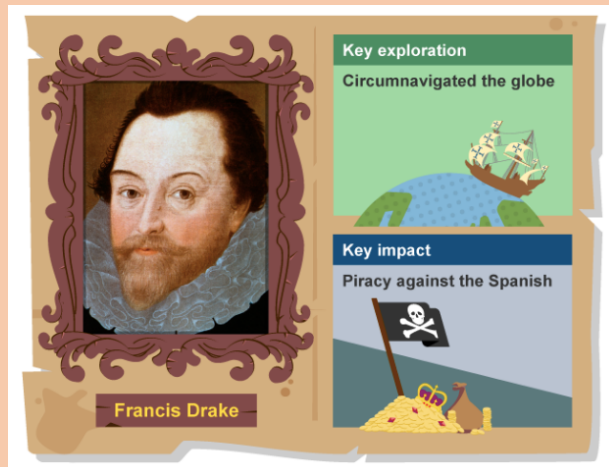
Royal Museums Greenwich - What did Sir Francis Drake discover? <https://www.rmg.co.uk/stories/topics/what-did-sir-francis-drake-discover>

Source D



Admiral Drake knighted by Queen Elizabeth © National Portrait Gallery, London

Source G



Sir Francis Drake was the most famous seaman of Elizabeth's reign. His career has been interpreted in different ways, ranging from national hero to villain. He grew up as a **Puritan** who hated **Catholics** and he was very anti-Spanish. His first voyage in 1566 was as a slave trader. He was attacked in 1568 by the Spanish at San Juan de Ulua in Mexico, losing four ships and over 300 men. He sought to take revenge on the Spanish after this.

Notable expeditions

Drake was the first Englishman to sail around the world, circumnavigating the globe between 1577 and

1580. He went on to play a role in the Spanish Armada by attacking Cadiz in 1587 and delaying preparations. He was also vice-admiral during the Armada.

Impact

- Launched successful attacks on the Spanish empire, bringing back gold, silver and jewels, making a huge profit.
- Claimed new lands for England and made valuable trading contacts with the Spice Islands.
- Knighted by Elizabeth and made an **admiral**.

BBC Bitesize – Tudor Explorers: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zy68tyc/revision/5>



What do YOU think?

Glossary

circumnavigation – sailing all the way around the world in one journey

knighted – when the king or queen gives someone the title of 'Sir' for their services to the country

Spanish Armada – a fleet of ships sent to invade England by Philip II of Spain in 1588

navy – the branch of the armed services that operates at sea

admiral – the highest rank achievable by a serving officer in the Royal Navy

colony – a country under the control of another country

plunders – robs

indigenous population – the people who have always lived in a place

Puritan – very strict Protestants, who wanted to live a simple life without any unnecessary excess

Catholic – a branch of the Christian religion; Catholics believe you must go to church and speak to God through priests

Further Reading:

Horribly Famous: Sir Francis Drake and his Daring Deeds by Andrew Donkin

What was the Age of Exploration? By Catherine Daly

The Queen's Pirate – Francis Drake by Sarah Courtauld