

Captain Stephen Hutchens

On the south wall of Paul Church there is a large impressive memorial that was erected in memory of Captain Stephen Hutchens who died in Jamaica in 1709. Both the memorial and the name are well known locally, the latter because of the Hutchens Trust, but many are not familiar with the life of Stephen Hutchens and how he came to leave on his death a fortune of some £9 million in today's value. As I piece together this account I am reminded that Captain Andrew Elton, whose memorial tablet hangs above the choir stalls near the pulpit and who was the subject of a series of articles in this magazine (Dec 00, Jan 01 and Feb 01), was killed at sea just a year later - 1710.

The inscription on the memorial records that Captain Stephen Hutchens died at Port Royal, Jamaica on the 24th of August 1709, aged 40, and was buried by the Communion Table in Kingston Church. Verses 8 and 9 of Psalm 112 follow and then an extract of his Will "He hath given one hundred pounds towards the repairing and beautifying of this Church and six hundred pounds for building a house for six poor men and six poor women, born in this Parish, to live in and towards their maintenance". There is then two lines in Cornish which translated reads "Eternal life be his whose loving care gave Paul an almshouse and the Church repair". Finally the remaining lines declare "Heroick actions eternize his fame and pious ones with glory crown his name". At the bottom of the memorial there is etched a sea battle and this records the engagement between two French ships, the Mignon and the Coventry, and the Portland which was commanded by Captain Stephen Hutchens but more about this event later.

Stephen Hutchens was born in a time of warring between England and France and the Dutch. The building of the naval docks at Plymouth was authorised by King William III and was nearing completion by 1700. They were second to those at Portsmouth and were a suitable response to the new naval docks across the Channel at Brest. In 1702, upon the proclamation of Queen Anne, England declared war on France and Spain.

Travel by land both within and out of Cornwall was difficult to say the least. People usually travelled within a day's ride, 30 miles or so, thus generally limiting their contact. In fact, it was more likely that a gentleman would travel by sea, rather than subject himself to the dangers of the 'road'. The main roads between London and Bath were

merely strips of compacted earth and suffered greatly from the extremes of the weather. It was not uncommon for a man setting off on a journey to make out his Will, assuming that he might not return.

Little is known of Stephen's early life but it is recorded that he joined the Scarborough at Plymouth as a Midshipman and seemed to have remained with the ship, being promoted through the ranks, and on 25th April 1704 was appointed its Captain. During the time of his command his own log is written in a very small neat hand, with entries more detailed than most, meticulously recording various events other than those directly nautical which would have been recorded in the true log. This was a man very much aware of the world he lived in. Early in 1707 Captain Hutchens sailed as part of Sir Charles Wager's fleet of 9 men-of-war to Port Royal, Jamaica via Madeira, Barbados and Montserrat arriving 21st June 1707 and then, accompanied by the Kingston, was ordered to cruise the seas off Jamaica. Just over a year later, Captain Hutchens was appointed to command the Portland following the court-martial of his predecessor!

In January 1709 he escorted a convoy of merchant ships (bound for England through the Windward Passage) and, on his return to Jamaica from this duty, took a French ship near Cape St Nicholas, making a prize of £6,000. He was then instructed, in April 1709, to patrol off the coast of the Dominican Republic in order to protect British trade. On the 15th he arrived off Bastimentos (now Panama) and was informed that four large ships were at anchor there. Early the next day he closed in to observe and the ships then formed into line raising the French colours. Noting that they had a total of over 150 guns (but not wishing to forgo the opportunity of gaining a prize, distinguishing himself and rendering service to his country), he ordered a reconnaissance group to be sent by canoe. The Portland stood well back from the superior force hoping that the four ships might come out to attack offering the Portland some advantage. The recon group returned on 22nd April and reported that two ships, a French merchant ship and a large Dutch ship, which had been captured off Bastimentos, had fled upon the arrival of the Portland. The remaining captor ships were the Coventry, taken from the English fleet, and the Mignon, having just arrived from Guinea. Captain Hutchens then retired to his former position, anchoring off Bastimentos on 27th April, sending his canoe again. It returned on 1st May with the information that the Coventry and the Mignon had sailed the previous night.

He then weighed anchor and stood to the north until the 3rd when at 8 in the morning the enemy were seen from the masthead and could be seen from the deck at midday.

The two ships came on, confident in the knowledge of their superior fire-power, bearing down on the Portland; they passed and fired, but fortunately too distant to make contact, and came about to re-engage. However, they kept at full sail and did not close. Captain Hutchens was determined that they should not escape and therefore tacked, keeping sight of them all night, attempting to get further windward and closer. Before eight in the morning Captain Hutchens had got close to the Mignon and opened fire, engaging to the Leeward, his ports so close to the water that it was only just possible to use the lower deck guns. The enemy ships were lighter and higher built. The Coventry then opened fire upon the Portland, guns aimed high so as to dismast, from the lee-bow, firing briskly, but to no effect. The firing of the Mignon slackened. Captain Hutchens was determined to continue with his first object of disabling the Mignon and ignored the attack from the Coventry, doubled the attack. However, a shot from the Coventry carried away some of his rigging, allowing the enemy to get ahead of him. This did not discourage Captain Hutchens and he pursued them with all speed allowable by this crippled condition, splicing rigging, bending new sails and making other quick repairs.

Around three the next morning, boats were seen passing between the Mignon and the Coventry, continually for the whole day. Captain Hutchens concluded that the Mignon had received so much damage that it was felt prudent to shift the valuable cargo to the Coventry, she being little damaged. Continuing calm prevented the Portland from coming in closer, so Captain Hutchens secured the masts and repaired rigging. By seven the next morning, after attempting to do so for nine hours (due to the continuing calm), he closed on the Coventry and the two ships exchanged cannon fire, with the Mignon firing from a distance as the opportunity arose. The Portland sustained no material damage. Captain Hutchens had wished to board the Coventry, but on a close pass, he observed that she was too well manned to attempt this, and so continued firing cannon until noon, at which time the main mast of the Coventry was down, and an hour later, she ceased firing and surrendered.

On boarding it was found that the Coventry's first captain had been killed, the second wounded, the first Captain of the Mignon was severely wounded (then taken to the Coventry) and over 70 men killed in both enemy ships. The Mignon escaped in the confusion, with only 20 men aboard, in a shattered condition, having removed all her treasure to the Coventry as Captain Hutchens has supposed. Unfortunately the Portland was too much damaged herself, from the

exchange with the Coventry, to apprehend the Mignon. On Captain Hutchens' ship 12 men had been injured and 9 had been killed. Besides the recovery of the ship, the capture of the crews and the treasure which was found, money was taken to the sum of 20,000 pieces of eight.

Sadly Captain Stephen Hutchens did not survive the honour, rewards and position gained in this protracted and unevenly matched engagement, dying on 24th August 1709 in Jamaica on board the ship which had served his gallant command so well. The cause of his death is not known but in his Will, which was written just eight days before his death, he states "being sick and weak in body, but of sound and perfect mind and memory" so I suspect that he succumbed to one of the many fevers or diseases that killed more sailors and soldiers in the tropics than military action.

Footnote: In addition to the bequests already mentioned I was amused to read in Stephen Hutchens' Will the following "I give devise and bequeath unto my worthy good friend Henry Pendarves, Minister of the Parish of Paul in the County of Cornwall, the sum of £20 Sterling to buy him a Suit of Mourning to wear in memory of me."

Bob Harrison
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