

Captain Andrew Elton

On the north side of the Chancel in Paul Church, between the choir stalls and the pulpit, there is a mural tablet which reads as follows:-

*Interr'd near this place lies ye body
of Captain Andrew Elton
Commander of the Godfrey Gally.
He was killd in an engagement
with a French Privateer
Off the Lands End of England,
Sept the 4th 1710 Aged 53.*

*His merit being Sufficiently Known
he needs no Further inscription.*



The History of St Pol de Leon by the Rev Cadman and Mr Cecil Aitken's Account of Paul Church both state "The sad truth is that in spite of the last two lines of this inscription, nobody seems to have any knowledge of who he was or where he came from". After a great deal of research we did find the answers and this is the story of how we achieved it.

We first searched the church graveyard but the earliest gravestone that could be found was dated 1785. A search inside the church, in case he had been buried within, also drew a blank. Visits to both the Penzance Library and the Morrab Library, that holds a large collection of old newspapers, again turned up nothing as their collection did not go back that far. However, they suggested the Cornish Records Office in Truro and they provided the first piece of new information which was Parish Register Entry P/172/1/2 (Page 126) stating that Captain Andrew Elton was buried at Paul on the 28th of September 1710. Hope that the entry would give some more details such as his home were sadly dashed - research is never simple! The Cornish Records Office suggested Lake's Parochial History of the County of Cornwall - four volumes published between 1868 - 1872 but again it only mentions the details inscribed on the tablet.

Tracing family trees was a new venture so we were at a loss as where to look next when somebody suggested that being a gentleman he must have made a will or letter of administration. Back to the Cornish Records Office who confirmed that they hold an index of wills etc. Hopes were raised but soon dashed when they stated that there were no entries for any Elton around that time. They were also able to check the index for Devon but again no Elton. However, we learnt from them that wills are usually proved in the county where the person in question either comes from or has their family home so it was possible then that Andrew Elton was neither Cornish nor Devonian. So why was he buried here at Paul? It could have been that he had Cornish connections but

more likely it would seem that having been killed off Lands End he was brought ashore at the nearest port (Mousehole or Newlyn) and then buried in the nearest parish churchyard i.e. St Pol de Leon (Paul Church).

But what was he doing on his ship off Lands End? Was it a warship, a merchantman or possibly a privateer like the French ship? Contact with the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich did not answer any of these questions as their standard reply informed us that they neither had the time nor staff to conduct private research but that we were welcome to visit and carry out our own search. However, in The List of Commissioned Sea Officers 1660 - 1815 there was no mention of an Andrew Elton which confirmed that he was not an officer of the Royal Navy.

A research guide, issued by the National Maritime Museum, informed us that most Admiralty records were deposited with the Public Record Office (PRO) at Kew and this would include letters of marque which are the warrants, issued by the High Court of Admiralty in London, for privateering exploits. The PRO also held the Probate records for all the United Kingdom so if Andrew Elton had made a will this would be the place to look for it. In the PRO's unpublished guide to wills 1701 - 1799 there was a reference to an Andrew Elton whose will was proved on the 10th of February 1711 so as this was such a coincidence i.e. five months after the incident off Lands End, a copy was obtained and we found that we had finally struck gold.

His will (PRO Prob 11/519) was made out on the 2nd of November 1708 and describes him as a mariner of the parish of St Mary, Rotherhithe in the county of Surrey, London so no wonder we could not find his will in either Cornwall or Devon. He was married to Mary and they had four children, Andrew, Nicholas, John and Mary. In addition to a property in Rotherhithe he had several dwelling houses or tenements in Church Street, Greenwich and a "copyhold" estate in Westerham, Kent which lies about 15 miles to the south of Greenwich. The will itself was difficult to read but in outline he left £150 to his eldest son, Andrew with the remainder to "my dearly beloved wife for her natural life and then in parts to our

children". Having found the will the next logical step was to search the International Genealogical Index (IGI) for Surrey and Kent but we could find no trace of him or his parents. The original Rotherhithe parish records are at the London Metropolitan Archives but they are very patchy with large gaps in them because of missing volumes.

A search through the Admiralty records for letters of marque turned up not one but four different letters issued to Captain Elton in 1692, 1702, 1707 and 1710. Originally, these letters of marque were a licence granted by a sovereign to a subject authorising him to make reprisals on the subjects of a hostile state for injuries alleged to have been made by the enemy's army. In later times this became practically a licence to fit out an armed vessel and employ it in the capture of the merchant shipping belonging to the enemy's subjects, the holder of the letters of marque being called a privateer or corsair, and entitled by international law to commit against the hostile nation acts which would otherwise have been condemned as piracy. In fact the privateers augmented a country's regular navy by providing a cheap and available means of support.

The first letter of marque is dated the 26th of June 1692 and was for the Russell Gally a ship of 111 tons carrying 26 guns. The second was for the Great Russell, a ship of 204 tons carrying 24 guns and with a crew of 90, but the third and fourth letters were the most interesting as they were both for the Godfrey Gally. The bond document issued with the letter gave a fair description of the vessel:- "Appeared personally Capt Andrew Elton and produced a Warrant from the Right Honourable the Commissioners for executing the Office of Lord High Admiral of Great Britain and Ireland etc. and of all her Majesties Plantations etc. for the Granting of a Commission or Letters of Marque to him the said Andrew Elton, and in pursuance of her Majesties Instructions to Privateers made the following Declarations viz. that his ship is called the Godfrey Gally and is of about three hundred tons, that he is the Captain of her, that she carries thirty guns, eighty men, eighty small arms, thirty-four cutlasses, twenty barrels of powder, forty

rounds of great shot, and about twenty hundredweight of small shot, that the ship is victualled for five months has two suites of sails, five anchors, six cables and about twenty hundredweight of spare cordage, that Humphrey Caseby goes Lieutenant, Thomas Goodfellow Boatswain, Richard Peck Gunner, John Wirril Carpenter and John Read Cook of the said ship and that Peter Godfrey, John Page, Joseph Tatem, Lancelot Tatem, William Gosselin, Samuel Short, Richard ffenne Merchants and he the Declarant are the owners and setters out of the said ship.”

The most interesting thing about the above information is that Captain Elton had financial backing from the merchants mentioned and that the ship was most likely named after the main backer - Peter Godfrey, who is also mentioned in the 1707 bond and letter of marque. Peter Godfrey was a director of the Bank of England, director of the East India Company and later a Member of Parliament so no small fry. Among those involved in fitting out the Great Russell in 1702 was one Francis Minshall, a member of both the Shipwrights and Vintners Companies and a London Common Councilman. In addition to making the above bond declaration Captain Elton, as the commander of the privateer, would have been required to provide a bail to guarantee the good conduct of himself and his crew. For a ship the size of the Godfrey Gally this sum would have been about £1,500 which was a considerable sum in those days. To date we have not found any financial figures concerning the Godfrey Gally but about twenty years later the Mentor, a privateer slightly larger than the Godfrey Gally, declared a sum of £37,532 for fitting out, provisioning and associated costs. If the Mentor had been unsuccessful on her venture it would have meant a heavy loss to her backers and crew but prize money of £114,053 as awarded by the Admiralty so the fitting out etc costs were recovered with £54,118 going to the ship's owners/backers and the remainder being divided amongst the crew.

It is of interest to note how the shares were divided amongst the crew:

<u>Position</u>	<u>Shares</u>	<u>Amount</u>
Captain	16	£1,744
Officers, Mate,	) 8	£872
Carpenter,	) 6	£654
Cook etc.	) 4	£436
	) 2	£218
	) 1.25	£136.5/=
25 Seaman @ 1		£109
70 Ordinary Seamen @.50		£54.10/=

In 1710, the year of Captain Elton's death, there were on average 18 privateers commissioned to carry out their trade but four years earlier (Sep 1706) there were only 3 privateers recorded whilst in Feb 1703 there were 31 listed. During our research we came across the George Gally (70 tons and a crew of 14) which listed her home port as Penzance. As a privateer in 1719 she operated with two other ships, the Friendship Sloop (Bristol) and the Enterprize Gally (Channel Islands) and declared two prizes that same year.

At the time of Andrew Elton's death England had, with her main allies the Netherlands, Prussia and Portugal, been at war since 1701 with France who had support from several of the German States. This was the War of the Spanish Succession and the conflict arose out of the disputed succession to the throne of Spain with the main claimants being England, the Netherlands and France. Queen Anne was on the throne of England and her favourite John Churchill (later Duke of Marlborough) played a leading role both in her government and on the battlefield - Blenheim (1704), Ramillies (1706) and Malplaquet (1709). Only four years before the start of this war Europe had seen the War of the Grand Alliance (1689 - 97) which had again pitted England, with the support of the Netherlands and Austria, against France so for most of the twenty years before Captain Elton's death England was at war and there was plenty of scope for privateers to successfully operate.

You will recall that in May 1710 Captain Elton produced a

Warrant when seeking his letter of marque and, as it gives a fascinating insight into the period, it is reproduced (with modern spelling).

“Thomas Earl of Pembroke and Montgomery etc, Lord High Admiral of Great Britain and Ireland etc and of all Her Majesty’s Plantations -

Whereas, by Commission under the Great Seal of Great Britain, bearing date of November 1708, I am required and authorised to grant Commissions unto such persons as I deem fitly qualified in that behalf, for the apprehending, seizing and taking the ships, vessels and goods belonging to France, and other Her Majesty’s enemies, their vessels and subjects, or other inhabiting within any of their countries, territories or dominions, and such other ships, vessels and goods as are and shall be liable to confiscation, with other powers in the said commission. These are therefore to will and require you forthwith to cause a commission, or letter of marque, or reprisal, to be issued out of the High Court of Admiralty unto Captain Andrew Elton, Commander of the Godfrey Gally burthen about three hundred and fifty tons, carrying thirty guns and seventy five men to set forth, in warlike manner, the said ship called the Godfrey Gally whereof the said Andrew Elton is commander; and to apprehend, seize and take the ships, vessels and goods belonging to France and other Her Majesty’s enemies, their vessels and subjects or others inhabiting within any of their countries, territories or dominions, and such other ships, vessels and goods as are and shall be liable to confiscation according to the said commission granted unto me for that purpose, and certain articles and instructions under Her Majesty’s Signet and Sign Manual (a copy whereof remains with you) and according to the course of the Court of Admiralty, and Laws of Nations. And you are therein to insert a clause, enjoining the said Andrew Elton to keep an exact Journal of his Proceedings; and therein particularly to take notice of all prizes which shall be taken by him, the nature of such prizes, the time and place of their being taken and the value of them as near as he can judge; as also of the station, motion and strength of the enemy, as well as he can discover by the best intelligence he

can get; of which he is from time to time, as he shall have an opportunity, to transmit an account to me or my secretary, and to keep a correspondence with me or him by all opportunities that shall present. Provided always, that before you issue such commission, security be given thereupon, according as is directed in Her Majesty's instructions aforementioned. The said commission to continue in force till further order for which this shall be your Warrant. Given under my hand, and the seal of the office of Lord High Admiral this 19th day of July 1709".

As to details of prizes taken by Captain Elton whilst commanding the Godfrey Gally we have drawn a blank so far but between 1692 - 1698, when he was captain of both the Russell Gally and the Great Russell, details of seven prizes are recorded:-

<u>Prize</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Cargo</u>	<u>Prize Landed</u>	<u>Privateer</u>
North Star	Feb 1692	Tobacco/Salt	Weymouth	Russell Gally
St Clement	Oct 1692	Salt/Fish	Weymouth	Russell Gally
St Joseph	Dec 1692	?	Weymouth	Russell Gally
Destiny	Dec 1697	?	Newfoundland	Great Russell
St Francis	Jan 1698	?	Newfoundland	Great Russell
Little Moses	Mar 1698	?	Newfoundland	Great Russell
Les Brumes Armees	Jun 1698	Vinegar/Salt	Newfoundland	Great Russell

This information was given in PRO HCA 30/774 but gave no details regarding the amount of monies raised by both the sale of the cargo and the vessels concerned. However, what is interesting is the fact that whilst the Russell Gally seemed to operate in the English Channel the Great Russell found rich pickings across the Atlantic Ocean.

We have consulted several publication from the period including the London Gazette, Post Boy and the Observator but can find no account of the incident in which Captain Andrew Elton lost his life off Land's End in 1710 nor, for that matter, details of any of his actions as a privateer except for the seven prizes taken between 1692 - 1698. As to his merits we know that he was a successful privateer for over 20 years and that he was a man of both influence and means. The London Gazette in the early

18th Century was very much the government mouthpiece whilst the other papers, usually no more than 4 - 5 sheets, were left to fend for themselves so their news usually came from foreign sources, manuscript newsletters sent to London or coffee house gossip. There were no reporters waiting throughout the countryside for stories to break and then rushing them up to Fleet Street in time for the morning papers. The PRO at Kew holds a vast collection of documents, letters etc and it would take a great deal of time and effort to search for further information on Andrew Elton and it could be that there is nothing more to be found. The important thing is that we have found Captain Andrew Elton.

Welcome back - we won't lose you again!