

Chapter 1

The Early Years



FIGURE 1 - SIR HENRY MORGAN (1635 – 1688)

HENRY MORGAN'S 53-YEAR LIFE had three distinct periods: the first thirty years, of which we know little; a central period, 1665 to about 1680, which is well documented and during which Morgan won fame and fortune; and his last eight years of steady decline and failing health, when he became increasingly embroiled in political controversy and which culminated in his death in 1688. Because few details of Henry's youth survive, I have chosen to write about

events he was a part of and about the lives of some of those with whom he had family, friendship or service connections.

Our saga begins with Henry John Morgan's birth sometime in 1635. Most historians calculate his birth year by working back from an affidavit made by him in Jamaica in 1671, which gives his age as thirty-six. So far as I have determined, no documentary evidence exists to confirm this, however.

Most modern accounts place Henry's birth at Llanrumney (Welsh Llanrhymni), though some say it may have been at Penkarne. Both places are in Monmouthshire, near Cardiff, and were associated with the Morgan family for generations. Henry gave us a hint when he named his favourite estate in Jamaica, Llanrumney. It was located on the north coast near Port Maria in the parish of St. Mary. However, to leave just a shadow of a doubt, he named another of his estates, Penkarne.

During Morgan's lifetime, different stories circulated about his origins. Most had him serving as an indentured servant on the island of Barbados. A frequently told version had him kidnapped in Bristol and sold to a planter in the West Indies. Another version claimed he bound himself voluntarily as an indentured servant for a term of four years. Apparently, documentation exists that shows a "Henry Morgan" left Bristol for Barbados as an indentured servant in 1655. That name, though, is a common

one in Wales, and this is almost certainly a coincidence. Besides, what reason would Henry have for indenturing himself to a master in the West Indies? He had two well-connected uncles who would undoubtedly have been able to find a place for him in England's military for, as time would show, Henry never shrank from a good fight.

John Esquemeling claimed to have sailed with Morgan during his Caribbean campaigns and made records of his adventures with the buccaneers. Esquemeling wrote in *De Americaenshe Zee-Roovers* (1678) that Morgan was the Welsh son of "a rich yeoman or farmer." He also wrote that Morgan went to Barbados as a "bondservant." However, when Esquemeling's book was published in England in 1683/84 by William Crooke and separately by Thomas Malthus as, *The History of the Bucaniers*, Morgan flatly denied this account and the accuracy of other passages. Consequently, he sued both publishers for libel, forcing a retraction.

The publishers acknowledged, among other things, that Morgan was "a Gentleman's son of good quality in the county of Monmouth, and was never a Servant unto anybody in his life, unless unto his Majesty, the late King of England." As additional settlement for the libel, each publisher paid Morgan £200 in damages—a tidy sum in those days. This case established the legal precedent of awarding money for a successful libel action.

Note: John Esquemeling, aka, Alexandre Olivier Exquemelin. “It is now almost certainly established that the real author was Hendrik Barentzoon Smeeks (1643–1721), a surgeon-apothecary, living at Zwolle in the province of Overysel, who was an industrious and talented writer of pseudo-historical works. He was born in that small town in 1643 or 1645 and educated in an asylum for orphans.” [source: Brig.-Gen E.A. Cruikshank, *The Life of Sir Henry Morgan* (MacMillan, 1935)]

In addition to Henry Morgan’s objections, the editor Philip Ayres’s preface to a contemporary account, *The Voyages and Adventures of Capt. Barth. Sharp* (1684) also refutes, and passionately so, much of what Esquemeling



FIGURE 2 - LLANRUMNEY HALL IN WALES

writes about Henry Morgan’s family background and his alleged acts of cruelty—especially during his attack on Panama. Ayres wrote that “it is sufficiently known that he [Morgan] was descended from an honourable Family in Monmouthshire, and went at first out of England with

the Army commanded by General Venables for Hispaniola and Jamaica.”

The editor also stated, “All those cruelties [alleged by Esquemeling], contrary to the nature and temper of an Englishman, I have heard absolutely contradicted by persons of infallible credit.”

As anyone who has read *The History of the Bucaniers* can attest, John Esquemeling disliked Henry Morgan and may have spoken more harshly of him because of spite. Esquemeling held a grudge because he believed Morgan had cheated him when sharing out the purchase from the attack on Panama. He may also have thought that portraying Morgan as a black-hearted English villain of humble origin would help sales of his book in countries like Holland and Spain, which were traditional enemies of England and often at war with that country.

Regardless of Esquemeling’s motives, his uncomplimentary characterization has survived to become grist to the Hollywood movie and pulp fiction mills. Notwithstanding the many inaccuracies of his accounts and the lurid tales they inspired, we are indebted to that Dutchman for much of the surviving details and rich descriptions of the buccaneers’ exploits.

I have concluded from my research that, far from being of humble birth, as the eldest son of Robert Morgan, Henry Morgan belonged to a lesser line of one of the

“great families” of Wales. He was a member of a cadet branch of the Morgan family of Tredegar. A family whose members had already distinguished themselves. Henry Morgan himself claimed a close relationship with the Morgans of Tredegar in his will. He made a bequest to his sister, Catherine Lloyd, “to be payed [sic] into the hands of my ever-honest Cozen, Mr. Thomas Morgan of Tredegar.” Besides, Henry is known to have married his first cousin, who was one of the daughters of Sir Edward Morgan of whose heritage there is little doubt.

continued ...