

Chapter 14

The Oxford Incident



An Example of an English Frigate | by Thomas Buttersworth (Cropped)

ADMIRAL HENRY MORGAN DID not stay long in Jamaica after his triumphant return from Portobello in mid-August 1668. To Jamaicans, Morgan's standing as a hero was approaching that of Sir Francis Drake, who was still much admired at the Point. To be sure, Morgan had received a mild reprimand from the governor, which he had accepted humbly.

By all accounts, Jamaica was thriving, having grown rich through privateering and the produce of its plantations. Far from being merely a base for buccaneers and pirates, the island had become home for many noble families who owned large, prosperous estates and plantations.^[1] As a much-heralded man about town, Morgan became sought after as a dinner guest of the most prominent of these, gaining the ear of those who were the colony's power-brokers.

[1] In Jamaica, sugarcane was grown on “estates”; pimento, tobacco and other crops were grown on “plantations”; coffee was grown on “mountains”; and cattle and hogs were raised on “pens.”



Not all doors were open to him, however. There were some, especially among Port Royal's merchants, who would never be his friends and who never lost an opportunity to speak ill of him and cast his every action in the worst possible light.

Morgan's buccaneers spent their hard-won booty lavishly, and what they did not spend they lost in games of chance. Some invariably fell victim to the numerous cheats who offered no end of schemes designed to rid the less cautious of their money. Before long, they were clamouring for a return to sea and another expedition.

After only a few weeks, with his fleet refitted and partially provisioned, Morgan set sail for *Île-à-Vache*, his favourite rendezvous. At that time, the admiral had formed no definite plan or, if he had one, he kept it secret. It is likely Morgan only wanted a quiet place away from the temptations of Port Royal, where he could complete his provisioning and train his crews without being spied upon. The next target would have to be agreed upon in the usual manner, at a council of war with his other privateer captains.

About the middle of October 1668, several weeks after Morgan's fleet had left the Point, the *Oxford* arrived from England. The *Oxford* was a fifth-rate frigate of the Royal Navy, carrying thirty-four guns and a crew of 160 men. Captain Hacket had brought the ship from England with a letter to the governor from the secretary of state. Lord Arlington placed the *Oxford* under Modyford's orders. He gave him instructions to recommission her as a private ship of war under the command of a veteran privateer Captain Hacket so that the crew could support themselves with their prizes, which was to include the capture of pirates and their cargos.

The *Oxford* took on supplies and set off on a six-month cruise off the coast of the Spanish Main. However, she was still at Port Morant in southeastern Jamaica when Captain Hacket fell out with the ship's master and ran him through with his sword. After the master died of his wound, Hacket fled and, in mid-December, the governor appointed a veteran privateer, Captain Edward Collier, to replace him.^[2]

^[2]Calendar of State Papers, America and West Indies, No. 1892, Browne to Williamson, 17th December, 1668.

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My version of the Oxford incident is supported by a letter dated 20 Jan 1669 from ship's surgeon Richard Browne, who arrived in the Indies with that ship, to Sir John Williamson, Lord Arlington's Under-Secretary of State. The letter contains Browne's eyewitness account of the incident and contradicts John Esquemeling's account. Although he was, apparently, not kindly disposed towards Morgan, Brown noted Morgan's moderation towards prisoners, especially women, which seems to contradict Esquemeling's accusations.

Shortly thereafter, news that pirates were cruising off the coast of Hispaniola arrived at the Point. They had chased several Jamaican privateers, damaging one of them. They were reported to be the crew of a slave ship who had mutinied and murdered some of their officers. Modyford ordered the *Oxford* to search them out. He also gave Collier instructions to investigate a charge of piracy laid by the master of a Virginia merchantmen recently plundered by French flibustiers.



The *Oxford* sailed on 20 December 1668 from Port Marrant for *Île-à-Vache*, where Captain Collier found the French flibustiers in a ship, *Le Cerf Volant*, of la Rochelle anchored among Admiral Morgan's privateer squadron. The ship was armed with 14 guns and under the command of a Frenchman, Captain Vivien. *Le Cerf Volant* had come out to the West Indies intending to trade with the Spaniards, but, having found this difficult, decided to plunder them. Vivien's crew were flibustiers from Tortuga who were anxious to share Morgan's promised booty.

After Captain Vivien refused Collier's invitation to come aboard the *Oxford*, Collier ran close alongside, intending to board her. At that, Captain Vivien changed his mind and met with Collier on board the larger ship. When he could not produce a valid commission, and after the

master of the plundered Virginian ship positively identified him as the pirate that had robbed him, Collier seized *Le Cerf Volant* arrested Vivien and his crew of forty-five. Collier took the pirates to Port Royal, where Vivien was tried by the Court of Admiralty and convicted of piracy. *Le Cerf Volant* was condemned as a lawful prize, then recommissioned and renamed *Satisfaction*. Later, Modyford sent it in company with the *Oxford* to join Morgan's squadron, which was still anchored at *Île-à-Vache*.

Captain Vivien was never hanged; he appealed his death sentence and was reprieved by the governor. However, I would not want to leave the impression that acts of piracy were condoned at Port Royal, for they were not. Privateers operating under valid commissions were welcomed, of that, there is no doubt. But piracy, especially against English subjects, was outside the law. Pirates who were caught and convicted usually hanged and their rotting corpses were left on display at Gallows Point to discourage similar acts.

Such was the case under every governor of Jamaica, for piracy was a danger to the colony's general wellbeing. Jamaica owed its growing prosperity to trade since it produced more products than its tiny population could be consume. Moreover, many of the island's estates were located near the coast and were especially vulnerable to attack by pirates from the sea. The influential planters who owned these properties would hold to account any governor who did not take the problem of piracy seriously.

Obviously, merchants who depended on the safety of their goods coming in and going out of the island would have a similar view.



What the Oxford Explosion

By the end of the year, Admiral Henry Morgan had assembled many Jamaican privateers at *Île-à-Vache*. There they collected supplies from the hunting grounds on that island and on the much larger island of Hispaniola. By most accounts, Morgan had recruited a force of 900 to 1,000 privateers and twelve ships, including the recently arrived *Oxford* and *Satisfaction* under Captain Collier's command.

On 2 Jan 1669, Morgan convened a general council of war on board the *Oxford*, which he—as commander-in-chief of Jamaican forces—had chosen as his flagship. Attending were Morgan and eight captains besides some officers of lower rank, including Captains Aylett, Bigford, Collier, Morris (father and son), Thornbury and Whiting and the ship's surgeon, Richard Browne.

During dinner at a table set up on *Oxford*'s quarterdeck, Morgan proposed an attack upon Cartagena, which he had reconnoitred recently. Those present

knew Cartagena was the strongest fortress on the eastern coast of Spanish America. But even more important to them, the city was known to be a veritable storehouse of wealth. The council of war endorsed Morgan's plan, but it was never executed.

The privateer commanders ate a celebratory dinner on the quarter-deck of the *Oxford*, while her crew and those of the other vessels were having a rousing time eating, drinking, quarrelling, and firing off the ship's guns. At the height of their celebrations, *Oxford's* gunpowder magazine exploded from an unknown cause and without warning. Besides most of the guests at the table with the admiral, nearly the entire crew of 200 were killed instantly, drowned, or horribly wounded.

Ship's surgeon Richard Browne, who had been seated towards the foot of the table on the same side as Morgan, saw the mainmasts blow out and fall "upon Captains Aylett, Bigford and others, and knocked them on the head," before he was hurled into the sea and miraculously survived "by getting astride the mizzen-mast." Browne reported that, of the *Oxford's* crew, only six men and four boys survived. Captain Aylett, who had commanded the *Lily*, and Captains Bigford, Thornbury, and Whiting were killed by the explosion or drowned. The dead also included the namesake son of Morgan's old friend and fellow Jamaican planter, John Morris, Jr. Admiral Morgan and Morris's father, his most senior lieutenant, were also flung into the sea and luckily survived, as did the captain of the *Oxford*, Edward Collier.



Convento de Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria

Before long, news of Oxford's fate reached the Spanish Main. The residents of Cartagena, who had expected an attack from Morgan, saw in the accident divine intervention and attributed the miracle to their guardian and patron saint, *Nuestra Senora de la Popa*, whose shrine at that city was the convent-church known as *Convento de Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria* high atop a hill overlooking the ocean and easily seen by all vessels approaching the city. According to William Dampier, the Spaniards believed:

Any misfortune that befalls the privateers is attributed to this lady's doing; and the Spaniards report that she was aboard that night the Oxford man-of-war was blown up at the isle of Vacca near Hispaniola, and that she came home all wet; as belike she often returns with her clothes dirty and torn with passing through woods and bad ways when she has been out upon any expedition; deserving doubtless a new suit for such eminent pieces of service.



Captain William Dampier, A New Voyage Round the World. Dampier (1651-1715) was the first Englishman to explore parts of what is today Australia, and the first person to circumnavigate the world three times. He has also a much-quoted natural historian as well an important British explorer. Daniel Defoe, author of Robinson Crusoe, was likely inspired by accounts of real-life castaway, Alexander Selkirk, a crew member on Dampier's voyages. In 1679, Dampier crewed with Captain Bartholomew Sharp on the Spanish Main of Central America, twice visiting the Bay of Campeche, or "Campeachy" as it was then known, on the north coast of Mexico. He is cited over 80 times in the Oxford English Dictionary, on words such as "barbecue," "avocado," "chopsticks" and "subspecies."

He may not have coined the words, but his use of them in his writings is the first known example in English.



Needless to say, the accident put an end to any thought Harry Morgan had of making an attempt on Cartagena.