

# Detailed Information Concerning Francis Drake's Brief Involvement in the Slave Trade

Marin Independent Journal editor Dave Allen recently sent me an article about Francis Drake's early involvement in the slave trade.

The second page, below, offers important information and comments about the article by England's foremost Drake historian, author John Sugden ("Sir Francis Drake").

Hi Duane,

A reader reached out and shared this article with me. That's the first time I saw a number applied to Drake and the slave trade. I'd love to hear if your research is different.

## Sir Francis Drake

Drake, the famed Elizabethan explorer, and a vice-admiral in the fleet that defeated the Spanish Armada, was also a slave trader, making three voyages to Guinea and Sierra Leone that enslaved between 1,200 and 1,400 Africans between 1562 and 1567 – a figure that probably meant the deaths of around three times as many, according to contemporary estimates.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/10/after-colston-figures-such-as-drake-and-peel-could-be-next>

Thanks,

Dave

The section of the Guardian article that refers to Francis Drake:

## Sir Francis Drake

Drake, the famed Elizabethan explorer, and a vice-admiral in the fleet that defeated the Spanish Armada, was also a slave trader, making three voyages to Guinea and Sierra Leone that enslaved between 1,200 and 1,400 Africans between 1562 and 1567 – a figure that probably meant the deaths of around three times as many, according to contemporary estimates.

A petition calling for the removal of statues in his honour in **Tavistock** and **Plymouth**, and demanding that schools better reflect his role in the slave trade, has gained more than 1,400 signatures. The local councils have stopped short of agreeing that the statues should be removed but both issued statements acknowledging “the great wrongs of the past”. Plymouth’s council leader, Tudor Evans, promised to ensure the monument was accompanied by information about Drake’s role in the slave trade.

### *Some reported details about Drake's involvement with John Hawkins' slaving expeditions:*

At twenty (ca. 1563-1564) Drake made a voyage to the coast of Guinea in a ship owned by William and John Hawkins, some of his relatives of Plymouth.

In 1566-1567, Drake, made his first voyage to the Americas, sailing under Captain John Lovell on one of a fleet of ships owned by the Hawkins family. They attacked Portuguese towns and ships on the coast of West Africa and then sailed to the Americas and sold the captured cargoes of slaves to Spanish plantations.[ The voyage was largely unsuccessful and more than 90 slaves were released without payment.

Drake's second voyage to the Americas and his second and final slaving voyage ended in the ill-fated 1568 incident at San Juan de Ulúa. Whilst negotiating to resupply and repair at a Spanish port in Mexico, the fleet was attacked by Spanish warships, with all but two of the English ships lost. He escaped along with John Hawkins, surviving the attack by swimming. Drake's hostility towards the Spanish is said to have started with this incident and Drake vowed revenge.

**Below is Important information and comments about the Guardian article by English Drake historian, author John Sugden ("Sir Francis Drake").**

Hi Duane,

As usual we're dealing here with misinformation and smear tactics. The guardian item implies by omission - at least from this quotation - that Drake was the creator or principal figure in the voyages he served upon. It wants to unload hypothetical losses upon Drake, as if he was the principal perpetrator. In fact he was a pretty junior officer in the second of the two voyages on which he served. One witness, asked to name the principal officers of the last fleet Hawkins took, didn't even name him. As you say Drake was an upcoming seaman at this time, possibly in his mid twenties. There is only evidence that he took part in two slaving voyages: Lovell's and the last Hawkins venture. The three figure probably comes from Kelsey, but this is an extremely unreliable and vindictive book, and this new item is additionally simply plucking figures out of the air with no real knowledge of the sources. We can put Drake in two voyages and that's as far as the evidence goes.

**The main failing of this type of accusation is its inability to take a developmental view of people's lives. Someone did something when they were relatively young, and are therefore beyond redemption. As you know Drake became a champion of black and Native American peoples, and took to liberating slaves he encountered as a policy. He may have liberated more than a thousand on his 1585-86 voyage, but this seldom appears. It is rather like condemning Gandhi as a war monger because he was once a recruiting sergeant for the army, and ignoring what he became afterwards. Or Mandela for alleged connections with terrorists in his early days, when we respect him for realizing that all people need to live together and respect each other. Whatever Drake was as a young man he developed a marked sensitivity to black and native American people when precious few other Elizabethans did.**

I don't offhand know the figures for the Lovell voyage the Hawkins voyage, and we don't know how many died on either trip. There is a book by Rayner Unwin that deals solely with the Hawkins voyage of 1568-69 if you can get it. It was fairly well researched. Hawkins wrote his own narrative of the voyage, but I don't have either reference to hand right now. I'll take a look at what I have here and let you know what figures they suggest. Duane, I've written a piece about Drake and his relations with other ethnicities which someone from the 'San Francisco Chronicle' seems to be interested in. I'll keep you posted on it.

Best wishes,  
John Sugden

# Details of Drake's Early Slaving Days

By Drake historian and author, John Sugden

Duane's Query:

You asked me about the slaving voyages. Our details come from English narratives collected long ago by C. R. Beazley (1903) and James A. Williamson (1927); from Spanish reports collected by I. A. Wright (1927); and from the statements extracted from English captives, and transcribed in the Conway manuscripts in Cambridge University Library. I referred to all these sources in my Drake. There are two useful secondary accounts. Rayner Unwin's *Defeat of John Hawkins* (1960) uses all these sources, but for my money the most scholarly account is P. E. H. Hair's paper on "Protestants as Pirates, Slavers and Proto-Missionaries" (1970), which is also in the bibliography of my book.

Now, to your specific enquiries:

**1]** Drake's early voyages. Edmund Howes (1615) is our only authority. He says the young Drake sailed as a purser on a voyage to Biscay, which must have been a routine trading venture, and then two of what we would call slaving voyages. We can identify both of these: John Lovell's voyage of 1566-67 and the famous Hawkins voyage of 1567-69.

**2]** Let's look at the Lovell voyage first. We only know Drake was on this because Michael Morgan, one of the English prisoners tortured in Mexico in 1974, mentioned Drake as one of his shipmates on the Lovell voyage. Morgan said that young Drake was "a great Lutheran" who taught him the Paternoster and the Creed. Lovell's voyage was deemed a failure. He sailed with three small ships of between 40 and 200 tons captained by Lovell, James Hampton and Robert Bolton. Lovell seized five Portuguese ships, looting them of cargo and slaves, and with these headed for the West Indies. Spain was shutting interlopers out of their colonial ports at this time, and Lovell didn't sell any of the slaves he had. He landed 92 at Rio de la Hacha (Colombia), but these were apparently those older or sick. We don't know what he did with his other slaves, and he may have brought some back to England.

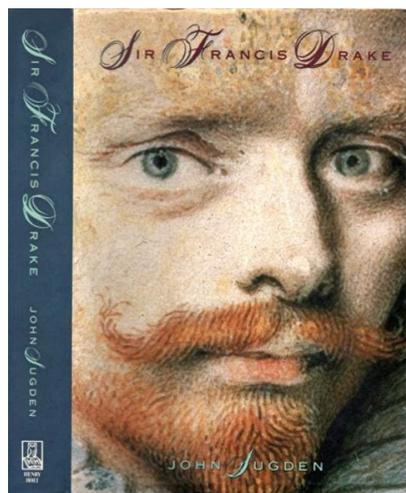
**3]** The Hawkins voyage was a much more ambitious affair, commanded by Hawkins himself, and consisting of six vessels between 32 and 700 tons. Drake, who was a second cousin of Hawkins, would receive his first commands in this voyage. He was put in charge of one of the Portuguese prizes in the Cape Verdes, and later – at some unstated time – transferred to the 'Judith', a 50-ton bark, in which he would escape from the battle of San Juan de Ulua.

Hawkins was more efficient than Lovell, and it is estimated that he gathered some 500 slaves (Andrews, *Drake's Voyages*, 24; Hair, 213, 217) in the Sierra Leone region before sailing for the West Indies. About 260 of these were gathered by intervening as a mercenary in the inter-tribal warfare between rival black kings. The victorious king slaughtered his defeated opponents in

Conga, but granted Hawkins the slaves as a reward for his support. Again, our evidence is scanty and imprecise, so we're not sure what happened to all of these 500 slaves that Hawkins took to the West Indies. Hawkins seems to have been choosy about the slaves he took. On one occasion he captured twelve, and released four as "thin and old" (Hair, p. 213) There is evidence that he sold 260 slaves in Rio de la Hacha and 110 in nearby Santa Marta. There is also a reference to 57 slaves being unsold, and these were presumably on the ships when they were attacked by the Spaniards at San Juan de Ulua, where the English tried to refit before returning home. These figures will be imprecise but they account of 427 slaves. About seventy are missing from the record, and it certainly arguable that many of these succumbed to disease.

Hair makes an interesting point in his account of what is, by any yardstick, a miserable business. He notes that the English made no attempt to defend their actions in Sierra Leone. They could, for example, have tried to mitigate their guilt by arguing that by taking the slaves at Conga they had spared them the savage deaths being administered by the victorious king. But although they do seem to have been disturbed by the savagery of the conflict, they never felt it necessary to justify their participation in slaving. As Hair says, this was not a time when this issue attracted a heated debate. Even Spain, which had stimulated the trade by importing workers for their trans-Atlantic colonies, made little protest. Las Casas and his supporters were principally concerned about the treatment of the indigenous native of the Americas, not the black Africans.

**It is this moral bankruptcy – as far as this issue is concerned – that Drake himself appears to have challenged from the 1570s, when he began to work with the Cimarrons and hear their stories. That is one of the most interesting aspects of Drake's career. He had grown to manhood in a society that general accepted slavery, but as a mature adult he rejected it, and argued the common humanity of white, black and Native American races. He pursued a policy of liberating slaves whenever he could, perhaps more than a thousand of all kinds during his famous West Indian voyage of 1585-86. Sadly, this side of the coin doesn't always get told.**



John Sugden's excellent book, "Sir Francis Drake"

## Marin's Drake Debate - One Other Point...

As previously mentioned, I strongly agree that the organized, name-changing effort to remove Drake's name from public places in Marin County is both uninformed and absurd.

Drake's legacy, taken as a whole, is of a man who dedicated himself to fighting tyranny and promoting equality and opportunity for all. His reputation is now at stake here in Marin. We should be celebrating of his great achievements, not condemning him for being involved in something objectionable early in his career.

*One other point...*

There was a man named John Newton who was a *major* figure in the slave trader for many years of his life. He saw the light later in life and wrote the song, "Amazing Grace", a song of his personal evolution that is beloved and sung in churches and events by people of all colors throughout the entire country. This is a song about redemption.

Drake realized very early in his life that the slave trade was not a worthy pursuit. People evolve.

*Sincerely,* ~ Duane Van Dieman, Drake historian, Mill Valley

