Bartholomew Roberts

Bartholomew Roberts (17 May 1682 - 10 February 1722), born John Roberts, was a Welsh pirate who raided ships off the Americas and West Africa between 1719 and 1722. He was the most successful pirate of the Golden Age of Piracy as measured by vessels captured, taking over 400 prizes in his career. He is also known as Black Bart (Welsh: Bach), but this name was never used in his lifetime.

Early life

He was born John Roberts in 1682 in Casnewydd Bach, between Fishguard and Haverfordwest, in Pembrokeshire, Wales. His father was most likely George Roberts. It's not clear why Roberts changed his name from John to Bartholomew, but pirates often adopted aliases. He may have chosen his first name after the well-known buccaneer Bartholomew Sharp.

He is thought to have gone to sea when he was 13 in 1695, but there is no further record of him until 1718, when he was mate of a Barbados sloop.

In 1719, Roberts was second mate on the slave ship Princess under Captain Abraham Plumb. In early June that year, the Princess was anchored at Anomabu (then spelled Annamaba, which is situated along the Gold Coast of West Africa, present-day Ghana) when she was captured by pirates. The pirates were in two vessels, Royal Rover and Royal James, and were led by captain Howell Davis. Davis, like Roberts, was a Welshman, originally from Milford Haven in Pembrokeshire. Roberts and several other crew of the Princess were forced to join the pirates.

Davis quickly discovered Roberts' abilities as a navigator and took to consulting him. He was also able to confide information to Roberts in Welsh, thereby keeping it hidden from the rest of the crew. Roberts is said to have been reluctant to become a pirate at first, but soon came to see the advantages of this new lifestyle. Captain Charles Johnson reports him as saying:

In an honest service there is thin commons, low wages, and hard labour. In this, plenty and satiety, pleasure and ease, liberty and power, and who would not balance non-chalant? The hazard of that is run for it, at worst is only a sour look or two at chokings? No, a merry life and a short one shall be my motto.

– A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the most notorious Pyrates(1724), p.213-214

Life as a pirate

Commander or commoner?

In the merchant navy, Roberts' wage was less than £4 per month and he had no chance of promotion to captaincy. Roberts' first act as captain was to lead the crew back to Principe to avenge the death of Captain Davis. Roberts and his crew landed on the island in the darkness of night, killed a large portion of the male population, and stole all items of value that they could carry away. Soon afterwards, he captured a Dutch Guineaman.

He accepted of the Honour, saying, that since he had dipp'd his Hands in Muddy Water, and must be a Pyrate, it was better being a Commander than a common Man.

– A General History of the ... Pyrates(1724), p.162

Brazil and the Caribbean July 1719 - May 1720

Roberts and his crew crossed the Atlantic and watered and boot-topped their ship on the uninhabited island of Fernando. They spent about nine weeks off the Brazilian coast but saw no ships. They were about to leave for the West Indies when they encountered a fleet of 42 Portuguese ships in the Todos os Santos Bay waiting for two men-of-war of 70 guns each to escort them to Lisbon. Roberts took one of the vessels and ordered her master to point out the richest ship in the fleet. He pointed out Sagrado Familia, a ship of 40 guns and a crew of 170, which Roberts and his men boarded and captured. Sagrado Familia contained 40,000 gold moidores and jewellery designed for the King of Portugal, including a cross set with diamonds, and what remained of the loot.

The sloop became wind-bound for eight hours. Roberts and his crew remained on board and attended to their duties in the pirate code. When the wind blew, they broke off the engagement after sustaining considerable damage. After they sighted a brigantine, Roberts took 40 men to pursue it in the sloop, leaving Walter Kennedy in command of Rover. The sloop became wind-bound for eight days, and when Roberts and his crew finally returned to their ship, they discovered that Kennedy had sailed off with Rover and what remained of the loot. Roberts and his crew renamed their sloop Fortune and agreed on new articles, where now known as a pirate code, which they swore on a Bible to uphold.

In late February 1720, they were joined by French pirate Montigny la Palisse in another sloop, Sea King. The inhabitants of Barbados equipped two well-armed ships, Summerset and Philipa, to try to put an end to the pirate menace. On 26 February, they encountered the two pirate sloops. Sea King quickly fled, and Fortune broke off the engagement after sustaining considerable damage and was able to escape. Roberts headed for Dominica to repair the sloop, with twenty of his crew dying of wounds on the voyage. There were also two sloops out searching for the pirates, and Roberts swore vengeance against the inhabitants of Barbados and Martinique. He had a new flag made with a drawing of himself standing upon Z skulls, one labelled ABH (A Barbadian's Head) and the other AMH (A Martiniquian's Head).
**Death in battle**

Roberts himself made a gallant figure, at the time of the engagement, being dressed in a rich crimson damask waistcoat and breeches, a red feather in his hat, a gold chain round his neck, with a diamond cross hanging to it, a sword in his hand, and two pairs of pistols slung over his shoulders...

—from A General History of the ... Pyrates (1724), p. 212

**Pirate Code**

As recorded by Captain Charles Johnson regarding the articles of Bartholomew Roberts.

I. Every man has a vote in affairs of moment; has equal title to the fresh provisions, or strong liquors, at any time seized, and may use them at pleasure, unless a scarcity makes it necessary, for the good of all, to vote a retrenchment.

II. Every man to be called fairly in turn, by list, on board of prizes because, (over and above their proper share,) they were on these occasions allowed a shift of clothes: but if they defrauded the company to the value of a dollar in plate, jewels, or money, marooning was their punishment. If the robbery was only betwixt one another, they contented themselves with slitting the ears and nose of him that was guilty, and set him on shore, allowed a shift of clothes: but if they defrauded the company to the value of a dollar in plate, jewels, or money, marooning was their punishment. If the robbery was only betwixt one another, they contented themselves with slitting the ears and nose of him that was guilty, and set him on shore.

III. No person to game at cards or dice for money.

IV. The lights and candles to be put out at eight o'clock at night: if any of the crew, after that hour still remained inclined for drinking, they were to overboard after wrapping it in his ship's sail. It was never found.

Roberts's death shocked the pirate world, as well as the Royal Navy. The local merchants and civilians had thought him invincible, and some considered him a hero.
Aftermath

The battle continued for another two hours until Royal Fortune's mainmast fell and the pirates signaled for quarter. One member of the crew, John Philips, tried to reach the magazine with a gun to prevent it from firing, but: 

"there is none of you but will hang me, I know, whenever you can clinch me within your power."

After his exploits in Newfoundland, a state Governor from New England commented that "one cannot with-hold admiration for his bravery and courage". He hated cowardice, and when the crews of 22 ships in Trepassey harbour fled without firing a shot he was angry at their failure to defend their ships. Roberts experienced problems with mutinous Irishmen early in his pirate career and was known to generally avoid recruiting Irishmen, to the extent that captured merchant sailors would sometimes affect an Irish accent to discourage Roberts from forcing them into his pirate crew.

Captain Chaloner Ode was rewarded with a knighthood, the only British naval officer to be honoured specifically for his actions against pirates. He also profited financially, taking gold dust from Roberts' cabin, and he eventually became an admiral.

This battle proved a turning point in the war against the pirates, and many consider the death of Roberts to mark the end of the Golden Age of Piracy.

The defeat of Roberts and the subsequent eradication of piracy off the coast of Africa represented a turning point in the slave trade and even in the larger history of capitalism.


Personal characteristics

Most of the information on Roberts comes from the book A General History of the Pirates, published a few years after Roberts' death. The original 1724 title page credits one Captain Charles Johnson as the author. (The book is often printed under the byline of Daniel Defoe on the assumption that "Charles Johnson" is a pseudonym, but there is no proof that Defoe is the author, and the matter remains in dispute.) Johnson devotes more space to Roberts than to any of the other pirates in his book, describing him as:

... a tall black [i.e. dark complexioned] Man, near forty Years of Age ... of good natural Parts, and personal Bravery, tho' he apply'd them to such wicked Purposes, as made them of no Commendation, frequently drinking 'Damn to him who ever lived to wear a Halter'.

-- A General History of the ... Pyrates(1724), p.213

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Roberts was the archetypal pirate captain in his love of fine clothing and jewelry, but he had some traits unusual in a pirate, notably a preference for drinking tea rather than rum. He is often described as a teetotaler and a Sabbatarian, but there is no proof of this. He certainly disliked drunkenness while at sea, yet it appears that he drank beer. Ironically, Roberts' final defeat was facilitated by the drunkenness of his crew. The Sabbatarian claim arises from the fact that musicians were not obliged to play on the Sabbath - this may merely have been intended to ensure the musicians a day's rest, as they were otherwise obliged to play whenever the crew demanded.

Black Bart was not as cruel to prisoners as some pirates such as Edward Low, but did not treat them as well as did Samuel Bellamy, Howell Davis, or Edward England. Roberts sometimes gave gifts to cooperative captains and crews of captured ships, such as pieces of jewelry or items of captured cargo. He would sometimes ill-use prisoners if he felt that the crew demanded it, but:

When he found that rigour was not expected from his people (for he often practised it to appease them), then he would give strangers to understand that it was pure inclination that induced him to a good treatment of them, and not any love or partiality to their persons; "For", says he, "there is none of you but will hang me, I know, whenever you can clench me within your power."

-- A General History of the ... Pyrates(1724), p.183

In 1997, a book was published that theorized Bartholomew Roberts was a woman transvestite. It was argued that Roberts' corpse was thrown overboard to conceal this fact.

Popular culture

Bartholomew Roberts is one of four pirate captains mentioned in Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island. In it, Long John Silver says that the surgeon who amputated his leg was one of Roberts' men:

"It was a master surgeon, him that amputated me - out of college and all - Latin by the bucket, and what not; but he was hanged like a dog, and sundried like the rest, at Corso Castle. That was Roberts' men, that was, and comed of changing names of their ships - Royal Fortune and so on."

-- Robert Louis Stevenson, Treasure Island


In an episode of the animated television series South Park, the Casa Bonita restaurant in Lakewood, Colorado, features an attraction called "Black Bart's Cave", named for Roberts.

Popular culture


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Roberts may be the inspiration for the "Lord Bartholomew" in the Pirates of the Caribbean film series.

Roberts appears as a non-player character in the Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End video game, voiced by Fred Tatasciore.

A fictionalised version of Roberts appears as the primary antagonist of the 2013 video game Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag, voiced by Oliver Milburn. In the game, Roberts is reimagined as a "sage", a human reincarnation of the Precursor scientist, Alta.

Notes
"Boot-topping" was similar to careening, except that only the upper part of the hull was cleaned.

References

- Richards, Stanley (1966) *Black Bart. Christopher Davies.*

External links

- [PiratesInfo.com biography](#)
- [Biography of Roberts at the Wayback Machine](#) (archived October 28, 2009)
- [Biography of Bartholomew Roberts](#)
- [BBC Article (Welsh)](#)
- [Famous Welsh Article](#)

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Bartholomew Roberts was described as a tall, attractive man, who loved the expensive clothes and jewelry. He was often seen dressed in a gorgeous crimson waistcoat with an expensive hat which had a unique red feather. Even in battles he was well-dressed. On his chests, there was a heavy gold chain with a diamond cross hanging to it. He was born in South Wales, and his real name was John Roberts. Since his youth, he had been on many ships, preparing for a marine life.