

Joseph Pitts of Exon: the first Englishman in Mecca

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Joseph Pitts was born in Exeter around 1663, shortly after the restoration of Charles II. At the age of 15, Joseph was taken with a desire to travel - "my genius led me to be a sailor" as he puts it - and enrolled as one of a crew of six on the fishing boat *Speedwell* under the captain, George Taylor. They sailed on Easter Tuesday 1678, bound for the Grand Banks of Newfoundland, where they intended to catch fish for sale in Spain.

In the Bay of Biscay, however, the boat was captured by Barbary pirates. The pirates sank the boat, as they subsequently did many others. They weren't interested in the boat or its cargo, but only the people on it.

What were Barbary pirates?

Also known as Corsairs, they were privateers from ports in North Africa, who sailed the Mediterranean in search of people they could capture and sell as slaves. It is estimated that they captured around a million people from the 16th to the 19th century.

Until the 17th century they used galleys, powered by oars, and so were restricted to the Mediterranean. Around 1610 however, they developed the broad sails that enabled them to go into the Atlantic, due to the help of English sea captains who had left the country after Queen Elizabeth's death. Kent-born Captain Jack Ward, for example, was active in Tunis at the time under the name Yusuf Reis.

So the Corsairs went further afield – all the way to South America and Iceland. They also raided the land, and in 1631 they took most of the inhabitants of Baltimore in Ireland. Many other Devonians were captured.¹

Their practice was to take the captives back to their home ports and sell them in the slave markets. At that point, they would look carefully at the captives' hands. If they were rough (as Pitts' must have been), they were sold as manual labourers, many to work as galley slaves, chained to the oar. If the hands were smooth however, the captive would be ransomed. There were even Christian religious orders that specialised in ransoming captives from North Africa, as well as a tax levied in England.

At this time, the English navy was engaged in a number of campaigns against the Barbary ports. As a result, treaties were signed with Tunis, Tripoli and Salé and in 1682, with Algiers. The port of Tangier was even part of the English crown for a while, coming as part of the marriage settlement of Charles II and Catherine of Braganza.

¹ For example, see Chapter 3 in Todd Gray's *Devon and the Slave Trade*

Pitts' life in North Africa

Pitts was taken to Algiers and sold as a slave, first to a man called Mustafa, and then Dilber Ibrahim, who forced him to convert to Islam. After Dilber Ibrahim died in a revolt, his widow sold Pitts to Omer "an old bachelor of kindly disposition" according to Cecily Radford. Omer treated him well, and took him with him on the Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina in 1685 or 1686. Pitts was therefore the first Englishman to visit the Muslim Holy Places, the next being Sir Richard Burton in 1853.

They travelled the 3,000 mile journey by sea to Alexandria, then by land to Cairo and Suez, across the Red Sea to Jeddah. Pitts spent around four months there, and was granted his freedom by Omer. They then travelled back across land to Alexandria.

Astoundingly, while walking in the port at Alexandria, Pitts met a fellow Exonian, John Cleak of Lympstone, on board a Topsham boat. They talked, and Pitts gave Cleak a letter and some presents for his parents - a green silk purse and a Turkish pipe.

On his return to Algiers, Pitts became a soldier in the Algerian army, with hopes that he might escape. He was a 'bombaci' at the siege of Ceuta, the Spanish enclave in Northern Morocco.

In 1693 he met the English consul, who gave him a letter for the consul at Smyrna (now Izmir). Pitts travelled to Smyrna, and from there he made his escape, in disguise, in a French ship bound for Livorno (Leghorn) in Italy. On arrival he kissed the earth, but was put into quarantine, where he was entertained by a group of Jews. He met up with some freed Dutch slaves, and agreed to walk home with them - a distance of around 800 miles. They were obviously worried about the prospect of being re-captured en route through the Western Mediterranean.

Pitts became separated from the others, was robbed & beaten up in Germany, and ended up outside the city walls at Frankfurt. With snow on the ground, no passport, and little money, Pitts thought his luck was out, but some kindly guards took pity on him, shared their food and their fire, and were happy when Pitts paid for some wine. The next day, the corporal of the guard took him into the city and introduced him to a French merchant who got him a passport and an introduction to another merchant in Mainz. Thus he continued down the river Rhine to Rotterdam.

Crossing the North Sea, he arrived at Harwich, only to be press-ganged into the Navy. He secured his release with the help of a merchant trading with Turkey. Finally arriving in Exeter, he was too nervous to go straight to his father's house, so used an old friend Benjamin Chapel to break the news. The year was 1695, and Joseph was now 32 or 33, having been away for 17 years.

We know little about Pitts' story after this. He published the first edition of his book in 1704, and was married to Hannah, according to his will. They had a daughter, Elizabeth, who married a man called Skutt or Scutt, in St. Leonard's Church in 1734. It is assumed that he was a member of St James Presbyterian Meeting at Friernhay. He died around 1739.

Pitts' Book

Pitts book was first published in 1704, nine years after his return, with the title *A true and faithful account of the religion and manners of the Mahometans*. The publisher was Philip Bishop, who was probably at the shop to the right of the Guildhall, currently occupied by a Bubble Tea company².

The second and third editions were pirated, and Pitts published a third, revised and enlarged edition in London in 1731, with a fourth in 1738.

The book gives a full account of Islamic rituals and practices, including wudu (ritual ablution) and prayer, and a detailed description of the stages of the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. It also covers customs like marriage, burial, clothes, housing, wrestling (which Pitts compares with Devon wrestling), and what may be the first mention in English of couscous.

It is generally taken to be an accurate and honest account of Islam: previously there was little knowledge of the religion in Europe, and authors "all recycled the same myths", as Paul Auchterlonie says. He goes on to say "Pitts' essentially honest nature has also led him to create perhaps the most dynamic account in early modern Europe of what it meant to have been both a Christian and a Muslim".

We can wonder about how far Pitts integrated into Muslim culture and society in his 17 years in North Africa. He learnt Turkish and Arabic, and was able to read and write in Arabic script, a rare feat in those days. His observations on culture and manners are accurate; he kept his eyes and ears wide open, as one might expect from a young man. But he was there under duress, even after being given his freedom, and he always wanted to return to Exeter. His conversion to Islam was a forced one: he writes "I never converted in my heart" and was happy to be in contact with his father during his time abroad.

This extraordinary life of an extraordinary adventurer and writer is little known in Exeter. I hope this brief account will aid the spread of knowledge.

Ghee Bowman, September 2013

² See <http://bookhistory.blogspot.co.uk/2006/12/devon-exeter-b.html>

Sources & Further Reading

Encountering Islam. Joseph Pitts: An English Slave in 17th-Century Algiers and Mecca. A critical edition, with biographical introduction and notes of Joseph Pitts of Exeter's 'A Faithful Account of the Religion and Manners of the Mahometans' 1731
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<http://www.exeter.ac.uk/news/events/details/index.php?event=398>

Devonshire Association 1920 – biography by Cicely Radford and bibliography

<http://archive.org/stream/ReportTransactionsOfTheDevonshireAssociationVol521920/TDA1920vol52#page/n247/mode/2up>

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