

## Pirates of the Mediterranean – Wallasey’s Forgotten Privateer Hero

By Gavin Chappell

### Part One: This Brave Corsair

The recent blockbuster *Pirates of the Caribbean* made pirates high fashion this summer. Perhaps now is a good time to remember Wirral’s own piratical past. Everyone has heard of Mother Redcap and the wreckers, but few now remember Fortunatus Wright – the Wallasey privateer.

Privateering was a form of piracy carried out against enemy shipping during wartime, by private individuals on commission from the government. Originating in Elizabethan times, it was piracy in all but the eye of the law. During Britain’s wars against France in the eighteenth century, many privateers plied their trade in the Mediterranean, attacking French shipping and plundering her merchant vessels. Fortunatus Wright, a native of Wallasey, was the most famous.

Fortunatus Wright’s early days are unrecorded. He may have followed the sea as a boy, but by his twenties he had settled down as a brewer and distiller. He married Martha Painter of Wallasey in 1732, and they had a number of children, including a daughter, Philippa. Martha died shortly after, and in 1736 Wright married Mary Bulkeley, daughter of the Anglesey squire and diarist William Bulkeley.

Mary had been staying with relatives in Dublin since 1735. A disappointment to her father, his disappointment greatly increased when his daughter wrote to him “requesting ... speedy consent of her being married to [Fortunatus] Wright forthwith whereby she may prevent all further trouble...” She was carrying his illegitimate child.

Wright married Mary in Dublin, and they came to visit Bulkeley. He notes in his diary that Wright “shows a fondness to his wife... always playing with her, and kissing of her...” Shortly afterwards, Fortunatus Wright took his new wife back to Wallasey to meet his family. Sadly, Mary miscarried shortly after.

Although Mary gave birth to a daughter, Ann, the next year, the marriage rapidly became an unhappy one, and Bulkeley refers in his diary in 1741 to “the barbarous usage and insults received by my Daughter from her husband ... who thereupon went a rambling towards Dublin.” On returning next February, Fortunatus Wright set out with his wife for Wallasey, but it seems they quarrelled again, and he abandoned her in Beaumaris. Like any Byronic hero-villain, he headed for the Continent.

In Tuscany, he was challenged at the gates of Lucca, but refused to hand over two pistols to the guards. He aimed one at the soldiers, threatening to kill them. A colonel took Wright prisoner and kept him under guard in his inn. Three days later, he was escorted from the city-state and forbidden to return.

He settled down as a merchant in nearby Leghorn for four years, during which time he knew John Evelyn, great grandson of the famous diarist. Meanwhile, Prussia invaded Silesia, intent on wresting it from Maria Theresa of Austria, whose claim to the throne was in some doubt. Thus began the War of the Austrian Succession. Britain and France soon entered the war on opposing sides.

In January 1744 Fortunatus Wright became personally involved when a French privateer took his ship, the *Swallow*, and ransomed her at sea. This stirred Wright to fulfil his patriotic duty – or perhaps his motive was simply revenge. He fitted out the brigantine *Fame* “to cruise against the enemies of Great Britain.”

In December 1746 *The Gentlemen's Magazine* reported that Wright had captured sixteen French ships in the Levant, worth £400, 000. On 19<sup>th</sup> December *Fame* seized a

French ship with baggage aboard belonging to the Prince of Campo Florida. The Prince was angry, as was Goldsworthy, English Consul at Leghorn, who urged Wright to set the prize free. Wright refused, but agreed to refer the matter to the naval commander-in-chief, who decided against him. The prize was released.

In 1747 the Sultan complained that Wright had seized Turkish property aboard French ships. Goldsworthy demanded an explanation. Wright replied that the ships in question had French passes and hoisted French colours while fighting him. The British Government ruled that Turkish property aboard French vessels was not prize. Wright refused to allow this order to be retrospective, and declined to give up the money. Orders came from England to arrest him and send him home.

The Turks imprisoned Wright in Leghorn Fortress but for six months refused to hand him over to Goldsworthy. In June, Goldsworthy was ordered to free Wright because the privateer was prepared to stand trial. But by this time the war was as good as over.

In August, Mary set sail from Liverpool to join her husband at Leghorn, but it does not seem that she received a happy welcome. Wright had settled down in Leghorn as a merchant, although the law case dragged on, and he profited less from peace than he had from war. He vented his frustration on his wife, and her father received a letter in 1751 complaining of his “cruel conduct.”

Back in England, in 1755, Philippa, Wright’s daughter by his first marriage, married Charles Evelyn, son of John. Meanwhile, however, the clouds of war were gathering across Europe once again...

Part Two: A Constant Terror

The Seven Years War broke out in 1756. Best known for the exploits of Clive of India and General Wolfe, this was in many ways a continuation of the War of the Austrian Succession. Wright built a vessel, the *St George*, to bring the war to the French. A French privateer had been cruising off the harbour for a month: Louis XV had promised a generous reward to whoever took Wright, dead or alive.

Wright applied for a permit for four small guns and twenty five men. Obtaining it, he sailed out of Leghorn with four merchant vessels. Outside Tuscan waters, he bought more guns from the merchants and got fifty-five of their men to come aboard his ship. Next morning, the French privateer bore down on them.

In the battle, Wright lost his lieutenant and four men, but a lucky shot carried away the prow of the French privateer on which thirty men were trying to board the *St George*. But two other enemy privateers appeared and stopped Wright from pursuing their colleague. Wright brought the merchants back to safety.

The English merchants in Leghorn rewarded Wright, but the Tuscans detained him for breaking the agreement. The governor ordered him to come within the harbour or be brought in under force. Wright refused. Two ships anchored alongside the *St George* and took charge.

The English captains were angry, but Wright chose to place himself in the hands of Sir Horace Mann, British Resident at Florence (capital of Tuscany). Leghorn's governor charged Wright with deceiving the authorities and disobeying orders to come within the harbour. Mann pointed out that the battle took place twelve miles off; besides, the Frenchman was the aggressor. As to their orders, they had no business to give them.

Admiral Hawke, naval Commander-in-Chief, sent Sir William Burnaby to demand Wright be given up. Wright was released and carried off in triumph. Next, he put into the port of Malta. The Maltese proved as partial to the French as the Tuscans, and Wright was not allowed to buy slops and bedding for his men. He was ordered to send ashore the English mariners he had received on board the *St George*.

Wright refused. A galley came alongside, the captain being under orders to sink Wright if he lifted anchor, and to board and kill everyone if he resisted. They dragged the mariners Wright was protecting from the privateer.

The *St George* left Malta without stores. A day later it was pursued by a large French privateer that had been in the harbour. Wright played with the larger ship, sailing round her – the *St George* was twice her speed.

In the next two months Wright harried French shipping, winning many prizes. Louis XV fitted out two ships, while the Marseilles Chamber of Commerce prepared another ship, to seek and destroy Wright. The *Hirondelle* of Toulon also set out after him and they fought in the Channel of Malta. Wright defeated the French ship and both put into Malta to refit. His own vessel had taken several shots under the waterline, but the Maltese refused to allow Wright to heave down.

Mann had been working hard to convince the Tuscans that their restrictions on British shipping were ruining trade. He obtained permission for Wright to send his prizes to Leghorn, and wrote to him to inform him that he could return safely. It is not known if Wright ever received this letter.

On April 1<sup>st</sup> Burnaby released Wright from Malta. They sailed for Leghorn, where a French man-o-war and frigate were attacking English shipping. But on April 16<sup>th</sup> the ship met with a great storm. Wright and sixty men all went to the bottom.

Later in the same month, a letter from Leghorn to a Liverpool merchant claimed that Wright was well and had taken another prize since leaving Malta. He had also been seen in Messina with a prize. Despite this “the fate of the hero remains a mystery to this day...”

Mary was cheated of Wright’s fortune by Philippa Wright’s husband, Charles Evelyn. Destitute, her children made their way back to their grandfather’s house in Wales, followed by Mary. After this, William Bulkeley wrote of nothing in his diary except the weather until his death.

In his *History of England*, Tobias Smollet called Fortunatus Wright “this brave Corsair”, while Gomer Williams referred to him as the “ideal and ever-victorious captain around whose name and fate clings the halo of mystery and romance.” In his day he was famed as the privateer who defied the French and won rich prizes. His philandering and his troubled second marriage were revealed when Bulkeley’s diary was discovered in the early twentieth century. Wright is even remembered in *Finnegans Wake*. But in Wallasey, the town of his birth, Fortunatus Wright is entirely forgotten.

*First published in Wirral Champion, 2006*