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Shifting Sands

Jenny Uglow

Who was responsible for the wrecking of the Royal Navy warship *Gloucester* in 1682, and why did it provoke so much political controversy?

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Royal Museums Greenwich

Johan Danckerts: The Wreck of the Gloucester off Yarmouth, 6 May 1682, circa 1682

Reviewed:

Samuel Pepys and the Strange Wrecking of the Gloucester: The Shipwreck That Shocked Restoration Britain

by Nigel Pickford
Pegasus, 293 pp., $27.95

Early on the morning of May 6, 1682, the Royal Navy warship *Gloucester* careered into a large sandbank off the port of Yarmouth. It bounced along the ridge, the rudder sheared off, a neighboring plank broke, and water poured into the hold. As men rushed on deck the ship was suddenly swept into deep water and sank. Of the 330 or so on board, roughly 150 drowned. For weeks bloated corpses drifted ashore with the tide.

The *Gloucester* was carrying James, Duke of York, the younger brother of King Charles II, to collect his pregnant wife, Mary of Modena, from Edinburgh, and Samuel Pepys watched it sink from aboard the yacht *Katherine*, in the small flotilla accompanying the royal party. The loss of life was mourned as a national tragedy, but it was also the focus of intense political controversy, which centered on animosity toward the Catholic Duke of York: one theory, easily discounted, was that the ship had been sunk deliberately in order to drown him. In *Samuel Pepys and the Strange Wrecking of the "Gloucester,"* his engrossing forensic account of the wreck, Nigel Pickford explores two main questions. The first is, What exactly happened, and why? The second is, Why did the society-loving Pepys choose to sail on the smaller, half-empty *Katherine* rather than the duke's flagship, despite—as he insistently repeated—having been invited by James himself and having friends among its passengers?

This is not the bouncy, sexy, life-loving Pepys of the 1660s, although Pickford makes deft use of his Restoration diaries in outlining the careers of men involved in the wreck and in depicting the places important to the story, from Portsmouth to Greenwich, Holyrood Palace to the narrow streets and docks of Wapping and Deptford. The Pepys we meet here is an anxious, ousted bureaucrat of forty-nine desperate to regain something of his old status. By 1682 Pepys had known the duke for over twenty years, ever since James assumed his position as Lord High Admiral at the Restoration in 1660 and Pepys was appointed clerk of the acts to the Navy Board. He proved a superb administrator, mastering every aspect of naval life and becoming a fellow of the Royal Society, secretary to the Admiralty, and master of Trinity House, the body "responsible for all the lights, buoys, beacons, lighthouses and landmarks of the nation's waterways and coasts."

In the late 1670s, however, the duke fell from grace, and Pepys fell with him. Since Charles II had no legitimate children, James was his heir. But in 1673, when the new Test Act required all public officers to swear loyalty to the Church of England, James had openly declared himself Catholic and resigned as Lord High Admiral. Later that year, inflaming things further, he married the fourteen-year-old Mary (touchingly portrayed by Pickford as both stoical and devoted), fresh from her Italian convent.

To most of the British public, particularly the "Fanatick Party"—Puritans who clung to the republican ideals of the Commonwealth—the notion of a Catholic monarch was anathema. Anti-Catholic feeling soared, and in 1679, after a time when, as Pickford breezily puts it, "hysteria…was whipped up daily by the likes of Titus Oates" (an English priest), the Earl of Shaftesbury introduced an Exclusion Bill to bar James from the succession. In response, Charles dissolved Parliament and sent James to virtual exile in Brussels and then Edinburgh.

Pepys also came under attack in 1679, when he and his friend Sir Anthony Deane, a shipbuilder and the mayor of Harwich, were accused of "piracy, popery and treachery" and briefly imprisoned in the Tower. Though the trumped-up charges, thought to be fomented by Shaftesbury, were quickly disproved, Pepys resigned as secretary to the Admiralty and lost his beloved house in Seething Lane, which went with the position and which he "had lavished much time and money on, continually changing the décor, the furnishings and the layout to keep up with the latest fashions." In May 1682, when his chief accuser, the American colonel John Scott, "a fraudster and a fantasist," allegedly a double agent for Holland and England, was accused of murdering a coachman and fled across the Channel, Pepys's glee was intense.

Charles repeatedly dissolved Parliament when it seemed likely to pass the Exclusion Bill, and after 1681 he ruled without it. Pickford comments that in Edinburgh, as Lord High Commissioner of Scotland, James's

tenure of power was relatively successful, but it still did not endear him to the draughty hallways of Holyrood Castle. He was itching for London and the opportunities it would provide him.

The chance came in March 1682 when Charles invited him south. The brothers would meet at the races at Newmarket, then stay briefly in the capital before James sailed north again. In London James ostentatiously went to see Thomas Otway's play *Venice Preserved, or, A Plot Discover'd*, with its ill-disguised attack on Shaftesbury, whose effigy had been hung in the streets.

Scenting a restoration of his fortunes, Pepys hurried to Newmarket, a town packed with "so many of London's glitterati" eager to welcome the duke "that the cost of a room in a cheap hostelry had gone through the roof." Pickford sets Newmarket, where Charles could appear as a man of the people mingling with crowds and going to cockfights and plays, against the pomp orchestrated elsewhere. Ceremony accompanied every stage of James's travels: his departure from Holyrood accompanied by "trumpets, bagpipes and drums," the grand dinner on his landing at Yarmouth, celebratory bonfires in London, and his journey back down the Thames, during which he was followed by hundreds of small river boats: "wherries, skiffs, shallops, gigs, smacks, hoys and pinks."

The pomp extended to the vessels themselves, from the yacht *Henrietta*, with sea creatures and "scantily draped nymphs" carved on the stern and damask-covered couches within, to the *Gloucester*, hurriedly refurbished in Portsmouth. Pickford, whose previous books include *The Atlas of Shipwrecks and Treasure* (1994), is a consultant for salvage companies, and when he turns to maritime affairs his text hums with absorbing detail, from the miles of cordage and yards of canvas needed for a ship, to the "graving and paying" of the hull to rid it of barnacles and weeds, to the exact mix of rosin, oil, and sulphur for the protective "white stuff" that covered exposed timbers.

The *Gloucester* was nearly thirty years old, not a first- or second-class warship but a "third rate," one of "the workhorses of the fleet, the handiest for speed and versatility." Navy Board papers reveal a panic-stricken flurry of activity to bring it up to the standard required to carry the duke. The beer (safer to drink than water) was not brewed; there were no half-hour glasses for measuring time; there was no barge, and although one could be borrowed from another ship, it had no oars, and the oar-maker, who had not been paid, demanded cash, which was also lacking. The ship had to be painted but the weather was too wet; canvas was lacking to protect the windows in storms, and no one could find the vital royal standards or crimson cloths. Somehow they managed it. When the *Gloucester* sailed it looked suitably magnificent, with a new tier of windows, a gilt coat of arms, and elaborate quarter galleries "resembling miniature overhanging glass and wood palaces."

Pickford is equally precise about the crew. The captain, Sir John Berry, was a "tarpaulin" who had risen through the ranks, not one of the aristocratic "gentleman captains" often imposed without any knowledge of the sea at all. (This class-based priority was a particular irritation to Pepys, who had long argued for training and reform.) By contrast, Berry's second lieutenant, James Hyde, came from those "gentleman" ranks, being the younger brother of James's first wife, Anne (the daughter of the former Lord Chancellor, the Earl of Clarendon). This was a potentially awkward clash, but Hyde—who drowned in the wreck—admired the popular captain.

Sailors had been short of work since the last Dutch War of the mid-1670s, and once news of Berry's appointment spread, they trooped down to sign on, clad in the standard blue shirts, canvas jackets, and red caps. Pickford tabulates the gradations of pay (though it was seldom disbursed on time), from the "ordinary seamen" at 19s a month to the surgeon at £2.10s and the purser, boatswain, carpenter, and gunner at a solid £3. The muster books include men from across Britain but particularly from the East London areas near the docks, including Berry's home parish of Deptford. Many sailors had wills drawn up before they sailed.

A huge social gulf separated the seamen from the duke's passengers. These included his protégé John Churchill, the future Duke of Marlborough, who would later desert James to support the invading army of William of Orange, and a bevy of Scottish nobles en route to new appointments in Edinburgh, among them the designated Lord Chancellor, Sir George Gordon; the Earl of Perth and future Lord Justice General, James Drummond; and the Lord Provost, Sir James Dick. With them sailed the Earls of Roxburghe, Middleton, and Winton and the Marquis of Montrose. All were rescued apart from Roxburghe, whose furious widow, Lady Margaret Hay (her "fat-faced and dumpy" portrait, Pickford writes rather unkindly, "suggests a truculent, strong-minded, down-to-earth, blunt-mouthed woman"), sent her servant on a desperate search for her husband's body and had no hesitation in laying blame for the disaster on James.

Other passengers were more congenial to Pepys than this aristocratic bunch. He had known Sir Charles Scarborough, James's personal physician, since they drank together

on the ship bringing Charles from Holland at the Restoration, and Pepys had watched him dissect a body in the Barber-Surgeons' Hall. Scarborough was pulled out of the water onto the *Katherine* "almost dead," wrote Pepys, and they were companions for the rest of the voyage. Another friend was Thomas Greeting, who had led the musicians at a party in Seething Lane where "they danced by candlelight in Pepys's office" until two in the morning, and who had taught Pepys's wife to play the flageolet. Later he became sackbut player and violinist to the Chapel Royal. He and his son Edward were among eleven musicians on board: Pickford identifies them all and even tracks one of their silver trumpets, which turned up at auction in 1967, possibly having floated ashore in a wooden box. Greeting drowned, but Edward survived. So did a "poor fiddler" taken onto the duke's own boat: the crew, according to one account, "were going to knock him on the head, but the Duke cried out, take him in, he's a fiddler.'"

As they sailed north through foul, murky weather, four of the six accompanying warships lost contact with the fleet at different times, and one, the *Ruby*, narrowly escaped grounding on the Galloper Sand, one of many hazardous sandbanks off East Anglia. After they sighted the Lowestoft lighthouse the captains knew they had a choice of three routes: the first was coastal, inside the Yarmouth Sands; the second took a middle way; and the third was a deep-sea route, sailing east and avoiding all the hazards including the great Leman and Ower Sands. After a heated meeting, with acrimonious disagreements between the *Gloucester*'s pilot, Captain James Ayres, and the master of James's yacht *Mary*, the touchy, pugnacious Captain Gunman, an expert on the North Sea waters, the duke finally ruled for the deep-sea route. But the *Gloucester* tacked too soon. Instead of being far out to sea, it was heading straight for the Leman and Ower Sands.

At 5 AM, the linesman on the *Mary* was alarmed to find a depth of a mere seven fathoms. Horrified, Gunman ordered the helmsman to steer west, immediately finding a good depth. But while he waved the Union Jack seven times to notify the *Gloucester* of the depth, no warning gun was fired—a bone of contention later. By then the *Gloucester* was already shuddering along the sandbank, unable to anchor. In forty-five minutes the ship sank completely. The duke, unwilling to leave, was finally persuaded to escape by climbing through his cabin window into a small boat with "persons of quality," including John Churchill. A second boat carried more notables, but others overturned. The waves were full of men clutching the sides of the overloaded boats, only to be beaten off for fear of capsizing. The struggle was vicious.

After all hope was lost, James continued his voyage on the *Mary*, and Pepys sailed on the *Katherine*. In Edinburgh the duke worked on his administrative duties, although according to Mary of Modena he was "almost beside himself with grief, at the calamity which had been attended with the loss of so many lives." Pepys, meanwhile, "in the manner of the trained bureaucrat and compulsive administrator," and "always keen to impress," briskly lobbied for an inquiry, hoping to alert Lord Brouncker, the president of the Royal Society, to his idea.

People wanted someone to blame. On June 6 James Ayres faced a court-martial in the gloriously paneled main cabin of the *Charlotte* at Greenwich. Oddly, while the records of a previous court-martial that day, after the burning of another ship, the *Henry*, are preserved in full, all traces of Ayres's trial are missing, a source of understandable frustration. He was, however, found guilty and sentenced to the Marshalsea prison "in perpetuity." Pepys, who felt strongly about pilots unlicensed by Trinity House, was outraged at such leniency and thought he should have been hanged.

In Pickford's narrative, Pepys appears increasingly intemperate and even vindictive. When Gunman was tried for failing to fire a warning gun, the captain, "incandescent with rage," wrote his own passionate defense and after a short spell in the Marshalsea was reinstated as captain of the *Mary*. Pepys disapproved of his exoneration, and when Gunman died in 1685 he promptly evicted his widow and children from their naval lodgings.

His disapproval also extended to the state of naval cartography. In Edinburgh, the baffled Ayres had suggested that great storms had "moved the Sands far distant from the place they were before." This was clearly crazy, yet Pickford offers an intriguing explanation: on the latest charts available, the Leman and Ower Sands were marked much nearer the coast in the completely wrong position. If Ayres had plotted a course based on these charts, then the *Gloucester* should have been well out to sea. Pepys, who had long argued against faulty charts "by which our ships have been always to this day exposed to ruin," might have acknowledged this. It was largely due to his urging that the Admiralty appointed Captain Grenville Collins to produce new charts, yet when these were published in 1693, after six years of painstaking surveying and five years of engraving, Pepys was sneeringly disparaging. This was probably because of a long-running dispute, since he felt the project should have been controlled by Trinity House. Pickford writes, "One suspects, as so often with Pepys, that an element of turf war was clouding his judgement."

Pepys had worked tirelessly to improve all aspects of the Royal Navy. He knew its weaknesses all too well. Indeed, the answer to why he shunned the *Gloucester* may lie in his familiarity with the ship's woeful history:

It seems that James was dispatched to Scotland on a ship that had been laid up for more than eight years, that was notorious for leakiness in the bows, that had been subject to a disastrous experiment with a new kind of lead sheathing, and on which the carpenter, most recently responsible for its structural care before departure, was a negligent drunk.

The lead sheathing corroded the iron fastenings that held the rudder—the fatal start of the tragedy. It was not a "strange wrecking" at all.

Pickford's patient untangling of different contemporary accounts, notes, and minutes, as well as Pepys's own frustrations, reveals a catalog of naval weaknesses, not only in navigation and training of pilots but in command structure, organization of dockyards and contracts, overall financing, and seamen's pay. Because sailors were paid by "ticket" rather than in cash, the promised wages often did not arrive (in 1682 sailors on the *Mary* were five years in arrears), so the tickets were sold at a discount to moneylenders on the quay. It was James's care for these seamen and their families that restored his reputation. He ordered special "bounty payments" (normally only given for those lost in battle) of eleven months' wages to be given to the relatives of those who drowned and an unusual extra month's pay to those who survived.

This generosity boosted James's popularity at a time of intense arguments over his behavior during the wreck. Royal propagandists presented his escape from drowning as proof that he was under divine protection. A painting by the father-and-son duo the Van de Veldes, widely engraved, showed him being carried off as a shaft of heaven-sent sunshine pierced the stormy skies; a medal was struck to celebrate his fearlessness; and Sir John Berry described how the "poor seamen" on deck, "in the midst of all their affliction and dying condition, did rejoice and thank God his royal Highness was preserved." Other accounts elaborated this unlikely scene, attesting to the sailors giving "huzzahs of joy as if they had attained some signal victory over their enemies and in this rapture sunk to the bottom of the sea immediately."

James's enemies were equally quick off the mark with inflated stories. *The Impartial Protestant Mercury* claimed that no one had been allowed to leave the wreck in the first boat except those called by James, "which were about 40, of which one or two in mean habit and unknown." In fact he left in a small shallop and those in "mean habit" were men he insisted be pulled out of the water, regardless of the danger. Elsewhere he was said to have left with a boatload of priests (there were none on board) and to have cared more about his dogs than his men. (The dogs had to fend for themselves. Scarborough, clinging to his plank, had to beat off James's dog Mumper.) A more realistic issue was raised by Pepys's friend James Houblon: "Some thinke the Duke's heate and Courage to save the ship, made him stay too long Abord and over look the thoughts of saving the men." The duke was also damned for delaying by John Churchill's wife, Sarah, whose accusation was repeated in an error-filled retelling in Winston Churchill's biography of his ancestor.

Despite the uproar James retained his post in Scotland, and in 1684 (after the foiling of the Rye House Plot to assassinate both royal brothers the previous year) Charles reinstated him on his Privy Council. Pepys too was back in favor. After a commission to Tangier, he was reappointed secretary to the Admiralty, continuing in this post when the duke took the throne as James II on the death of Charles II in 1685. But within three years James's Catholic bias and pro-French policies had cost him all political goodwill. In November 1688 William of Orange, the husband of James's daughter Mary, landed with a small force at Torbay in Devon. When Churchill, now lieutenant general of the army, and James's other daughter Anne both gave their support to William, the distraught

James fled down the Thames in disguise, only to endure a humiliating capture by Kentish fishermen. His second flight was successful, conveniently removing an obstacle to William and Mary's accession. He died near Paris in 1701.

Pepys's career ended with James's departure, and he remained out of office until his death fourteen years later. At their last meeting, he had handed the duke a bill for over £28,000. It was signed, but never paid.

James had tried in vain, with the help of the Royal Society and a pioneering diving bell, to find the *Gloucester* and salvage its valuables, which possibly included a shipment of gold. In 2007 the divers Julian and Lincoln Barnwell eventually discovered the wreck between the Leman and Ower banks. They found no gold but brought up a scattering of evocative objects: a cannon, part of a trumpet, a wine bottle from the Sun Tavern, an African calabash marked "GM"—perhaps owned by the London seaman George Miller—and a teaspoon with the initials TJ, maybe belonging to James's huntsman Thomas Jory, the "saucy fellow" who hid under a seat in James's shallop. Many of the finds, including the ship's bell, which confirmed its identity, are on view at an exhibition in Norwich this year, with a film showing the ship, split down the keel, its hull buried in sand, with cannon, rope, and the anchor still visible.

Pickford ends with a plea for protection of the site as a part of maritime history. But the real treasure, as this book shows, lies in the archives: the National Archives at Kew, the British Library, the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, the Guildhall Museum in London, the Pepys Library at Magdalene College, Cambridge, and local record offices and private collections. Hundreds of carefully saved documents—from royal letters and accounts to Navy Board minutes, lists of bounty payments, ships' muster books and logbooks, petitions, and wills—allow Pickford and his readers to revisit the wreck, serving as memorials to the drowned and the saved, and to those, like Samuel Pepys, who bore witness.