

MORE GUINEA SURGEONS (1600-1650)

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It is often suggested that the Medical Faculty of the University of Liverpool is the institutional descendant of the medical training established in Liverpool in the 1790s to meet the consequences of an act of parliament requiring 'surgeons' on all slave ships. The passing of this act might be thought to imply that, previously, ships trading to Africa carried no medical men, yet this was certainly not the case, at least in earlier centuries. In the 1550s and 1560s, most — perhaps all — ships sailing to Guinea carried a 'chirurgion'.¹ The extracts below, taken from unpublished depositions before the High Court of Admiralty (HCA), relate to the presence of medical men on Guinea vessels in the first half of the seventeenth century.² Unfortunately their medical activities are little described and it appears that they were often additionally employed in other capacities. The ships generally carried Guinea products such as hides, timber and pepper to Britain, and only in the 1640s carried slaves to America.

HCA 13.38 (6.6.1607)

Henry Smith of Wappinge mariner late master of the Little John of London sworne ... upon the contents of a petition ... on the behaulf of Thomas Corbett barbor surgion, Sayth ... that it is true that he hired Robt Norris servant to the said Thomas Corbett to goe to sea surgion of the said shipp, and promised to pay him XXs p. month ... And he confesseth that the said Robt Norris had his cheste furnished with salves and tooles, although by reporte of two other surgions that were in two other shippes in Ginny there were many thinges wantinge in the said chest which a surgion was to use in such a viadge but the valewe of the chest he cannot judge of. And sayth that the said Robt Norris did the pane of an honest yonge man whiles he was in the shipp & did his endeavor in the curinge of such as were hurte in Guiny by the Negros, and served in the shipp from the twenty of October 1605 untill the XVIIth of March 1606 nowe last past, and then beinge at Malta³ ... [he went ashore without permission and failed to rejoin the ship when it left] ... Beinge demaunded what was the reason that the said Morris wente ashore, he answereth that the said Norris said his pleaster boxes were ashore. & he would goe ashore for them as he sayde.

¹ P.E.H. Hair, 'Full fathom five': Deaths of Elizabethan seamen', *Med. Historian*, 8(1996), 46-54, on p. 50, based on P.E.H. Hair and J.D. Alsop, *English seamen and traders in Guinea 1553-1565: the new evidence of their wills* (Lampeter: E. Mellen Press. 1992).

² The documents are in the Public Record Office, Kew, in the category High Court of Admiralty (HCA).

³ At this date some ships carried goods from Guinea to Italy before returning to England.

HCA 1.49 (14.5.1623)

William Deepinge dwelling in Bold Streete London, Chirurgeon, aged 19 yeares ... touchinge the death of one Thomas Pigg a Cooper Saieth that the said Thomas Pigg servinge and sailinge in the shippe the Thomas of London ... in the last voyage for Ginneye upon the said voyage homewards bound ... in betweene the decks ... there grew some difference between the said Thomas Pigg and Matthew Clarke the Gunner ... [and after they had angry words] (some other words passinge betweene them which this examine doth not now remember) Church took up a shovell and in heate of blood strooke at the said Pigg ... and hitt him under the shorte ribbs and theruppon they closed and dark had Pigg downe upon the decke under him, the said Pigg cryed out — owe my backe and theruppon they were parted, and Pigg seemed to bee very well for the space of three quarters of an houre afterwards and never complained of any greefe, but aboute three quarters of an houre after ... findinge himself not well he wente to bedd where the examine being Surgeon of the said shipp with others of the Companie looked upon and viewed his side where hee received the blowe with the shovell ... and he saieth upon his oath that they could not finde any one of his ribbs to bee broken, or any signe of any blowe save then two little blacke spotts and aboute three or fower houres after ... he died ... the examine never heard him complaine of any paine in his side but that hee was sicke at the stomacke with sicknes at his stomacke (as this examine beleeveth in his conscience) [which] did not growe by the said blowe with the shovell but rather by disorderinge himself and his bodye by excessive drinkeinge, who was druncke the night before with aquavita and other drinke, and had vomitted much before the blowe was geven him and was not fully sober when hee and Clarke fell out ... before there had bin noe fallinge out... all the voyage but they lived together very friendly and quietly ...

HCA 13.46(5.6.1627)

Stephen Woolcocke of St Katherines marriner ... deposeth ... that the shippe the Charles of London ... beinge laden in Guinny ... was intercepted, surprized and taken ... upon the coaste of France ... [and] carried into the a little harbour neere St Sebastains where they dismissed and sett at liberty the examine who was Cooke of that shippe and all the reste of her Company, excepte her Master, Merchant, Chirurgeon, Carpenter ... and some ten others.

HCA13.48(14.7.1629)

William Yarburrowe of the parish of St Andrew in Holbom, London, chirurgeon, aged c.37 ... wente out from London in a Scottish shippe called the James in January laste, was twelve Monethes in the service of the Ginney Company and was placed ... to buy goodes for the use of the said Company at a place called Sockett...⁴ [Testifies about trading].

⁴ It is not clear whether he doubled as a surgeon when stationed in Guinea or had given up the occupation. The same applies to two instances below. Sockett was probably in the Sherbro district

HCA 13.52 (11.1.1635/6)

Richard Fare of the parish of St Leonards near Aldegate London, surgeon, aged c.32. [He was surgeon on the Intelligence, a pinnace — a small vessel — which was held by the Portuguese authorities on the island of Sao Tome and the crew imprisoned].

HCA 13.55 (28.5.1642)

Edward Archer, parish of St Giles, Cripplegate, London, surgeon, aged c.28. Deposes that de Groote detained the persons of the negroes who came to trade at Cormantyne ... He was surgeon of the Fleur de Lys wherein de Groote traded there and an eye witness of what happened. [Archer complains at length about de Groote, chief merchant of the English establishment at Kormantin in Gold Coast].

HCA 13.58 (8.12.1643)

William Cocke of Stepney Middlesex, barber surgeon, aged c.33. That in August 1641 this exanimate did proceed out to sea in the Charily ... and went upon a voyage from London to Ginneye. Where after her arrival at a place called Sereleon ... [a wreck was despoiled and ivory bought, whose price he knows because] he was employed ... for the sale of the said goods and procuring of the said teeth.

HCA 13.60(5.5.1646)

John Cutler, parish of Woolledge, Kent, surgeon, aged c33. [Testifies to seizure of Africans on the Little Coast of Senegal, and he mentions a previous voyage].

HCA 13.61 (24.5.1648)

Thomas Okeley, of Wapping, barber surgeon, aged c.35. [Served on the John and Isaac. Testifies re alleged piracy at Calabar, in modern Nigeria].

HCA 13.61 (29.6.1648)

John Browne, of Wapping, Middlesex, surgeon, aged c. 23. [Went to Guinea as surgeon of the George and there acted as a factor, buying redwood, on River Bum in Sierra Leone.]

HCA 13.62 (16.2.1649/50)

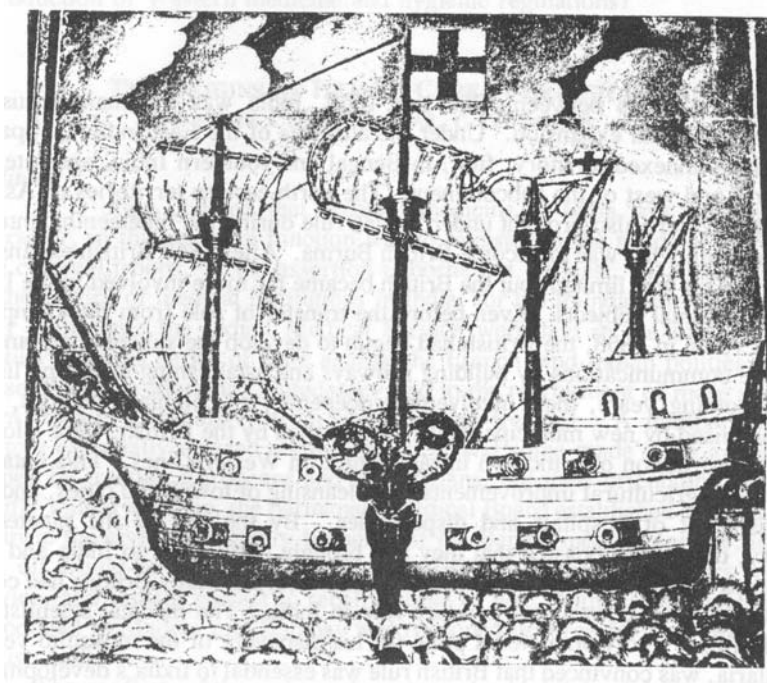
John Alien, surgeon of the May/lower, aged c.30. [Ship sailed to Guinea, then to Barbados with slaves, and was seized by the Spaniards].

I conclude by adding a reference to burial at sea that should have been included in my earlier paper (see note 1). On the 1582 Fenton expedition, Chaplain Walker, who had

of Sierra Leone.

fallen ill when the ships were in Guinea, died some months later off South America. The text in Hakluyt (1589, p.668) reads as follows:

The 5. day about 10 a clocke in the forenoone. Master Walker dyed, who had bene weake and sicke of the bloody flux 6. Dayes, wee took a view of his things, and prised them, and heaved him over boord, and shot a piece for his knell.



Burial at sea

There are few representations of burial at sea. This is from the Hales memorial in Canterbury Cathedral (reproduced with permission from an original photograph, copyright Mr Ben May, Canterbury). The body being lowered gently into the sea is that of an officer who died on the 1589 Portugal expedition. No doubt bodies were generally treated less circumspectly.