

# Sir George Beeston

It may come somewhat a surprise to learn that a Bunbury, Cheshire man was one of the foremost English sailors who fought with Drake, Frobisher and Hawkins against the Spanish Armada. His name was George Beeston, lord of the manor of Beeston, a descendent of Henry de Hunbury who took the name Beeston from the place of his residence. For his part in the battle against the Armada George Beeston was knighted on board the Ark, at sea, by the Lord High Admiral, Lord Howard of Effingham together with Frobisher, Hawkins and others. The defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 has been described as one of the most decisive battles in the world. It was a running battle lasting some nine days and marked the start of the downfall of Spain and the ascendancy of England as a great maritime power. Even though the Armada story is remarkable, even more remarkable is that Sir George Beeston's was reputed to be 89 years old at that time.

George Beeston was also a soldier and his active career is told largely on his memorial tomb situated on the north side of the sanctuary in Bunbury Church. A translation of the Latin epitaph is given by Rylands and Beazley in *The Monuments of Bunbury Church, (1918), as follows:*

"Here lies buried George Beeston, knight, a promoter of valour and truth; having been brought up from his youth in the arts of war [he was) chosen one of his company of pensioners by the invincible King Henry the Eighth, when he besieged Boulogne [1544]; he merited [the same] under Edward the Sixth in the battle against the Scots at Musselburgh [1547]. Afterwards under the same King, under Mary, and under Elizabeth, in the naval engagements as captain or vice-captain of the fleet, by whom, after that most mighty Spanish fleet of 1588, had been vanquished, he was honoured with the order of knighthood; and now, his years pressing heavily on him, when he had admirably approved his integrity to princes, and his bravery to his adversaries, acceptable to God, and dear to good men, and long expecting Christ, in the year 1601 and in the [refer below] of his age, he fell asleep in Him, so that he may rise again in Him with joy.

And together with him rests a most beloved wife, Alice, daughter of [Thomas] Davenport of Henbury, esquire, a matron most holy, chaste, and liberal to the poor, who, when she had lived in matrimony 66 years, and had borne to her husband three sons, John, Hugh, and Hugh, and as many daughters, Ann, Jane, and Dorothy, passed into the heavenly country in the year 1591 and in the [refer below] year of her age, with Christ for ever to live.

The dutifulness of their son Hugh Beeston, esquire, the younger, Receiver General of all the revenues of the Crown as well as in the county palatine of Chester as in the counties of North Wales, set up this monument to parents most excellent and beloved."

Under the semi-circular tomb arch and above Sir George Beeston's effigy in armour a further inscription, when translated, reads:

"Hugh Beeston, knight, son of George Beeston, knight, mindful of mortality, and in certain hope of rising again in Christ, placed this monument to his parents, himself, and George Beeston an only son, of the same knightly order, a youth, alas! snatched away by a too early death. Hugh, the father, died in the year of our salvation, 1627, but George, the son, 1611."

Sir George Beeston's tomb shows a representation of a Tudor ship that has many similarities to the *Mary Rose* of Henry VIII's reign, a vessel raised from the seabed within the last few years. A little is known about Sir George Beeston's ship, the *Dreadnought*, which was built in 1573. Her displacement was 400 tons, she carried 41 guns and her crew consisted of 130 mariners, 50 soldiers and 20 gunners.

Tantalizingly there are spaces on the epitaph for the ages of Sir George and Lady Alice which have been "filled-in" by eminent historians without quoting their information sources. There is some confusion, therefore, about Sir George Beeston's actual age when he was buried, at Bunbury, on 13 October 1601. Thomas Dingley, a visiting antiquary about 1684, attributed ages of 99 and 86 to Sir George and Lady Alice respectively on the dates of their burials. George Ormerod in *The History of Cheshire* states unequivocally, their ages as 102 and 86 respectively, and these ages have been quoted, almost without exception, ever since. Consequently, it must be concluded that George Ormerod, Cheshire's most eminent historian, *did not examine* Sir George Beeston's tomb.

A more recent author, however, J.C.Henderson, writing in 1981, on the History of Parliament, states that George Beeston was a pensioner between 1547 to at least 1589, Ranger of Delamere Forest in 1562, M.P. for Cheshire in 1589, and according to his father's *inquisition post mortem* he was 22 in 1542, thus implying Sir George was born c.1520. Clearly Henderson's dates are not incompatible with the career facts stated on the epitaph, but there is some difficulty reconciling Sir George's first marriage to Alice Davenport of Henbury. As stated unambiguously on their epitaph Sir George and Lady Alice Beeston had been married for 66 years in 1591.

Accordingly, if Henderson is to be believed, it would mean that Sir George was married in 1525 when he was about 5 years old. If the age of Lady Alice, quoted by both Dingley and Ormerod, is correct, then Alice Davenport was 19 years old on her wedding day and would have resulted in a most unlikely "child plus adult marriage" - not impossible but improbable. If, however, both Dingley and Ormerod were altogether incorrect about their ages and a "child plus child" marriage took place then Henderson's contention gains some support by the birth of Sir George's *second* son, Hugh Beeston, reputedly born c.1545 when Lady Alice could have been in her twenties, rather than in her forties as implied by both Dingley and Ormerod. In the sixteenth-century child-marriages were not that uncommon and were performed for political and acquisitive reasons, and also because of short life-expectancies. Such an event took place in Bunbury on 25 June 1552, when John Dutton, aged 12 years or thereabouts, was child-married to Eleanor Calveley, daughter of Sir Hugh Calveley - "since which marriage, we two have for the much part cohabited together and used and taken each other as man and wife."

The mystery of Sir George Beeston's age must, therefore, remain a mystery.

As we learn from the larger monumental inscription Sir George had three sons and three daughters by his wife Alice. Lady Alice Beeston was the daughter of Thomas Davenport of Henbury, Esq., and married George Beeston in 1525. She died aged 86, and was buried in Bunbury on 9th April 1591. Lady Alice, therefore, enjoyed her title for about three years. Sir George married a second time to Margaret?, daughter of George Ireland from the Hutte of co. Lancaster. [On the present-day Ford site, Halewood.] A third marriage was to Mary, daughter of James Chittwood (Chetwode) of Walcherton, the widow of ? Dorrington of Stafford.

Sir George Beeston did not reside at Beeston Castle which belonged to the Crown, but at the ancestral home of Beeston Hall. Little, if any, of the Beeston Hall known to Sir George now survives. It was moated, and was almost destroyed in the Civil War, being fired on by the soldiers of Prince Rupert. On 19 March 1645 the Prince dined with the lady of the house, and after dinner, told her he was sorry to make so bad a return to her hospitality and advised her to secure her valuables, as he had to order the house to be burned that night to prevent it being garrisoned by the enemy.

**John Elsworth**

Churchwarden

Dated 23 May 2000