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# THE UNLUCKY PIRATE

MARK GREENWOOD  
HISTORY HUNTER



FREMANTLE PRESS

# INTRODUCTION

Few subjects excite more fascination than the reckless high-seas adventures of pirates. The widely held perception is of a swashbuckling scoundrel, armed with a cutlass and a belt braced with pistols. From eye patches to peg legs, from pieces of eight to walking the plank and the skull and crossbones, much of the mythology of the beastly buccaneer owes its legacy to fiction.

Contrary to legend, there was nothing romantic about pirates in the 'Golden Age'. Strip away the myth — most were social rejects. Atrocity was a career choice. United by a collective reputation for violence and cruelty, they hitched their fortunes to the

floating world of a tall ship and the dream of a share in ill-gotten plunder.

Today, pirates have become the cool heroes of pop culture. Artist Howard Pyle's *Book of Pirates* immortalised the 'look' of a sea bandit. J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* introduced Captain Hook, the pirate with an iron hook for a hand. Stage and screen swordfights transformed cutthroats into beloved villains. The heroic buccaneer was an invented mix of bravado and glamour, as depicted by Captain Sparrow, the lead character in *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

Robert Louis Stevenson's classic book, *Treasure Island*, took readers to Skeleton Island in search of buried loot. No image is more closely associated with pirate lore than scabbed, scarred, sullen-faced bandits burying a seachest by the misty glow of a lantern. The captain clutches a map. X marks the spot.

One pirate, above all others, is credited with originating the concept of buried treasure. His name is Captain Kidd. As a privateer, he was commissioned by wealthy investors and the King of England to hunt

pirates and seize their treasure. The venture had the potential to earn great riches — until rumours reached London that the pirate hunter had turned rogue.

Facing arrest, Captain Kidd allegedly buried a vast fortune, and the seeds of a legend were sown. Is a fabled hoard of pirate treasure still waiting to be found? Join me as I sail back in time and delve into a centuries-old mystery.



**THEIR GHOSTS  
MAY BE HEARD**

Ghosts haunt the banks of the river that snakes through the heart of London. The Thames once teemed with frigates, schooners and ships of war. Wapping, the riverside settlement, was home to residents who made their living from the famous waterway — fishermen, sailors, boatbuilders and smugglers.

On certain days, the cobbled streets echoed with the clip-clop of horse and cart and the slow march of a sombre procession. One by one, convicted pirates descended the stone stairs that led to the gallows. Sobbing confessions and pleas for mercy could be heard above the slap of waves at Execution Dock.

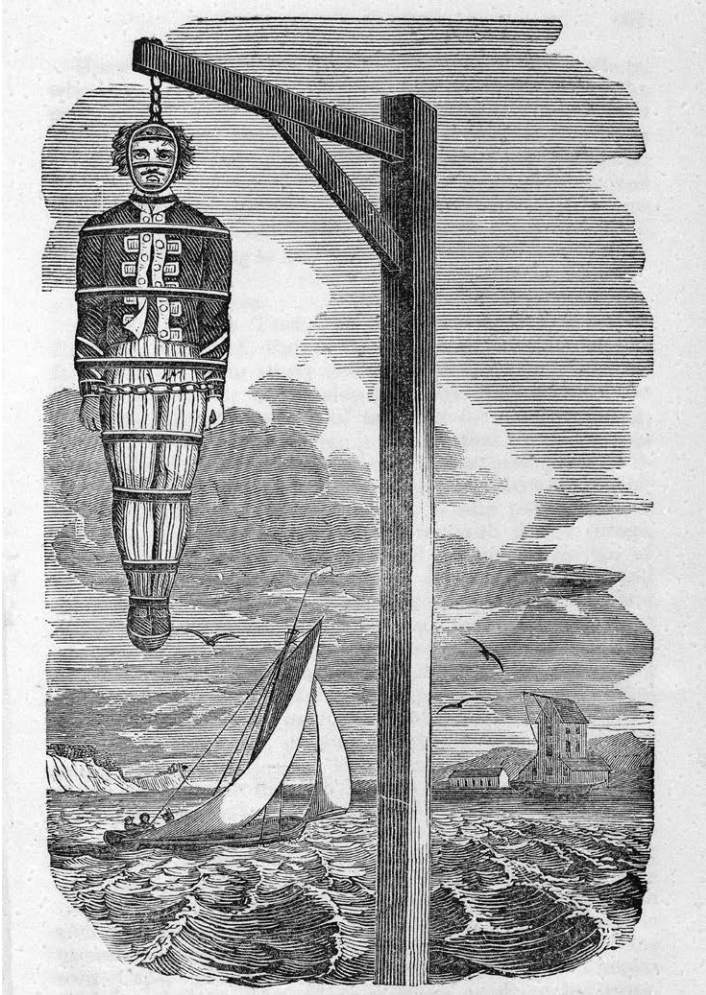
On 23 May 1701, the condemned are mostly unknown wretches — with one defiant exception. Hands bound behind a scarlet coat, his notoriety has drawn a raucous crowd. They guzzle beer, jeer and

hoot. Some pick pockets as they elbow closer to the ‘conquered beast of prey’ riding in the hangman’s cart. A sea of pox-pitted faces closes in as the cortège rumbles over the cobblestones. ‘Where did ye bury ye treasure?’ they shriek.

The convicted pirate inhales a whiff of wine and frying fish. He once frequented the waterfront taverns in this humble maritime community. Wapping is the home of his uncle, the fishmonger. He lodged there, in the home of Mrs Hawkins, a distant relative of his wife.

For him, the river held the promise of adventure. It led out to sea, where fortune beckoned. But fate has played tricks on this unlucky pirate. Accused of crimes he swears he did not commit, he is painted darker than any bloodthirsty buccaneer who forced a victim to walk the plank.

As the rough hemp noose tightens around his neck, the pirate strives to maintain his dignity. He takes in one last glimpse of the bobbing ships, the jungle of hulls. He hears the familiar fluttering of sailcloth, the creaking of ropes in a forest of wooden



*Captain Kidd hanging in the gibbet,  
from The Pirates Own Book by Charles Ellms.*

National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.

masts. He sighs for the shame he has brought upon his wife and the sorrow of leaving his children fatherless.

The wooden block is kicked out from beneath him. The short rope snaps.

‘Tis a miracle,’ onlookers declare. ‘Spare his life.’ Their pleas are ignored. Cloaked in mud from where he has fallen, the pirate is yanked back up the ladder, onto the scaffold. The sad spectacle of a second attempt puts an end to his disgrace.

Slowly, the crowd disperses. But the Lords of the Admiralty have not finished with this wicked pirate. As was the custom, he is tied to a slimy post. The tide will rise and fall three times before his waterlogged body is cut down and coated with tar.

Downriver, his corpse is suspended in an iron cage known as a gibbet. On wintery nights, when the sou’westerlies blow, the eerie sight serves as a warning to would-be pirates. But this wretch’s inglorious end is the beginning of a legend. Long after his bones have rotted to dust, he will be remembered, not for his crimes, but for the dazzling treasure he left behind.



**A KIDD OF THE SEA**

The date and the exact location of his birth remain in dispute. What is known is that William Kidd was raised in a seaside town in Scotland, and the story of his life would be told for centuries to come.

As a boy, he watched fishing boats sail in and out of the harbour. Sailors' shanties called him to the sea. When merchant ships drifted into port, the clanging of tall masts and the rhythm of foreign voices inspired dreams of adventure beyond the horizon.

William Kidd's early seafaring career began as an apprentice on a ship bound for the Caribbean. Over the next three decades, he drifted from one tropical island to another. The lowly seaman was brash and stubborn. He quickly worked his way up through the ranks of the maritime world.

The burly Scotsman was a born leader. He emerges into history in 1689 as the captain of a British ship operating in the Caribbean. Brimming with confidence, he led attacks on pirates and enemy ships that threatened British interests. The treasures he seized were shared with his loyal crew. As England was at war with France, Captain Kidd also captured French ships. His victories as a privateer — a ‘legal’ pirate — earned him high praise and eventually drew him to colonial seaports on the east coast of America.

When he wasn’t raiding ships in the Caribbean, Captain Kidd settled in New York, where pirates infested dockside taverns. They swilled rum to warm their black hearts and strutted the streets with jewelled daggers flashing from silk waistbands. In warehouses that lined the wharves, the sale of rum and guns was brisk. Bars of gold and Spanish doubloons were exchanged for butter and bread, pork and salt.

Captain Kidd was a shrewd trader. In New York, he turned his back on the pirates to project a



*'Captain Kidd in New York Harbor'.*

From a painting by Jean Leon Gerome Ferris (1863–1930).

more honourable reputation. On a quest for wealth and privilege, the captain mingled with powerful merchants and cultivated political influence. After marrying a wealthy widow, he became a devoted husband and father, with investments in several properties.

For a time, Captain Kidd packed away his telescope, compass and nautical maps. But the comforts of a land-based life were not enough to satisfy a man of the sea. He grew restless. The command of a tall ship beckoned. In 1695, he accepted an offer to sail to London on a trading voyage. While there, he met Lord Bellomont, an ambitious Irishman, soon to take up a royal appointment as Governor of New York. 'The King wishes to put your skills to use,' he told Captain Kidd, 'to rid the seas of pirates.'

At that time, the scourge of piracy extended beyond the Caribbean to the Indian Ocean. The waters off the coast of Africa, the Red Sea and India were rich pirate hunting grounds. The English East India Company and the Grand Mughal of India

were jointly outraged after treasure-laden ships were attacked. Pirates were branded as ‘ravenous beasts’ and ‘enemies of the human race’.

A syndicate of English lords, earls and dukes invested money to purchase a warship. Their plan, backed by the King, was to hunt pirates disrupting East India Company trade routes and to share any treasure seized. Ships flying French flags were also regarded as legitimate targets. Captain Kidd was chosen as the King’s privateer, or nautical mercenary. According to the agreed-upon formula, the investors would take sixty-five per cent of the captured loot. Ten per cent would be skimmed by the King, leaving twenty-five per cent for Captain Kidd, to be divvied up with his crew.

To conduct his mission, the pirate hunter would command the *Adventure Galley*, a warship with thirty-four cannons and a hull thick enough to survive a barrage of cannonballs. In April 1696, Captain Kidd set sail from London, bound for New York to top up his crew with battle-hardened brutes who knew how to

sail and fight. Under a 'no prey, no pay' agreement, the rogues that signed up to hunt pirates were promised a share of the treasure when a 'prize' was captured.