

**WILL ADAMS:**  
**Gillingham's own Samurai**

Will Adams was born about the 24 September, 1564, in what was then the small fishing village of Gillingham, in Kent, which was, as Adams himself said: "... two English miles from Rochester and one mile from Chatham, where the King's ships do lie ..." (A record of his baptism is held at Gillingham Parish church and can be viewed on request). He was about six months younger than William Shakespeare and lived to be four years older.

When he was twelve years old, his father died and he was apprenticed to a Master Nicholas Diggins of Limehouse, on the outskirts of London. Diggins owned a shipyard in Limehouse and Adams was originally intended to become a shipbuilder, however, over the next ten years Diggins also taught him mathematics and astronomy as he became interested in navigation. Then, Adams started learning how to become a pilot.

To clarify things a little, in the Middle Ages the skipper of a ship was known as the Master and was probably the only man in the crew who could read and write, certainly the only one who could navigate. Most ships (even ocean going ones) were very small, often less than 100 feet long. The larger merchant ships (as well as many of the warships) of the time often carried a man skilled in navigation to help the Master get where they were going. He was known as the Ship's Pilot.

A 'Captain' on a medieval ship would not have been the Master, but an officer in charge of soldiers on a warship. The Captain was in overall command, but would have had little to do with the actual details of sailing the ship, which would have been in the hands of the Master and/or the Pilot. In Adams' time, this system was starting to change, but hadn't yet completely gone out of use. This meant that Adams, as Pilot,

was a senior officer on board any ship, ultimately responsible for navigation and therefore, for getting the ship where it was supposed to be going.

In 1588, Adams left Master Diggins to become skipper of a transport ship under Sir Francis Drake, ferrying supplies to the ships engaged in the running battle with the Spanish Armada. Much of the supplies would have been loaded from Upnor Castle, since this is where many of the guns and ammunition were stored. Once the threat of invasion was over, Adams left the Navy and settled down to marry a lady named Mary Hyn, with whom he had a son and a daughter.

Home life didn't seem to suit him and he joined the Company of Barbary Merchants as a Pilot. He would have been expected to navigate ships from England out to the Mediterranean, and also to the coasts of North and West Africa. He also took part in an expedition to find the North-East Passage, a sea route along Russia's northern coastline, which, if it existed, would open up English trade with Russia and more importantly, to the Far East without going anywhere near the Portuguese merchants in East Africa and India. This expedition took him to the edge of the Arctic Circle before it had to turn back. (The North East Passage does exist, but it would need a modern icebreaker to navigate it).

In Adams' day, Northern Europe was in the middle of a weather phenomenon known as 'The Little Ice Age'. Temperatures were, on average, one degree colder than they are now, winters were much colder (the river Thames often froze over) and storms were heavier and more frequent. As a Pilot, it would have been part of Adams' job to find routes which would not only have been the quickest, but also the safest.

In 1598, the Dutch trade with 'The Indies', the spice islands in the Indian Ocean and China Sea, had just begun to get truly profitable, and the Dutch merchants were hiring seamen and especially experienced pilots wherever they could find them. Adams was offered, and accepted, the post of Pilot-Major (senior pilot) with a small fleet of ships fitted out and commanded by Rotterdam merchant Jacob (or Jacques) Mahu.

By today's standards, these ships would have seemed pitifully small, none were over 250 tons, although they all carried crews which would have seemed enormous to a modern sailor. Three of the ships in the convoy were named *Faith*, *Hope* and *Charity*. Adams started out on the flagship, the *Hope*, but after a series of bad storms, he transferred to the *Charity* (better known by her Dutch name of *De Leifde*). This little ship was 160 tons and carried 110 men.

The whole trip seemed plagued by bad luck. They left the Texel in the Netherlands on 24 June, 1598 and almost immediately, some kind of sickness broke out. Mahu himself died in August, leaving the fleet without an overall commander. By agreement, they put into the Guinea Coast of West Africa, (which Adams would have known well from his Barbary Merchant days) where they tried everything they could to cure the sickness (which may have been scurvy).

The (Roman Catholic) Portuguese were very active in Africa, and the small Dutch (Protestant) fleet had several fights with rival Portuguese merchants before leaving West Africa and heading for the Cape of Good Hope. No sooner had they got out to sea than the sickness and fever broke out again. From that November till the following April, the little fleet were wandering all over the South Atlantic, getting further and further away from the Dutch settlement at the Cape of Good Hope.

Eventually, they found themselves off the other Cape at the tip of South America, Cape Horn, so they headed for the Straits of Magellan. They tried to run the Cape, but because it was July or August by this time, it was the middle of the South Atlantic winter and the storm winds consistently blew against them.

Finally, after fighting wind and high seas, on 24 September 1599, they were able to get through the Straits of Magellan and into the Pacific. Their bad luck continued to haunt them in the form of bad weather which scattered the ships all over the South Pacific. They were eventually blown all the way back to Cape Horn with two of the ships limping back into the Atlantic, and, in desperation, heading back to the Netherlands.

The *Faith* was captured by the Spanish, who regarded that part of the Pacific as their own private lake, leaving *Hope* and *Charity* sailing north along the coast of South America trying to find each other. They finally caught up with each other off the coast of Chile, at Santa Maria Island, and camped ashore for a few days, where their jinx struck again and the Skipper of the *Hope*, along with a number of crew members (including Adams' brother Thomas) were captured, then killed, by the Spanish.

The survivors, including Adams, decided to head for a port where the Spanish wouldn't be any danger to them. North America was completely unknown (although Drake had visited a bay which would later become known as San Francisco) and Mexico was Spanish, so there was only one place they could go – across the Pacific to Japan. This was still something of a risk, as the Portuguese had a factory (a trading post run by a 'factor') there, where their merchants traded with the Japanese, but there was also a Dutch presence and *Hope* and *Charity* would be able to trade the remnants of their cargoes of woollen cloth under this Dutch protection.

They left Chile on 27 November and sailed north-west, fighting gale force winds and contrary currents until, on Christmas Eve 1599, the *Hope* was lost with all hands in a typhoon. *Charity*, with most of her crew sick or dying, struggled on, finally sighting Japan and anchoring in Saeki Bay, off Bungo, on the island of Kuishu, on 19 April 1600. At the time, there were 24 survivors, of whom 6 died within the year. The local *daimyo* (the equivalent of a medieval Lord of the Manor) received them well and treated them kindly, sending off messengers to his feudal overlord asking what he should do with the strangers.

Japan at this time was just recovering from a terrifying Civil War which was to set the tone of Japanese society for the next 250 years. Some years before, a famous and popular General with Imperial blood in his veins, Hideyoshi, had himself proclaimed *Shogun*, or Warlord, ousting the powerful Fujiwara family, who had held the job for many years previously. To be *Shogun* was to be both Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the Army. Although the *Shogun* theoretically answered to the Emperor, in fact he was the most powerful man in Japan and the Emperors were regularly deposed in favour of their infant sons, spending the rest of their lives in a Buddhist monastery.

Hideyoshi died in 1598, leaving an infant son, and the Shogunate, up for grabs. Civil war inevitably followed as the contenders for the Shogunate fought amongst themselves. In October 1600, the last battle was finally won by one of Hideyoshi's old commanders, a low-born genius named Ieyasu Tokagawa. Ieyasu ordered the *daimyo* of Bungo to send Adams to Osaka, where he could interview the stranger and find out his intentions. Adams was duly sent, and Ieyasu was favourably impressed with the Englishman. He was also extremely worried.

He was intrigued by the technology used by the Europeans, as well as their success in business, but he was doubtful about the influence of their culture on the highly stratified Japanese feudal society. He was also afraid that the Dutch merchants and Portuguese priests would change the Japanese character, permanently and for the worse. He treated Adams well, providing him with rooms in which to live, good food and comfortable clothes, but he refused to let Adams leave Osaka.

The Portuguese, from their base in Nagasaki, tried to persuade Ieyasu that Adams was a Dutch pirate, and should be executed as such, but this had the opposite effect from their intentions because Ieyasu promptly released Adams and the other survivors, now reduced to six, granting them a set allowance of rice and a small pension.

However, Ieyasu still refused to release *Charity*, so they split the money and "... every one took his way where he thought best ...", most vanishing from the pages of history. Although Ieyasu allowed *Charity*'s Skipper to travel home on a Dutch ship, it unfortunately fell foul of a Portugese fleet off Malacca. The Skipper was one of those killed in the following fight, so that news of Adams' survival did not get back to England as he had hoped.

Adams, however, decided to stay close to Ieyasu, with whom he was becoming very friendly. Ieyasu gave him a house at Edo, just outside Tokyo, and he was allowed into Edo Castle (at that time, Ieyasu's headquarters) as a diplomatic adviser. Taking advantage of Adams' knowledge of shipbuilding, Ieyasu persuaded him to build a European-style ship and Adams obliged with an 80-ton vessel. He later oversaw the

building of a 110-tonner, which eventually carried a shipwrecked Governor of the Phillipines back to Manila from Japan.

In the Far East, there had been a Chinese tradition of building of huge ocean-going junks which regularly traded as far as India and occasionally even East Africa, but in the 1420's there was a change of Dynasty and China became increasingly isolationist and isolated. Within a couple of generations the knowledge of deep sea navigation and ship building, amongst other things, had been lost.

Japanese ships tended to be built to sail round Japan's often rocky and treacherous coasts rather than the deep sea, but Ieyasu may have seen, and must have heard about, the Dutch and Portuguese armed merchant ships which regularly visited Japan. He may well have wanted European-style warships for himself. With European ships built, and crews probably trained, by Adams, the Japanese could meet the foreign merchants on equal terms.

Ieyasu was so pleased with Adams' work that he ennobled him, giving him the rank of *Samurai* and the title of *Anjin Miura* as well as an estate at Hemi, near Yokosaka: "... like unto a lordship in England ...". (Miura was the site of Adams' estate, however, a Japanese-speaking friend translates *Miura* as "Three Coasts", so it may be that Adams' estate was named after him, the man from the coast of England who travelled half way round the world to reach the coast of Japan), however, Ieyasu still refused to let Adams return to Europe.

In 1609, some Dutch ships anchored off Firando, (also called Hirando, but more properly, Hirado) in Western Japan and Adams acted as interpreter for them and was able to get them favourable trading privileges. When the traders left, in 1611, they took with them a letter from Adams asking for help from England to persuade Ieyasu to let him go home.

The two ships from the original convoy which had been blown back round Cape Horn in 1599, had made it safely back to the Netherlands and had spread their story, including the news that *Hope* and *Charity* intended to press on. As a result of their

news, the English were considering mounting an expedition to Japan themselves. On 13 June 1613, the *Clove* and two consorts sailed into Firando, and by the end of November, an English trading factory was set up with Adams working there.

Adams took the Skipper of the *Clove*, a man named Saris, to Ieyasu's court and introduced him, again getting favourable trading concessions for the English. It was about this time that Ieyasu finally gave Adams permission to leave Japan --- but he didn't go! It has been suggested that Adams and Saris didn't get along, and that Saris didn't pay Adams the respect which he felt an man of *Samurai* rank should be accorded, even though by English standards he was of low birth. It is more likely that, after talking to Saris and his crew, Adams realised that he had been away from England for more than fifteen years, almost half a lifetime in those days and it suggests a rather complicated reason why Adams might have chosen to stay in Japan.

When Adams left England, Elizabeth I had been Queen, but she had died in 1603 and was succeeded by James I, who was already King of Scotland. He was heartily disliked by some of his subjects and had survived kidnapping and assassination attempts, which had left him suspicious to the point of paranoia. He also firmly believed in 'The Divine Right of Kings', that is, that God had made him King and so all his subjects had the duty to obey him, whatever he might command.

Adams, by accepting a job as ship-builder to the *de facto* ruler of Japan, and then allowing himself to be made a Japanese aristocrat, could be said to have switched his allegiance from England to Japan and, in King James' suspicious eyes, might well have been accused of treason, found guilty and executed, had he returned to England.

Whatever his reasons, Adams stayed on in Japan, married himself a Japanese wife and had two children with her. He worked for the English trading company from November 1613 to December 1616, going to Ieyasu's court on their behalf and also undertaking trading journeys for them, some as far away as a voyage to Viet Nam and back.

In 1616, Ieyasu died and his son Hidetada succeeded to the Shogunate. Hidetada disliked and distrusted foreigners even more than did his father, and although he and

Adams appear to have been on amicable terms, Adams no longer had any influence at court. The privileges of the Dutch and English merchants were curtailed and the Japanese Christians persecuted so furiously that Christianity more or less disappeared.

At the end of 1619, the Dutch suddenly declared war on the English and attacked the factory and ships at Firando, burning everything. Soon after peace was declared, on 16 May 1620, Will Adams died.

In 1623, the English factory was closed for good because of increasing Japanese hostility. All the European traders left Japan, and the country remained closed and isolated until the American, Commodore Matthew Perry, forced trade with Japan at gunpoint, in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Adams' will (preserved in the archives of the East India Company for many years, but now missing) shows that he left £500 (a considerable amount of money in those days – a poor man could live on about £1 a year) which he wanted divided equally between his English and his Japanese families. He was buried on a hill overlooking the site of his estate at Hemi and the harbour at Yokosaka. His grave is now part of the Tsukayama Park, Yokosaka. On the 15 June every year the Japanese celebrate the Festival of the man they called *Anjin San* (“Mr Pilot, Sir” or the “Honourable Pilot”) - Will Adams.

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