

# John Gow Heritage Trail



Walk in the footsteps of  
Orkney's most notorious pirate!



UHI



## 4 - Piracy

Having ransacked their first ship, captured its crew and sunk the vessel, Gow returned to the hunt. Nine days later, the *Sarah*, a Scottish ship, was captured with its cargo of fish seized. A French vessel narrowly managed to escape the clutches of the *Revenge* a few days later, losing the pirates in some sea fog. Running low on water, the *Revenge* turned towards Madeira, where the crew failed to prey upon local small boats. Gow then sailed for Porto Santo (around 35 miles/56km away), where, under a British flag, the pirates went ashore. Fooled by the ploy, the local governor was kidnapped and then forced to produce supplies.



A Naval Brigantine in a Calm Sea, John Cleveley

Resupplied, the pirates released the governor and returned to sea. On 18 December, near Lisbon, the American timber ship, *Bachelor*, was caught and pillaged. On 27 December, the French ship, *Lewis Joseph*, loaded with wine and fruit for Cadiz, was similarly captured. These successes made Gow's second, Williams, bold and he pressed the captain to attack larger vessels and take greater risks. This led to a fight, during which Williams tried to shoot Gow but he misfired. Gow had Williams beaten and thrown in the hold. Three days after the incident, the *Revenge* claimed its next victim - the *Triumvirate of Bristol*. Amongst the looted goods were fish, two cannons, small arms, sails, cables, a cask of rum, a cask of brandy, a watch, a longboat and some spoons. The crew of the *Triumvirate*, and a wounded Williams, were set adrift.

1 - The John Gow Heritage Trail was developed by the J. Gow Distillery and the Institute for Northern Studies, University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI). This pamphlet provides an overview of Gow's story, situating it within the Orkadian landscape. On the map overleaf, key locations are highlighted and their connections to Gow explained providing an accessible means to learn about one of Orkney's most infamous figures, and visit sites featured in Gow's story.

The J. Gow Distillery was founded in 2016 by Collin van Schayk in Lamb Holm. Since then, the distillery has produced a rich array of rums, many of which draw inspiration from Gow himself. Not only does Collin craft every drop of J. Gow Rum and run the business, but he also designs all the labels, branding, and graphics himself – including this pamphlet!

The Institute for Northern Studies (INS) is a research and teaching institute which is part of the University of the Highlands and Islands. While INS staff conduct research all over the globe and teach students from all four corners of the world, the department's headquarters are in Kirkwall. INS offer a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, as well as commercial consultation and research.

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A digital version of this pamphlet is available on the INS website.



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On the cover an Illustration of John Gow from the 1769 edition of *The History and Lives of all the Most Notorious Pirates and their Crews*.

## 5 - Return to Orkney

Fearing unwanted attention, Gow resolved to sail north to lay low. He believed that returning to Orkney would allow the crew to rest, make necessary repairs and buy time for their notoriety to die down. The *Revenge* arrived at Stromness in January 1725. Disguised as the trading ship *George*, bound for Stockholm from Cadiz, Gow ordered his men to conceal their true identities while they traded their stolen goods with the local merchants.

Gow himself was soon recognised and given a hero's welcome, wining and dining with locals who were unaware of his piracy. However, coincidentally, the captain of another ship anchored nearby, the *Margaret*, recognised several of the crew as having sailed on the *Caroline*. Uncovering the truth, the captain raised the alarm on 1 February. Kirkwall Burgh Council ordered a 24-man militia to guard the town and instructed cannons be placed along the shore to repel an attack by the sea. After this news reached Gow's men, ten of them stole the *Revenge's* longboat and sailed to Caithness. Now understrength, the pirates attempted to pressgang some sailors into their crew, including Gow's 14-year-old nephew, William Clouston.



Andrew Watt (Captain of the *Margaret*), Declaration Concerning the Galley *Carolina*, 9 Feb 1725  
'... the crew declared that said John Gow Captain and changed the name of the ship from the *Carolina Galley* to the *Revenge*, that on their way to the Orkneys they boarded four ships and plundered out of them what they had ...'

By 10 February, the ship was ready to sail. Before leaving, Gow sent an armed party to raid the Hall of Clestrain, the home of Robert Honeyman of Graemsay, High Sheriff of Orkney. The pirates pillaged the house and abducted two or three of the serving girls. Gow's men allegedly forced another servant to bagpipe them back to their ship in triumph.



Hall of Clestrain, Orkney

Kirkwall Burgh Council, 11 Feb, 1725  
'... order twenty-four men, furnished with good and sufficient arms, to keep guard this night at the Tolbooth, and in time coming as long as the magistrats and council shall



John Gow, Execution of Gow, from the Pirates of the Spanish Main series for Allen & Ginter Cigarettes

2 - John Gow was born in Wick, Caithness, in 1697 to the merchant William Gow and his wife, Margaret Calder. Soon after Gow's birth, the family moved to the parish of Stromness, where they later purchased a modest estate at Hammigar, roughly where Copland's Dock is situated today.

We know that Gow had an older sister, Anna, who married Harry Clouston in May 1708. The couple remained in Stromness and had a son, William, who became entangled in his estranged uncle's piratical activities upon his return to Orkney. Little else is known of Gow's upbringing, other than his burning desire to seek his fortune at sea. It is not known exactly when Gow left Stromness in this pursuit, but by 1720 when his father died, the family estate did not pass to Gow, indicating that John had already left.

By 1724 Gow had clearly been working on merchant vessels for some time, rising to the rank of second-mate. That year, he joined the crew of the *Caroline*, a Guernsey merchant ship sailing from Santa Cruz for Genoa, carrying a cargo of leather, woollen cloth and beeswax. The ship was captained by the Frenchman, Oliver Ferneau, whose neglect of the sailors' pay and rations quickly earned him their scorn.



As soon as the *Caroline* set sail, mutiny amongst the crew began to ferment, exacerbated by the poor conditions and even worse food. Such was Ferneau's concern that he ordered his officers to secure all the weapons onboard...

## 6 - Capture & Trial

The unmasked *Revenge* sailed north around the Orkney Mainland and into Calf Sound. It was here that the ship struck rocks – perhaps intentionally by one of the newly pressed men, William Pottinger – causing it to be carried onto the Calf of Eday. With the longboat missing, the crew had no way of refloating the ship.



Gow's bloodstain at Carrick House  
Image with thanks to Rupert Joy.

As fate would have it an old schoolmate of Gow's, James Fea, owned Carrick House on the nearby island of Eday. Fea cannily sent word to the authorities and had all small vessels on the island sunk, all while promising aid to the stricken Gow. After days of sending letters back and forth across the Bay of Carrick, seeing an opportunity, Fea's men seized Gow and imprisoned him in Carrick House. With the captain in chains, the rest of the crew surrendered, just before the warships *H.M.S. Weazel* and *H.M.S. Greyhound* arrived in Orkney to apprehend the pirates.



Gow to Fea, 15 Feb 1725  
'... I have wronged noe man, nor taken anything but what I have paid for ... I cannot surrender myself prisoner; I'd rather commit myself to the mercie of the seas ...'

By 30 March, Gow and his 32 men had been transferred to London. On 26 May, the trial began. However, Gow refused to plead, which led to him being tortured by thumbscrews and pressing. Relenting, Gow entered his plea and was found guilty alongside ten of his men – nine of whom were executed. On 11 June, Gow was taken to the Execution Dock, Wapping, to be hanged. His body was left to be washed by three tides, then it was tarred and hung in chains as a warning to other would-be pirates.

3 - Despite Ferneau's precautions, the embers of mutiny had already caught flame. On the first evening of their voyage, 3 November 1724, Ferneau was attacked by three crewmen, whom he managed to fight-off. However, at that moment, the captain was shot in the back by his second-mate, John Gow. The shot was not fatal, so the mutineers threw the wounded captain overboard and seized control of the ship. Two other crewmen who had taken refuge in the hold were slain by the mutineers, while the ship's surgeon was killed as he tried to escape overboard. The following day, those who had joined the mutiny elected Gow as their captain, with fellow mutineer, James Williams, serving as his second. Spare cannons were brought up from the hold to bolster the ship's existing ordnance, bringing its strength up to 32-guns. The repurposing of the merchant vessel into a pirate ship was completed with its renaming as the *Revenge*.



The crew who had taken no part in the mutiny were presented with a choice: join the pirate crew or be imprisoned. All chose the former. With control of the ship secure, Gow turned his attention to the shipping lanes which ran parallel to the Spanish and Portuguese coasts. To ensure the loyalty of his crew, Gow needed to seize a prize quickly to refill the *Revenge's* stores and appease the crew with booty. Nine days after the mutiny, the *Revenge* claimed its first victim, the *Delight of Poole*, carrying fish from Newfoundland to Cadiz.



Gow's Seaman's Chest,  
in private ownership

The bell has 'Soli Deo Glorja 1640' on it and was supposedly looted by Gow from a Spanish monastery. Image with thanks to Rupert Joy.



## 7 - Legacy

Despite his short piratical career, Gow's story has endured. Shortly after his death, the details from his trial were published in *Conduct and Proceedings of the Late John Gow* (1725), a pamphlet commonly attributed to Daniel Defoe. Due to the popularity of the pamphlet, Gow was included in the 1728 edition of the *General History of the Pyrates*. Thus, Gow's name has been etched alongside the likes of Blackbeard and Charles Vane.

Alongside his international reputation, Gow's story has thrived in Orkney through a variety of folk tales and stories linking the pirate to several locations. The most famous tale is the love affair between Gow and Helen Gordon, a local woman from Stromness. According to different versions of the story, the pair either knew each other from their youth or became infatuated upon Gow's return in 1725. They resolved to exchange vows in the local fashion of placing their hands through the Odin Stone, Stenness. Following Gow's capture and execution, Helen supposedly travelled to London to clasp the hand of Gow's swinging corpse – the only way she could release herself from their oaths and to prevent Gow's ghost from haunting her.



Of course, Gow also lives on through Sir Walter Scott's *The Pirate* (1821). After visiting Orkney in 1814, Scott based the character of Captain Cleveland on Gow. Indeed, Scott apparently visited the supposed witch, Bessie Millie, who claimed to remember seeing Gow in her youth and regaled the writer with tales of the pirate's adventures and misdeeds.



Gow's telescope Image with thanks to Stromness Museum.