

An Object of interest from Hunstanton Heritage Centre – May 2021

Pocahontas – Part 1 – Prepared by Jerry Simmons (H&DCS Committee Member)

Our object of interest this month is not to be found in our Heritage Centre, as it is the Heacham village sign on the A149, showing a representation of Pocahontas.



The story begins in the 16th Century, and is one of colonialism, trade, international relationships, identity, mixed-heritage marriage, and much more. Its themes are very relevant to us in the 21st century.

NEW WORLD SETTLERS

We start with English settlers in the New World during the last quarter of the 16th Century during the reign of Elizabeth 1st. In 1584 Elizabeth granted Sir Walter Raleigh a charter to colonise part of

North America, to be called Virginia in her honour (she was the Virgin Queen). The intention was to provide riches from the New World, and to establish a naval base from where raids could be launched against the (enemy) Spanish, who were busy colonising South America.

JAMESTOWN

The English monarch would appoint Governors to found settlements, one of the earliest being The Virginia Company, who founded Jamestown in 1607 (after James 1st, who had succeeded to the throne following the death of Elizabeth). The leaders of the Virginia Company established an extensive publicity campaign in England through pamphlets, broadsheets, and sermons, in order to encourage investors. A single share was equivalent to 6 months wages for an average working man. It may seem strange that clergymen should be involved in this campaign, but there was a further purpose behind the Virginia Company's exploration, namely that of Protestant English colonisation in competition with the (still enemy) Catholic Spanish. The leaders of the Virginia Company believed they had a duty to evangelise and convert "Native Savages".

So what did the English colonists find in April 1607 when they first landed in what was to be named Jamestown? The area was uninhabited - probably because the indigenous people considered it a remote, mosquito-ridden swamp, too poor for agricultural purpose, and devoid of fresh water. Unsurprisingly, despite supply ships being sent from England, by 1610 some 70% of settlers had died from disease or starvation.

JOHN ROLFE

Let us now return to Heacham, birthplace in 1585 of John Rolfe. He was a smoker of tobacco, which had been introduced to England around 1556, and had become increasingly popular as a recreational activity. However, the most desirable tobacco was exported from South America by (you guessed it) the Spanish, who had a monopoly on the product. That from Virginia was much harsher. It seems that John Rolfe had obtained a supply of Spanish

tobacco seeds, and that his intent was to travel to Virginia and make his fortune as a plantation owner.

In May 1609 John and his wife Sarah boarded the 30m Sea Venture (along with some 120 other passengers and 35 crew) in Woolwich, to sail across the Atlantic Ocean via Plymouth, as part of a fleet of 9 ships. The journey did not go well. Caught in a storm, and separated from the rest of the fleet, the Sea Venture is shipwrecked off one of the Bermuda islands in July 1609. The castaways find themselves stranded on an uninhabited island, where 7 months later in February 1610, Sarah Rolfe gives birth to a daughter christened Bermuda, who survived for only a few days. Sarah, then aged 20, is believed to have died on the same island in the spring of that year (or perhaps in Jamestown that summer).

From the time of their shipwreck, the castaways faced a dilemma - stay on the island or continue the journey to Jamestown. They were, of course, presumed by the rest of the fleet to have died at sea, and knew nothing of the desperate situation in Jamestown. Ultimately, using salvaged material from the Sea Venture, they were able to build 2 ships, Deliverance and Patience, which reached the famine-ridden Jamestown in May 1610. The abandonment of Jamestown was only avoided by the arrival of supply ships from England a month later. John Rolfe went on to establish the Varina Farms Plantation, and cultivate his sweet (and nicotine containing) Spanish variety of tobacco. By 1614, vast quantities were being exported to England.

NEXT MONTH

Where does Pocahontas fit into this story? We will examine a little of her background, and how she came to meet and marry John in the concluding part of this article. In the meantime here are some numbers to ponder:

In the 17th Century, maternal mortality in England (a measure of deaths due to complications from pregnancy or childbirth) is estimated to have been in the region of 1000 per 100,000 maternities. Currently in the UK the figure is 13 per 100,000, worldwide 210 per 100,000, Afghanistan 400 (probably an underestimate) per 100,000.

In the 17th Century, infant mortality in England is estimated to have been approximately 120 per thousand live births. Currently in the UK the figure is 4 per 1000, worldwide 29 per 1000, Afghanistan a staggering 106 (that's more than 1 in 10) per 1000.