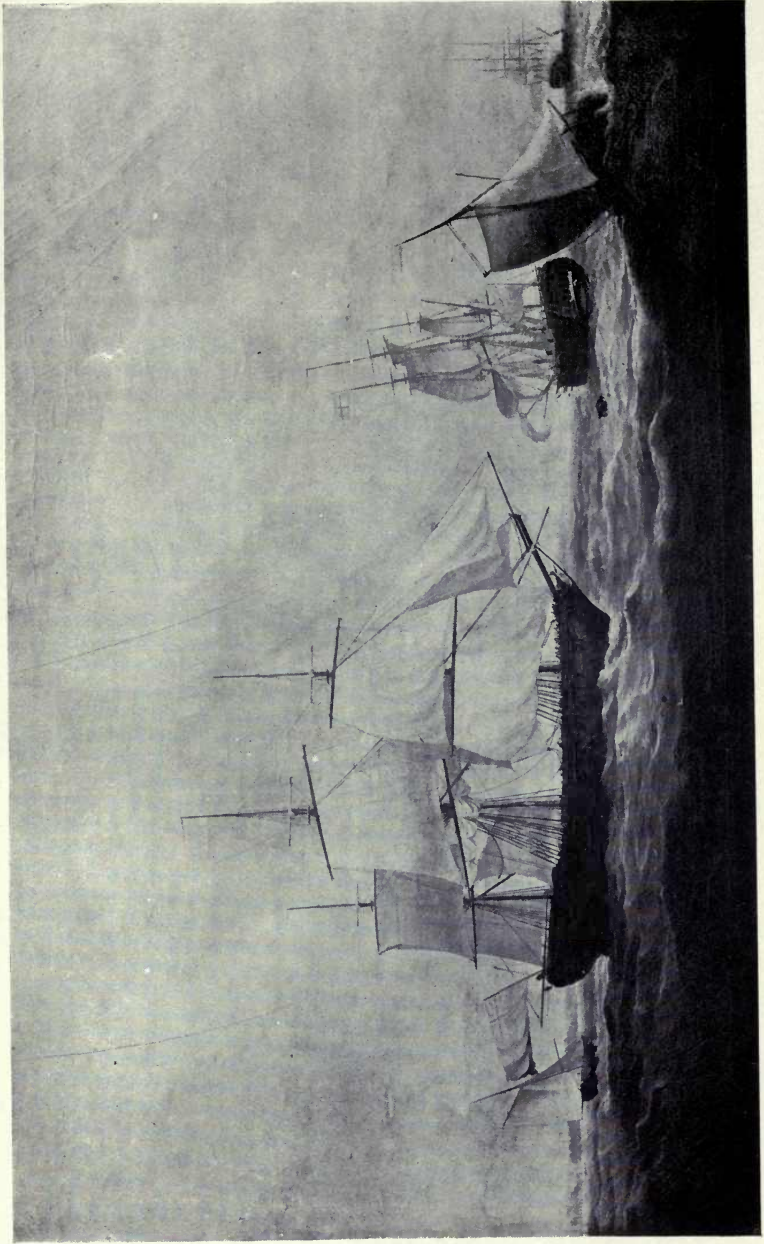


The "Taunton Castle" Privateer.

BY HENRY SYMONDS, F.S.A.

OUR fortress home in Taunton has seen many wars during the six centuries of its existence, but only once, I believe, has its name been associated with fighting on the sea; to describe the circumstances of that association with maritime events is the object of these notes.

By way of preface to the description of this "private ship of war" it will be convenient to make a brief reference to the history of her owners, and the story shall begin in the year 1782 when Sir James Esdaile, his sons, and Sir (then Mr.) Benjamin Hammet were bankers at No. 73, Lombard Street, a house which had been known in the days of the goldsmiths by the sign of the Union, or clasped hands. Sir James, the head of the firm, was a man with varied interests, public and private; in addition to conducting the transactions of the Bank, and of a separate business in Bunhill Row, he had been Lord Mayor in 1777-8, and Colonel of the 2nd (or green) regiment of the City Militia. A country house, named New Place, and the manor of Gains in Upminster, Essex, afforded him relaxation from the cares of town life. It is probable that Sir James' connection with Taunton dates from the marriage of his daughter Louisa with Sir Benjamin Hammet, who was knighted, as was his father-in-law, for services rendered to the city of London. This alliance was followed by the establishment in Taunton about 1790 of the firm of



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bankers styled Hammet, Jeffries, Woodford and Buncombe, which was in close relationship with the older firm in Lombard Street.

Sir Benjamin Hammet, on the other hand, was a Taunton man by birth who found time amid his work in London to do much for his native place, including, as we know, some rebuilding at the Castle; he represented the borough in Parliament for eighteen years, until his death in South Wales in 1800, and now he rests with his kindred in Wilton churchyard. His son, John Hammet, of whom more presently, succeeded to the vacant seat in the Commons. A second link between these two families and our county town was created in 1786, when John Hammet, James Esdaile Hammet and Edward Jeffries Esdaile received a grant from the Bishop of Winchester of the office of Bailiffs of Taunton and Taunton Deane and keepers of the Castle there, a position which had been previously held by the father of the two first-named grantees.

We may now turn from biography to a consideration of the reasons which induced these staid men of affairs to set on foot an enterprise in which the vagaries of fortune played so large a part. At the end of the XVIII Century England's relations with foreign powers were the reverse of friendly, and as a consequence the ocean trade routes were harried by ships commissioned on both sides under letters of marque to take toll of their enemy's cargoes and shipping, by way of reprisal for similar damage previously suffered.

Such was the condition of international politics when Sir James Esdaile and his co-partners were moved to adopt the practice of other merchant princes and safeguard their interests, as far as might be, by converting a trading ship into a private man-of-war, a conversion which was legalised under the authority of the High Court of Admiralty.

The choice of the partners fell upon a ship owned by them and known as the *Taunton Castle*, a name which may with

certainly be attributed alike to the appointment of the younger members of the Esdaile and Hammet families as custodians of the Castle and to their many associations with the town. An application for a commission, or letter of marque, was duly made to the Court of Admiralty, whose chief requirements, apart from fees, consisted of detailed particulars of the ship's armament and equipment so that her identity might be beyond dispute, and of a submission to severe prospective penalties for non-observance of the general regulations governing such craft. The following extracts from the Court records provide an accurate description of the armed strength of the vessel which we may almost claim as a local privateer, and which was undoubtedly one of the finest of the many British "irregulars" sent to sea during the second half of the XVIII Century.

DECLARATION.

"26 April, 1794. Appeared personally Thomas Blaiklock of the Old Jewry, London, merchant, on behalf of Captain Edward Studd now at sea, and produced a warrant from the Right Hon. the Lords Commissioners for executing the office of Lord High Admiral of Great Britain and Ireland for the granting of Letters of marque and reprisals to him the said Edward Studd for the apprehending, seizing and taking the ships vessels and goods belonging to France or to any persons being subjects of France or inhabiting within any of the territories of France, and in pursuance of His Majesty's instructions made the following declaration, to wit ;

"That the said Edward Studd's ship is called the *Taunton Castle*, is belonging to the port of London, is of the burthen of 1246 tons; square stern, British built, figure head, has 3 masts; that the said Edward Studd goeth commander of her; that she is mounted with 36 carriage guns carrying shot of 12 and 4 pounds weight, and no

swivel guns ; is navigated with 155 men, of whom one third are landmen ; has 120 small arms, 60 cutlases, 45 barrels of powder, 820 rounds of great shot and 200 weight of small shot ; that the said ship is victualled for 12 months, has 3 suits of sails, 5 anchors, 7 cables, and 5 tons weight of spare cordage ; that Wm. Urmston goeth mate or lieutenant, — Welch gunner, — Pearson boatswain, John Roberts carpenter, Chas. Welch cook, and Edward Watson surgeon of the said ship ; and that Sir James Esdaile of London, knight, is one of the principal owners and setters out of the said ship."

On the same day of 1794 a bond is executed by which William Esdaile and John Hammet, esquires, of Lombard Street, are bound in the sum of three thousand pounds as sureties for the due observance of the instructions issued by the Court of Admiralty to Ed. Studd commander of the *Taunton Castle*, and finally an official of the Court certifies that the two bondsmen are persons of substance. This completed the formalities, and the actual letter of marque would then be issued to the applicants.

It will have been observed that the above mentioned grant empowers the captain to take action against France only, but it is evident that the owners afterwards desired to extend the scope of their operations. On 5 February, 1796, a similar "declaration" is filed preparatory to the issue of a commission for the same ship against the United Provinces, in which document Peter Esdaile of Lombard Street is stated to be the owner and setter out. The details show a few variations, the burthen of the *Taunton Castle* is then given as 1198 tons and her crew as 130, but the officers remain as in 1794.

War had broken out with Spain in 1796, which supplies the reason for a third commission being asked for against that country ; the declaration is dated 26 November in that year and is identical with number two, Peter Esdaile being named as the sole owner.

A few words as to the rules laid down for the guidance of the holders of such commissions may be useful. The commander was authorised to set forth his ship in warlike manner and to seize the property of the enemy anywhere except within cannon shot of harbours or roads of Princes and States in amity with his then Majesty. After seizure the vessels and cargoes were to be brought into a convenient British port, there to be adjudged by the Court as lawful prizes before they could be sold by the captors. The commander was also ordered to keep an exact journal of his proceedings while afloat,—a very desirable provision. Unfortunately the official records of this particular ship end with the issue of the commissions, and so leave us in the dark as to whether the three ventures resulted in wealth or in disappointment, but it is satisfactory to know that the vessel was neither sunk nor captured by Frenchman, Spaniard or Dutchman, as is shewn by some statistics of the East India Company for 1802 which accidentally came under my notice. In the last named year the *Taunton Castle* was serving in that Company's fleet of merchantmen and sailing to Asiatic ports under Capt. T. B. Pierce, having presumably surrendered her threefold letters of marque as a result of the cessation of hostilities which led up to the treaty of Amiens in March 1802. For a time, therefore, that picturesque figure the privateersman dismounted his guns, and no longer sought upon the water a short cut to fortune.

The fact that the ship had been chartered by "John Company" induced me to examine again the Admiralty books after the short respite from war which followed the peace of 1802. The renewal of hostilities naturally brought about a revival of privateering, and sure enough I found a "declaration" dated 3 May, 1804, relating to a new commission against the French Republic. The commander was then Thomas Burston Pierce, the principal owner still being Peter Esdaile. From this point I lost sight of our vessel in the Admiralty Court;

it may, however, be assumed that she finally ceased to sail under a letter of marque about 1805 or 1806, when the ship was transferred to other owners who continued to use the old name, but the transfer would put an end to any existing commissions.

It is, perhaps, an open question as to how far the captain made use of his powers under the respective licences; whether he went out solely on raiding expeditions, as the majority did, or whether he combined adventure with commerce by exercising his rights only for the purpose of hitting back when molested, and annexing, say, a Dutch or French Indiaman.

Having traced the career of the *Taunton Castle* as a private ship of war, I will conclude by appending some details of her history as a merchantman, both before and after the incidents already set forth.

Prior to the Shipping Act of 1786 there was no general registration of British vessels, but in pursuance of that Act a register was established and the books are now preserved at the modern Registry of Shipping and Seamen on Tower Hill, from whence I have obtained the undermentioned facts.

On 20 October, 1790, the *Taunton Castle* was first registered, being then newly built by Wm. Barnard of Deptford, a well known ship builder of the day. Her owners were Sir Benjamin Hammet of Lombard Street, banker; Edward Jeffries of S. Thomas' Hospital, Southwark; Sir James, Peter, and William Esdaile of Lombard Street, bankers, with one or two others whose names are not now material. The register further states that the vessel had three main decks and three masts, her length being 182 feet, breadth 41 feet, and burthen 1246 tons. She was square sterned, carried a round house, and galleries on stern and quarters. There was also a fore-castle deck, the figure head being a man. The rig is not mentioned, but she was sheathed with copper, an unusual luxury at that period.

These structural details, supplemented by the equipment

particulars contained in the Admiralty "declarations," will enable us to form a mental picture of the ship when ready for sea ; apparently nothing in the nature of a sketch or print has so far been brought to light.*

The vessel continued in the ownership of the two Somerset families from 1790 until about 1806, when she was sold or otherwise alienated to one Andrew Timbrel who employed her in the merchant service until June, 1813, in which month she was, alas, broken up by her second owner ; the reasons for her destruction are not stated, but old age could hardly have been one of them.

We have thus followed the *Taunton Castle*, alternately privateer and East Indiaman, from her cradle on the Thames to her grave on the shore of the same river.

* Since this paper was set up in type, Mr. St. G. Gray has called my attention to an oil-painting in an upper room of our Museum, which most fortunately provides us with the contemporary representation of the vessel which I had failed to discover among the East India and other records in London. The canvas, here reproduced by photography, measures about 65 by 41 ins., and bears the following inscription :—"Taunton Castle East Indiaman, Capt. Urmston, built by Mr. Barnard ; for Sr. Benjamin Hammet, 1790." It is very appropriate that the Castle should itself furnish the one thing needed to complete the history.