



0. FIRE SHIPS and the BATTLE OF GRAVELINES - Story  
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The British sent eight fire ships toward the Armada, causing the Spaniards to worry about their wooden vessels. This painting, by Hendrik Cornelisz Vroom (creator of the House of Lords tapestries), depicts the still-famous event. Entitled "Day Seven of the Battle with the Armada, 7 August 1588," the oil-on-canvas is now maintained by the Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum, in Innsbruck (Austria).

Sir Francis Drake had tried a new technique in a prior battle with the Spanish. Setting old ships on fire, then using the wind to send them toward enemy ships, had been effective at the Spanish port of Cadiz in 1587.

Drake thought it would work well again during the summer of 1588. The idea was also in keeping with Lord Effingham's orders to assault the Spanish fleet rather than attacking the Armada head-on.

The British used eight old ships, loaded them up with flammable materials, set them on fire and directed them toward the Spanish fleet. Although they failed to set opposing ships ablaze, the fire ships terrified some of the Spaniards.

They broke their crescent formation, despite Medina-Sedonia's explicit orders against it, thereby setting up the fierce battle of Gravelines (off the then-Flemish coast) which occurred the next day. Worse, to get away quickly, they cut their anchors, leaving them without future protection against storms (among other things).

William Camden, who wrote that he used all available sources to record the most accurate history he could for both sides, says this about the fire ships:

... the Lord Admirall made ready eight of his worst shippes, besmeared with wild-fire, pitch, and rosin, and filled with brimstone and other combustible matter, and sent them downe the winde into the dead of the night under the guiding of Young and Prowse, into the Spanish fleete.

Which when the Spanyards espied approaching towards them, the whole sea being light with the flame thereof, supposing that those incendiary shippes, besides the danger of the fire, were also provided of deadly engins and murdering inventions, they raised a pittifull cry, weighed anchor, cutt their cables, and in a terrible panic feare, with great haste and confusion put to sea.

Amongst which the great Galleasse [a ship with sails and oars, capable of moving with no wind], having broken her rudder, floated up and downe, and the next day fearefully making towards Calys [Calais], ranne aground upon the sands ... (Camden, *Annales Rerum Angliae et Hiberniae Regnante Elizabetha*, 1588, Section 26)

The August 8th battle of Gravelines was so fierce that both sides effectively exhausted their ammunition. For much of the battle, like much of the entire campaign, the Spanish were fighting both the British and the wind (which appeared to be pushing Spanish ships into the shoals).

Then, the wind shifted. Philip's ships were able to escape into the North Sea. Although battered, the Armada was effectively undefeated. Bloodied, the Spaniards were unbowed. The official Spanish account expresses relief:

*From this desperate peril [the battle at Gravelines] we were saved by God's mercy.*

But ... Elizabeth's fleet was also undefeated. Philip's Armada, en route for months to achieve his objectives, did not succeed on this August day.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/FIRE-SHIPS-and-the-BATTLE-OF-GRAVELINES-Elizabeth-I-The-Golden-Age>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/FIRE-SHIPS-and-the-BATTLE-OF-GRAVELINES-Elizabeth-I-The-Golden-Age>

## Media Stream



Sir Francis Drake

Image online, courtesy the [National Portrait Gallery](http://www.nationalportraitgallery.org.uk) website.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Sir-Francis-Drake>



Defense of Cadiz

Image online, courtesy the [Prado Museum](http://www.pradomuseum.org) website.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Defense-of-Cadiz>



Battle at the Spanish Port of Cadiz

This water-color painting online, courtesy the [jrusselljinishiangallery.com](http://www.jrusselljinishiangallery.com) website.

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Cadiz - Map Locator

Image online, courtesy [vacationstogo.com](http://www.vacationstogo.com) website.

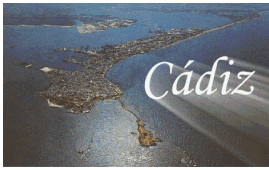
View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Cadiz-Map-Locator>



### Port of Cadiz - Satellite View

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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### Cadiz - Aerial View

Image online, courtesy the [University of Cadiz](http://www.universityofcadiz.es/) website.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Cadiz-Aerial-View>



### Fire Ships

Image online, courtesy the [bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk) website.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Fire-Ships>



### Spanish Armada Assaulted by the English Fleet

Image, described above, online via Wikipedia.

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View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Spanish-Armada-Assaulted-by-the-English-Fleet>



### Vanguard Engages two Spanish Galleons - 1588

Image online, courtesy the [britishbattles.com](http://www.britishbattles.com) website.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Vanguard-Engages-two-Spanish-Galleons-1588>



### Gravelines - Map Locator

Image online via Wikipedia.

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### Battle of Gravelines - Attack Following the Fire Ships

Image, described above, online via Wikimedia Commons.

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### Battle of Gravelines - Fierce Fighting

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Battle-of-Gravelines-Fierce-Fighting>

## Battle of Gravelines - King Philip's Armada Escapes Destruction

A significant battle, between the Spanish and English fleets, took place off Gravelines in August of 1588.

Today, Gravelines is part of France. At the time, in 1588, Gravelines was part of Spanish Netherlands. Its coastline is (and was) characterized by rocky shoals.

As the British and Spanish fleets made their way east, across the English Channel, neither side could claim a major victory. The Armada continued to maintain its crescent formation (making it very difficult for the British to attack the Spanish ships-in-formation).

Then ... British commanders decided to send eight "fire ships" toward the Spanish vessels. That decision caused the information Spanish ships to break formation. We [learn more about it](#) from the BBC:

*On the night of 7 August, English fireships broke the Spanish formation, and Medina Sidonia's ships 'scattered in a thousand directions'. Until then, the English had not dared to properly engage with the Armada. Even now, they hesitated long enough before opening fire for the Spaniards to form a fighting rearguard, in the teeth of a strong current that claimed two ships and threatened to drive the rest onto the shore.*

*The ensuing battle...is traditionally seen by English historians as a great English victory. In fact, the English failed to press their advantage. Sir Francis Drake's squadron led the attack, but Drake himself quickly slipped away from the fighting, presumably in search of prizes, drawing charges of 'cowardice or knavery' from fellow-commanders.*

*The English continued to use the wind, which remained in their favour, as it had been throughout almost the entire campaign, to hold off, much to the anger of the Spaniards, who would have been able to make use of their superior manpower had the English tried to board their vessels. Although overall the Armada had abundant stocks of shot, most of the front-line Spanish ships ran out of heavy ammunition before the English closed the range.*

*As a result, the English suffered almost no damage at Gravelines, and the Spanish relatively little. Towards seven o'clock in the evening, the English broke off the fight, probably because of the worsening weather and the apparently inexorable drift of the Armada towards the shoals. The following day, however, said the official Spanish account, 'From this desperate peril we were saved by God's mercy.'*

*The wind shifted. The Armada escaped northwards, essentially intact and effectively undefeated, scotched but not killed, bloodied but unbowed. The English commander thought he had 'plucked its feathers'. The Spaniards, though apprehensive about how long their fleet could remain battleworthy, were willing to renew the fight. (From "Armada Gallery," by Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, online via the BBC.)*

*The image, at the top of this page, depicts one of John Pine's engravings (Plate IX) memorializing tapestries which once were displayed at the House of Lords (before fire destroyed them in 1834). It shows the Spanish Fleet heading north, after the Battle of Gravelines.*

*Click on the top image for a better view. It will help you to see the flag which Spanish ships flew in 1588 (shown below).*



*Image, described above, part of the Hans and Hanni Kraus Sir Francis Drake Collection (Library of Congress). John Pine, Engraver.*

*Drawn by Hubert François Gravelot (French, Paris 1699-1773 Paris) and Clement Lemprière (British (?), active in London, 18th century) based on the House of Lord Tapestries created by Hendrick (Cornelisz) Vroom (a Dutchman, from Haarlem, circa 1563-1640 Haarlem).*

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[View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Battle-of-Gravelines-King-Philip-s-Armada-Escapes-Destruction>](http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Battle-of-Gravelines-King-Philip-s-Armada-Escapes-Destruction)



## Battle of Gravelines - Spanish Fought the British and the Wind

After the Battle of Gravelines, in 1588, the Spanish Armada headed back to Spain. The route home, however, would be extremely long, difficult and—for many seamen—deadly.

With the wind blowing from the south, the only direction the heavy Spanish galleons could head was north (since they had to sail with the wind behind them). To reach Spain by the best-possible route, the men would have wanted to sail west, initially, and then south (which is where they needed to be in order to reach Spain).

Even if the Spanish ships could have sailed against the wind, the English fleet was blocking the route west (across the English Channel). This put the Armada in a very difficult position.

The Spanish fleet had to sail home first by traveling north (along the British and Scottish coasts), then west (around Scotland), then south (along the rocky coast of Ireland).

The map, depicted above, was created by Robert Adams (an English cartographer) who produced seven maps for a book (*Expeditionis Hispanorum in Angliam*), published in 1590, chronicling the Armada battles. This illustration (Map 7) illustrates "Expeditions of the Spanish in England" (the English translation of the book's title).

If we could position Adams' map over a modern map, what would we see?

NASA's Landsat satellite images allows us to do precisely that. The image, below, depicts the area of Adams' map as it appeared between May and October of 2013.



NASA image, by Mike Taylor, using Landsat 8 OLI bands 4,3,2, between May and October of 2013.

Click on both images for a much-better view.

Image of Robert Adams' map, described above, online courtesy NASA.

NASA image, described above, created using Landsat 8 OLI bands 4,3,2. The image, collected between May and October of 2013, by Mike Taylor using Landsat data available from the USGS archive.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Battle-of-Gravelines-Spanish-Fought-the-British-and-the-Wind>



## Spanish Armada - Map of 1588 Battle Locations

Map image online via Wikipedia.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Spanish-Armada-Map-of-1588-Battle-Locations>



## FIRE SHIPS and the BATTLE OF GRAVELINES

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