

II.—JEAN BART'S DESCENT ON THE COAST OF NORTHUMBERLAND IN 1691.

By WILLIAM WEAVER TOMLINSON.

[Read on the 27th of September, 1899.]

The incident dealt with in my paper to-night has been almost entirely overlooked by our historians. Macaulay, it is true, alludes to it in very general terms, but places it in the autumn of 1692. 'Jean Bart,' he says, 'even ventured to land in Northumberland, and burnt many houses before the train-bands could be collected to oppose him.'¹ Details of the occurrence have been accumulating in my hands for some time, and I now feel justified in putting before you with some particularity the story of the almost forgotten descent of Jean Bart on our coast.

In the spring and summer of 1691 a large squadron of English and Dutch warships, under the command of Vice-Admiral Sir Ralph Delaval,² one of our Northumbrian men of mark, was engaged in blockading Dunkirk. In the harbour lay nineteen large men of war,³ recently refitted for service, three of sixty-four guns, one of sixty-two guns, and the rest, with two exceptions, of from thirty-six to fifty-two guns a-piece, which, it was supposed, were intended to convey munitions to Ireland and co-operate with Tourville's fleet in an attack on some part of the British coast. The commander of this squadron was the redoubtable Jean Bart, the son of a Dunkirk fisherman, whose deeds of daring had made him the naval hero of his time. He was brilliantly supported in his adventurous projects by an officer sprung from a very different station in life—Claude de Forbin, who, five years earlier, had accompanied the French ambassador to Siam, and been appointed admiral of the king of that

¹ *Hist. of England*, vol. iv. pp. 292-3.

² March 12, 1690-91. Sir Ralph Delavall is sail'd from the buoy in the Nore with a squadron of 15 men of warr, and is ordered to cruize off Dunkirk to prevent a squadron of French men of war that are there from joineing the Brest fleet. Luttrell's *A Brief Historical Relation of State Affairs*, vol. ii. p. 194. May, 1691. Sir Ralph Delavall continues with his squadron to block up Dunkirk. *Ibid.* p. 224.

³ Luttrell's *A Brief Historical Relation of State Affairs, from September 1678. to April 1714*, vol. ii. p. 253, and *London Gazette* for July 6th, 1691.

country, general of his armies, and governor of Bangkok. Bart and Forbin were the two French captains who, in May 1689, had made so sensational an escape from Plymouth by filing through the bars of their prison and then rowing across the Channel in a small ship's boat. Such men were capable of any enterprise, however hazardous.

After successfully checkmating Bart for two months, Sir Ralph Delaval seems to have been recalled, and, early in July we find Captain Bokenham in command of the squadron off Dunkirk.

The number of vessels engaged in the blockade has been greatly exaggerated by the French historians. One authority gives thirty-two,⁴ another thirty-seven,⁵ and a third forty.⁶ According to Burchett there were twenty-one, viz., eight English (six men of war of from fifty to sixty guns, one fire-ship, and one sloop) and thirteen Dutch (one of fifty-four guns, one of fifty-two, five of fifty, and six of from twenty to forty).⁷

On the 14th of July Bart made an attempt to get out to sea with sixteen of his ships, but the blockading squadron drew into a line, with fire-ships at each end. A few shots were exchanged, and the French retired again into the harbour.⁸ Clearly these large vessels, which could only be taken out in daylight, had little chance of getting past the allied fleets. But Bart was not the man to remain passive at a juncture like this. Seven light frigates and a fire-ship had been fitted up in Dunkirk in pursuance of a plan which he had recently submitted to the Comte de Pontchartrain, minister of the navy, for ruining the trade of the Dutch. With this small squadron he determined to make his escape. Taking on board five months' provisions⁹ he made his final preparations, and on Wednesday, July the 15th, in the night, he sailed out of the harbour at the spring tide.¹⁰

Silently forward through the darkness sped the skilfully handled frigates, steered by men who knew every inch of the roadstead, and, as they neared the blockading fleets, the gunners stood with their lint-

⁴ *Description Historique de Dunquerque*, by Pierre Faulconnier, 1730. Book viii. p. 101; and also *Jean Bart*, by Adolphe Badin. Paris, 1882, p. 111.

⁵ *Recueil des nouvelles ordinaires et extraordinaires, relations et récits des choses venues tant en ce royaume qu'ailleurs pendant l'année 1691.*

⁶ *Mémoires du Comte de Forbin*, vol. i.

⁷ Burchett's *Remarkable Transactions at Sea* (1720), book iv. chap. vii. pp. 440-1.

⁸ Luttrell's *A Brief Historical Relation of State Affairs*, vol. ii. p. 265.

⁹ *Cal. of State Papers* (Dom.), 1690-1, p. 456.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 457.

stocks in their hands¹¹ ready to pour in a broadside at the first sign of alarm. According to Colonel Austin, speaking in the House of Commons, 'they came out on the Dutch side and not on ours'¹²—a statement confirmed by Luttrell¹³—afterwards 'sailing along shore as far as Ostend before they set out to sea.'¹⁴ Their escape being at length discovered, eighteen or twenty ships went in pursuit of them, but at daybreak the bold Dunkirk corsairs were out of sight.¹⁵ Towards the evening Bart fell in with three large merchantmen bound for Russia, convoyed by a man-of-war of forty-four guns. He had received information about these ships ten days before they left London, and it was part of his project to intercept them.¹⁶ Forbin hovered near them all night, making them believe he was English and came from Flushing. About five o'clock the next morning—July the 17th—being then ten leagues W.S.W. from Yarmouth, Forbin hoisted the white flag, and after a short engagement, in which he lost six men and the English forty, the ships were taken and sent off to Bergen, in Norway, under the escort of one of the frigates of the squadron.¹⁷ It is gratifying to learn that three days later one of the largest of these prizes, the 'Tiger,' valued at from £40,000 to £50,000, and a Danish buss, containing the prisoners, were recaptured by an English galley from Elsinore.¹⁸ Another prize taken by Bart on the 17th was a Dutch collier, which he sank.¹⁹ Two days later he captured on the Dogger Bank ten or twelve Dutch herring-busses with a small man-of-war convoying them.²⁰ Eighty is the number given by the French authorities.

¹¹ Letter from M. Patoulet, Governor of Dunkirk, to A. M. de Villermont, dated Dunkirk, the 26th (?16th) July, 1691:—'En accusant Monsieur la réception de la lettre que vous m'avez fait l'honneur de m'écrire je vous donnerai avis du passage de l'escadre de M. Bart, cette nuit à travers de trente sept vaisseaux des ennemis, dont dix-huit ou vingt lui donnent à présent chasse, et, je crois, assez inutilement. M. Bart a été près de quinze jours dans la rade sans que les ennemis aient jugé à propos de venir l'attaquer; les vaisseaux de son escadre n'étant que de quarante pièces de canon (les plus forts) ils sont sortis du port le boutefeux à la main.'—*Histoire de la Marine Française*, by Eugène Sue, vol. iv. p. 290.

¹² *Parl. Hist. of England*, vol. v, p. 657.

¹³ 'Passing by the Dutch squadron that were to block them up.'—Luttrell, vol. ii. p. 268.

¹⁴ *Cal. of State Papers (Dom.)*, 1690–1, p. 457.

¹⁵ *Mémoires du Comte de Forbin*, vol. i.

¹⁶ *Cal. of State Papers (Dom.)*, 1690–1, p. 455.

¹⁷ *Mémoires du Comte de Forbin*, vol. i.

¹⁸ *Cal. State Papers (Dom.)*, 1690–1, p. 455.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 458.

²⁰ Luttrell's *A Brief Historical Relation of State Affairs*, vol. ii. p. 270.

These he burnt as being of little value, and their crews he shortly afterwards landed on the English coast.²¹ Ranging along towards Newcastle, with designs no doubt on the fleets of colliers, which he fortunately does not seem to have encountered, he found himself on Tuesday, the 21st of July, off the Northumberland coast, with a stately castle and some small villages in sight.²²

Forbin erroneously surmised that they were off the coasts of Scotland.²³ It was decided to land some men and burn the villages. Such a deed would make no little stir in the country, and the fame of the squadron would be noised abroad. An English renegade of the name of Chetworth or Thetford piloted the French ships into Druridge Bay²⁴: these were the 'Alcion,' a frigate of forty-four guns, which Jean Bart had commanded at the battle off Beachy Head the previous year, the 'Conte,' the 'Heureuse,' the 'Seux' (?), the 'Tigre,' the 'Aurore,' the 'Railleur,' and the 'Sorcière,' the latter being the fire-ship.²⁵ Some privateers seem to have accompanied the squadron out of Dunkirk, and probably were also present, for the captain of one of these vessels, a renegade Scotchman of the name of Melford or Milford, was afterwards charged with having taken part in this affair.²⁶ Bart left Forbin to carry out the plan of the expedition. The latter having landed somewhere in the neighbourhood of Druridge Links no doubt, stationed twenty-five men in a suitable position for protecting the boats and covering his retreat in case he were driven back, and advanced through the fields at the head of his party.²⁷ They first pillaged and set fire to the village of Widdrington, and then forced their way into Widdrington Castle, the seat of the third Lord Widdrington. After carrying away all the valuables they found there—the money, plate and household goods, they burnt the barns, stables and outhouses, with

²¹ *Mémoires du Comte de Forbin*, vol. i. ²² *Ibid.* p. 315. ²³ *Ibid.* p. 315.

²⁴ Luttrell's *A Brief Historical Relation of State Affairs*, vol. ii. p. 152-3.

²⁵ *Cal. of State Papers (Dom.)*, 1690-1, p. 458.

²⁶ Luttrell's *A Brief Historical Relation of State Affairs*, vol. ii. p. 435. Capt. Jas. Wishart, commander of the *Mary* galley, in a letter dated July 23rd, 1691, gives the strength of Bart's squadron as seven men-of-war, one fire-ship, and twelve privateers (*Cal. of State Papers (Dom.)*, 1690-1, p. 458). and Burchett reduces this number somewhat, 'About this time fifteen or sixteen Privateers got out of *Dunkirk*, and ranging along the northern coast, under the command of Monsieur *Du Bart*, landed in *Northumberland*, and there they burnt a House of Lord *Widdrington's* and did some other mischief.'—*Remarkable Transactions at Sea* (1720), book iv. c. vii. p. 444.

²⁷ *Mémoires du Comte de Forbin*, vol. i. p. 315.

several cottages thereabouts.²⁸ Forbin afterwards regretted this sacking of the castle, for he discovered from the ornaments taken from the private chapel that the house belonged to a Roman Catholic.²⁹ The marauders then proceeded to Chibburn and Druridge, burning a farmhouse at the former place—the old preceptory of the Knights Hospitallers—and three or four houses at the latter.³⁰ They had only just completed their work of destruction when a small body of cavalry and infantry, hastily gathered together in the neighbourhood, and, consequently, very badly equipped, arrived on the scene. The French retired in good order and the cavalry dashed forward to the boats. However, the officer in charge of the detachment already referred to fired upon them and obliged them to retire. Forbin and his men then embarked with their ‘loot,’ and regained the squadron without further molestation. One man only was missing, and he lost his life through his cupidity, for having loaded himself with more booty than he could carry, he fell behind and was overtaken by the cavalry and killed.³¹

Most of the French accounts of the descent state that about two hundred houses were burnt,³² but this is clearly an exaggeration. From the briefs authorising collections in churches for the inhabitants of the devastated villages we learn that the damage done was estimated at £6,000.³³ Before leaving the northern coasts Bart captured several fishing-boats, which he scuttled or burnt,³⁴ and so, having done as much damage as possible in a comparatively short period, he made his way back to Dunkirk, rich in booty and fame. As Forbin had anticipated, the news of the landing quickly spread throughout the

²⁸ *London Gazette*, July 23-27, 1691. Quoted by T. P. Armstrong in *Notes and Queries*, 9 ser. iv. p. 152; also *Gazette de France*, August 25th, 1691, p. 539.

²⁹ *Mémoires du Comte de Forbin*, vol. i. p. 317.

³⁰ *London Gazette*, July 23-27, and *Gazette de France*, August 25th, 1691, p. 539.

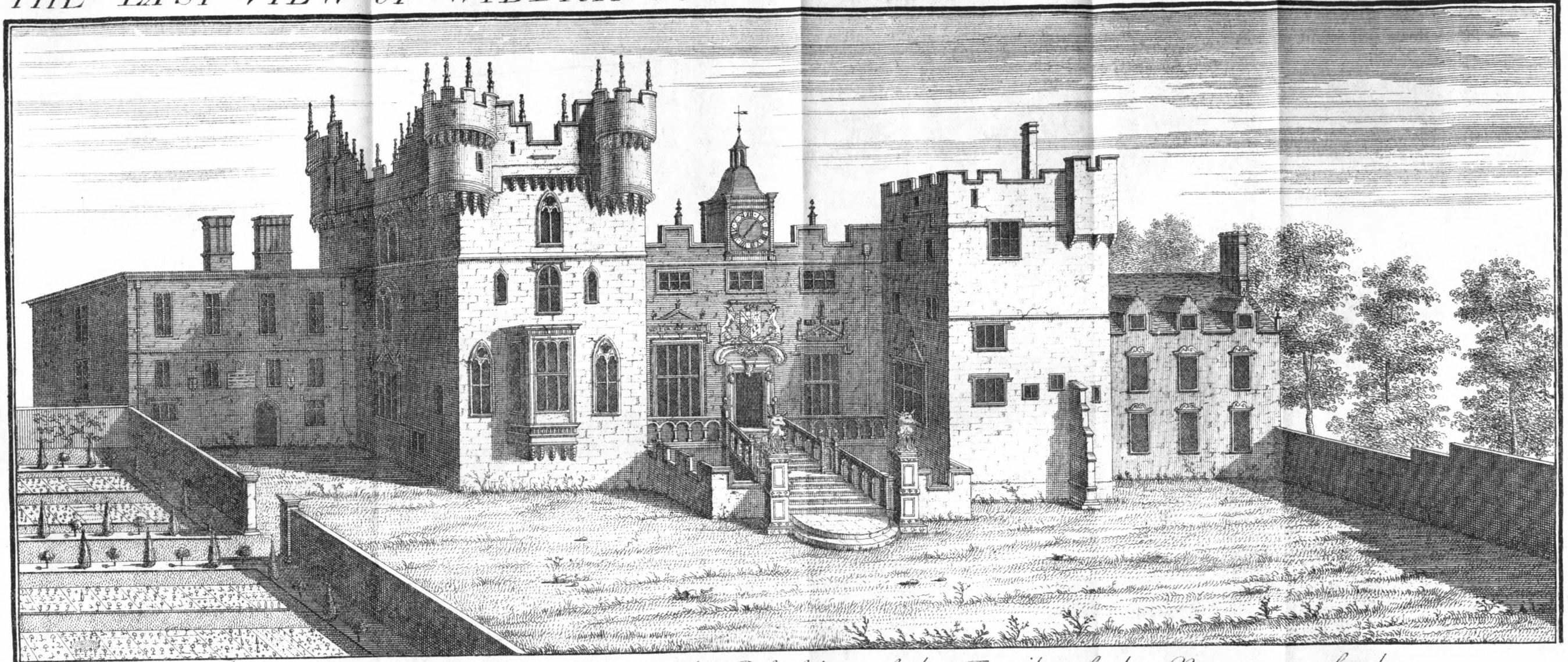
³¹ *Mémoires du Comte de Forbin*, vol. i. p. 317.

³² Richer in his *Vie de Jean Bart*, p. 118, improves on this number. According to this author Bart burnt ‘environ cinq cents maisons.’

³³ ‘1692-3. Druridge, Widdrington, and Chibburn. Damaged by fire and by the French. Loss estimated at £6,000.’ W. A. Bewes’ *Church Briefs* (1896).

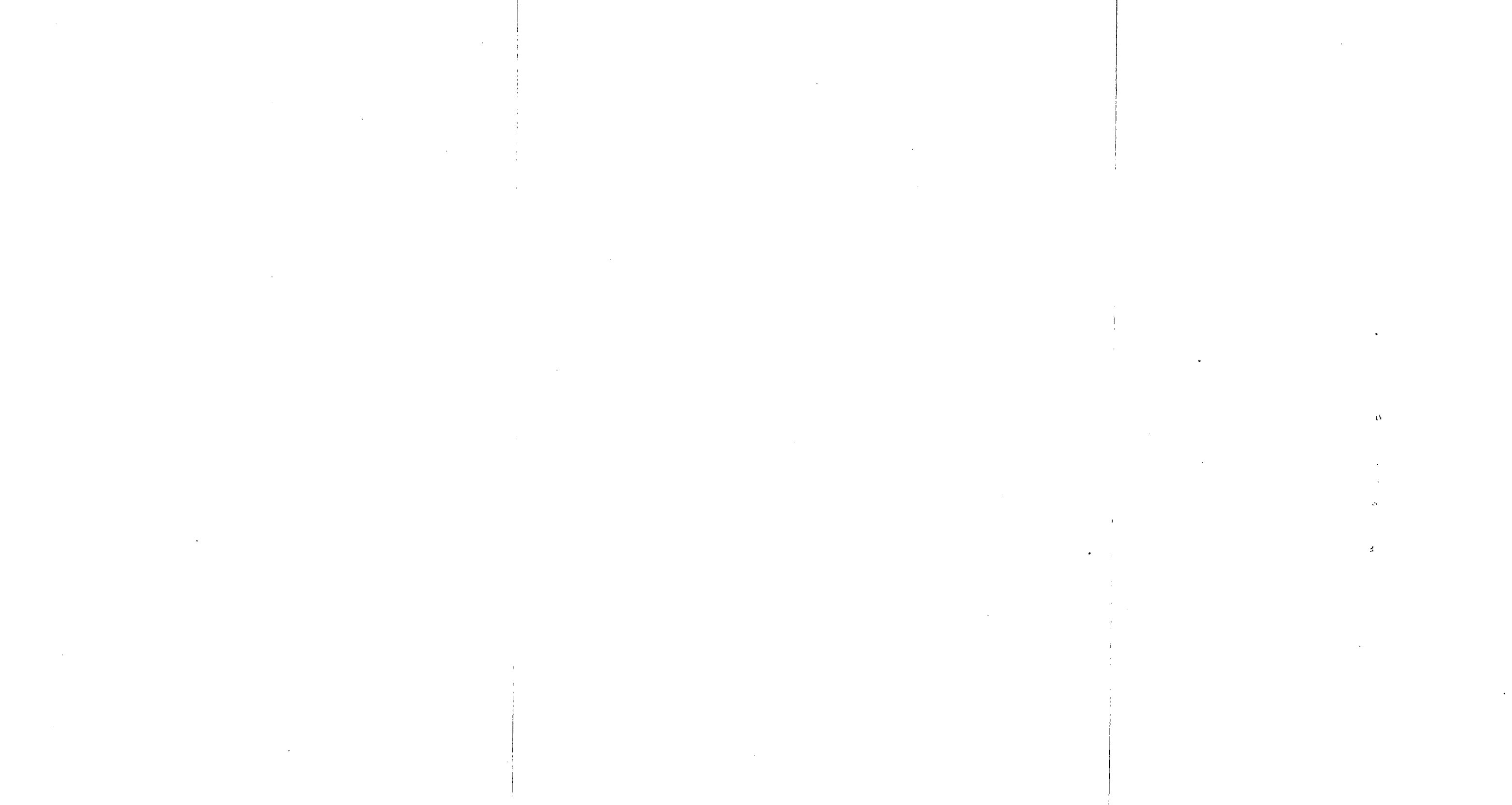
³⁴ ‘Il y a plusieurs armateurs Français sur les costes d’Écosse qui ont pris depuis peu quarante deux bastiments Hollandois occupez à la pesche du harang, près de Montrosse. Ils ont coulé les bastiments à fond et mis à terre les matelots.’ De Londres le 24 Aoust, 1691. *Recueil des nouvelles ordinaires et extraordinaires, etc.*, 1691.

THE EAST VIEW OF WIDDRINGTON CASTLE IN NORTHUMBERLAND.



This Castle hath for many Years been in the Possession of the Family of that Name, one of whom Roger de Widdrington was Sheriff of the County of Northumberland, 36. Edward 3. & by descent in a direct Line came to S^r Will^m. Widdrington K^t. advanced by King Charles the first to the Dignity of a Baron of this Realm, who lost his Life in Lancashire fighting to restore King Charles the Second.

S. & N. Buck delin. & sculp. 1728.



country. Robert Harley, writing to Sir Edward Harley, July 25th, 1691, informed him, 'an express brought tidings last night that the ships which got out of Dunkirk had landed some men in Northumberland, who plundered and then burnt the house of Lord Widdrington, a papist';³⁵ and Sir William Hamilton of Whitelaw, in a letter to William, earl of Annandale, dated July 30th, 1691, wrote, 'The privateers of Dunkirk burned a gentelman's house of Northumberland. The council of Scotland sent a boat after the privateers to discover their whereabouts.'³⁶ For two years after the affair collections continued to be made in the churches for the benefit of the sufferers. Billingham Church, Co. Durham, contributed three shillings and seven pence on July 31st, 1692,³⁷ and Ormesby St. Margaret's three shillings and four pence on April 3rd, 1693,³⁸ and research would no doubt bring to light many other instances. Echoes of the affair were also heard in the assize courts two years and more afterwards. From Luttrell we learn that 'Captain Melford, taken on board the French privateer on the Goodwin Sands, with other English, were examined yesterday [April 27th, 1692] before council; he is charged for burning the lord Widdrington's house in Northumberland, and is thereon committed to Newgate, and will be speedily tried.'³⁹ He is referred to again, on November 29th, 1692, this time as 'Captain Milford, a sea-officer, supposed to be captain of the French privateer who burnt the lord Widdrington's house in the north,'⁴⁰ and then he drops out of sight. In August, 1693, however, Nemesis overtakes another miscreant. Under date of August 3rd Luttrell records, 'One Chetworth, who piloted in the French privateers that burnt the lord Widdrington's house 2 years since, being taken in a privateer and sent prisoner to Newgate, is sent prisoner to Newcastle to be tried.'⁴¹

The assizes began Tuesday, August 15th, before Sir Edward Nevill and Sir John Powell, and being brought to trial, Chetworth, or, as he is afterwards called, Thetford, 'pleaded guilty to the

³⁵ MSS. of the Duke of Portland, *Hist. MSS. Comm. 14th Rept., app.* ii. p. 471.

³⁶ MSS. of J. J. Hope Johnstone, esq., of Annandale, *Hist. MSS. Comm. 15th Rept. app.* ix. p. 57.

³⁷ *Proc. Soc. Ant. of Newcastle*, vol. iv. p. 150.

³⁸ *Notes and Queries*, ii. series, vol. ii. p. 223.

³⁹ Luttrell's *A Brief Historical Relation of State Affairs*, vol. ii. p. 435.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 627.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* vol. iii. p. 152-3.

indictment.’⁴² The depositions in York castle for this period are unfortunately in some disorder or further particulars might have been gleaned from them respecting this landing of the French on the coast of Northumberland. What we naturally suppose would be the sequel to the affair is given by Luttrell under date of September 14th. ‘Thetford, who piloted in the French privateers, has been executed at Newcastle.’⁴³ But five days later he adds, ‘Thetford, the pilott, said to be executed at Newcastle, proves a mistake.’⁴⁴ What eventually became of Thetford I have not been able to discover.

In 1694 we narrowly escaped having another visit from Jean Bart in these parts, for in the instructions given to him by the king, on August 19th, his majesty recommends him, not only to destroy all the English and Dutch fishing along the coasts of England and Scotland, but to take steps to capture some fleet of Newcastle colliers (‘quelque flotte de charbonniers de Neufchâtel’), as such an expedition, he knows, would make the people of London cry out very loudly, and this would be exceedingly opportune at the particular juncture.⁴⁵ It may possibly have been two of Bart’s privateers which, in October 1695, landed some men near Shields and burnt two houses. They, however, had not the good fortune or adroitness of the famous Dunkirk captain, for on putting to sea with their booty they were taken by two Dutch privateers.⁴⁶

The descent of Jean Bart on the coast of Northumberland forms the subject of a small engraving by Yves le Gouaz—it is one of a series depicting the chief sea-fights of the Dunkirk hero—but as this Breton engraver was not born till 1742, and in all probability was never in the north of England, the dim undulating line of coast represented, with the frigates lying off it, may safely be assumed to be an imaginary sketch.

⁴² Luttrell’s *A Brief Historical Relation of State Affairs*, vol. iii. p. 174.

⁴³ *Ibid.* vol. iii. p. 185. ⁴⁴ *Ibid.* vol. iii. p. 188.

⁴⁵ *Histoire de la Marine Française*, by Eugene Sue, vol. iv. p. 295.

⁴⁶ Luttrell’s *A Brief Historical Relation of State Affairs*, vol. iii. p. 540.

APPENDIX.

A quelques jours de là, comme nous étions sur les côtes d'Écosse je proposai à Barth de faire une descente et de brûler quelques villages qui étoient à vûë, parmi lesquels il y avoit un très-beau chateau. Cette expédition, me parut d'autant plus convenable que vraisemblablement elle devoit faire du bruit dans le Pais et donneroit de la reputation à l'escadre. Barth approuva ma proposition, et me laissa toute la conduite de cette affaire. Après avoir mis pied à terre, je fis retrancher vingt-cinq Hommes, dans un endroit propre à couvrir les chaloupes et les canots, et à favoriser la retraite en cas que je fus repoussé par les Ennemis. Je m'avançai ensuite dans les terres, à la tête de tout mon Monde, et je commençai mon attaque. Les Villages furent brulez et pilléz, aussi bien que le Chateau, auquel j'eus grand regret, car je connus par les Ornemens qui avoient été enlevéz à la Chapelle que la Maison appartenoit à un Catholique Romain. Au bruit de cette expédition, les Ecossois qui s'étoient assemblez des environs, formèrent à la hâte, un petit corps de Cavalerie, et un autre corps d'infanterie le tout assez mal ordonné. Informé de cette démarche des Ennemis je me retirai en bon ordre ; la Cavalerie ennemie voulut nous poursuivre, et s'approcher de la Marine mais l'officier retranché ayant fait un décharge sur eux les obligea de se retirer. Je ne perdis qu'un seul Homme dans cette expédition ; encore ne périt-il que par son trop d'avarice ; car s'étant chargé de butin au delà de ce qu'il pouvoit en porter, il resta derrière et fut tué par la Cavalerie qui l'atteignit. Avant que de quitter ces Côtes, nous fimes encore plusieurs autres prises de Pêcheurs que nous brulâmes. *Mémoires du Comte de Forbin, chef d'escadre, chevalier de l'ordre militaire de Saint Louis.* Amsterdam, 1730, vol i. pp. 315-317.