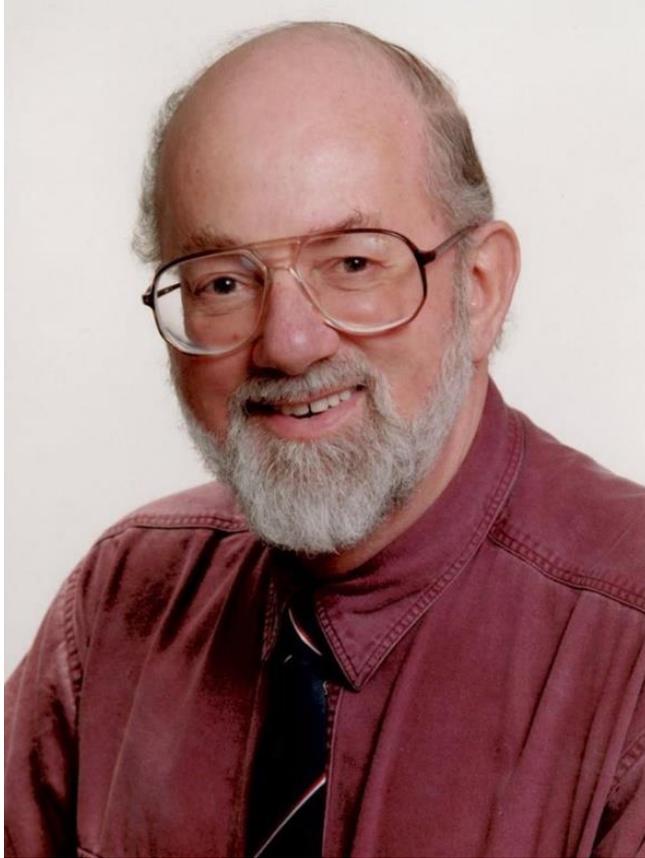


## Transcript of a conversation between Ted Gundry and WG, date and location unknown



Porthleven-born Ted Gundry was a well-loved radio broadcaster who spent many years as the voice of BBC Radio Cornwall, of which he was a founder member. He was also a bard of Gorsedh Kernow, a governor of Helston Community College, president of Porthleven Gig Club and a former treasurer and secretary of the Cornish Pilot Gig Association. On his death, aged 81, in 2016, BBC colleagues paid tribute to "a true master of the art of the radio interview"; to BBC Radio Cornwall presenter Laurence Reed he was "an icon of radio broadcasting."<sup>1</sup>

During his radio career with the BBC, Gundry set out to preserve the day-to-day activities of those living in the county and [cornishmemory.com](http://cornishmemory.com) now holds his archive of more than 500 Cornish voices captured on 348 recordings, the whole constituting an irreplaceable treasure trove preserving the sounds and recollections of those with whom, from the 1970s on, he "had a little chat". Some of his older, earlier interviewees recount their memories from the 19th century. Many of the accents have since disappeared. Gundry travelled widely, visiting Cornish communities across the globe.<sup>2</sup> One of those to whom he talked was Winston Graham.<sup>3</sup>

The archive attributes the Graham tape to the "1940s" which is clearly wrong since at one point Gundry references WG's "now republished ... *Spanish Armadas*". Following its first publication by Collins in 1972, the book was republished by Fontana in 1976, by Collins in 1987, by Penguin in 2001 and by Bello in 2013. The last is not possible, since WG was by then

ten years dead and 2001 is highly unlikely since at 93 he was not giving many interviews. The likeliest recording years, then, are 1976 or 1987.

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TED GUNDRY: Well, I've got with me now Winston Graham and we're talking about the Spanish armada and in particular the subsequent armadas, not necessarily the armadas of 1588. Cornwall is rather special in this respect, isn't it, Winston, because we certainly featured in the subsequent armadas?

WINSTON GRAHAM: Oh, yes, very much so. Of course, we did to some extent feature in the first armada as well, but the whole thing I think one has to keep in mind is that this is a picture of a whole half-century of conflict. The first armada didn't come out as a nice little fight somewhere between England and Spain. It derived from twenty years of tension between Philip and Elizabeth and, before that, Philip's marriage to Mary and things and I would like to make plain my view, before we get on to the later armadas, that the first armada was not, as some people think, defeated by weather, it was defeated by the British, or the English. It was eventually wrecked by the weather when, having been defeated by the British, they decided, against the advice of some of their more warlike captains, not to force a way back through the Channel but to go around the north of Scotland again. Then they struck the terrible storms and were beaten to pieces on the Irish coast. This is quite a different thing from the second, third and fourth armadas, all of which were in fact destroyed by weather. The first one was fairly abortive and didn't get very far beyond Biscay, the second one actually had a venue in the Scillies and it arrived off the Cornish coast and there is a story – I'm not sure it's totally authenticated – that certain groups of Spaniards did in fact land around the area of the Helford river and then re-embarked again. Their objective on this third armada was in fact Falmouth and there is a very strong suspicion that John Killigrew, who was then Commander, was prepared to allow them in without fighting. There is in fact a record of the fact that the Spanish said that Killigrew and Falmouth were safe.

TG: One man who featured in those adventures was a gentleman called Richard Burley, who was quite a character by all accounts.

WG: Oh, indeed he was. In fact, I've used him in the novel *The Grove of Eagles* first, but he was a sea captain who seemed to be able to live with both sides. He was in fact a complete renegade.

TG: And was always there, seemingly, on these raids, giving the Spanish guidance on how to land and where best to land and so on.

WG: Yes, indeed. Of course, before the second armada, the Spanish – four galleys under a chap called Amésquita, I think – did land at Mousehole on a raid simply from France and they burned part of Mousehole, went up to Paul, then they re-embarked, disembarked again at Penzance, set fire to parts of Penzance – what there was then of it – and they celebrated Mass on the hill and a scratch force was brought by Sir Francis Godolphin who tried to drive them away or keep them contained. What did in fact drive them away was news that Drake was on his way from Plymouth.

TG: Do you think at this stage, then, that if they had landed with a bigger force, that they could have used Cornwall as the back door to England?

WG: Oh, that was their whole aim. They were going to establish a bridge-head from the Tamar – Tamar west, they were going to ... and I don't think there was anything in Cornwall which would have stopped them. What did stop them was the great gale, but it was an enormous armada – practically as big as the second – this is the third one I'm talking about, 1597, I think – but it was an enormous armada and it was perhaps better equipped because it was commanded by men who had had the experience of the first armada and knew exactly what they had to contend with.

TG: And they came in more or less unopposed, didn't they, because our fleets, I think, were out in the western Atlantic?

WG: They'd all gone to the Azores or something and I think that was a – Elizabeth was absolutely furious later on, to discover how totally unguarded the west coasts were at that time. If the winds were ever Protestant, they were on that occasion.

TG: Yes, this Protestant wind that we've heard about, it always seemed to save the day, didn't it? And modern historians make a lot of that, don't

they, as you were saying just now, it was the winds that really brought about the destruction of the armada.

WG: Well, that's phony; absolute rubbish, I think. I think it's equally rubbish to say that the armada solved nothing. It solved a great deal. It established England for the first time, instead of being just a little unimportant island on the periphery of Europe, it established it as a major European power. It re-established Elizabeth and the Protestant succession and it completely defeated Philip's plans to reconquer England, although as soon as the news came that the first armada had been defeated, he went into the chapel and said to God he must have sinned in some terrible way to have had this failure and he thereupon immediately set about building another armada.

TG: Yes, he didn't really seem by all accounts to be all that upset. There wasn't a great deal of recrimination following the defeat of that first armada.

WG: Well, there was no recrimination for Medina Sidonia, who was in command. He was certainly vilified by a lot of the people in Spain, but Philip greeted him because he had in fact obeyed all the orders that had been given to him and I think he promoted him in the end. I think it's a great mistake to suppose that these men who sailed even in the first armada – except for Medina Sidonia himself, who was *not* a sailor – they were all extremely good, weather-wise sailors, and they knew how to sail their ships. It may be that the ships were fairly unhandy, but they were all good sailors.

TG: There was with the third armada, I think, and in the book that you've written – *The Spanish Armadas*, which is now republished – with the third armada I think the Spanish were pretty confident they could win the day, weren't they, because in your research you've discovered a proclamation that was smuggled out by a Cornish sea captain.

WG: Yes, a proclamation in English to be distributed all over Cornwall as soon as they landed, and the instructions were that everybody in Pendennis Castle was to be spared and everyone else put to the sword – those were the instructions, but this was a sort of document which was supposed to win over the English, those that were left.

TG: How did this Cornish sea captain get hold of that, I wonder?

WG: I don't know. That's beyond me. It's something that was brought in and it exists as a document. Clearly, you can see the holes that it was folded in, to fit presumably into a shoe.

TG: Sir Francis Drake, we've heard a lot about him. How would you sum him up as a man? Was he the man that we think he was? A fine sea captain, a leader of men and so on?

WG: Oh, yes, he was a great sea captain, one of the greatest ever. One thinks of that voyage round the world, which was an incredible achievement, apart from his wonderful achievements in Mexico and South America and his raid on various parts of the ... the singeing of the King of Spain's beard and all these things. He was to some extent a buccaneer and, you know, a tiny bit of a privateer because he was fighting for England but also fighting for himself. But he had, of course, very much a Puritanical upbringing and, to him, anybody in the Catholic religion obviously belonged to the devil and he was tremendously devoted to defeating anything that came from Spain.

TG: Hawkins of Plymouth, he was another great sailor as well. The work which he did in refurbishing the British fleet.

WG: Well, I think that some people say that he was in some ways almost more important than Drake because he did in fact design the ships, which were better sailers and lower-built than the Spanish and that, in a way, he was the architect of the victory.

TG: And, indeed, I think just a little later the Spanish copied his design, didn't they?

WG: Yes, I believe they did and I think it was just about the end of the galleys. I think there were no more galleys after the first armada.

TG: I wonder why it is that nobody has really developed the theme of Hawkins and Drake and produced books or, rather, plays for television based on those characters?

WG: That I don't know. I suppose it could be that they are such figures of notability and greatness that they could easily become figures of fun. I don't know whether that is it. Whether our present generation don't like to think of people as being great men, I don't know, but other than that I can think of no reason why one – you're telling me something I didn't know. Have there been no plays that have been centred around Drake?

TG: Not on Drake or Hawkins or Richard Grenville for that matter.

WG: Grenville was a tremendous character, but the trouble with a chap like Grenville is that his whole life ended in this tremendous battle in which he eventually died – he died a few days afterwards – and how one could put that on television I don't quite know. Similarly, most of Drake's exploits were at sea and these again are things which are very difficult to photograph.

TG: As is the case of Captain Bligh and the *Bounty* and all the difficulties that *that* came across. Sir Walter Raleigh, he was more or less in charge of the land defences, wasn't he, here in Cornwall?

WG: Yes, he was Lord Lieutenant of Cornwall and, I think, did his job very well. But again, he was responsible partly for the absence of the ships which the third armada nearly took advantage of. I think that was after Drake's death.

TG: Yes, I think he was going to Cadiz, wasn't he? No, he was in the Azores.

WG: He was in the Azores. He was after some treasure fleet or something.

TG: Out of the Spanish armada story is there any one individual that stands out in your mind? Someone, perhaps, that you would like to have met?

WG: Hmm, I suppose Elizabeth. She's the big mystery of all time – a woman who, I think, remained a spinster all her life but loved to have men fawning on her; who may have had her life a little bit warped in her early days by these sort of rather disgraceful love-plays made upon her by was it one of the Somersets or something? I don't know. I think that people think that because she was the daughter of Henry the Eighth, she was necessarily

highly sexed, but I think that inheritances very often jump a generation and I think she was very much more like Henry the Seventh, who was a very cold, calculating man, and I think Elizabeth was coldly calculating, but had a certain warmth which is inherent in a woman and I think her relationship with Philip was quite friendly for a long time. I think Philip did propose marriage to her on one occasion and she always wanted to remain friendly with him as long as he would leave her alone. So, to the very last protesting undying friendship to him, she sank his armada.

TG: Not a very friendly thing to do. [Both laugh.] But it was a case of intrigue, wasn't it? At the court of Elizabeth, it was intrigue and counter-intrigue, treachery and so on?

WG: Yes, yes, of course Leicester was one of her great men. She was a very good picker of men, even though she was susceptible to good looks, she didn't fail to appreciate the ill-looks of Robert Cecil, who was clever and wise and a good counsellor, yet she found Mountjoy – wasn't it Mountjoy, I think, who went to Ireland and was one of the few men ever to make a success of that job, and she favoured Drake and Raleigh and many great men. Many of them.

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## NOTES AND SOURCES

<sup>1</sup> *The Falmouth Packet*, 14 April 2016

<sup>2</sup> [azook.org.uk](http://azook.org.uk)

<sup>3</sup> WG presumably gave the interview so an edit could be broadcast on Radio Cornwall to help promote the "just republished" *Spanish Armadas* – but, if so, the broadcast date remains obscure.

Ted Gundry, "Winston Graham," *cornishmemory.com*, accessed 28 April 2022

[https://cornishmemory.com/item/GUN\\_CD\\_018\\_4](https://cornishmemory.com/item/GUN_CD_018_4)

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