

Queen Elizabeth I – Episode 2 - The Spanish Armada

Alice: Hello, and welcome to the Bitesize GCSE History podcast. I'm Alice Loxton, author and historian.

Anouska: I'm Anouska Lewis, history podcaster, and we're here to help you dive a little deeper into Elizabeth I. Today, we're talking about the Spanish Armada.

Alice: Now when Elizabeth became Queen in 1558, England's religion was Protestant and Spain's religion was Catholic. But despite this, the two countries were still on friendly terms, at least for the time being.

Anouska: At the time, Spain was the most powerful country in the world. It had a big navy of large ships. So it was important to keep this relationship friendly.

Alice: But over time, tensions increased between Spain and England. Religion was a factor but there were others too.

Anouska: Exactly. Elizabeth had rejected a marriage proposal from the King of Spain which didn't go down too well. Also, Spain controlled the Netherlands at the time, who weren't happy when Elizabeth agreed to send English troops to fight Spanish soldiers during the Dutch Revolt. That was in the 1580s.

Alice: And of course there had been a flurry of thefts which saw English pirates stealing from Spanish ships.

Anouska: All of this tension led to Spain attempting to invade England. Sorry, spoiler alert, this story ends with a war.

Alice: Now let's fast forward to one of the most crucial events in history, which would forever impact Spain and England's relationship.

Anouska: So it's the 29th of July, 1588.

Alice: An English Captain has just spotted a fleet of armed ships in the distance.

Anouska: They're sailing towards England.

Alice: The Spanish boats are sailing in a crescent formation, like a crescent moon, or a delicious croissant.

Anouska: King Phillip of Spain has decided to invade England and try to overthrow Elizabeth. He sends his fleet of ships, also known as the Spanish Armada, into battle. The invasion has begun.

Alice: In response, England needed to prepare for battle. So, ten days later, on the 9th of August 1588, Queen Elizabeth delivered a speech to her troops which would go down in history.

Elizabeth: I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too, and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any prince of Europe, should dare to invade the borders of my realm: to which rather than any dishonour shall grow by me, I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field.

Alice: That was Elizabeth delivering her famous Tilbury speech, but what do you think of her calling herself a weak and feeble woman there?

Anouska: Yeah, that bit really stood out for me. I'm not sure I'd personally describe her that way.

Alice: Well, I think it's a clever way for her to prove to people that she can both be this pure and feminine queen that they might expect her to be, but also the strong ruler that they need her to be in that moment.

Anouska: So what actually happened during the Spanish Armada?

Alice: Well it wasn't all smooth sailing for the Spanish, shall we say. They left Lisbon on the 28th May 1588 but immediately hit storms in the Atlantic.

Anouska: They had to repair their ships and didn't set sail again until the 21st of July.

Alice: Which was an unlucky start. And just one week later, the English spotted them in the distance.

Anouska: As the Armada sailed through the English Channel, they were chased by English ships. But their crescent formation gave them quite a strong defence.

Alice: The Armada then anchored near Calais. Their aim was to pick up more Spanish troops from the Netherlands before setting sail for England again.

Anouska: But the English sent in fire ships to attack the Armada. These were wooden ships filled with tar, gunpowder and loaded cannon. They were set ablaze and sent to drift towards the Spanish ships.

Alice: Now the Spanish weren't expecting this, and in the chaos, they scattered out of their crescent formation.

Anouska: And the weather was a big factor too. Wind blew the Spanish fleet towards dangerous sandbanks where the English continued to attack, causing significant damage.

Alice: So, the Armada tried to escape back to Spain, but the English chased them northwards all the way up to the coast of Scotland. And eventually, the English had to turn back because they were running out of supplies.

Anouska: This meant the Spanish had to keep going all the way around the north coast of Scotland where they ran into terrible storms. Thousands of sailors drowned. For a useful breakdown of the Spanish journey, head to the GCSE History page on the BBC Bitesize website.

Alice: Spain lost about 20,000 men and almost half of the ships they started with.

Anouska: In comparison, England lost around 100 men, although thousands more did die from illness in the weeks after.

Alice: Now England had won the battle, and this victory really strengthened Elizabeth I's position as Queen of England. Because she had faced all these questions over her legitimacy, there were plots to overthrow her, so this victory really improved her reputation as a strong ruler.

Anouska: It also strengthened Protestant rule. At the time, the view was that this strong, Protestant, English navy had defeated Catholic Spain.

Alice: So both Catholics and Protestants at the time would have believed that Elizabeth had God on her side.

Anouska: So the English took victory against Catholic Spain as confirmation of the legitimacy of Protestantism.