



BANISTER, THOMAS

BANISTER, Thomas (d. Arrash, 20 July 1571), British merchant and traveler to Persia who commanded the fifth voyage from Britain to Persia via Russia for the purpose of establishing trade. There is no record of his parentage or early education. Banister married Elisabeth Gamadge, a widow, on 3 March 1549. He exported cloth to Danzig and Denmark in the 1550s, and imported various commodities from Spain and Portugal. Banister was part owner of the ship *Christopher Bennett*, which took part in voyages to Africa, and was also a charter member of the Muscovy (Russia) Company. He became the Warden of the Skinner's Company in 1563.

Banister was in the embassy of Thomas Randolph to the court of the tsar of Russia in 1568. From there, on 3 July 1569, at the head of the fifth voyage to Persia, Banister in the company of Geoffrey Duckett, Lionel Plumtree and about twelve English sailors and forty Russians, set sail down the Volga in the *Thomas Bonaventure*, a special barge built for this journey. They embarked at Yaroslavl and when they were about 40 miles from [Astrakhan](#), they came under a barrage of arrows from an army of Nogay Tartars. Using their guns, they fought for two hours and managed to repel the Tartars. Banister was wounded, and many lives were lost on both sides. The party eventually arrived in Astrakhan on 20 August, where they planned to stay until they had recovered; however, Astrakhan was besieged by an army of Turks and Tartars, sent by Sultan Selim II to establish an Ottoman stronghold on Russian soil. The Ottoman army eventually withdrew and the English merchants left on 16 October, arriving in Bil'bilkent (in the present Republic of Dagestan) towards



the end of October. They then proceeded to Shabran where, having stayed in tents, they lost their provisions to a skulk of jackals. They spent the winter in the town of Shemakha (Šemaḳi), then the capital of Šervān (Shirvan). In April the company traveled to [Ardabil](#) where they stayed for many months, witnessing several religious riots. They managed little by way of trade there since they found “the towne being more inhabited and frequented with gentlemen and noblemen than merchants” (Morgan and Coote, II, p. 425).

Eventually they were summoned to Qazvin by Shah Ṭahmāsp I. The company had to leave Duckett behind because of his ill health. They were received favorably by the Shah who bought 200 kerseys (long woolen English cloth) at a good price and met all their requests, except for the transit of some horses to India for export. “A copy of the ‘Priviledges granted by Shah Tahmasp to the merchants’ survives in the State Papers (Morgan and Coote, II, p. 426, n. 1). Banister left Qazvin after six months and, on his way to Tabriz, he visited both Kāšān (Kashan) and Tehran. In Tabriz, Banister found Duckett alive and well; the latter would remain there for two and a half years. Banister and some of the others traveled to Arrash to buy raw silk, but because “of the unwholesomnesse of the ayre and corruption of the waters in the hote time of the yeere” (Morgan and Coote, II, p. 427), he died on 20 July 1571. Altogether, five Englishmen died in Arrash from malaria, while two were murdered by robbers. After Banister’s death, Duckett took over the responsibility for the safe carriage of their merchandise to Britain.

Banister left behind six children; his wife had already died when his will, which he had prepared before he left England, was read in 1575.

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