

Bones of the lost English samurai are identified

The last resting place of a sailor who became a shogun's favourite is confirmed after 400 years

By Julian Ryall in Tokyo

AN ENGLISHMAN shipwrecked in Japan in 1600 before rising through the ranks to become a samurai: the tale of William Adams's life sounds like the plot of an adventure story.

The remains of Adams, the first English person to set foot in Japan, can be formally identified today - the 400th anniversary of his death in 1620, after forensic tests and painstaking research in Japan and Britain.

Born in Gillingham in 1564, Adams fought against the Spanish Armada in 1588 before signing up a decade later to serve as a navigator on a Dutch ship sailing with four others to the Far East. The storm-battered ship limped into Usuki, in southern Japan, in April 1600.

He survived threats of execution to become a respected figure in Japan, although he had to consent to never see his family back home again after rising through the ranks.

The path to identifying his remains began in July 2017 on Sakigata Hill, overlooking the town of Hirado in Nagasaki prefecture, after a funerary urn was discovered by excavators.

The urn contained bones that had been discovered during a dig carried out in 1931 of a Western-style grave that was rumoured to be the site chosen by Adams for his last resting place. Nearly 90 years later, and despite just five per cent of the skeleton surviving, advances in genetic sequencing have confirmed that the bones are of a northern European who was aged between 40 and 59 when he died.

The DNA testing, conducted by experts at the University of Tokyo, also shows that the man died sometime between 1590 and 1620, which tallies with Adams's death.

At least eight other Englishmen were known to have died in Hirado around the same time, although an investigation by the Tokyo-based William Adams Club has ruled out the remains

being those of another person. Adams had asked to be interred on the top of a hill with a view of the ocean and Japanese records show that he obtained a small plot of land at the top of Sakigata Hill sometime around 1613.

"Throughout the modern era this site has been associated with Miura Anjin," said Robin Maynard, president and founder of the William Adams Club, referring to Adams by his Japanese name. Miura is taken from the peninsula south of Tokyo where he had his estate and *anjin* is the Japanese word for a maritime pilot.

"The skeletal remains rediscovered in 2017 are consistent with the known characteristics of Adams, in terms of sex, country of ancestral origin, age at death, and year of death," Prof Richard Irving, a member of the club, said.

"The possibility that the bones be-



An artist's impression of William Adams, who became the first Englishman to visit Japan in 1600

long to another person of north-west European origin is refuted, on the grounds that almost all English and Dutch traders, or mariners from visiting trading ships, known to have died in Hirado were buried with their compatriots in small national cemeteries," said Mr Maynard, who donated £23,000 to fund the excavation work.

Mr Maynard said the William Adams Club hopes to make Adams as well known in Britain as he is in Japan, where his story is still taught in schools.

Threatened with execution, Adams and the rest of his crew were imprisoned on the orders of Tokugawa Ieyasu, the future shogun. But Adams befriended Ieyasu and became his adviser, representative and interpreter. As a reward, Adams was given a samurai status and granted an estate at Yokosuka, south of Tokyo.

Events marking the 400th anniversary of his death are planned for later this year and include the unveiling of a sculpture at the British Embassy