

When, in 1855, John Harrison of Lofthouse wrote "our pretty little Countess is going with mostly all sails set" he was, of course, referring with affection and pride to the ship which was bringing him home from China with her cargo of tea.¹ His ship was a small barque called the Countess of Seafield which had been built at Stockton-on-Tees three years earlier.

On the following day, the 9th of April, he records sighting the Regina of Stockton and receiving a visit from her Captain. The barque Regina, also loaded with tea, had sailed from Shanghai on the same day as the Countess of Seafield and here, eight days later, were the two crews exchanging courtesies in mid-ocean. By this time the ship Celestial, having left much earlier in the season, was already back in London with her cargo of tea. All three vessels had come from Turnbull's shipyard just below the Stockton bridge on the Yorkshire side of the river Tees. Stockton built and owned tea clippers? Such a revelation may come as a surprise to those who know the tea clipper Cutty Sark, now renovated to her former glory and on show at Greenwich, and can recall only a few other famous names like Thermoplae, Taeping and Ariel. Deservedly tea clippers like these are remembered as the beautiful and very fast sailing ships they were. However, they came at the end of an era. The opening of the Suez Canal (1869) and the improving efficiency of steamships meant that no more tea clippers were built after 1870. In a mere 20 years they had come and gone. Even in the early 1850's there were very few shipbuilders with the skill and imagination to design the longer and finer hull form so necessary for speed and yet it wasn't long before the term "clipper-built" was being applied to almost any vessel with a length of more than above five beams. In comparison with what they usually built it is not surprising that the larger vessels Messrs. Wm. Turnbull.& Co., started turning out in the 1850's attracted the label "clipperbuilt" but they were hardly a match for a few of the better examples of naval architecture coming from Scottish shipyards. Even so, as some of these Stockton built vessels were employed on the China run their claim to be known as early tea clippers cannot be ignored.² The later, and more famous ones, were about twice the size and at least half as fast. again as the early ones but the Countess of Seafield, 492 tons, was a small barque with dimensions:- 120.7ft. length, 25.1ft. breadth and 17.0ft. depth of hold.

Up to the waterline her wooden hull was copper sheathed to inhibit marine growth and to protect her against attack from the teredo worm. Although barque rigged, that is to say her third (mizzen) mast carried no square sails, she was fully equipped with studding sails which could be set on the ends of both- fore and main square sails to give a fair spread of canvas when necessary. The fastest speed John Harrison mentions is 10 knots and it is very doubtful whether she ever sailed much faster than that.

Launched in January 1852 for Addison Brown of Redcar the Countess of Seafield left Hartlepool for Hongkong in February 1852 and had completed two runs from China before John Harrison's log book or journal commences in June 1854. Without this log

book, which covers a round voyage from London to Australia, up to China then westwards back to England, her career would be little more than a list of arrivals and departures but thanks to John Harrison we now know something of what life aboard her was like. Her first master had been Addison Brown³ but when she left London for Sydney on the 19th of June Joseph Hamshaw was the newly appointed master. As far as we can judge from the log book John Harrison was probably an apprentice but certainly not one without previous sea time for he was at the wheel not long after the 'Countess' - as he usually called her - had sailed.

We are soon made aware of just how dependent a sailing ship is on the elements when we discover it was over a week before the Countess of Seafield picked up a favourable wind to set her on her way down channel. At the end of the first week at sea the Captain put his wife ashore at Brighton and even then had to turn back to Dungeness for shelter. Perhaps his wife had had enough ! Once properly away the Countess of Seafield cleared the channel in less than three days, after another nine days she passed Madeira and nine days more saw her off the Cape Verde Islands. Now about 2500 miles out the equator lay only about 800 miles ahead but contrary winds forced them to take another eighteen days before they could claim to have crossed the line. This was the first of the four crossings John Harrison records but on not one occasion does he mention any accompanying ceremony. Had there been only crew aboard this might have been explainable but the Countess of Seafield was carrying passengers to Sydney and it is very unlikely they had all crossed the line before. Not mentioned either is whether any passenger suffered from sea sickness but we do know that some of the passengers enjoyed themselves baiting hooks to catch sea birds and even shooting at them. We do not hear of the crew engaging in such pastimes. Their life, as related by John Harrison, was one of seemingly endless work. Certainly the task of running the ship kept them busy but only once does he mention "the watch below" and never how they amuse themselves.

Indeed, what John Harrison leaves out of his journal is often as interesting in its own way as what he decides to tell us. There is no hint of illness and never a grumble about food which for much of the time must have been pretty grim. There are no complaints about the heavy work which had to be undertaken in all weathers and if there was a shantyman to keep their spirits up he is not mentioned. Fortunately the bullying mates and cut-throat sailors of fiction are not part of this story but the tell-tale words "a fight on board" - are entered during that frustrating passage to the line. However, one glimpse of a disturbance does not prevent the general sense of contentment emerging from the pages of John Harrison's journal. The catching of rainwater "for tank and for washing", the arrival of Fridays "the appointed day for washing wearing apparel" and the appearance of a friendly breeze to fill the sails and dry their clothes are the simple pleasures he invites us to share with the crew. For John Harrison the Countess of Seafield was a happy ship. There is no doubt he delighted in the wide variety of bird life which seldom deserted the ship. He observed with the eye of a keen naturalist, often comparing the unknown with his own not inconsiderable store of knowledge. A typical comment being "tonight a small land bird about the size of a skylark with a bill about $\frac{3}{4}$ " long, the back and wings grey,

the breast a fawn colour and feet resemble the thrush very much". Not only the bird life but whales, porpoises, dolphins, flying fish and sea snakes were, for him, all worth a few remarks in his journal.

Daily entries in the log book cover the ship's progress and how the crew are employed for although this was not the official log it was being compiled in much the same way. We have the latitude quoted together with the course and wind direction. There is the never ending putting on and taking in of sail to record as the most has to be made of every breath of wind and yet not too much sail has to be carried when squalls threaten or a gale is imminent. Over and above the ever varying routine of working ship any additional comment our chronicler offers lends colour to life aboard and is especially welcome. However, the complete entry for 25 January 1855 suggests there were days when there was no time for anything but concern for the 'Countess'.

Thursday 25	"Wind increasing and the weather dull this morning; at
Course E by S	2.0'clock furl'd main topgallant sail; at 4.0'clock tacked ship;
Wind NE by N	less wind up to 10.0'clock, set gaff-topsail and main topgallant
Lat.24° 12' 45"N	sail over the single reef'd main topsail. 11 O'clock set the fore
	topgallant sail over the single reef'd fore topsail, set outer jib
	and mizen topmast staysail; at noon shook out the reefs of the
	main & foretopsails, unbent the fore topsail and bent another;
	wind increasing up to 6.0'clock; furl'd fore & main topgallant
	sails, single reef'd fore & main topsails and tacked the ship;
	furl'd outer jib and gaff topsail; a strong NE by N sea running
	At 8.0'clock furl'd mizen topmast staysail ; about half past
	9.0'clock tacked ship".

The rigging, the spars and the sails all strained in their efforts to speed along the 'little Countess' but sooner or later something always gave way. The sailmaker was regularly employed repairing or making new sails so that making a gaff topsail from a large old topsail was all in a day's work. Much of his work was done on deck assisted by members of the crew but at times he was called up to do some of the work aloft. The carpenter had to fashion several new spars to replace broken ones and more than once even topmasts and the flying jib-boom had to be replaced. The ship's boats, the winch and the ship's wheel all claimed his attention. He effected improvement to the fo'castle and the roundhouse which, despite its name, was the conventional deckhouse abaft the main mast used for accommodation. At one stage this needed caulking so could not have been as weatherproof as it should have been. Always busy, the carpenter worked on additional adornment for the bows to set off the figurehead to greater advantage and he also carved name boards which on the bows would add a refinement not too common on sailing ships when the only requirement was to have the name and port of registry on the stern. All these activities are reported by John Harrison in the detached way of one who is not directly involved.

It is "the men" or "the crew" who attend to every rope and sail adjustment and not

once does he talk of his own experiences aloft although it is difficult to believe he did not have a few frightening moments. But when he is at the wheel it is different and he does not hide his pleasure - obviously it was a duty he revelled in.

I am ahead of myself for some of the events I have described were yet to come and we left the Countess of Seafield fighting both winds and currents on the difficult passage southwards until it was safe to turn eastwards and clear the Cape of Good Hope. The usual stormy weather was experienced off the Cape and on 10 September 1854 the Countess of Seafield was "running with a fair wind, the sea heavy makes her roll much, she rolls gunwales in at times which makes her wet continually admidship, the latter part seas came over her topgallant bulwarks admidship". The storm lasted the best part of three days and it rained all the time. The helmsman had to be lashed to the wheel and for once John Harrison has to admit "we were wet and uncomfortable all the while". As the westerly trades drove the Countess of Seafield towards Australia the weather improved and he is soon writing "Light and pleasant breeze; this morning the sun appeared very nice which is a good treat to us; tacked the ship; we have dry decks today, a breeze sprung to towards night; prayers on board which makes it look like a Sunday on shore and makes the time pass on more pleasant and comfortable". This slightly wistful note is rare. He enjoyed the Sunday services aboard ship and it added interest when a passenger read the prayers while the Captain gave the sermon and the mate read the lesson. It is curious however, that once the passengers had disembarked at Sydney services aboard are not mentioned again. Nevertheless, later when the last day of 1854 arrived it happened to be a Sunday and John Harrison is inspired to add a prayer and the words of a hymn to the pages of his log. Sundays, hopefully, meant less work but just what the crew did with their leisure is not revealed.

Sydney was reached, 127 days out, at 10.0'clock on 24 October 1854 and coming into harbour John Harrison was greatly impressed by what he could see and entered his impressions on paper. One of them "Several pretty little black and white goats were playing near to the shipping wharf" - conjures up a scene which would give any modern harbour master a fit! Surprisingly John Harrison describes the work of discharging as "pleasant" but that was only so long as there was a cool breeze and the sky overcast. What the cargo was he forgets to tell us - it may have been coal. There is certainly a lot of dust around although much of it came up from the roads when a strong wind blew. Rain would settle it but then, as John Harrison put, it, "the roads is very dirty, makes it uncomfortable walking". On his first Sunday in Sydney he went ashore to enquire after someone he hoped to meet but finding they had moved up country he dropped into St. James Church to hear the sermon. He enjoyed several visits ashore admiring the buildings and exploring the botanical gardens. He visited other ships to meet friends and a visit to the large P & O steamer Norna was one of the highlights.

Pleasant though his month long sojourn in Sydney was he expresses no regrets when the Countess of Seafield set sail for Shanghai on 29 November 1854. On the first day out one of the seven sheep they had taken aboard was slaughtered. In this

way the crew were able to enjoy fresh meat for a little while longer. Unfortunately it wasn't long before one of the sheep died and had to be thrown overboard. John Harrison was well in with the cook and later he was allowed to help slaughter and cut up one of the pigs. Another morning a flying fish he had found in the scuppers was turned into a tasty breakfast but in spite of having the oceans beneath their feet there is only one reference to fishing - "caught a shark, had a fresh mess cooked for tea and very nice and good was it".

The Countess of Seafield sailed well out into the Pacific towards the Fiji Islands looking for the south-east trade winds to take her over the line and then for the north-east trades to bring her back westwards to Shanghai. But winds are notoriously fickle; there were days of calm and days of squalls. In bad weather two lengths of the bulwarks were stoved in but before this there had been trouble with the stays holding the bowsprit so they hove to for repairs; then the jib-boom gave way. Nothing defeated them; when no repairs were needed there was always scraping, varnishing, painting and the tarring of standing rigging to be done; decks to holystone and brasswork to polish. All this was hard work but John Harrison seems never to have minded as he always liked to see the 'Countess' looking her best. To feel her running before the wind with all sails set pleased him enormously and no doubt he must have wished sometimes for a bird's eye view of his beautiful ship pressing on under full sail.

One essential duty noted on this passage to China was the checking of the cannons - probably two - and also the small arms held aboard the ship. To be unprepared for the worst in Far Eastern waters was unthinkable.

After more than 70 days reaching the shallow China seas, the Countess of Seafield ran aground but luckily managed to get off in a matter of hours. The next day the pilot came aboard and the tricky approaches to the Yangtse river and the channel up to Shanghai were negotiated successfully so that two days later, on 14 February 1855, they were able to drop anchor opposite the great walled city. It had been a slow passage of 77 days but there was excitement in store - a civil war was raging. Extensive fires could be seen burning in the French concession and the carpenter who went ashore the next day came back with lurid tales of headless and disembowelled bodies lying around. But it was to be another month borne without complaint before John Harrison was allowed ashore to see for himself. There were still dead bodies to be seen but as a sightseer, with his friend the cook, he was able to find other scenery to enjoy. After six weeks, during which the cargo of tea was loaded, he confides to his log the hope that they will soon be leaving Shanghai. It took two or three days to clear the mainland but on 2 April the ship "squared away with a fair wind carrying mostly all sail".

Although in the company of the Regina for many days the time spent in the China seas was never free from anxiety so the sight of an American Man o'War must have been reassuring. As late as 19 April, just before crossing the line once more, John Harrison writes "saw a suspicious looking vessel to windward running down upon our

quarter got arms out and made preparations if she attacked us".

As the Sunda Straits were approached more shipping gathered and 31 days after leaving Shanghai the Countess of Seafield passed Anjer, a signalling station and common reporting point for all ships passing to and from China. Here they were able to buy fresh fruit from natives alongside in their boats which, to John Harrison's eye, were crudely fashioned, some being merely "hewn out of solid wood". He describes the natives as wearing "turbans round their waist to cover nakedness". After another six days a distant sail is seen and they are sure it is the Regina still keeping pace with them.

Across the Indian ocean they encountered erratic winds which called for a lot of setting and taking in of sail and for some of the heavier work all hands were called. In one bad spell a studding-sail boom came crashing down on deck but no-one was injured though the sail blew itself to pieces. Eventually the 'Countess' rounded South Africa and made for St Helena where the Captain stopped briefly on 26 June to pick up stores. John Harrison and the cook went ashore with their Captain and managed a quick look around the churches, the market and the house where Napoleon had lived and died.

Pressing on again Ascension Is. was sighted before crossing the line. Work on board intensified to make the ship look smart for her arrival in England but this had to be suspended awhile when the martingale - a stay spreader beneath the bowsprit - gave way and had to be attended to.

Getting nearer home there was a natural desire to catch up with what had been happening in the rest of the world and from the barque Arthur Wellesly they learnt that the Emperor of Russia had died and from the barque Granville that Sevastopol was not yet taken. From a Scottish brig they received the laconic message that the war "was going on as usual" ! They in turn signalled this gathered news to other ships asking. Once in the channel they were blessed with fair winds until they could, pick up a pilot off Dungeness, then, with the help of a tug they were able to anchor in Shadwell Basin on Wednesday 8 August 1855, only three days after sighting the Lizard light. The weather greeting them was "heavy rain attended with thunder and lightning, which made it very uncomfortable working". They had returned to an English summer !

The Countess of Seafield's passage time from weighing anchor in Shanghai must be recorded as 133 days. This could not be called a slow passage, bearing in mind the vessel concerned, but soon the fastest clipper ships were expected to reach England with the new season's tea in 100 days or less.

On the day John Harrison's ship reached London he penned the last entry in his log book. The Countess of Seafield had been away nearly 14 months, covered about 35,000 miles and touched only Sydney, Shanghai and St. Helena before returning. More than eleven of these months had been spent at sea yet not once had John Harrison, in his log book mentioned any family or receiving news from home.

Perhaps he had taken advantage of the two opportunities offered to keep in 'touch'; once in the doldrums after passing Cape Verde Island when letters were put aboard the barque Ascendent homeward bound for London and again when letters and newspapers were posted from Sydney. He must have had thoughts of home but in his journal he never expresses a wish to be anywhere other than aboard his ship - a truly remarkable devotion to his "pretty little countess"!

Where races are concerned few are interested in the "also rans" and it was the fate of these Tees built ships to be among the unsung majority. The Countess of Seafield continued in the China trade until sold to George Traill of London after which she was switched to trading to Australia and New Zealand. It was in 1864, whilst carrying railway iron ⁴, to Lyttleton, New Zealand, that her strength was severely tested. A storm had shown up on 27 April and during the night she was 'pooped' the heavy sea coming over the stern to carry away the wheel and other deck fittings. Temporary steering gear had to be rigged up and with great skill Captain Danvers managed to get his vessel under control but at the height of the storm more seas enveloped her completely carrying away the deckhouse with the loss of nine crew. One of the passengers who had gone to their aid had also been washed overboard. Passengers were put to the pumps and the remainder of the crew repaired what damage they could. The crippled ship entered Hobart Town harbour on the 1st of June looking a very sorry sight. It was there hinted that she must have been overloaded to have suffered so badly. However, after further repairs she delivered her cargo of rails to Lyttleton but in 1865 was back in Hobart Town. The following year she was up for sale by order of the Vice-Admiralty Court of Tasmania⁵ and passed into local ownership. Her end came in August 1870 when she was wrecked on a reef in the Torres Strait: but fortunately all hands were rescued.⁶

The story of the Countess of Seafield has many gaps but the re-emergence, after many years, of John Harrison's log book has helped to give life to some of the bare facts. To date, however, even less is known about John Harrison; his descendents have not yet slotted him into their family tree and until this is done, or crew lists turn up, we shall not be sure just what his position was aboard the Countess of Seafield. Although his spelling, even for that time, was poor he was able to express himself very well and the interest he took in his surroundings and his compilation of the log book suggest a man capable of becoming a master of his own vessel one day but at the moment what the future held for him we do not know.

William Turnbull, the Stockton shipbuilder and shipowner died in 1858, aged 52, but not before he had launched the largest wooden sailing ship - the Westminster, 731 tons - ever to be built on the Tees. Perhaps now he should be remembered also for his Countess of Seafield and other early tea clippers.

References:

- 1 The "Log book of the Countess of Seafield, Stockton-on-Tees,.... Kept by John E. Harrison, Lofthouse" has come into the possession of Mrs. Lynne Watson of Middlesbrough. John Harrison was an ancestor of her husband. With a keen interest in the subject she has carefully transcribed and typed out a copy of the log book.
Mrs. Watson has very kindly made a copy available to me and for her permission to use the information I am greatly indebted.
For the purposes of this article I have brought John Harrison's spelling up to date.
- 2 Three articles by David R. MacGregor published in "The Mariner's Mirror" Vol. 34 Nos. 2, 3 and 4 (1948) were entitled "Some Early British Tea Clippers" and although the Countess of Seafield is not mentioned in the text she appears in the appendices with some of her passage times. In 1956 we, MacGregor and myself, exchanged what little information each of us had on the Countess of Seafield but little has been added until this year with the re-emergence of John Harrison's log book.
- 3 No.12 of 1852. H.M. Customs Ship Registration, Stockton. Just possibly not the same Addison Brown, the owner. When the Countess of Seafield was first registered her owner was given as "of Redcar" whereas,- on the same document, the master is "of Staithes".
- 4 Henry Brett, "White Wings" Vol.1 Auckland 1924 pp 230-231.
- 5 No.102 of 1861. H.M. Customs Ship Registration, London.
- 6 CUS/39/10 .Letter, British Consulate to Registrar of Shipping, Hobart Town. State Archives of Tasmania.

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