

EAST INDIAMEN AT ST HELENA 1600-1834 NEW SOURCES FOR ST HELENA-WATCHERS

by Trevor W. Hearl

Major studies of East India Company shipping recently published will be welcome new sources for man time and postal historians, especially St Helena specialists. The significance for the latter of having readily accessible data on “John’s Company’s” maritime service, of course, is that the island was the only safe haven, and an obligatory port of call, for every East Indiaman on its perilous voyage from the Orient. Indeed, this was the only justification for its occupation by Britain!

For an authoritative account of Company shipping, there has been nothing to beat Jean Sutton’s richly illustrated and eminently readable *Lords of the East* since its first appearance in 1981. Conway Maritime Press has now published an even more sumptuous second edition, revised and extended, fully illustrated throughout, including 16 pages in colour. “No finer fleet of merchantmen ever sailed the seas,” declared Sir Evan Cotton, an earlier authority on the subject in 1939, and here we have the latest research into its building, manning, financing, sailing and operating, supported by appendices of factual data, including the size, voyages and dates of over 1,240 vessels in the Company’s service. There are chapters on the Company’s steamers, its “navy” and on the peculiar problems of navigating distant waters, such as making a voyage “to China direct.” Helpful sketch maps of sailing routes and prevailing winds should help scotch the common historical gaffe that St Helena was on the East Indiamen’s route TO the East and eagle-eyed readers who doubt the date of the island’s acquisition given in the caption to Pocock’s colourful panorama are right: it is still 1659!

The building of East Indiamen is the subject of an attractive and informative volume, published by Anthony Nelson, in which John Barnard tells the story of the “Barnard Dynasty” in *Building Britain’s Wooden Walls* at Ipswich, Harwick, and Deptford. Over 200 vessels were launched at their yards for the East India Company’s service and the Royal Navy between the 1690s and 1850s, including HMS Northumberland which took Napoleon to St Helena. This fully illustrated and annotated study illumines a neglected topic of a technical turn with a grace and clarity which readers will find a pleasure to peruse.

Researchers seeking even more detailed data can now turn to two British Library compendiums compiled by Anthony Farrington, former custodian of Company records at the old India Office Library. These list the voyages and officers of every East Indiaman in the Company’s service, enabling postal and maritime historians, for example, to pinpoint the dates when any particular vessel made St Helena, or any other port of call, between 1600 and 1834.

The Catalogue of East India Company’s Ships’ Journals and Logs 1600-1834 follows no fewer than 1,577 ships, until the ending of the China trade monopoly under the India Act of 1833 which enabled the Company, with much relief, to abandon St Helena to the care of the Crown. The Catalogue is arranged alphabetically by ships’

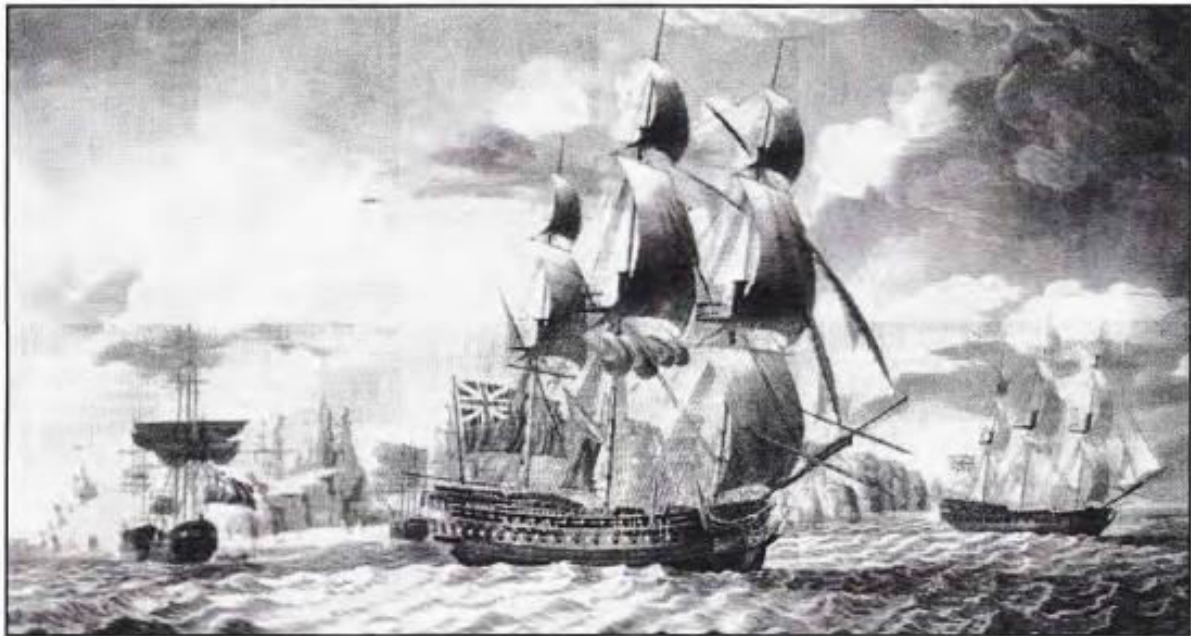
names, giving the builder, managing owner and “vital statistics” of each, its voyages, captains and ports of call - rarely without St Helena - adding such incidental facts as its fate if wrecked or captured. Appendices give this information in alternative formats, listing ships by season, and under their shipbuilders and principal managing owners (from 1760), including those chartered in Asia for single voyages to London. The last Indiaman at St Helena was apparently the David Clark on 4 May 1834.

The main sources for this 790-page Catalogue are, as its title indicates, the Journals and Logbooks deposited at East India House by ships’ commanders at the end of each voyage. Not all survived the Company’s closure in 1858, however, and other sources have been combed to cover the losses, most obviously Hardy’s *Register of Ships*. Private ships in the East India trade, such as Tristan’s Blenden Hall wrecked on Inaccessible Island in 1821, do not qualify, unless sailing “in the Company’s service.” Though it is now probably impossible to identify every voyage of every ship, even from the British Library’s incomparable sources, there is still one untapped source which would have helped fill the gaps had it not lain neglected in a distant dungeon!

Among The Castle’s Archives in Jamestown are the Register Master’s shipping lists recording every vessel calling at St Helena since 1673, through the years when it was at the hub of the South Atlantic sea routes. Until recently this unique resource of international significance has remained untouched, but in 1994 it yielded its first title, *The First St Helena* by Barbara Montgomerie, and now, in the wake of the new millennium, Robin Gill, co-author of *St Helena 500*, has transcribed the records of the 17th and 18th centuries, hoping to return in due course to tackle the 19th century. From the rare surviving copies of St Helena’s published “Shipping Intelligence,” it is clear that they would have provided a valuable supplement to the British Library’s London sources. Checking the years 1829 and 1832-33, I found that though most of the *Catalogue’s* entries were confirmed, a significant number were not. Some dates of arrival at St Helena differed by anything from one to five days so that, for example, the *Dunira* was actually well on her way towards Ascension on the date given for her at St Helena in the *Catalogue* (27 February 1833). It omitted St Helena as a port of call for at least eight ships which, according to Jamestown’s reports, spent two or three days there, while two other ships in 1829, HCCS *Maria* and *Rockingham* (2), had no entry at all. The scant entry for the island’s packet schooner *St Helena* is less excusable - fewer than 20 of its 64 voyages were noted - given that Barbara Montgomerie’s full history, published in Bristol, was readily available for reference.

The *Catalogue* will, nevertheless, provide a versatile tool for researchers and prompt new lines of enquiry. For example, it reveals some unexpected ports of call for East Indiamen such as the *Albemarle* in 1761 which sailed from St Helena to Rio de Janeiro before making for home, only to be wrecked off Polperro in its case. And in the 1830s it is noticeable that several ships left St Helena for Halifax or Quebec. The Company’s trading links with Canada would seem to require investigation in view of Alexander Dalrymple’s proposals in 1789 to develop the fur trade in a joint venture with the Hudson’s Bay Company, as only one of the stand-

ard works on “John’s Company,” an American Stanford University study by Marguerite E. Wilbur in 1945, even mentions the Company’s interest in Canada. Sir Evan Cotton’s *East Indiamen* (1949) does, however, note that the *Elizabeth* in 1834 returned “from China by way of Canada” - though in fact via St Helena - later to be wrecked in the St Lawrence laden with lumber. As the British Library’s *Catalogue* leaves that ship safely anchored at Halifax, Nova Scotia on 18 August, I conclude that its contract with the Company expired there on disposing of its cargo. There seems plenty of scope for delving into the Company’s operations.



The British Library’s companion *Biographical Index of East India Company Maritime Service Officers 1600-1834* provides career outlines, with varying amounts of biographical detail, of some 12,000 “commanders, mates, surgeons and pursers,” of the ships listed in the *Catalogue*. Checking the entries against the crew list in a *Rockingham* (1) Logbook (1791-93), I found the profiles of its 14 officers, including the most junior midshipman, with only one discrepancy - Andrew Morrison, 6th mate, was given as Henry Morrison. Though history is said to be “about chaps”, historians know only too well how difficult it is getting to know the *dramatis personae* of past events, nowhere more so than at St Helena.

This prolific mine of biographical information will be a boon to a wide range of researchers beyond maritime and family historians. Specialist tomes on this scale do not come cheap, however, and at £85 each these “good companions” may not be as readily accessible as all might wish. Nevertheless, these first-rate publications should give the Company’s maritime operations firm foundations on which researchers can build and not least provide a deeper understanding of St Helena’s role therein.

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