

# UPTON TEA QUARTERLY

Vol 20 No. 3

Holliston, Massachusetts

Summer, 2011

## Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry

Part XX: *The Transit Time for Tea; East Indiamen vs. the Clippers*



**EAST INDIAMEN OF THE EARLY 1800S**

*The ships illustrated above were a combination of warship, passenger ship, and trader. This is the sort of ship that Captain John Willis, the elder, would have sailed. Until the era of the great tea-clippers, which began in the 1840s, the transportation time from the ports of China to the docks of London by the East Indiamen was approximately six months. That time would be cut in half a generation later by the clipper ships of the 1860s. The records that were set by the best of these ships survive to this day.*

*“Owners of the tea ships always made pets of their favorite clippers. Some owners, indeed, who were not regular China traders built tea-clippers for the pleasure of possessing what was recognized as the thoroughbred of the seas.” Basil Lubbock*

Few stories tell the tale of the transition from the East Indiamen to the great tea-clippers as well as that of John Willis, the elder, and his son, “Old White Hat” Willis, owner of the *Cutty Sark*, one of the greatest tea-clippers ever built.

*Please turn to page 48.*

Upton Tea Imports will be closed for our annual vacation from July 2 through July 10. Orders received by June 30 will be shipped by July 1. We will also be closed Fridays during the month of August and September 2 so that our staff can enjoy a little extra time off!

## *Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry, Part XX*

In the last three parts of our *Reversals of Fortune* series, we discussed the first half century of British tea production. The first tea sent from India to London was a modest eight chests, arriving at the end of 1838, to be auctioned early the following year.

As the mysteries of tea were unveiled, limited production of handmade tea evolved into an industry designed by engineers and driven by steam. There was, and still is, a great deal of labor in the production of tea, but British science and technology allowed them to compete with Chinese imports.

By 1887, British imports of tea from their own manufacture in India and Ceylon had eclipsed imports of China tea. All along, the price of British tea declined, making tea the most affordable beverage in Great Britain. The first fifty years of British tea manufacturing coincided with equally impressive gains in the transportation of tea from the ports in the Far East to the docks of London.

Several articles from early issues of the *Upton Tea Quarterly*, available on our website, provide some background to our current topic. The following articles are especially recommended: Summer 2002, *Merchant Ships of the 1830s*; Fall 2002, *America Launches Extreme Clippers*; and Winter 2002, *Great Britain responds to the American Challenge*.

In 1839 an aggressive ship's captain could make the trip from China to London in six or seven months, at speeds of up to seven knots (eight miles per hour). Less than three decades later, thanks to the era of the great tea-clippers, the time was cut in half, with speeds of over fourteen knots being relatively common under proper conditions. As tea grew in popularity, and as European and American consumers finally tasted relatively fresh tea, fast transportation of tea from the Far East became a top priority. By the 1860s, the race to bring the first teas of the new season to market had become high sport, as well

as lucrative business. In the words of William Ukers:

The interest and excitement among landsmen during the clipper-ship days has been rivaled only by the Derby. The tea trade was then the highest class of mercantile pursuit, and during the tea season the cynosure of all eyes was the dashing "tea-clipper." Speeding under her enormous spread of snow-white canvas from far-away Cathay to her British or American home-port, she was freighted with the choicest of the new season's pickings, a cargo meaning a handsome profit to the consignees of the first arrival. The best sailing masters, the finest seamen, and the swiftest vessels afloat were represented in the tea fleet. The racing of the tea ships was at that time the all-absorbing topic of the hour on 'Change, at the club, or by the fireside. The winner gained something more substantial than mere fame - not infrequently a fortune was the prize.

The fastest tea-clippers commanded a rate of £7 or more per ton, while the average rate was roughly £3. There was an obvious financial incentive to build record-breaking tea-clippers specifically designed to outpace the competition, thereby capturing premium cargo rates. But breaking the speed record grew increasingly difficult as shipbuilders reached the upper limits of their craft.

Raw speed was one consideration for the design of a tea-clipper, but any ship that raced for three consecutive months, through unpredictable and often treacherous seas, had to sustain high speeds in the worst of conditions. If records were to be broken, it was not possible to merely trim sails and batten down the hatches, to ride out a storm until it blew itself out. The fastest ship would have to sail hard through whatever nature blew her way.

The first ship to be designed, according to Ukers, "to give a good account for herself in a blow as well as in light airs," was the *Thermopylae*, a 212 foot long ship that upon launch was hailed as "the best all-around ship of the tea-clipper fleet." On her maiden voyage she sailed from London to Melbourne in a record time of sixty days, pilot-to-pilot, and sixty-one days port-to-port. No other ship under sail has ever matched that feat. The arrival of the *Thermopylae* in Australia was

heralded in the *Melbourne Argus* on January 13, 1869, as follows:

The splendid and almost unprecedentedly rapid passage made by the new clipper ship *Thermopylae*, from London to this port, has created more than ordinary interest in nautical and commercial circles...It seemed almost impossible, and certainly never entered into the calculations of the most sanguine, that a voyage to the antipodes could be accomplished by a sailing-ship in fifty-nine days, the period taken by the *Thermopylae* to within sight of the Australian coast...She is in every respect a fine specimen of naval architecture, a model of symmetry and beauty; her sweeping lines and exquisite proportions, her graceful outline and general compactness, conveying an idea of perfection.

Even before the *Thermopylae* returned to London, plans were put in place to build a ship with the single objective of beating the *Thermopylae* in the battle for supremacy on the high seas. This competitive game was not for the weak at heart or for those without deep pockets. It was a game for the likes of Captain John "Old White Hat" Willis, a stubborn Scotsman who was driven by an iron will that he inherited from his father, Captain John Willis, the elder.

Andrew Shewan, whose father had sailed for the elder Willis for many years, documented many of his childhood memories in *The Great Days of Sail* (1927, Heath Cranton Ltd.). According to Shewan, the elder Captain Willis had "a considerable fortune accumulated by means of dogged perseverance, integrity, and tenacity to purpose." Soon after his father died, the elder John Willis was left to the guardianship of an uncle, with whom he had frequent disputes. At the age of 13, he left home for a life at sea. It is unknown whether his turn to the sea stemmed from a yearning for adventure, or from the fact that he had just decked his abusive uncle with a "well-aimed" brick, leaving him motionless, flat on the floor.

In time, cabin boy Willis rose through the ranks, earning a reputation as a tough and able-bodied sailor, eventually earning a captain's position. At the onset of Willis's career, ships were almost rectangular in shape, and so

slow that they reportedly could "push a floating coconut ahead for miles, and carry a bunch of bananas from Port Royal to the Downs in the dead water under the vessel's lee quarter." At least one ship of the era "achieved fame by carrying away her topmasts when she was driven up to the speed of six knots."

Willis was resourceful and frugal, investing his savings in percentage interest in ships until he could afford full ownership. By 1853, Captain Willis, along with his sons John Jr. and Robert, owned at least four ships. The firm of John Willis & Sons never borrowed a penny as they continually added to their fleet.

The younger John Willis spent his early life at sea, until he finally took over from his father's tight grip. At the time *Thermopylae* was launched, Captain John Willis Jr. was at the helm of the family business and, for all intents and purposes, was running it as though it were his alone. Often seen in public with a rakish white beaver top hat, John Willis Jr. was referred to as "Old White Hat", or simply "Old John", by friend and foe.

Willis owned a very fast sailing ship named the *Tweed*, which he had purchased in 1863 from the East India Company, along with her sister ship, the *Assaye*. The *Tweed* and the *Assaye* were originally steam-driven, paddle-wheel frigates. But Willis abhorred the noisy, sky-smoking contraptions that consumed exorbitant quantities of coal. Why carry tons of coal and a "crowd of dirty stokers" when the natural winds could drive a ship at 14 knots for free? So "Old John" sold the *Assaye* at the price he had paid for both ships, and proceeded to sell the steam engines of the *Tweed* as well, converting her to one of the fastest sailing ships of her time.

At 250 feet, the *Tweed* was considered too large for a tea-clipper, and was used primarily as a passenger ship, with a capacity of over 600. It was a favorite of passengers and crew alike, and it was Willis's most treasured ship until he launched his next showpiece.

Whether it was from pride or good business sense, upon the launch of the *Thermopy-*

lae, John Willis decided to go for the prize and build the fastest tea-clipper in the world. "Old John" believed that by combining the finest points of his beloved *Tweed* with the latest advances in shipbuilding, he could build a ship that was faster than the *Thermopylae*, and thereby capture the coveted "Blue Riband" of the annual tea races. The ship would be named the *Cutty Sark*. It would become the most famous of the legendary clipper ships of the era, even though there remain doubts to this day as to just where in the lineup of greatest clipper ships the *Cutty Sark* rightfully stands.

The fledgling firm of Scott & Linton, Dumbarton, Scotland was selected to design and build the *Cutty Sark*. They had only built five ships prior to the *Cutty Sark*, and none were on her scale. Scott & Linton were anxious to make a name for themselves, and building a ship like the *Cutty Sark* would bring instant recognition.

Being naive and inexperienced at business, they agreed to build the *Cutty Sark* for an impossible price of £21 per ton (some sources state £17 as the contracted price). At 921 tons, it would cost less than £20,000 for the completed ship. Willis had not skimmed on the materials specified for their masterpiece and the attractive price of £21 turned out to be too good to be true.

Hercules Linton had apprenticed with one of the preeminent Aberdeen shipbuilders of the era, *Alexander Hall and Sons*. They had helped pioneer the famous *Aberdeen Bow* and had built over 260 ships at the time the *Cutty Sark* was conceived. But Willis decided to go with a younger, more creative company.

Hercules Linton was a gifted designer, and William Dundas Scott was an equally gifted engineer, but neither had a knack for business. When they became partners in May, 1868 their combined capital was £1,600, and cash flow problems plagued them before the completion of their first ship. Taking on an ambitious project like the *Cutty Sark* was a huge gamble for the young firm.

Scott & Linton signed a contract with Willis on February 1, 1869, with a scheduled completion date of July 30th of that year. Willis had written a very aggressive contract, with clauses that a more experienced shipbuilder would likely have rejected, especially at the contracted price of £21 per ton.

One clause in the contract allowed Willis to have one of his men on-site as quality control agent during the construction of the *Cutty Sark*. For this position, Willis selected one of his ablest and most trusted men, Captain George Moodie, who would become the first captain of the *Cutty Sark*.

Moodie was relentless in his supervision. To what degree his demands delayed construction is open to debate, but by July 30th the *Cutty Sark* was still months away from completion. With funds exhausted and payroll unmet, Scott & Linton could no longer afford to operate, and bankruptcy ensued. Their gamble had failed, and the *Cutty Sark* would be their last project.

Basil Lubbock (*The Log of the Cutty Sark*) describes it as follows:

One reason that I have heard given for the failure of Scott & Linton was that Captain Moodie was so particular as to the wood and other materials used in the building of the *Cutty Sark*. Apparently his eagle eye searched every bit of wood for knots, shakes or sappy patches, and if the least defect was found it was thrown back on Scott & Linton's hands. Undoubtedly Moodie's untiring superintendence of the building is one of the reasons why the famous old ship is still afloat to-day and sound as a bell at that.

The *Cutty Sark* was completed by another firm and launched in November. She was designed to be the greatest of the great tea-clippers, but her service in the tea trade was brief. In November, 1869, the same month that the *Cutty Sark* was launched, the Suez Canal was completed. Teas transported by steam through the Suez Canal would reach London a month before teas that were shipped on the fastest tea-clipper.

Our series on *Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry* will continue in the next issue of the *Upton Tea Quarterly*.