

Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry

Part XXI: Cutty Sark Challenges Thermopylae in 1872



Cutty Sark was launched in November 1869, the very month that the Suez Canal was completed. When Captain Moodie sailed her to China for the arrival of the new season's teas, he discovered what every other captain in the fleet of *Tea Clippers* would soon discover. The era of the *Great Tea Race* had passed from sail to steam. The first tea to reach London that year would be transported via the Suez Canal, which was impossible for the *Tea Clippers* to navigate. The owners and captains of these fine sailing ships retained their competitive spirit, however, even as the tea trade was transformed.

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Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry, Part XXI

By some accounts the commencement of the *Age of Sail* is heralded by the defeat of the Ottoman Turks at the Battle of Lepanto on October 7, 1571. This was the last major maritime battle involving ships powered primarily by oarsmen.

However, as documented in *Part III of Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry*, in 1488 Bartolomeu Diaz “rounded the southern tip of Africa, and safely returned to Portugal,” nearly a century before the Battle of Lepanto. It was Prince Henry “The Navigator” (1394-1460) who had laid the foundation for Portugal’s early maritime supremacy, which ultimately secured for Portugal the enviable position of being first to reach the Orient from Europe by sail.

The *Age of Sail* ended soon after steamships demonstrated superior maneuverability in war. Its demise was hastened by the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869, the very year *Cutty Sark* was launched. While some impressive sailing ships continued to launch after the opening of the Suez Canal, at least one qualified judge suggested that no ship built after 1869 was in the same league as the finest *Tea Clippers*.

Prior to 1869, those who could afford the luxury of commissioning a world-class *Tea Clipper* could justify the cost by the expectation of higher freight rates, often more than double the average rate of £3 per ton. Those higher rates translated into significantly higher profits and the ability to once again commission another world-class *Tea Clipper*. But with the opening of the Suez Canal, steamships could easily transport tea from China to London in 60 days, cutting more than a month off the record times achieved by sail. Suddenly everything changed.

By 1870 it was becoming obvious that the expense of designing and building *Tea Clippers* was no longer a sound investment. Even

the finest of the *Tea Clippers* would have to settle for £3 or less per ton of freight.

David R. MacGregor (*The Tea Clippers*) states:

When the clippers reached the loading ports in 1870 they found that the steamers had increased in number and that their services were much in demand. Practically all had gone out by way of the Suez Canal in almost half the time taken by the Cape route. Coaling stations were being established at Gibraltar, Port Said, Aden and at other ports of call on the way to the East. This route was almost half the distance taken by sailing ships...

According to MacGregor, the impact on rates was immediate:

As supplies of tea were abundant steamers were quickly taken up at £7 from Hankow and £4 10s from Shanghai, with a premium of 10/- per ton for the first ship home, the rates formerly given to sail. Clippers asked £4 per ton of tea but only got £2 10s.

Harry Davis, captain of the *Kaisow*, documented what must have been a typical scenario in the late 1870s:

There were eight or ten of our clippers anchored there, waiting for tea – glossy black sides, brass-work gleaming in the early sunlight ... Some of the ships had been there many days, ours only a few.

Enter the [S.S.] *Aberdeen* of Aberdeen, under her own steam. She anchored below all of us and was admired by all, I think, for she looked very smart in her green dress. But although we all admired her, I think we resented her intrusion into what had been our freehold and domain for long, long years. She was optical proof to most of us that the day of the tea clipper was swiftly drawing to a close. And when, at dawn on the fourth day, she hove up by steam, the rattle of her cables and windlass sounded the knell of lovely vessels as tea carriers, for she had gobbled up all there was in the godowns, except ours (for we were loading for the Cape), and left the fleet waiting for cargoes which she had swallowed whole!

The conclusion was obvious. Even the fastest *Tea Clippers* were excluded from the transport of China tea to Europe at the premium rates they once commanded. There was little alternative but to turn to other trade, especially on routes that were impractical for steamers due to the lack of refueling



"Via Suez Canal" became synonymous with "fresher tea", since steamships could transport teas from China to London in two-thirds the time required by sail.

stations. *Tea Clippers* in sound condition, such as *Cutty Sark*, turned to the Australian wool trade. A few once-proud *thoroughbreds of the sea* spent their declining years humbly hauling coal to steamer refueling stations. Some owners refused to give up the tea trade altogether, and concentrated on tea cargo bound for American and other ports not yet captured by steamers.

Reality had not quite sunk in for "Old White Hat" when the *Cutty Sark* set out on her maiden voyage to China on January 13, 1870. As Basil Lubbock phrased it in *The Log of the Cutty Sark*, "... sailing ship owners were by no means discouraged and faced the future with a confidence which was rather more stout-hearted than far-sighted."

It took some time for Captain Moodie to get used to his new ship, which flew over 32,000 square feet of canvas when carrying full sail. Moodie knew that every ship had its own personality, and it was his job to learn every trait of the *Cutty Sark* before an emergency arose. Ships designed to be the fastest at sea could present some fearful moments, but Moodie soon "became confident that if only he could keep the spars in her he would not only beat the *Thermopylae* but all records in the China trade."

It was unfortunate that *Cutty Sark's* 1870 arrival in Shanghai coincided with the new,

lower pricing structure for freight by sail. That being said, she was given the honor of being the first to load among all of the *Tea Clippers*, and commanded the highest rate by sail that year, £3 10s per ton of 50 cubic feet.

The return trip to London was beset by many days of calm, and even if Captain Moodie pushed the *Cutty Sark*, no record would have been set. The passage took 109 days, but the experience convinced both John Willis and Captain Moodie that they would surely beat *Thermopylae* in the near future.

In 1871, the best rate that *Cutty Sark* could command dropped to £3 per ton. For two months, efforts were made to locate freight that could command higher rates, but in the end she had to settle for the "despised £3." Meanwhile, *Thermopylae* had settled for the lower price two months prior and the opportunity for the much-anticipated race would have to wait another year.

A race was still possible, however, for loading alongside the *Cutty Sark* was the *Ariel*, one of the ships that made headlines in the "Great Tea Race of 1866." When the two ships had finished loading, they weighed anchor at the same time and the race was on.

It was a bad start for *Cutty Sark*, for almost immediately her windlass (winch) broke. The *Ariel* sailed out of sight as the *Cutty Sark* floundered for a day, for by the time the windlass was repaired the tide had gone out and departure was impossible. But still the race had started, and there would be many obstacles to overcome during a race that would last over three months. Perilous seas, broken gear and torn sails would surely be experienced by both ships before the end of the race, so a day's loss was not a defeat.

Captain Moodie never again sighted the *Ariel*, so when he finally reached London he suspected that he had lost the race. But, to his surprise, *Ariel* had not yet been spotted, and would take another six days to reach London. This would be the last time *Ariel* would bring tea to any port. On January 31, 1872, she sailed from London under command of a new

captain. *Ariel*, along with her captain and crew, were never seen again.

The much anticipated race between *Thermopylae* and *Cutty Sark* finally occurred in 1872, when both ships loaded tea at Shanghai at the same time. Captains Kemball and Moodie both seemed eager and confident, but it appeared that both wanted to increase their odds a bit. According to Lubbock:

Captain Kemball, whose average cargo of tea was 1,390,000 lbs., only loaded 1,196,400; whilst Moodie, though he did not cut it down quite as much, took 20,000 lbs. less than usual.

The race commenced on June 18. Moodie and Kemball chose slightly different courses, for Moodie was a conservative navigator and avoided sailing close to land, while Kemball chose shorter over safer routes. Still, after a month of sailing the two ships had often sighted each other. On July 16 *Cutty Sark* was just three miles ahead.

William F. Baker (*Running Her Easting Down*) tells what happened subsequently:

Now, having picked up the E.S.E. trade winds, the *Cutty Sark* was really in her element, and her tremendous driving power began to tell. Pressing on every yard of canvas the spars would carry, she literally flew across the waters and she never again saw *Thermopylae* for the remainder of the race. By August 7 the *Cutty Sark* was some four hundred miles ahead ...

A few days later, however, fierce weather approached:

On the 10th of August Moodie ran into squally weather which proceeded to get worse as the days wore on. The wind blew like thunder beating her, thrashing her, tearing the tops off mountainous waves and flinging spray and foam like millions of flashing steel darts. Screaming squalls tore her fore and main lower topsails to shreds. Then after days of unmerciful pounding, by millions of tons of booming seas, disaster struck!

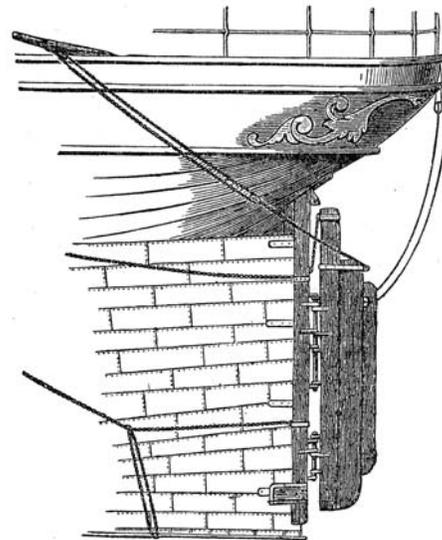
Cutty Sark's rudder was torn completely off by the pounding sea on August 15. Without a rudder, a sailing ship is at the mercy of the winds. With luck and skillful setting of sail, it might have been possible to coax the *Cutty Sark* to safe harbor along the coast of South Africa. But this would have amounted

to "quitting the race", not to mention the risk of running aground.

John Willis's brother, Robert, was on board, and desperately tried to convince Moodie to head toward shore. Moodie was headstrong about continuing on and conceived a plan to construct a jury rudder by joining sections of a spare spar and forging new mounting hardware, all while still at sea.

An argument ensued between Moodie and Willis, but Moodie was the ship's Captain and he was not about to abdicate his authority; according to Lubbock, Willis was firmly told that "he could go to the devil."

A blacksmith's forge was erected on deck to form the hardware for the massive jury rudder, which measured roughly seven yards in length. Moodie's son, Alexander, was assigned the task of working the bellows as carpenter and blacksmith went to work. Thus began what William Baker described as "one of the truly incredible feats of seamanship in the annals of maritime history."



A drawing of the *Cutty Sark's* jury rudder, from Basil Lubbock's *The Log of the Cutty Sark*.

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