

UPTON TEA QUARTERLY

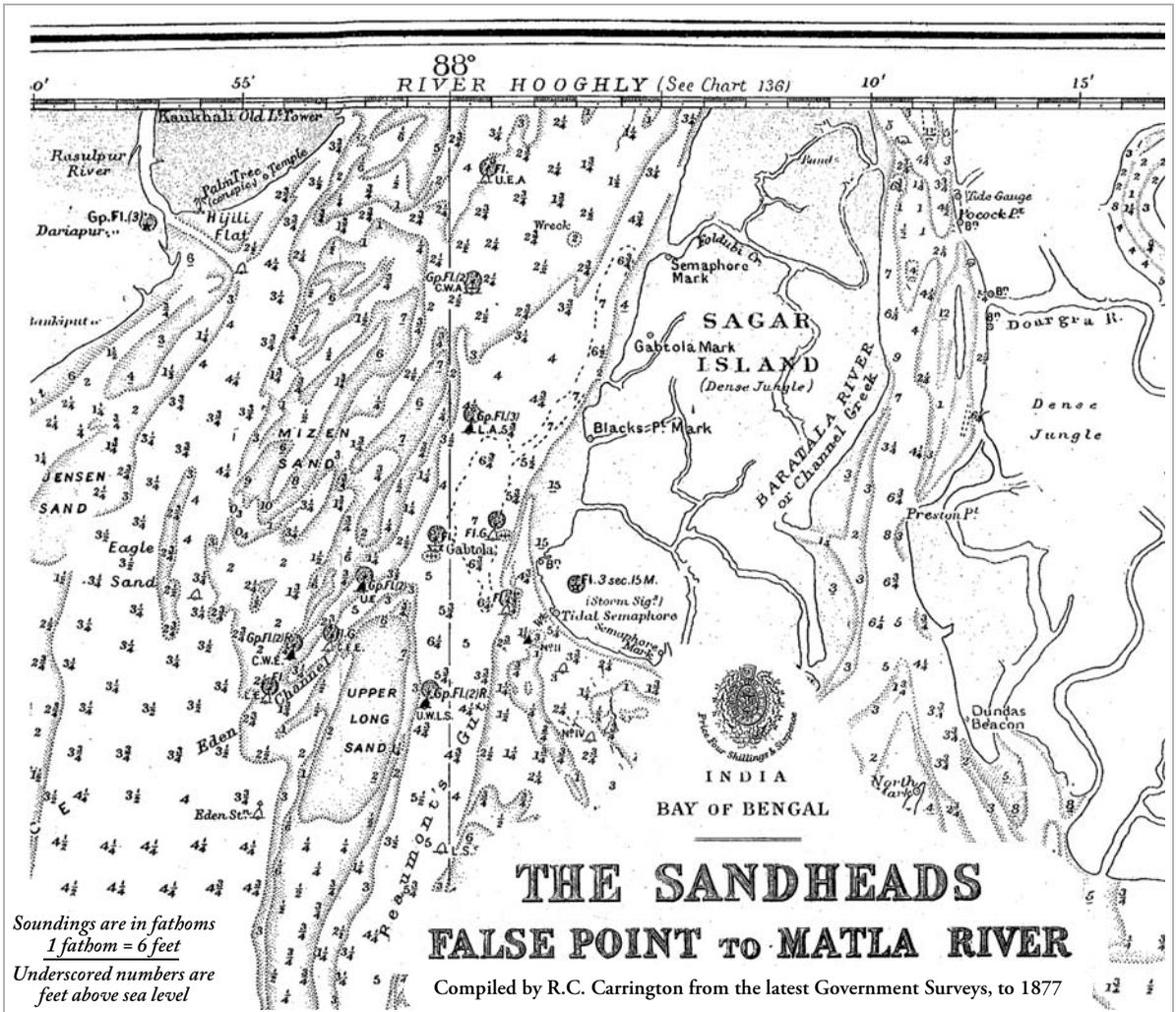
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Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry

Part XXIV: The Cutty Sark under Captain William Bruce



Calcutta (Kolkata) is 54 nautical miles from Sagar Island, at the mouth of the Hooghly River (a distributary of the Ganges River). Ships destined for Calcutta relied on local pilots to navigate beyond Sagar Island. Safely reaching Sagar Island was challenging enough, due to the massive formation of silt and sand along the coast, named *The Sandheads*. Captain William Bruce had a paralyzing fear of landfall, and as he approached *The Sandheads*, he “seemed to be in the grip of a nerve-destroying panic, and all hands watched his weakness with growing contempt.”

Please turn to page 48.

Upton Tea Imports will be closed for our annual vacation from June 30 through July 8. All orders received by June 28 will be shipped by June 29. We will also be closed Fridays during the month of August so that our staff can enjoy a little extra time off!

Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry, Part XXIV

At the conclusion of Part XXIII of *Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry*, the *Cutty Sark* had returned to Anjer, on the west coast of Java, after the tragic suicide of Captain Wallace. William Bruce, chief officer (i.e., first mate) of the *Hallowe'en*, was dispatched from Hong Kong to take command of the *Cutty Sark*. Unbeknownst to shipowner John Willis, Captain Fowler of the *Hallowe'en* had supported the promotion of his chief officer solely as a means to be rid of him.

Willis aborted the original plan to transport the cargo of Welsh coal aboard the *Cutty Sark* to Yokohama. Instead, he arranged to have the coal unloaded at Anjer, which had become a refueling station for steamers bound for Suez. Meanwhile, the crew of the *Cutty Sark* optimistically awaited the arrival of Captain Bruce. That optimism would soon be shattered. According to Basil Lubbock:

And thus it came about that one day, whilst the *Cutty Sark* was still discharging her coal, her crew were surprised to see a fat little man with an uneasy look coming up the companion ladder, who announced himself to the newly appointed mate as the ship's new commander. There could hardly have been found a greater contrast to Captain Wallace than Captain Bruce.

The "uneasy look" that Basil Lubbock attributes to Bruce stemmed from a cowardly fear of the unknown. Unfortunately for both captain and crew, life aboard a *Tea Clipper* abounded with the unknown, and a captain who feared the unknown was doomed.

Little has been written about Captain Bruce, except for what is found in Lubbock's *The Log of the Cutty Sark*. Lubbock describes Bruce with few kind words, referring to him as a "physical coward" and a "nautical Jekyll and Hyde." Dr. Jekyll would mostly appear on land, while Mr. Hyde was the persona who commanded the *Cutty Sark*.

We will delve further into the character of Captain Bruce, but first it is worth reflecting

on the frame of mind of the crew that he would command. Lubbock keenly observes the melancholy of the *Cutty Sark* crew at the time of Bruce's arrival as they witnessed the passing of their tea trade:

The cargo of the *Cutty Sark* was but half out when the *SS Glencoe* came alongside to take the remainder. The ship was one of the steam supplanters of the tea clippers, and with a cargo of tea on board was actually racing home against another steamer called the *Sultan of India*. One may imagine the disgust of the *Cutty Sark's* crew when they found that they had to provide the means of propulsion for one of those contemptible steam kettles which had driven the beautiful clippers out of the China tea trade. The half-deck, with all the devotion of youth for their ship, were specially indignant.

"The miserable thieves," groaned the senior apprentice, "that tea belongs to us and the *Titania* and the *Thermopylae*."

"Shade of Tam o' Shanter!" burst forth another, voicing a common exclamation aboard the *Cutty Sark*, "to think that dirty ditch at Suez should be the means of turning the 'Cutty' into a collier for those fair weather sailors!"

The *Glencoe* confirmed that steam was a permanent "mechanical fashion," as her steam hoists unloaded the remaining coal from the hold of the *Cutty Sark* in record time. As the last of the coal was unloaded, Captain Bruce received orders to set sail under ballast (i.e., without cargo) for Calcutta. It was October 1, 1880.

The crew soon learned that the loss of the tea trade was the least of their problems. Unlike Captain Wallace, Bruce was a mean-spirited bully, likely affected to mask his obsessive fears. It was to no avail however, as it was obvious from the start that the new captain of the *Cutty Sark* was terrified of landfall, rough seas, and foul weather, making him totally unfit to be captain of a *Tea Clipper*.

As long as the winds were steady and the weather fair, he "strutted the deck like a turkey cock." Bruce shouted orders to the crew in a *bucko* style, but his commands were erratic and often contradictory. According to Lubbock, if the weather appeared to turn or land came in sight, "his nerve went entirely – the fat little man collapsed like a pricked bal-

loon and with a pale face and shaking hands would retire below and leave his chief officer in charge.”

The “circus,” as the apprentices called it, continued for weeks. The last act came as the *Cutty Sark* approached *The Sandheads*, a vast formation of silt and sand along the approach to the Hooghly River. The illustration on page 1 is a small segment of a nautical chart of *The Sandheads*, produced in 1878. Bruce’s approach to *The Sandheads* is described by Lubbock as follows:

For some days before sighting the pilot brig, the miserable little coward was prey to his imagination. He was torn between the fear of stranding and the dread of a cyclone. He watched the barometer with bulging eyes and quivering lips, though the weather had every appearance of being set fair.

Day after day he sent his amazed crew aloft to shorten sail for no apparent reason: night after night he laid the vessel to. He seemed to be in the grip of a nerve-destroying panic, and all hands watched his weakness with a growing contempt.

At last the pilot brig was sighted, and straightaway that despicable old man regained his own self-esteem and once more strutted the deck like a turkey cock. Presently a powerful Hooghly tug took hold and away went the *Cutty Sark* up the celebrated river.

After dropping anchor on November 11, 1880, the entire crew, including both mates, took their pay and left in disgust. Only the apprentices and “faithful carpenter” remained of the entire English company.

For nearly four months the *Cutty Sark* was moored without taking on cargo, all the while lesser ships arrived, took on cargo, and set sail fully loaded. It is unknown whether this idleness was due to Bruce’s lack of ambition, or simply that the *Cutty Sark* was “out of her beat,” as Lubbock suggests. Luck would have it, however, that by the spring of 1881, a new crop of India teas would be ready for export. The *Cutty Sark* would have a rare opportunity to haul tea once again!

By 1881, annual tea production in India had reached roughly 50 million pounds. Just as the choicest spring season teas were in production, there lay the crack *Tea Clipper*, *Cutty*

Sark, ready to haul a portion of those teas to Melbourne. Little fanfare was forthcoming on this occasion, although this shipment of tea had some historical significance:

The tea turned out to be the first tea ever shipped from India to Australia. It consisted of the choicest Indian brands and the greatest care was taken over its stowage. Owing to her well-known reputation for speed, the *Cutty Sark* was also entrusted with the Australian mail, though if the postal authorities had known of Bruce’s lack of nerve they would undoubtedly have preferred a slower vessel with a captain whose reputation for passage making had been proved.

Before Captain Bruce could set sail, he had to hire two new mates, and an entire crew. His selection for first mate was especially poor, being characterized by Lubbock as someone who “rivalled [Bruce] in every kind of villainy and debauchery, from robbing the ship to robbing the crew, from cruel hazing to attempted murder, and from steady soaking to delirium tremens.”

While Captain Bruce feigned a strong religious conviction, his first mate was a rank atheist. The one genuine fealty they shared was a strong devotion to *Demon Rum*. Early on, the captain and his mate seemed to hate each other; in time, however, the two would bond over bouts of alcoholic excess.

The voyage to Melbourne seems to have been relatively uneventful, except for the regular hazing that Bruce and his mate dispensed. That mistreatment was at least a distraction from the incompetence and cowardice of Captain Bruce, and it became a rallying point for the crew to form a supportive alliance.

The low point of the voyage to Australia seems to have occurred when the crew saw the *Cingalese* easily speed past them with all hands shouting a “cheer of derision.” The *Cingalese* had left Calcutta a full week after *Cutty Sark* and was an inferior ship. With a half-competent captain, the *Cingalese* could never have humiliated the *Cutty Sark* crew. But for days on end, Captain Bruce seemed to be in an extreme funk as *Cutty Sark* floundered and made little headway.

Upon reaching Melbourne, one of the apprentices, deciding that he had experienced enough of life at sea, promptly booked passage on a steamer bound for England, hoping to start a new career. In a last attempt at harassing the crew, the first mate managed to trigger a small riot, the culmination of which was the smearing of thick tar on poor *Cutty's* brightwork and sails. The disgruntled crew unleashed their anger at their captain and mate by defacing poor *Cutty Sark*, which had already suffered humiliation at the hands of Captain Bruce. Sadly, the low point in this phase of *Cutty Sark's* history still lie ahead.

Once the Calcutta cargo was unloaded at Melbourne, Bruce received orders to sail for Sydney and load a cargo of Australian coal, bound for Shanghai. Once again, a new crew had to be hired.

Wages for A.B.s (able bodied seamen) in Sydney proved to be expensive, comparable to those of a second mate. With no alternative, Bruce hired a minimum number of men, with the intent of working his crew extra hard during the voyage to Shanghai.

Bruce's brief tenure as captain, which started poorly, spiraled downward from there. As described by Lubbock:

[*Cutty Sark*] was hardly at sea before it was noticed that [Bruce] and the mate, who had so far been at everlasting loggerheads, had made a truce and were giving vent to a peculiar and most suspicious chumminess. This alliance between such a pair of devils was at once recognized as ominous of coming trouble, and the old hands in the half-deck prepared to stand from under. The first result of this sinister entente was a drinking bout – both captain and mate being plainly drunk for all hands to see before the ship had gained an offing.... [The new bond between captain and mate was all that was needed] to set that limb of Satan, the mate, going to the utmost extremes, and the poor little *Cutty Sark* became a real Hell afloat.

For the entire trip to Shanghai, there was a game played without rules, with captain and mate on offense, and the crew on defense. The second mate distanced himself from his captain and first mate, and stayed out of the game throughout this leg of the journey.

Bruce and his first mate not only wanted to “get their money's worth” from the crew, they also wanted to encourage them to quit after unloading the cargo of coal at Shanghai, where there would be plenty of “shilling a month men” for the next haul. But, as before, a strong alliance formed among the abused crew. They banded together to help each other carry out the most arduous chores, which Lubbock describes as “the most dreary, back-breaking, God-forsaken [work] that was ever devised by man.”

In spite of their poor treatment, very few of the expensive Sydney hands quit upon reaching Shanghai. It is not known whether those who stayed on were motivated more by their desire to spite Bruce and his mate, or by the realization that Shanghai was a nasty place to be unemployed. Sailors would take almost any wage to crew on a departing ship!

The first mate was able to drive off a few more hands by assigning the most dismal work. But, as described by Lubbock, his effort “was a short-lived one, for the work was most effectually put a stop to by that dreadful scourge Asiatic cholera.”

Captain Bruce was ashore at the time of the cholera outbreak and was unscathed, but nearly everyone on ship came down with the dreaded disease. The *Cutty Sark* was fumigated and quarantined for three weeks. All of the men's clothes were smoked over sulfur fires for two days.

After *Cutty Sark* was declared safe, Bruce and his first mate returned to put the crew through their paces. So weak they could barely crawl, the crew refused all work. Foolishly, Bruce saw this as an opportunity to charge his crew with mutiny, so off to a local judge he went to make his charges.

This nefarious strategy backfired when the judge suspected that Bruce was withholding some important details, and pronounced that an investigation was warranted.

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