

Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry

Part XXVI: Cutty Sark Earns Her Place in History



Captain Richard Woodget aboard the *Cutty Sark*.
This picture was taken just before his death in 1928.

“A tireless worker himself, Woodget got the last ounce out of his officers and men, but he told me once that he never asked a man to do what he would not do himself. If his discipline was strict, it was also just; and he could unbend and joke with his officers and apprentices without losing his dignity. Indeed he was always full of fun and his apprentices adored him. As one of them wrote: -- ‘He never bullied and was always “one of us” all the time I was with him.’”

-- Basil Lubbock, *The Log of the Cutty Sark*

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Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry, Part XXVI

Before Captain Bruce took command of the *Cutty Sark*, bad luck and a series of tragic events, including murder and suicide, had disheartened “Old White Hat” Willis. The disastrous command of Captain Bruce added insult to the injury of those early years. The era of the *Tea Clipper* was effectively past, and Willis knew that his *Cutty Sark* had, at best, one last chance to earn a respectable place in maritime history.

Everything changed when Willis gave Richard Woodget command of *Cutty Sark*. As written by William F. Baker (*Running Her Easting Down*):

Woodget was the man – the *Cutty Sark* was the ship. Here was a man destined for greatness – here was a ship destined for immortality. Together their accomplishments have never been equaled. The driver pushed the driven; the driven tore at the bit, eager to perform, willing to burst her heart to please. This is the real story of the *Cutty Sark*.

Richard Woodget began his life at sea when he was sixteen years old. His first assignment was *apprentice*, aboard a small coastal trader named the *Johns*, a slow moving boat with round bow and stern. This class of boat was popularly called a *billy-boy*. Over the next twenty years he crewed on no fewer than sixteen vessels, serving in every capacity from cook to mate. Finally, in 1881, he was hired

by John Willis as captain of his 36-year-old “balk of teak,” *Coldstream*.

Woodget returned from his first voyage as commander of *Coldstream* in January 1885. Upon reviewing the ship’s log, Willis was astounded by the fast passage times recorded by Woodget. He was equally impressed with the profits that Woodget was able to wring out of one of his less remarkable ships.

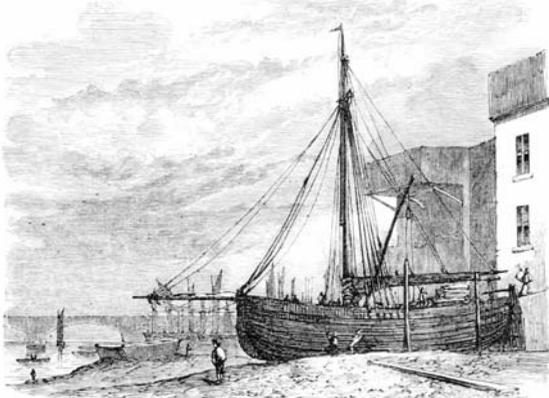
Willis immediately realized that Captain Woodget’s talents were wasted on *Coldstream*. If he could clock great times with an outdated ship at the end of her useful life, Woodget would surely drive one of the finest *Tea Clippers* ever produced to her true potential.

His maiden voyage to Australia had barely begun before Woodget had gained full mastery of *Cutty Sark’s* rigging. He pushed *Cutty Sark* to her limits and, on occasion, a bit beyond. He quickly learned just how far he could push her.

On the return passage, while rounding Cape Horn, he told his first mate, “Double check the hatches, Mister, for we will soon have weather that will try not only men’s souls but our good ship likewise.” Baker describes the hours that followed:

He didn’t have too long to wait for his prediction to come true. Quickly working his way into the 50s, with a complement of only nineteen men, the weather and the sea started to build till it was blowing a strong gale. Struck by a terrible squall, she broached, with a tremendous sea almost sweeping the deck clean. The upper main topsail and the fore topgallant were blown clean off the yards, the main topgallant and main royal were torn to shreds. The “Cutty” was shipping enormous quantities of water, the outer jib stay parted, and the ship was in danger of foundering. Momentarily she hung there, hovering on the verge of death. Never before nor ever again would the *Cutty Sark* come so close to the edge of doom. Finally, she righted herself, shuddering and shaking off the millions of tons of cascading, boiling, foaming ocean that threatened to press her to the bottom of the sea. It must have been a night of horror for every man aboard.

The trip from Sydney to London took only seventy three days, a feat that Baker describes as “a truly remarkable maiden passage.” In all, nine ships had raced from Syd-



“The Billy-Boy.” An illustration from *The Book of the Thames from its Rise to its Fall* (1877).

ney to London that year, competing for first chance at the January wool sales. The following table illustrates just how well Woodget had done.

Ship	Arrived Downs	Days Out
<i>Cutty Sark</i>	Dec. 28, 1885	73
<i>Thermopylae</i>	Jan. 5, 1886	80
<i>Salamis</i>	Jan. 6, 1886	81
<i>Woolahra</i>	Jan. 7, 1886	82
<i>Loch Vennachar</i>	Jan. 6, 1886	84
<i>Sir Walter Raleigh</i>	Jan. 6, 1886	87
<i>Samuel Plimsol</i>	Jan. 23, 1886	91
<i>Patriarch</i>	Jan. 8, 1886	95
<i>Cimba</i>	Jan. 27, 1886	95

Woodget had, in a single voyage, erased the sixteen years of disappointment that had made *Cutty Sark* the brunt of “an endless stream of jocular derision and puns directed at ‘the little toy clipper.’” *Cutty Sark* had clearly beaten *Thermopylae*, and “Old White Hat” was delighted. But he still lamented that this race was not about tea.

Firmly believing that *Cutty Sark* could set a Shanghai-to-London record with a tea cargo, Willis ordered Woodget to sail for Shanghai on February 19, 1887.

Upon arriving at Shanghai, Woodget found *Hallowe'en* and *Leander* already waiting for tea cargo. *Leander* eventually loaded the last tea of the season, along with general cargo, all at rates that did not pay expenses. *Hallowe'en* had to settle only for general cargo.

Three and a half months were wasted, hoping for tea that never materialized. Finally accepting reality, Willis ordered Woodget to proceed “in ballast” to Australia. He weighed anchor on October 6.

Due to the time wasted in Shanghai, Woodget arrived in Australia too late for the prime wool season. Three more months were lost waiting for wool, and it was not until March 26 that Woodget finally departed for London, arriving just seventy one days later.

Such a late departure makes it difficult to compare the *Cutty Sark's* performance with earlier prime-season departures. However, the following table is revealing.

Ship	Arrived (various)	Days Out
<i>Cutty Sark</i>	June 5, 1887	71
<i>Mermerus</i>	Feb. 26, 1887	78
<i>Sir Walter Raleigh</i>	Feb. 28, 1887	80
<i>Salamis</i>	Jan. 17, 1887	85
<i>Thermopylae</i>	Jan. 19, 1887	87
<i>Patriarch</i>	Jan. 21, 1887	89

Cutty Sark continued to log passages that, according to Basil Lubbock, “have never been beaten or even approached by any other vessel.” For ten years Woodget drove *Cutty Sark* like no other ship has ever been driven.

The fact that no previous captain was able to demonstrate *Cutty Sark's* potential speaks volumes about Captain Woodget. His unique style is perhaps best described by Lubbock:

A close call to Woodget always acted like a tonic, cooling his brain and sharpening his wits. Yet he was no reckless ship-driver. He knew his ship and the condition of her to the least used rope, and he never overstepped the limit of the breaking strain though he carried on to the very last minute.

There was another key element to the success of Captain Woodget, and that was in the way he handled his crew. He knew how to drive them hard, but never abused his power and he never gave a command that he was not willing to execute himself. Captain Woodget never lost the confidence or respect of his crew, even in the most treacherous of circumstances. One of Woodget's apprentices was quoted as saying, “He was a seaman of iron nerves, and drove his crew, like he drove the *Cutty Sark*. All the same not a sailor on board but admired him and agreed that he was the finest seaman he had ever sailed with.”

Sadly, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Australian wool trade was being overtaken by increasingly large steamers, just as had happened to tea two decades earlier.

Maintenance expenses, relatively small freight capacities, and declining freight rates forced all shipowners to ultimately abandon sail in favor of steam. So it was in July 1895 that John Willis decided to sell his *Cutty Sark* to the Portuguese firm of Ferreira & Co., for the “paltry sum of £2100.” *Cutty Sark* was renamed *Ferreira*. By this time there were only three other *Tea Clippers* still afloat: *Titania*, *Blackadder*, and *Lothair*.

Captain Woodget was transferred to the *Coldinghame*, a “steady going” steamer in the Willis line. After a single voyage, however, he decided it was time to retire. At fifty one years of age, he bought a small farm in Norfolk. There he spent his next thirty years as a gentleman farmer, raising all sorts of animals, from chickens and ducks to pigs and sheep.

For the next twenty six years, *Ferreira* would occasionally be spotted by those who recognized her as the former *Cutty Sark*. At each sighting, she appeared to be in worse shape. Finally, in September 1922, she was observed in Falmouth harbor by Captain Wilfred Dorman, who had apprenticed in the 1890s and had often seen and admired *Cutty Sark* at the height of her glory. According to Baker:

... *Cutty Sark* crept into Falmouth Harbor and dropped her hook, the last tack on a million mile voyage. Battered by a terrible Channel gale, desolation was rampant. She was in filthy condition. The fragrance of the tea chests no longer clung about her hold, instead pigs slept in the fo’c’sle, a monkey was tied to the taffrail and dogs were sitting on deck mournfully scratching themselves...

Captain Dorman saw through the dishevelment. Garish colors, painted posts, the strange barkentine rig could not hide her beautiful lines, her slim, graceful appearance.

By now, all the other great sailing ships were gone. Determined to save *Cutty Sark* from the fate of her peers, Captain Dorman purchased the tattered ship for £3750 and proceeded to restore her at his own expense.

Had it not been for Captain Dorman, *Cutty Sark* would have suffered the same fate as every other great *Tea Clipper*. Instead, she

was instantly reborn as an icon of Great Britain’s past glory. *Cutty Sark* Whisky was created on March 23, 1923, marketing on the popularity of the now legendary name. As described by Baker:

Old men of the day, who went to sea as boys, spoke in awe of the occasion when the ships they sailed in tried to challenge the *Cutty Sark* in a test of speed. Legend was mixed with facts, historical tradition mixed with myth, but one thing was certain, any sailor who had served on her were celebrities in every dock-side tavern up and down the coast.

Whether it be embellishment or fact, one story encapsulates what sailing was like aboard *Cutty Sark* under Captain Woodget: On one exceptionally harrowing rounding of the Horn, Woodget overheard one of his crew suggesting that they might have to lower the lifeboats. In response, Woodget is said to have taken an axe to the lifeboats and drawn his pistol, threatening to shoot any man who abandoned his post.



Captain Woodget's Revolver.
Manufactured by Lacey & Co. c.1850
(National Maritime Museum, London)

In *The Log of the Cutty Sark*, Basil Lubbock wrote, “It is a thousand pities that [Captain Woodget] did not command the *Cutty Sark* in her China days, for the run down the China Sea to Anjer would have just suited his skill and daring.” This was written in 1924, four years before Woodget’s death at the age of eighty five.

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