

# 'CUTTY SARK'



*Photo by Warsh*

*The proceeds of the sale of this booklet will be devoted to the 'Cutty Sark'*

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## THE SHIP 'CUTTY SARK'

"The beauty and mystery of the ships  
And the magic of the sea"

The *Cutty Sark* is famous—if for no other reason than that she has outlived all her contemporaries. She is in very truth "the last of the wind ships".

Today, she can be seen and inspected from the river just below the Pool of London, where she lies peacefully at her moorings—home at last.

During her working life she was perhaps the most renowned ship in the world. In the ten years under Captain Woodget, beginning in 1885, when she was already sixteen years old, she is reputed never to have been passed by any other ship, steam or sail. Admittedly, she was at her best in strong winds and perhaps she never fell in with a steamer in light weather! Nevertheless, more than once she logged 360 sea miles in twenty-four hours, an average of fifteen knots. On a memorable occasion she overhauled and passed the s.s. *Britannia*, the crack P. and O. mail boat of the day, while the passengers in the steamer lined the rail and loudly cheered the "flying Clipper".

It may well be asked why do men not now sail these ships, so independent of coal or fuel oil, with holds empty of engines, boilers and bunkers and available for a full cargo? The answer is that these very high speeds could not be sustained over a long voyage. The *Cutty Sark* holds the record for the quickest voyage ever made by sailing ship from Australia to England, but even that record of seventy-one days, established in 1887, only works out at a speed of a little more than eight knots. And already in the 80's tramp steamers could make the same voyage in sixty days with far less uncertainty and danger. For in sail, those who work the ship

"Must hand and reef and watch and steer  
And bear great wrath of sea and sky"

One of the most dreaded of the many dangers of sail was (and is) that of being pooped by a following sea—a wave breaking over the stern or poop of the ship. To be pooped when running before the wind in heavy weather was a very serious matter. The man at the wheel, buried under water or smashed to the deck, would lose control; the ship, like a restive horse, would take charge and fly up into the wind. Stopped in her course, she would "fall away", lie in

the trough of the sea and then might well be thrown on her beam-ends and overwhelmed. When at the wheel, running before high seas, the helmsman was forbidden to look aft, so terrible was the aspect of a mountain of water rushing down and apparently about to overwhelm the ship.

During all her long career *Cutty Sark* was never once pooped, and under Captain Woodget she was never once "hove to", the last resort of a sailing ship when in difficulties.

A letter exists, written by a foremast hand in *Cutty Sark*, containing the following paragraphs:

"I can picture myself now, standing at her wheel on first watch from 8 to 12 p.m. 'Running our easting down' somewhere about 55° south, wind well on port quarter, all sail on her except royals, the night as black as pitch, the only thing I could see was the binnacle light and the compass in front of me. The ship was tearing along about fifteen knots and gryping (i.e., trying to fly up into the wind) so that I could hardly hold her, one spoke of the wheel bearing down on my knee and making it bruised and sore. Although it was cold I was wet with perspiration, owing to the strain she was putting me to. The wind was whistling up aloft; there was blackness everywhere and I expected to see something go every time she gave a grype to windward of her course. The Captain himself was standing on the after end of the monkey poop—I could just see his dark form against the rail. He had his arm linked round the top rail and was quietly whistling a jig. Here was I expecting to see the sticks or something else go overboard and working myself into a perspiration to hold her on her course, and he calm and enjoying himself with a jig. I thought him mad. At last I yelled out to him: 'Captain! I want some help here. I can't hold her!'

"His answer was, 'Stick to her, lad! You're doing all right; stick her!' And I stuck it until I was relieved." And the writer adds: "Captain Woodget was the strongest man and the steadiest-nerved man ever I met—in fact, he did not know what nerves meant. Men with any nerves at all were no use in the *Cutty Sark*."

If the famous Clipper was never pooped, she was very wet forrard, and on one occasion when the helmsman let her "fall off" by mishandling, so that her speed immediately increased from five or six knots to eleven knots, and next put her head into the teeth of the wind, she dipped her jibboom (the spar extending the bow sprit), and to an onlooker must have seemed to be about to dive like some strange, winged submarine.

All seafaring men who had to do with the *Cutty Sark* were unanimous in recognising the strength of the personality built into her—

Sometimes I think a soul was gi'ed her with the blows

—and it was no lucky chance or accident which made it possible for the Clipper to sail as she did. There was nothing cheap or clumsy or inferior in her design or construction. Only the finest materials and the best workmanship were good enough for her owner, and in hard fact the building contract ruined Hercules Linton, the Dumbarton shipwright who designed and constructed her.



To be so well-bred and high-mettled made her by no means every captain's ship. Some were afraid to let her go in hard winds and the little Clipper seemed to know it as she snatched at every opportunity to run away with them, just as if she had an impish sense of humour.

In bad hands she could even get herself branded "hell-ship". On one voyage the mate murdering a man on the fo'c'sle head with a capstan bar; the kindly, foolish captain conniving at the mate's escape from the ship; the fear of the inevitable inquiry driving the captain to death at his own hand; his paltry and drink-sodden successor stricken with land-fear (fear of coming within shoal distance of the land) and unable to bring himself to leave the deck; the sober second-mate on one occasion in a dangerous channel plying his superior officer with more drink, waiting for him to fall unconscious, so that he might take charge himself without being a mutineer. . . .

Like others of strong character, *Cutty Sark* could not abide dull folk; somehow or other she shook herself free of them (not that she ever drowned her crew); there was a tang to those privileged to be much in her company and that may be yet another reason for her own fame.

Captain Woodget has already been described; here is another account of *Cutty Sark's* greatest captain.

"It was a pleasure to see 'the old man' in dirty weather. He fairly revelled in it. With one side of his moustache jammed into his mouth, he stood hanging on to the weather rigging. I can see him now, his sturdy figure in yellow oilskins and long leather sea-boots, watching aloft and hanging on to the last minute."

"White hat" Willis, her owner, was also a very notable man; tall and extremely handsome, he was always dressed in what today would be called the "height of fashion in the Ascot Enclosure", complete with white top hat. His keen trading instinct was inherited from a Scottish father who—when a ship boy—earned money ashore by blacking boots, in order to purchase stocks of fiddle strings to sell at great profit to native banjo-players in the West Indies.

His son was a most successful shipowner and lavished money on his ships, particularly on the *Cutty Sark*. He had her cabins panelled in teak and birds-eye maple with much fancy carving. In the Captain's cabin to this day is a great fourposter bed. In her passenger carrying days the ship was fitted with her own named and monogrammed gilt chinaware.

The leading artist of the day carved the figurehead of the mythical *Cutty Sark*—the young witch called "Nannie" in Robert Burns's

poem "Tam O'Shanter" who danced before Tam in a very short shirt; "a souple jade she was and strang". "Weel done, cutty-sark", yelled Tam in his excitement. The naming was apt; it is in part the cause of our remembering but it was also in character; and long after



she had been sold to the Portuguese, who changed her formally to *Ferreira*, she was still known as *El Pequena Camisola*.

What is this strange hold that a sailing ship has upon a modern generation—a hold which may well grow and strengthen as the years

## APPENDIX

The *Cutty Sark* was built in 1869 in the Woodyard at Dumbarton to the order of Captain John Willis, the London shipowner from Tweedside, by Scott and Linton, under the supervision of Captain Moodie, her first master. The contract to complete this vessel was for £16,150, a price of about £17 a ton. She was actually completed in Denny's Yard at Dumbarton.

Her registered length was 212 feet 6 inches, and 280 feet from tip of jib boom to end of spanker boom. Her beam 36 feet; depth, moulded, 22 feet 6 inches; gross tonnage 963 tons.

The main yard was 78 feet in length and even the skysail yard was 34 feet long. From the deck to truck of the main mast was 145 feet 9 inches. If *Cutty Sark* and the *Queen Mary* lay alongside each other, the truck of the skysail mast would be exactly level with the top of the foremost funnel of one of the greatest of British ships.

*Cutty Sark* is built of American rock elm and teak on iron frames, with teak decks. The under-water planking is sheathed in muntz-metal, and even today she is comparatively sound.

There were three masts, all carrying square sails, and her total area of canvas was nearly 33,000 square feet. All her pulley blocks were fitted with ball-bearings of phosphor-bronze.

*Cutty Sark* remained in the China trade from 1870 to 1877, and for the next eight years voyaged all over the world, carrying wool, jute, coal and, in fact, anything she could get.

In 1895 Willis sold her to the Portuguese for £2000 and she settled down to a round of Oporto, Rio, New Orleans and Lisbon.

In 1916 she was dismasted in fearful weather in Table Bay, but refitted.

In 1922 Captain Dowman bought her for £3750, and after twenty-eight years' foreign service she appeared again in British waters with the Red Ensign at her peak.

On the death of Captain Dowman his widow gave her to the Thames Nautical Training College (*H.M.S. Worcester*) and she has spent peaceful days at Greenhithe in the London River.

*Published by*

## THE THAMES BARGE SAILING CLUB

c/o National Maritime Museum

GREENWICH, LONDON, S.E.10

CLUB BARGE

*Arrow*: 156 tons gross

Home Station: Union Wharf, Greenwich, S.E. 10

THE THAMES BARGE SAILING CLUB was formally constituted at a general meeting of founder members on 6 March, 1948.

Principal objects of the Club are:

1. To foster the practice of sailing; particularly in working craft.
2. To maintain in commission one or more Thames Sailing Barges for week-end sailing at a nominal cost.
3. To preserve drawings, plans, prints, photographs, and models of working craft; and to publish a journal.
4. To accept as members of the Club all interested in such craft, including working skippers.