

# THE CUTTY SARK

described by  
Edward Crowley

WITH THE WITCH Nannie in hot pursuit, Tam just made it over a running brook (witches can't cross running water) but his horse was somewhat mutilated in the process and left its tail in Nannie's outstretched hand. Burns' strictures on the perils of drink and the cutty sark (or short chemise) may savour of cost benefit analysis but his poem provided the name for one of the world's most famous clipper ships and the figure of Nannie clutching the remains of the unfortunate animal's tail was the figurehead which adorned the underside of the bowsprit.

The *Cutty Sark*, now on permanent display at Greenwich, was a splendid example of the composite-built sailing ship—a tall, beautifully rigged clipper with 32,000 square feet of canvas which enabled her to log 17 knots when 'cracking it on' with a fair breeze.

Yet she was, if not an unlucky ship, certainly an unfortunate one in some respects. Built for the China tea trade and designed to work the trade winds and round the Cape of Good Hope, she was rendered obsolescent for her destined calling even before she was launched on November 22nd 1869. The Suez Canal

was opened a few days earlier and this event provided the new-fangled steamships with a much shorter route to the Far East, so that by 1877 almost the whole of the China tea trade was carried by steamships.

For her builders, Scott and Linton of Dumbarton, who had previously built nothing bigger than a schooner, her construction spelled financial disaster. On a voyage in 1880, the death of a coloured seaman at the hands of the chief mate, led to the latter's appearance at the Central Criminal Court on a charge of murder and to the suicide of the *Cutty Sark's* master, Captain J. S. Wallace. Nevertheless, the *Cutty Sark* is unique among the great tea clippers in having survived into modern times. She is a relic of an era of great competition for a specialised cargo which led to considerable risks being taken commercially by owners and at sea by tough, hard-driving captains.

In the heyday of the clippers the annual race from China with the first teas of the season was a sporting event for anyone connected with shipping and huge sums were wagered on favourite ships. Apart from the top prices obtained for the cargo, the winning owner

stood to collect a small fortune in stake money, while his skipper consolidated his professional reputation for all time. Captain John Willis, a Scottish shipowner with offices in Leadenhall Street and a member of Lloyd's Register Committee, never had any luck with his ships in the race from China and was determined to build a clipper which would outclass even the *Thermopylae* which in 1868 made a record-breaking maiden voyage to Melbourne.

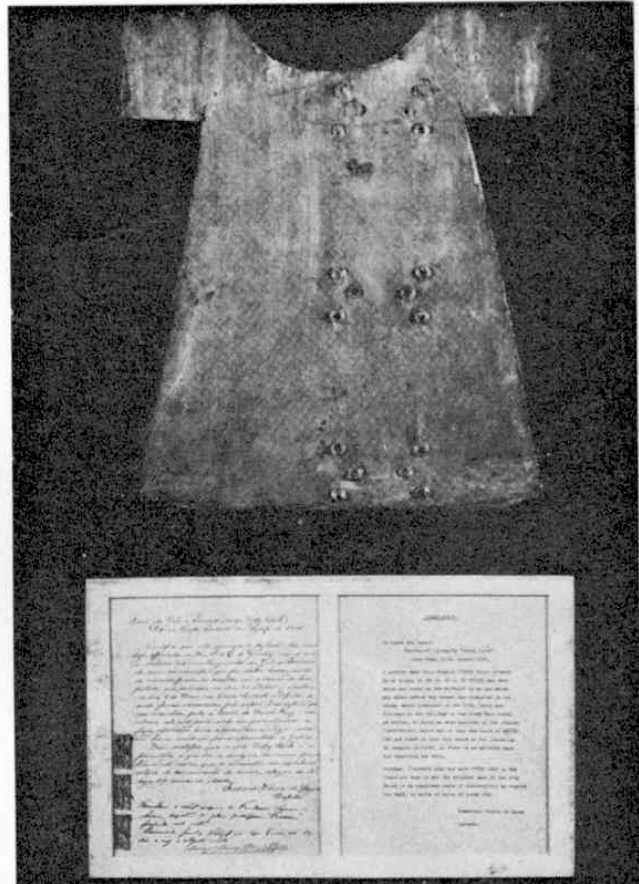
The man Willis chose as his designer was Hercules Linton, son of a Lloyd's Register surveyor and a naval architect and shipbuilder of great ability. Linton had formed a partnership with William Dundas Scott-Moncrief who was a civil engineer and who, amongst other things, invented a mechanically propelled tramcar powered by compressed air. They set up as Scott and Linton, building ships at Dumbarton, and soon established a reputation for turning out fast and beautiful vessels. Willis calculated that the young partnership might be prepared to quote him a favourable price for the chance to show what they could do with a large ship. He was right in this and the agreed price of £16,150 for the *Cutty Sark* (or about £17 per ton) proved to be the undoing of the small firm. They ran out of ready cash before she was completed and called in Denny Brothers to finish her. The partners never recovered from this setback and went into voluntary liquidation in 1870.

Was 'Old White Hat' Willis so pleased with the price he negotiated and the prospect of glory in the City as the owner of a winning tea clipper that he failed to note the significance of the impending opening of the Suez Canal? One thing was certain, he had a good ship for his money. The *Cutty Sark* was surveyed by Lloyd's Register and placed in the 16 A1 class. The survey report noted that she was built with teak decks and with keel, stem and stern post also of teak. Her outside planking was of rock elm and teak and the inside planking was of red pine. As a composite ship she had beams of bulb and angle iron. Her scantlings were heavier than her rival of almost identical size, the *Thermopylae*, and the relative strength of the two ships is often debated. However, the *Cutty Sark* is still with us whereas the *Thermopylae* lies fathoms down off the coast of Portugal.



Original drawing by Hercules Linton for the "Cutty Sark's" figurehead which was carved by Hellyer of Blackwall.

The *Cutty Sark* performed best under a strong breeze and with a real 'driver' as captain. Her maiden voyage to Shanghai was plagued by lack of suitable winds and her captain, George Moodie, was not the one to get the best out of her. Passing the Downs on 15th February 1870 it was not until the 1st



Original masthead decoration in form of a cutty sark, purchased in a London saleroom, together with original certificate in Portuguese signed by Captain then in command.

The original "Cutty Sark" emblem, cut out of sheet metal and used as a wind vane, came to light at an auction in 1960. The certificate is signed and sealed by the Portuguese Consul at Capetown in 1916 and testifies that this was the original emblem rescued from the masthead when the ship was dismantled.

March that Moodie was able to set his sky-sail and royal staysails on picking up the first of the North East trades. After lying becalmed on the line he eventually picked up the South East trades but soon ran into flat calm. Moodie wrote in his log, 'Calm! Calm! Calm! Sea like a mirror.' She reached Shanghai 104 days out on 31st May and after unloading started taking on new teas at £3.10.0 per 50 cubic feet. She was the first tea clipper away from Shanghai in 1870, crossing the Woosung bar on 25th June and entering the Thames on October 13th. It was the best passage from Shanghai made that year and although Captain Moodie and John Willis were disappointed with the actual time of 110 days they were satisfied that they had a vessel which could beat the *Thermopylae* or any other ship in the China trade. From the 18th to the 24th October the *Cutty Sark* underwent the first of many annual surveys by Lloyd's Register and in Green's Upper Dock and East India Docks her yellow metal sheathing was repaired. Samuel Presions, the Lloyd's Register surveyor, recommended retention of class 16 A1.

It was not until 1872 that the *Cutty Sark* was able to match her speed against the *Thermopylae*. The two ships loaded together at Shanghai and sailed from Woosung on the same day, the 18th June. Sailing south down the China coast, round the north coast of Borneo and through the Sunda Strait between Java



Hercules Linton, designer of the "Cutty Sark," was a gifted artist as well as a naval architect and shipbuilder.

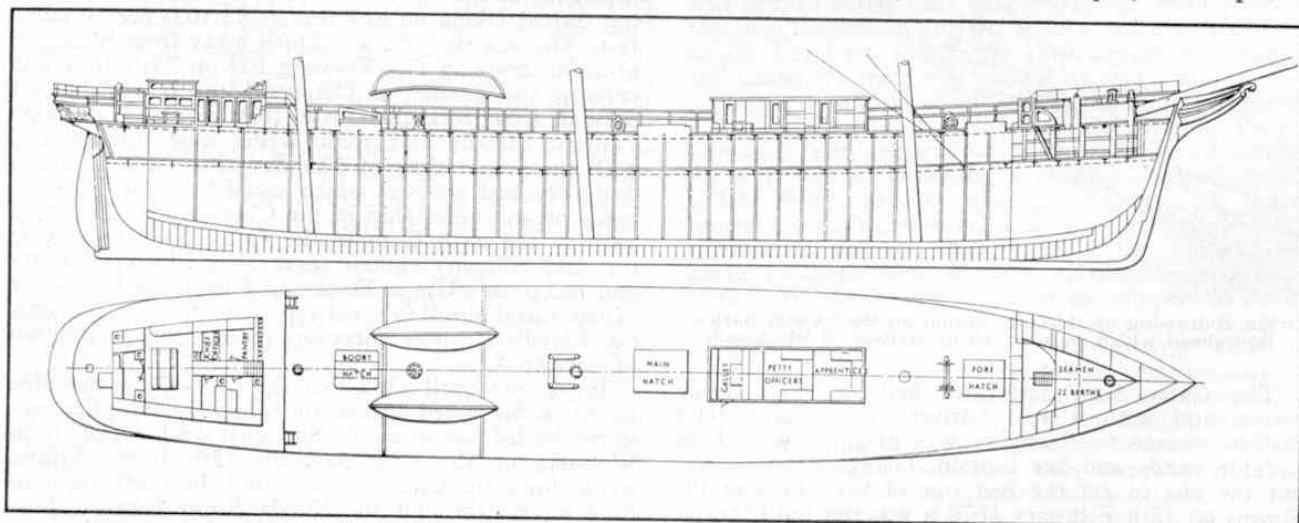
and Sumatra the two ships kept fairly close and the *Cutty Sark* made several sightings of the *Thermopylae*. But once out into the Indian ocean the *Cutty Sark* picked up the strong trade winds and forged ahead.

Copy of original profile and plan drawn by John Rennie, Chief Draughtsman of Scott and Linton.

By 7th August she was off South Africa and 400 miles ahead of the *Thermopylae*. Here her luck deserted her. On the 13th and 14th Moodie encountered a tremendous sea with the wind from the west which developed into a hard gale with howling squalls. On the following day a heavy sea broke under the stern and tore the rudder from the eye bolts. Captain Moodie tried a spar over the stern but was unable to steer the ship with it. The owner's brother, Robert Willis, who was on board pressed Moodie to make for the nearest South African port but Moodie declared for a jury rudder. A spare 70 ft. spar was cut into three parts and fitted. This took a week and while the *Cutty Sark* was hove to, the *Thermopylae* made the most of the prevailing strong winds and passed round the Cape.

Nevertheless the *Cutty Sark* made the Thames by the 18th October in 54 days from the Cape, an extremely good performance with her jury, and this brought her time from Shanghai to 122 days. In the arguments which ensued the captain of the *Thermopylae* insisted he was ahead at the time the *Cutty Sark's* rudder was lost but on being challenged he refused to yield his log book for inspection and it was generally conceded that the *Cutty Sark* would have beaten the *Thermopylae* but for the mishap.

Lloyd's Register carried out a survey of the damage at Green's Lower Dock and South West India Dock between the 29th October and 20th November and the Society's surveyor, Henry T. Tyrrell, noted, 'Repairs: Now done on account of loss of rudder. Placed in dock for examination. Rudder renewed. Main piece with English oak. All new pintles fitted and one brace on stern posts. New iron flange and revolving hoop fitted to rudder head and steering gear refitted and made good. New head rails and timber on port side.' Tyrrell recommended retention of the 16 A1 class. The *Cutty Sark* continued in the China tea trade, though in 1875 her creditable 108 day passage from Shanghai lost some of its lustre alongside the 42 days taken by the steamship *Glenartney* via the Suez Canal. By 1877 the clippers could no longer operate profitably in the once lucrative tea trade. It was in 1877 that the *Cutty Sark* nearly came to grief in the great November gale of that year. She left London for Sydney on the 3rd November and encountered a strong South West wind, thick rain and a falling barometer in the Channel. In company with many sail and steam ships she ran back to the Downs and sheltered there. As hurricane-strength winds developed, cables parted



and many of the 60 ships at anchor started drifting. At night, blue lights, flares and rockets were to be seen in every direction and a large steam ship was on the Shingles firing guns and burning distress flares. Five ships went ashore in Pegwell Bay, a large barque sank off Broadstairs and another was stranded on the Goodwins. Margate was full of dismasted coasters. Amid the turmoil the *Cutty Sark's* cable parted too and she fouled a brig on her port bow and then hit another vessel with her starboard side. Tugs eventually took her in tow and got her to East India Dock where Lloyd's Register surveyor J. W. Scullard carried out a damage survey. Extensive repairs were carried out and a diver went down to look below the waterline. 'Sir,' he reported in writing, 'I have examined the Bottom of the ship *Cutty Sark* and all that I could find the matter with her, there was a few sheets of Copper off amidships on the Port Side of the Bilge which I have replaced and now that the ship is alright.—R. Arnold, Diver.'

The salvage tugs were awarded £3,000 and in the wake of the gale lawsuits were scattered around like autumn leaves. John Willis, owner of the *Cutty Sark*, was sued for damage by the owners of a ship damaged by collision during the gale but the case against him was dismissed through lack of evidence. It is said that, during the gale, the *Cutty Sark's* carpenter found a piece of the name board of a vessel lying on the deck of the *Cutty Sark*, where her bulkwarks had been stove in, and thoughtfully slid the evidence overboard. If he did, it saved Willis a lot of money.

The *Cutty Sark* won her greatest fame as an Australian wool clipper under Captain Richard Woodget in the 1880's. Taking over command in 1885 Woodget took the *Cutty Sark* from East India Docks to Port Jackson in 77 days. On his return trip from Sydney to the Channel he took 67 days, beating his rival the *Thermopylae* by 12 days. The *Cutty Sark* has proved her right to be considered the fastest ship in the wool trade, which in the eighties meant the fastest ship in the world.

In 1895 the twenty-six year old ship docked at London with a record cargo of 5,304 bales of Australian wool putting her two inches below the Plimsoll line and Captain Woodget learned that she was to be sold to J. A. Ferreira & Co., a Portuguese firm. Her last voyage in the wool trade had taken 84 days. After a condition survey at Amos's Dry Dock due to the new ownership and change of name to *Ferreira*, Lloyd's Register surveyor W. Morrison recommended retention of the 13 A1 class she had been given in 1888. Her new master was Sebasteos dos Santos Pereira. One of the signs of the times was the appearance of a letter, in connection with the survey, which was done on a typewriter.

As the *Ferreira*, the *Cutty Sark* sailed the world for another 25 eventful years after which she was acquired by another Portuguese firm and renamed *Maria de Amparo*. In 1916 she was dismasted in a gale off the Cape of Good Hope. Finally the late Captain Wilfred Downman bought her from the Portuguese in 1922 and had her towed to Falmouth where she was used as a full-rigged training ship. In 1954 she came to her present resting place at Greenwich. Though she ended her commercial career under the Portuguese flag her crew always referred to her as 'El Pequina Camisola'—the little chemise.

Upper right: The restored "*Cutty Sark*" on display at Greenwich. It has been calculated that there is enough Terylene in the present running rigging to make 50,000 drip-dry shirts. Right: The "*Cutty Sark*" in dry-dock in 1872 showing her jury rudder and with Henry Henderson, ship's carpenter, at the wheel.

