

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2021

2112 Carving the Future

By Kerry Close

CARVING THE FUTURE

My third great-grandfather John Harriott was an artist, at least according to the 1841 England Census. He lived in North Shields, on the River Tyne in Northumberland. Most of his male neighbours had occupations such as grocers, cordwainers, cabinetmakers etc., as well as shipwrights and mariners, as Tyneside during this period was the busy hub of shipping and shipbuilding. But John appeared to be the only 'artist',¹ although his brother, Archibald, was recorded in the same census as 'carver'.²

Intrigued by these rather vague descriptions of the brothers, I resolved to discover how they were able to provide for their growing families in a place so centred on the shipping industry.³ John, born in North Shields in 1808,⁴ and his wife Ann,⁵ already had four children to support in 1841,⁶ and it seemed highly unlikely that he was a portrait painter to the rich and famous, or a sought-after landscape painter, as I certainly had never come across him in that regard. And what could Archibald possibly be carving that would enable him to feed *his* brood?⁷

Because of the plentiful supply of coal in the area, the banks of the Tyne were also crowded with factories, factories which produced sulphuric acid, soda and bleaching powder, essential requisites for the finishing processes used by the numerous woollen mills that had sprung up across the country since the Industrial Revolution. This toxic mix resulted in many tons of hydrochloric acid escaping into the atmosphere⁸ and one can only imagine the devastating effect it may have had on the health of all who lived there. According to a talk given by Mr W.A Campbell for the Northumberland and Durham Family History Society in 1987... "By the middle of the 19th century the banks of the Tyne were laid waste from Newcastle to Shields. No grass, trees or flowers grew there due to this 'acid rain'..."⁹ A truly appalling scenario.

Britain was the world leader in shipping from the Industrial Revolution to the 20th century and the North-East of England was the main ship producer with shipyards such as Young's, Forsyth's and Wright's dotted along the river.¹⁰ The wooden tall ships built there were used in warfare and for transporting goods, soldiers and colonisers overseas. It was a chaotic, smoggy and dismal environment in which to nurture a family. But what other skills did John possess to enable him to eke out his family's existence? Keen to find out, I made enquiries to the Northumberland and Durham Family History Facebook group and was fortunate to receive a post of the baptism certificate of John and Ann's son, which noted John's occupation as 'ship carver'.¹¹ Now I was getting somewhere.

Following up this clue led me to the website of Maritima Woodcarving in Oxfordshire, England, managed by Andy Peters, a carver himself, who restores, as well as creates, ships' figureheads. From a reference book he had he was able to provide me with a copy of an advertisement of an auction held in 1843 at the premises of

'A. & J. HARRIOTT,
CARVERS, GILDERS, JOINERS, &c.,
LOW END of BELL-STREET.

*NEAR THE UNION WHARF, NORTH SHIELDS.*¹²

The stock for sale included 'several Carved Male and Female Busts and Figureheads for Ships of various sizes. A quantity of Stars, Drops, Brackets and Lions' Faces for Ships' Sterns and Catheads'.¹³ It also states that John and Archibald had worked on at least seven vessels for H.S. Edwards, shipbuilders of South Shields, between 1836 and 1840, creating figureheads from American fir for the *Mary Muir*, *Caroline* and *Janet*. Erica McCarthy writes in 'Ship Carvers in 18th and 19th Century Britain' for *Sculpture Journal 2015*, '... Some carvers stockpiled their carvings in quieter times. One example was that of Archibald and John Harriott of North Shields....'. The brothers had set up business in 1828 and in 1834 had moved to larger premises – hopefully that meant business had been booming – but by 1840 John had gone his own way, although the title of A. & J. Harriott was retained until 1847 when it was altered finally to 'Archibald Harriott'.¹⁴

From very early times figureheads represented many things; lions for strength, horses' heads for vision and swiftness, serpents, bulls or dragons to strike fear into the enemy. They were also a means of identifying ships in the days when many sailors couldn't read. Often a figurehead was fashioned after the wife of the captain or owner of a ship, and although women themselves were considered bad luck on board a ship, figureheads of naked and semi-naked women 'were supposed to be able to calm a storm at sea'.¹⁵

By 1851 John and his family had given up the polluted environment of Tyneside for the similarly polluted one of London.¹⁶ Brother Archibald had died in 1848 aged just 44¹⁷ so perhaps John hoped a better life awaited them in the big city. The census for 1851 has the family living at 55 Robin Hood Lane, Poplar, with both John and his son described as 'carver' and 'gilder'.¹⁸ By 1855 there were 9 children.¹⁹ Since the call for figureheads had dwindled dramatically by this period, was John reliant only on carving and gilding mirrors and picture frames to earn the family's keep? Most likely, as in September 1859, following the brave journeys of daughters Ann in the *Admiral Lyons* in 1857²⁰ and Jane in the *David McIvor* in 1858,²¹ the Harriott family arrived on the welcome shores of Australia aboard the *Parsee*,²² eager to start a new life.

And so, the mystery of 'artist' was resolved most unexpectedly and to my delight. My ancestor had been a creator of figureheads, those wonderfully whimsical adornments on ships' prows. He had been an artist after all, but in a field I had never imagined and one which is rare today.

John Harriott arrived in Australia as a 'carpenter'²³ but was a 'medical herbalist' when he died in 1879 at his residence in Goulburn Street, Sydney.²⁴

Yet had he ever hankered after his rather romantic trade left behind in Tynemouth a world away?

1. Ancestry: 1841 England Census; Tynemouth, Northumberland. Piece 826, Book 2, Folio 5, p.3
2. Ibid., Piece 826, Book 3, Folio 25, p.6
3. Wikipedia: History of Newcastle upon Tyne
4. Ancestry: England, Select Births and Christenings, 1538-1975: FHL Film number 1068653, Reference ID -2: 1Z4MF6J,
5. Ancestry: England, Select Marriages, 1853-1973: FHL Film number 1068929, Reference ID p229 No686
6. Ancestry: 1841 England Census; Tynemouth, Northumberland. Piece 826, Book 2, Folio 5, p.3
7. Ibid., Piece 826, Book 3, Folio 25, p.6
8. *The Journal of the Northumberland and Durham Family History Society* Vol 12 no.2, SUMMER '87 p.3
9. Ibid.
10. Tyne Built Ships- 'A history of Tyne shipbuilders and the ships that they built.' (Shipping and Shipbuilding Research Trust)
11. DustyDocs: FreeReg., Baptism Entry, Christ Church Tynemouth, Register Entry number 1815, File line number 187
12. *British Figurehead and Ship Carvers* – P.N. Thomas ISBN 0 905 184 16 5
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. *The Oxford Companion to Ships and the Sea* – Figureheads. Peter Kemp, Ed.
16. Ancestry: 1851 England Census; Poplar, Middlesex. Household schedule number 110, Piece 1556, Folio 238, page number 36
17. Ancestry: England and Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1837-1915. Tynemouth, Northumberland. Apr-May-Jun, Volume 25, page 335
18. Ancestry: 1851 England Census; Poplar, Middlesex. Household schedule number 110, Piece 1556, Folio 238, page number 36
19. New South Wales, Australia, Immigration Deposit Journals, 1853-1900: Deposit Date 7 Feb 1859, Immigration Group 10
20. New South Wales, Australia, Assisted Immigrant Passenger Lists, 1828-1896: Arrival Date 15 Sep 1857, *Admiral Lyons*
21. Ibid., Arrival Date 24 Sep 1858 *David McIvor*
22. Ibid., Arrival Date 14 Sep 1859 *Parsee*
23. Ibid.
24. TROVE *The Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser (NSW: 1871-1912)* Saturday 27 September 1879 page 493