ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO WHAT WAS SAID TO BE THE FINEST CLIPPER BUILT WAS SUNK OFF LISBON.
TREVOR BOULT MARKS THE ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEMISE OF THERMOPYLAE

The fierce fire that tore through the **Cutty Sark** earlier this year has focussed fresh attention on a vessel regarded as the ultimate clipper - an enduring symbol of Britain's maritime traditions, a superlative international icon of the great age of sail, and a worthy example of a hull-form acknowledged as close to perfection.

But **Cutty Sark** was originally built to rival another vessel - the **Thermopylae** - that was said by many to have been the finest clipper ever built and described in her day as the pride of the British merchant marine.

Justly regarded by contemporary mariners to have been the fastest sailing vessel ever launched, **Thermopylae** was specifically designed for the intensive demands of the China tea trades and was one of a series of vessels built in Aberdeen by the firm of Walter Hood for the local White Star Line of George Thompson & Co,

The tradition of England's 'cuppa' originated in the 17th century, when Dutch India ships brought tea to Europe, Small quantities found their way to London and were introduced to the English Court, whose members were sufficiently wealthy to afford this rare new luxury. As supply gradually increased it slowly infused more widely into society,

By 1840 ports in China were open for free trade and Americans were developing sailing ships that could make fast passages to New York Merchants in London were inspired by this and enabled ship designers and builders in England and Scotland to rise to the challenge,

Thus began the short and glorious age of the clippers, which culminated in the **Thermopylae** and **Cutty Sark** as the pinnacles of a ship type affectionately dubbed 'China birds', The London markets were some 13,000 miles from the Far East and these two ships came to define the era of sail that saw them and many other famous vessels maintain the prestige and romance of their singular calling,

Most of the tea clipper fleet carried general cargo outward to Australia, The masters of many visiting sailing ships enthused that Sydney Harbour was the finest in the world, It was in Australian waters that the **Thermopylae** and **Cutty Sark** met, and caused the newspapers to declare that no two finer ships for speed had ever visited that port.

The clippers then carried coal for the Chinese ports. Here they awaited the new seasons tea. Foo Chow was a destination of choice because of the early date the tea was available for loading, An early departure and speedy passage were essential. The London merchants who received the first tea delivery awarded a hefty premium to the clipper owner and master,

Designed by Bernard Waymouth, **Thermopylae** was launched in August 1868, Named after a narrow pass in east-central Greece, the vessel's pure white figurehead represented the young King Leonidas who, with sword arm extended and braced shield, symbolised the epic stand of a small band of Spartans who fought to the death against the Persian hordes, in defence of their homeland.

Described technically as an extreme composite clipper. **Thermopylae**'s hull was constructed of wood planking on iron frames. An effective and successful combination, it represented the period of transition from all wood to all iron ships. It was particularly suitable for the tea trade, where great strength was essential and in which iron ships were less popular. Iron was then considered detrimental for the tea, and in gentle breezes they could never equal the wooden ships.

The attributes of **Thermopylae'**s hull conformed with those of her sisters in the China tea fleet, displaying a sharply inclined cutwater below the figurehead, a fine entrance and an exquisite run aft to the elegant counter stern. She was heavily sparred with a large sail area, both for speed and headway in light airs.

The immaculate appearance of the **Thermopylae** proclaimed the zenith of clipper ship design. Her graceful yacht-like hull was liveried with green topsides above the yellowed metalwork of her underwater sheathing. The bow was decorated with gold and her stern was fashioned as a shapely bird tail. Gilded scroll work and full-length stripe set off her white bowsprit, yard arms, lower masts and pulley blocks. On deck, the bright work of varnished teak and polished brass complemented the snow-white of the holystoned deck itself

There was always intense rivalry to be considered the smartest ship, which included trimming the yards to the finest tolerance. Such preparations were made prior to the race home, as the top ships assembled at the premier loading ports towards the end of April whilst waiting arrival of the tea. With ensigns and enormous house flags flying at their trucks, none outshone the clippers of the Aberdeen White Star Line.

Keeping pace with the perfecting of clipper ship design, their serving masters became an exceptional breed that excelled in the arts of seamanship and leadership. In racing, there was only a narrow margin of speed difference between the best known clippers. It has been said that their captains had as much or more to do with the success or failure than the ships themselves. Handling a tea clipper required great skill and nerve, courage and endurance.
The master was solely responsible for driving the ship and nurturing the best from his officers and crew. British to a man, all racing crews were individually selected. These prime seamen all took great pride in their respective ships and bent to the challenge with the grit of true sportsmen.
Thermopylae 's crews are on record as having spread their own blankets in the rigging as an auxiliary to her sails. Numbering 34, both they and the ship were fortunate in having Captain Kemball as the first master. The annual races became closely contested. All through the China Seas and across the Indian Ocean, to rounding the Cape and the long haul of the South- and North Atlantic, each ship would be in ignorance of how their competitors were faring. It was a common enough occurrence that ships would only sight each other again in the English Channel.
On her maiden voyage from the Thames, **Thermopylae** sailed to Melbourne, Shanghai and Foo Chow. She broke records on each leg of the journey and was to continue setting new standards in the years ahead. The ship was eventually to sail more often to Australia in the wool trade, but it was her meteoric fame as a tea dipper that stimulated a prominent London shipowner to have a ship designed to beat both the Thermopylae and all other clippers in the tea trade.
Captain Jock Willis approached the Dumbarton firm of Scott & Linton, and it was on the Clyde that the product of Hercules Linton's inspired design took form as the **Cutty Sark**. Completed at Denny's yard, she was to be the last of the racing clippers and spread a greater sail plan than any of her predecessors. Rigged with a full spread of stunsails the width exceeded 150ft.
Entering service in the year following that of the **Thermopylae**, the **Cutty Sark** was not privileged to break any records on the tea trade, but did prove to be a fast racer. She later went on to become a swift wool carrier, becoming the only clipper to both equal and beat the **Thermopylae** on sections of several routes, accepting the accolade that she was possibly the only vessel that could beat her in strong favouring winds.

"**CUTTY SARK"**

In 1872 these two ships were set to duel. None could have predicted the outcome. The **Thermopylae** and **Cutty Sark** left Shanghai together, amidst great interest and excitement. After several weeks, with the **Cutty Sark** leading by only a few hours, a heavy sea broke under her stern and wrenched away the rudder. By great seamanship from her master, Captain Moodie, the catastrophe of being dismasted was avoided. Eventually a jury rig was fashioned and fitted. The repair was so effective that after a delay of 13 days the **Cutty Sark** was able to resume her voyage, reaching London only a week after the Thermopylae. Captain Moodie won great praise and his ship took the honours for the race which marked the beginning of the life-long rivalry between the two ships.

When rivalry in the tea trade between Britain and America was at its peak, the tea carried in American ships was often compromised due to the lightness of their build and the use of soft-woods which permitted ingress of water under a press of sail. British vessels were noted for the excellent condition of their own cargoes. The home-grown composite clippers of the 1860s were built to such exacting standards as to render the hulls tight.
Like any tea clipper, with her narrow beam and low freeboard, the **Thermopylae** was wet enough when heavily pressed through head seas, but otherwise her weatherly qualities were supreme. They evidently transcended anything a particular Melbourne pilot had ever seen, as she left that port on her first voyage bound for Newcastle, New South Wales. The **Thermopylae** was amazing under any condition of wind. In steady quartering breezes, with all sails set, she would comfortably make up to 13 knots, her helm amidships and with a boy at the wheel. In doldrum conditions **Thermopylae** was able to ghost along at up to five knots, when there was hardly a ripple on the sea and an American counterpart would barely have had steerage way.

The Suez Canal opened in 1869, when larger-capacity tea steamers entered the trade. They effectively halved the three- month passage time of the clippers on their route around the Cape of Good Hope. In less than a decade the tea clippers were eclipsed and eliminated from the China tea trade, but found gainful and proper employment in other spheres.

Due to the competition of steamships, economies were eventually introduced by sailing ship owners. In 1890 the **Thermopylae** was sold into Canadian ownership. In 1892 her hull was painted white and the rig reduced to that of a barque. She maintained her reputation but was not seen again in Australia; she plied the rice trade between Vancouver and Rangoon. In 1895 she was sold to the Portuguese government and converted into a training ship, renamed the Pedro Nunes.

A coal hulk at the last, on 13 October 1907 she met her final honourable discharge. The Portuguese government supervised the vessel's demise. Towed out of the Tagus by two warships, she was granted a naval funeral to honour her past accomplishments and - watched by the Queen of Portugal - was ceremoniously sunk.

In 1916, the **Cutty Sark** was converted to a barquentine. Some six years later she was found in a dilapidated condition in a London dock. Following restoration she also saw service as a training ship, on the Thames. She was eventually handed over in a formal ceremony in 1953 to HRH The Duke of Edinburgh, as patron of the Cutty Sark Preservation Society. Opening to the public, she gradually assumed and earned her iconic status from the millions of visitors who have paced her decks beneath the panoply of masts and rigging that, until recently, so proudly defined the Greenwich skyline.

'The delightful form of the hull of a tea clipper, gently twisting from a hollowed curve and flare at the bows to a slight inward inclination or tumblehome and then reversing the twist again into the grand sweep under the counter stem, all being moulded perfectly into the curves toward the keel, must surely rank as the most aesthetically perfect manmade shape. There is much to be learned about the purpose of life in looking back - as in our regard of the tea clipper'

- quoted from China Tea Clippers, by George Campbell.

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