

Ancestral mystery of desert warrior queen

Category: Stories, Syria

written by AS Media | 23 November 2024



I had requested a camel train to take us across the Syrian Desert to Palmyra, the hometown of the legendary Queen Zenobia, whose ancestry is unclear. She may have been raised as the daughter of her brother, who had married the widow of her father, who was the brother of them both. Palmyra was an important trading hub on the ancient Silk Road in the Third Century, so a visit might reveal more and help solve the ancestral mystery of the desert warrior Queen Zenobia.

by Terry Walker	05042024	17 minute read
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Plus, an image gallery and video

We were keen to discover more about the fascinating ancestry of Queen Zenobia and the intricate web of connections that made her one of the most powerful women in history. From her noble lineage to her strategic marriages, every aspect of her family history was intertwined with the politics and power struggles of that period.

We had to be in her capital to untangle the ancestry of this iconic queen and uncover the secrets of her rise to greatness.

Travelling by camel was a romantic, adventurous idea, but not very sensible considering we were 250 km or around 12 days' camel hoof away. However, my request to the Syrian Government *was* being considered. I was awaiting a decision sitting outside the office of Minister Ahmed Iskander Ahmed, in the grim black and cream Ministry of Information building in central Damascus. Alongside me were a dozen other supplicants wanting favours that were unlikely to mirror the one I was here to pursue.

This was the only place in Syria where I could obtain an authorisation for the camels to trek the barren desert to Palmyra from where Zenobia led her armies to capture Egypt from the Romans 1,700 years ago.

No camels, but request approved

It seemed like a long time perched on the dusty leather chair, from which I rose as the trying-to-be-helpful ministerial assistant emerged from the inner office. He headed towards me with a grin that suggested we might have a deal and a strong ancestral story for my party of travel writers.

“There is good news, Mr. Terry. You can take your journalists to the town of Palmyra, but it would be much too tiring to travel by camel. We will make more suitable arrangements, and please all be ready at 9 am in two days,” said the assistant.

With no camels on offer, I assumed we would use the three chauffeured official Government Mercedes limos to transport our group to distant Palmyra - a less adventurous substitute for my suggested ships of the desert trek.

1,000 miles of biblical history

Since arriving in Syria from London on this pioneering Fam Trip, we

have had the use of three chauffeured Mercs, replete with damask curtains for passenger privacy. Traffic in downtown Damascus pulled over and stopped to make way for us as we zig-zagged to inspect the touristic delights of the oldest city in the world.

We had even taken the cars right into the bustling *Al-Hamidiyah Souk* and parked in *The Street Called Straight*, visited by St Paul, but which now has mosques, churches and synagogues along the way. There were fine oriental rugs, silk, copperware and spices on offer everywhere.

The marketing theme being promoted by our media visit, “*1,000 miles of Biblical History*” included Jordan, much of the Holy Land, and, emulating St Paul, finishing up in Damascus. Our hosts, the Syrian Arab Republic, provided the travel and met the hospitality costs.

Massacres and tribal dissent

We aimed for positive coverage in carefully selected UK national and regional newspapers and travel magazines. Their journalists had accepted my invitation to look at Syria’s tourism potential as guests of the Al-Assad ruling regime. It was the first press trip of its kind to the country, so I was determined it would be a success.

We had negotiated a PR and marketing contract in London to assist the Syrians in beefing up their tourism market. Getting a solid media appraisal was an essential first step. There had been rumours in London about thousands of citizens of Hama, near Syria’s northern border with Turkey, being massacred. International media reported sectarian dissent around the country. But the Syrian Government officials attending our meetings in London suggested that things were much better now and the country was safe for tourists.

Long-range jumbo jets to expand airline

Our trip came at a pivotal time for Syria and the Middle East. The Western media had problems getting into Syria in earlier troubled years because of regular regional unrest, including the Yom Kippur War in

1973. But by now, the Syrians had expanded Damascus International Airport and updated the *SyrianAir* operations to pitch for an improved media image and dollar-earning tourism...

I explained all of this to media contacts. I put together a press party of national, regional, and travel trade journalists and tour operators to see for themselves what Syria had to offer to international tourists...

As the leader of this official familiarisation visit, I was on the flight deck at Heathrow Airport when the pilot programmed the 747's onboard navigation computer to Damascus. On the way to our take-off position, we trundled past a disgorging Concorde, soared skywards and headed east to Arabia.

I had heard that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had paid for the brand-new, long-range Boeing 747-SP that transported us from London. It was the first of two, due to be operated jointly by Syrian Arab Airlines and Alia Royal Jordanian Airline, to boost long-haul business for both countries. The 747-SPs could fly directly to New York from either Amman or Damascus, the first transatlantic route operated by an Arab airline. However, as is often the case in the Middle East, the two countries fell out. I don't think they actually operated their joint flight agreement.

We landed in Damascus to a barrage of local media interest. In an interview, I told *Syrian State TV* how much we looked forward to seeing the many touristic and cultural delights and informing the British about what was on offer in this glorious country.

Uncertainties on the political front

A fairly bland statement that reflected unvoiced uncertainties on the political front about President Hafez al-Assad and his Baathist regime. This was my first visit, so I kept the word count down. I had done my research with the help of *SyrianAir* officials in London, but there were no complicated questions to answer.

The senior and most important journalist in our party was Dilys Powell, the renowned film critic and travel writer for the *Sunday Times*.

Dilys might have lobbied the travel editor for the chance of getting to Syria because she later suggested I try to include a visit to Palmyra. She had probably heard about Queen Zenobia from her first husband, Humfrey Payne. He was a leading archaeologist, and Dilys spent many years with him in Greece after he was appointed director of the *British School of Archaeology* in Athens.

Following my pressure at the Syrian Ministry of Information, she was delighted when I told her and the rest of the party we were heading for Palmyra, the hometown of the desert warrior queen. Nobody mentioned camels.



Zenobia 3rd century Queen of the East



Queen Zenobia, captured by Romans and put in gold chains.



We flew to Palmyra by Russian-built Yak to untangle the ancestral mystery of warrior queen



Satellite view of our plane's flight path approach to Palmyra airstrip (right). Check out our ancestral story of Palmyra warrior queen.



Fakhr al-Din al-Maani citadel Palmyra (Syrian Arab Republic). Check out our ancestral story of Palmyra warrior queen.





Ruins of the ancient city of Palmyra, buried for 1,000 years under sands of the Syrian desert. Check out our ancestral story of Palmyra warrior queen.



Site of Palmyra (Syrian Arab Republic). One mile of "Main Street" civic buildings including, public baths and temples, some of which were demolished by Islamic State members during their Syrian incursion. Check out our ancestral story of Palmyra warrior queen.



Temple of Bel in Palmyra before it was demolished with explosives by ISIS rebels. Check out our ancestral story of Palmyra warrior queen.



ISIS forces demolish the "pagan" Temple of Bel in Palmyra, Syria. Check out our ancestral story of Palmyra warrior queen.



Syrian soldiers regain Palmyra after battles with ISIS rebel forces. Check out our ancestral story of Palmyra warrior queen.



Syria's capital Damascus, one of the earliest cities in the world. Check out our ancestral story of Palmyra warrior queen.

For the evening before our departure, our party was invited to a formal banquet at a ritzy casino in Damascus to meet Syrian Government officials and tourism chiefs. Many locals came in army uniforms, mainly those of generals and other high-rankers. Many wives wore Fifties-style evening dresses and much gold jewellery.

Our printed menus promised a main course of spit-roasted lamb. It arrived in lamb-sized pieces on huge silver salvers, which chefs placed on the long refectory table. The carcass of each lamb had been placed, pyre-like, on a deep bed of fluffy rice...

The chefs withdrew and the waiters placed a heated dinner plate in front of each guest but made no effort to serve anyone.

What's happening? What is the protocol here? A general indicated I should help myself from the huge pile of food in front of me. Not ladies first then, not ministers or generals in order of seniority. Was I some guest of honour because of my TV news coverage when we arrived at Damascus Airport?

No serving spoons were within grasp, but a Syrian guest sitting next to me mimed how I should use my right hand to grab rice and meat and return portions to my plate. I was up and running, quickly followed by a flurry of self-serving hands around the table as the party got stuck into the spit-roasted lambs.

Camo-painted Russian-built Yak

However, I was to be up and running after this generous serving of botulism... Damascus Dash's (DD) symptoms - a local variant of Montezuma's Revenge or Delhi Belly - were a constant travelling companion for the rest of the year.

Breakfast the next day was a missed event for me and a couple of the journalists. Happily, we managed to be at the front door of *Le Méridien Hotel* (now Dedeman Hotel) as the Mercs rolled up to take us to... Damascus airport.

We were whisked through to the tarmac via the VIP route. Dilys Powell, dressed for the desert, looked like a leading lady from an Indiana Jones movie. She was alongside me as we were led to our transport. I spotted our plane - "Oh my God." But Dilys didn't bat an eyelid. We were to fly in a camo-painted Russian-built Yak, a military aircraft customarily used to

carry troops into war zones.

Would we be sitting on the floor with our backs to a webbed fuselage as depicted in WW2 newsreels... With a parachute pack on our laps? Would we need to be strapped to fuselage webbing bouncing around as we landed on a dusty desert landing strip?

We mounted the short boarding steps to be greeted by the head stewardess of the Boeing 747-SP that had carried us from London. A couple of her uniformed team held trays of refreshments and welcomed us aboard with knowing smiles.

Desert trail with real-life camels

None of that “squaddie squatting” was necessary because the plane now had rows of seats. They had been removed from the Boeing 747-SP and fitted in the Yak for our 243 km desert journey. And, hopefully, a safe return to Damascus. Russian-made planes had a nasty habit of coming down unexpectedly in all the wrong places.

The twin-prop Yak lumbered down the runway and rose slowly to about 6,000 feet on a north-easterly heading. Our pilot followed a clearly defined camel trail across the desert, regularly punctuated by real-life camel trains. That isn't easy to get into your head in an age of intercontinental travel and scientists working in the international space station circling the globe.

Our Yak got us to Palmyra just ahead of the nearest line of camels. We came in low (very low) over acres of Grecian and Roman pillars, temple ruins, and then the modern-day town of small, flat-roofed houses. We were now so low I wondered if we were putting down in the main street. Our landing gear just about cleared the last house in town. With the infamous Tadmor Prison on the left-hand side of the plane, we flopped onto the runway.

There was no obvious terminal building. So our party just walked off the sun-baked runway back into the town, where we were led into a small

museum crammed with impressive artifacts. Luckily, there was a sort of public loo because I was now feeling the full ill effects of the “Damascus Dash”. It probably did result from the finger buffet lamb of the previous evening! They eat dates in desert parts, don’t they?

Buried under shifting sand for 1,000 years

We were shown more amazing artifacts in the museum. Then, there was a guided tour of temples and monuments among the acres of ruins of the ancient kingdom of Palmyra, which is described in the Bible as being founded by King Solomon. The main Roman street with its colonnades was one mile long. The searing sun was beating down on our party as we moved along it, simply gasping at the sheer scale of the place. Some members of our party suggested Palmyra’s antiquities rivalled those of Athens and Rome.

The desert air and sands preserved everything, but many of the ancient buildings lay on the ground where they had collapsed in an earthquake. This resulted in the town being buried under the desert sands for 1,000 years. This helped with the preservation of structures and artifacts.

Nearby, there were tombs in the sky - tall towers built to show off the wealth and power of local dynasties. There were niches for the dead on all four sides. A fabulous Arabian Nights hilltop castle, Qula’at ibn Maan overlooks the town.



These camels had made it to Palmyra and provided visitor tours of the Greek, Roman and Palmyrene antiquities. Local guides joked about expecting “one-person groups”.

But we were the only tourists in Palmyra that day. We wandered into the shade of a large oasis. Our guide introduced us to a French engineer who was busy tapping an underground aquifer. It would fill the

swimming pool of a *Méridien Hotel* under construction. If they ever arrived at this stunning place, future visitors would appreciate a cool dip. Today's desert heat was unbearable for some of our party. One exception was Dilys Powell, who was accustomed to these temperatures from her years of "digging" in Greece.

Palmyra had been a forgotten place, buried under desert sands, until 50 years earlier when foreign archaeologists rediscovered it. Because of the constant upheavals in the region, there have been few tourists since. Syria has another 20 outstanding archaeological sites, including Damascus and Aleppo, each continuously inhabited for 5,000 years.

Crossroads town of the Silk Road

One previous tourist arrival in Syria was that of Mark Twain. In his 1869 book *Innocents Abroad*, he wrote: "Go back as far as you will into the vague past; there was always a Damascus." She has looked upon the dry bones of a thousand empires and you will see the tombs of a thousand more before she dies."

Even earlier visitors to Palmyra included Hadrian (of Wall fame). He was so impressed that he gave tax concessions. These were very useful for a town at the crossroads of the Silk Road. In 255 AD, Septimus Odaenathus was appointed governor of Syria Phoenicia, based in Palmyra. Five years later, he was made Governor of the entire East. In 266 AD, Odaenathus and his eldest son were assassinated, and his wife, Zenobia, became the effective ruler. Some believe the Palmyra warrior queen hired the assassin.

Zenobia captured and taken to Rome

The ambitious and attractive Zenobia was half-Greek and half-Arab, or possibly half-Jewish. There are several variants of her actual ancestry. She claimed to be descended from Egypt's Queen Cleopatra. Zenobia was an exceptionally intelligent and eloquent speaker in Palmyrian, Aramaic, Greek, Latin and Egyptian. In her court were scholars,

theologians and philosophers. She dressed as an emperor, not an empress, and claimed she could outdrink any man (and win at arm wrestling?).

Queen Zenobia was a successful ruler, and by 270 AD, her armies had conquered most of Anatolia (Asia Minor). This earned her the title of The Warrior Queen. Palmyra declared independence from Rome but fell into decline after Zenobia was captured three years later. The warrior queen was taken to Rome in gold chains.

Our Press party was captivated by this fantastic pink and ochre palm-fringed place in the middle of the desert. Dilys Powell was reluctant to get back on the Yak for the return journey to Damascus. She'd had a field day to remember in Palmyra, marvelling at the Greco-Roman artifacts on-site and in the adjacent museum.

For my part, I had to split my time between ancient artifacts and ancient plumbing in the museum and elsewhere. My DD was still causing chaos... The desert heat didn't help, but everyone in our party managed to stay well-hydrated and attentive.

That evening, we visited the impressive Damascus Museum. Its recent extension housed more of the seemingly unlimited artifacts of Syria. These included the world's first alphabet, probably the most important exhibit. There was plenty of evidence to suggest that Zenobia ruled over a vast empire, albeit in agreement with Rome. Her seizure of Egypt sparked her eventual downfall (watch video).

All our party was jaw-dropped by the breadth and quality of the collection, especially Dilys Powell. She displayed a deep knowledge of Grecian and Roman jewellery. Everyone enjoyed the pioneering visit, all of which went smoothly. The visit to Palmyra with its warrior queen was an important event to share with their readers and feature in upcoming their ancestral stories?

UPDATE

The entangled ancestry of Queen Zenobia, the Palmyra Warrior Queen, remains unclear in the aftermath of the media visit. She may have been raised as the daughter of her brother, who had married the widow of her father, who was the brother of them both.

Ancestry updated 23 January 2025 by **Jone Johnson Lewis**: Zenobia generally agreed to have been of Semitic (Aramean) descent. She claimed Queen Cleopatra VII of Egypt as an ancestor and, thus, Seleucid ancestry. This may be a confusion with Cleopatra Thea (the “other Cleopatra”). Arab writers have also claimed that she was of Arab ancestry. Another ancestor was Drusilla of Mauretania, the granddaughter of Cleopatra Selene, the daughter of Cleopatra VII and Marc Antony. Drusilla also claimed descent from a sister of Hannibal and from a brother of Queen Dido of Carthage. Drusilla’s grandfather was King Juba II of Mauretania. Zenobia’s paternal ancestry can be traced back six generations. It includes Gaius Julius Bassianus, father of Julia Domna, who married the emperor Septimus Severus.

Zenobia’s languages likely included Aramaic, Arabic, Greek, and Latin. The warrior queen’s mother may have been Egyptian; Zenobia was also said to be familiar with the ancient Egyptian language. To add to her mystery, Zenobia was known as Bat Zabbai, Septimia Zenobia, Znwbyā Bat Zabbai. The image (10 above) is *Queen Zenobia’s Last Look upon Palmyra* by Herbert Gustave Schmalz (aka Herbert Carmichael) in 1888. She was taken in chains from Palmyra to Rome, as depicted.

Syria’s Boeing 747-SP was never flown to New York. However, the second 747-SP, delivered to Alia in 1977, was used on the Amman-New York route. This was the first transatlantic route operated by an Arab airline. The 747-SP is no longer (2024) shown in the official SyrianAir fleet.

Four years after our Press visit, UNESCO made Palmyra a World Heritage site. It was described well: “The art and architecture of Palmyra stands at the crossroads of several civilizations. It marries

Graeco-Roman techniques with local traditions and Persian influences.”

Tourism grew steadily, centred on Damascus, beach resorts and Palmyra, but didn't reach its full potential. It peaked in 1981 before declining again, and in 2010 virtually ceased with the outbreak of civil war. Subsequent trade embargos against the Al-Hassad regime were invoked. This meant no Cocoa Cola or other products of American and European companies were officially available in Syria.

On 23 July 2012, as the rebellion against President Bashar Al-Assad continued, the EU imposed more sanctions on Syria. SyrianAir could not make flights to the EU or buy any new aircraft or parts made in the EU. SyrianAir was forced to suspend all affected operations in the EU.

In the Civil War of 2010-2020, Government troops occupied ancient Palmyra and took potshots at any locals who moved. ISIS rebels later destroyed some of its finest artifacts. The desert town was added to a list of endangered world heritage sites.

Dilys Powell, film critic and latter-day desert warrior, died in St Charles Hospital, London, on 03 June 1995, aged 93. Her Greek Odyssey book, *An Affair of the Heart* (1958), is a rare gem in travel writing. It has been described as “an unforgettable evocation of a country and its people on intimate knowledge and lasting affection”. Hailed as a classic when it was first published more than fifty years ago. It is still regarded as one of the most outstanding books on Greece ever written. It was reprinted and published by Souvenir Press in 2011.

“For decades, the mere mention of Tadmor Prison was enough to send chills down a Syrian's spine. The notorious facility was where thousands of dissidents were held. It was reported they were beaten, humiliated and systematically tortured for opposing the Assad rule. It was demolished by the Islamic State group, which took over the site in Palmyra. Many Syrians wanted it to remain standing so future generations would know its horrors.” - *News report from Associated Press.*

The Al-Assad Ba'athist regime was overthrown in just two weeks in December 2024 by opposition forces. The offensive was spearheaded by Tahrir al-Sham and supported mainly by the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army. This marked the end of the ongoing Syrian civil war that began in 2011. President Bashar al-Assad and his family fled to Moscow, where they were given asylum. Source: *Wikipedia*.

Read more about Queen Zenobia and Palmyra

First record for The Beatles, first jingle for a ferryboat

Category: England, Isle of Man, London, Stories
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This amazing story reveals enduring links with The Beatles, Sixties songwriter Mitch Murray and 84,000

Isle of Man residents whose lifeline ferry service faced a Perfect Storm.

by Terry Walker	AS28082014	8 minute read
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from *My Life, in Words*

The sea ferry company serving the tax haven Isle of Man is the oldest in the world but ran out of steam after 150 years of ploughing across the Irish Sea. A new rival ferry company and a smart airline start-up were attracting passengers and freight. In the 1970s, holidaymakers were singing the praises of Viva España as they flocked to their favourite Costas on cheap package holidays.

It seemed like a Perfect Storm was brewing, but a timely link to *The Beatles* helped set the ferry firm back on course to fame and improved fortune.

I had been working as a marketing and public relations consultant for the Isle of Man Government and its tourism industry for some years. I also headed up its information centre, based at our London Mayfair offices. This eventually led to a summons from the Isle of Man Steam Packet Company, the island's lifeline from 1830. Its ageing fleet of ferryboats provided reliable, three-hour crossings to England, Scotland and Ireland. But it was losing passengers, fast.

Changing holiday market

The ferry firm knew it had to improve its marketing to compete with new rivals and combat a changing holiday market that was no longer British beaches in British summers but cheap, affordable package holidays to Spain and sunnier climes - it was the worldwide cheesy pop hit, *Y Viva España* that chorussed the vacation trend:

... And then there was the Chicken Dance played nightly in Spanish bars

and nighteries for holidaymakers who couldn't dance sober...

In its post-war heyday, the IOM Steam Packet had become the island's Golden Goose, providing regular share dividends based on mass tourism and a travel monopoly.

In the 1970s, world tourist trends left the Steam Packet sailors astern. They didn't have leggy trolley dollies to welcome you aboard, just hairy-arsed seafarers wearing Guernsey-knit sweaters and, in a few cases, looking a bit like Popeye, the sailor man. But they excelled in the level of seamanship needed to keep going in an Irish Sea Force Nine storm when the Steam Packet's boats were often the only ones at sea at that time. The crew were kind to green-faced and puking passengers and adept in power hosing the scene of any "oral mishaps".

It was an efficient, no-frills service with an unblemished record stretching across 150 years. That should be at the heart of any new PR and marketing campaign. Stick with your strengths, sailors. Simple.

My colleagues and I had developed a lot of expertise in tourism and the leisure market, resulting from our work for the Isle of Man Tourist Board and their counterparts in other countries, so we had some stop-gap suggestions to focus on.

Best jingle writer in Europe

With the help of a cartoonist mate, we invented a seafarer character called *Steam Packet Jack* to emphasise the traditions and reliability of the ferry service. A friendly character to front advertising. "Steam Packet Jack - he'll get you out, and he'll get you back" A "visual" Jack and his message could appear in brochures, newspaper ads and TV commercials - maybe even painted on the sides of the ferries?

Radio commercials would need a jingle to carry the message, and the best jingle writer in Europe lived, with his untold wealth from pop song royalties, in the low-tax Isle of Man. Mitch Murray and his wife Grazina

were low-key residents, but visitors to their home were greeted by the strains of *The Ballad of Bonnie and Clyde* when they pressed the front doorbell.

I phoned Mitch from London to ask for his help on a jingle for Steam Packet Jack. By the end of the afternoon, we had a happy, catchy jingle with a hint of a traditional sea shanty. It took us about the same time as the sailing from Liverpool Pier Head to Douglas Harbour. Brilliant. Mitch was a jingle genius! It was all done over the phone as I tweaked the lyrics and Mitch tinkered with his home keyboard/ukulele. Words and music, job do you do it, over the phone. Who needs Abbey Road Studios?



Mitch Murray wrote the first record for the Beatles and ferryboat jingle



Beatles in concert 1963. Fan hysteria swept the country...



Aug. 4, 1963 - London, England, U.K. - THE BEATLES were an English rock band, that was one of the most successful and popular in history. PICTURED: PAUL MCCARTNEY, GEORGE HARRISON, RINGO STARR and JOHN LENNON receiving a silver disc to mark the sales of a quarter of a million records from GEORGE MARTIN of E.M.I. (Credit Image: © Keystone Press Agency)



Gerry and the Pacemakers took on the Beatles song and made it a number one.



Beatlemania arrived with two concerts at Stockton on Tees, the second being abandoned when fans swept onto the stage...



Security was weak for the second concert, with journalists backstage and fans hugging their heroes on stage.



The Beatles went on to be the most influential pop group.

Mitch Murray's first record for the Beatles

Songwriter Mitch Murray vetoed the Beatles' 1963 recording and gave his song to Gerry and the Pacemakers, who made it a massive hit within months. Thirty years later, it was included on The Beatles Anthology 1 album. Many fans said they preferred Gerry and the Pacemakers'

number-one hit version.

Abbey Road Studios in North London was where, in 1963, the *Beatles* were trying to find the right song to become their first-ever release. Their record producer, George Martin, wanted Mitch Murray's *How Do You Do It* composition as the group's first single, but Lennon and McCartney wanted to write what would have been their first hit song together.

Martin insisted, adding: 'When you can write a song as good as this, then you can record your own songs. Until then, you are doing this.'" Reluctantly, the *Beatles* agreed to record the song. However, Murray vetoed the resultant track as he thought it was suitable only for the B side. He offered the composition to *Gerry and the Pacemakers*, who took their version to number one in the UK and nine in the States.

Mitch Murray was 22 when he started songwriting, and Sixties pop stars like *Gerry and the Pacemakers*, *Freddie and the Dreamers* and *The Tremeloes* enjoyed big hits from his unique Sixties Sound. *Tony Christie* had number-one hits, including *I Did What I Did for Maria*. *Georgie Fame* had a massive hit with *Bonnie and Clyde*, while *Paper Lace* also went to number one with *Billy Don't Be A Hero*.

Just as crucial for the Steam Packet and my work for them, Mitch Murray's unique creativity helped the company achieve its highest passenger figures for decades. 1979 showed a substantial passenger spike, as thousands of overseas visitors with Manx connections returned to celebrate the island's Millennium; 1,000 years of continuous parliament, dating back to Viking rulers.

The increased awareness and promotion of specialist activity holidays kept the momentum in successive years. However, it wasn't the cars and passengers producing vast profits. It was the company's monopoly of freight traffic.

Steam Packet freight profits were up to three times higher than any of the 23 other European ferry firms, as the Manx Government discovered

when they were asked to help fund new ferries. It was a publicly quoted company in the Isle of Man, and many Manx families held Steam Packet shares to top up their pension fund or pay towards that autumn holiday in Majorca - on direct island-to-island charter flights.

Ferry service rescued by Manx Government

It wasn't very long before prying UK bankers spotted the potential for a quick killing. They made a multi-million-pound offer in UK sterling for the Steam Packet... subsequently sold on to *Banco Espirito Santa* (BES), one of the biggest banks in Portugal that eventually sank in a storm of money laundering and corruption claims. It has since been proven that the administration of BES led by Ricardo Salgado "disobeyed the Bank of Portugal 21 times, between December 2013 and July 2014", practising "wilful acts of ruinous management".

The Steam Packet ferry looked like it was going down with the rogue bank until the Isle of Man Government force-rescued it in an agreed purchase from the successor bank of its previous owner. Handing over £124M, a government spokesman said: "At least the money will come back here now."

As was the case before, the old sailors at the helm went all jingly in the 1970s and raised the profile and profits before selling out to a corporate raider...

Like the Golden Goose fable, this story has a moral: Boost yourself with a nice new jingle, by all means, but best avoid looking too much like the legendary goose that lays the golden egg to corporate pirates. And that's how the little island lost its golden egg forever but gained an enduring link to the legendary Beatles.

Now, meet the Real Steam Packet Jack.

There really was a “Steam Packet Jack” – but Capt Jack Woods, who joined the IOM Steam Packet in 1968 as a second mate, promoted to chief officer in 1970 then joining Esso before returning to Manx waters in 1978 – the year Terry and Mitch produced the advertising jingle. But, Capt Woods was with the new roll-on, roll-off ferry rival, *Manx Line* for the next five years before the ferry firms merged. He retired in 1999 and died in 2019, aged 78.

: : Capt William Whiteway, the author’s father-in-law, skippered Royal Navy escort warships on WW2 Arctic convoys and then post-war IOM Steam Packet boats.

UPDATE

Lennon & McCartney became the most prolific songwriters of the 20th century, creating 162 best-known and most-loved tracks, including 104 number-one hits in the UK and USA. Paul has had 194 compositions in the charts and is worth £800M.

Mitch Murray got a CBE for services to music. He continued his idyll in the Isle of Man, with his £millions of earnings regularly topped up by performance royalties, including some extra royalties from the *How Do You Do It* track. It was eventually included on the *Beatles Anthology 1* album 30 years later. But their first recording remains a flop for them but a great hit for *Gerry and the Pacemakers* – he knew how to do better with Mitch Murray’s composition.

Mitch Murray’s life in pop and Manx residency has been commemorated in postage stamps by the *Isle of Man Post Office*. Issued in 2020, they have proved to be a money-spinning enterprise for the free-spirited Manx nation.

For more early revelations, read *The Beatles – A Tiny*

Contribution

Island's fightback for tourists who had *GONE TO THE COSTAS*

Last outpost saves the mother tongue of Jesus

Category: Stories, Syria

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Last outpost saves Jesus of Nazareth's mother tongue. Aramaic was the language spoken at the time of Jesus and is still in the remote mountains of ancient Syria. It was the mother tongue of Jesus, his disciples, and most people who attended their gigs. It has survived

wars and changing dynasties and remains the language of Christians and Muslims living peacefully in its last outpost - a biblical-style village called Maaloula that I have visited.

by Terry Walker	AS280924	5 minute read
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One medieval despot threatened to cut out the tongues of anyone heard speaking their exclusive language. Despite this, generations of ancestors have spoken Aramaic and successfully passed it on to today's population.

Maaloula is known to scholars as the last surviving place where Western Aramaic is still spoken widely. Anthropological linguists now reckon the dialect is still pretty close to that used in the first century when Jesus and his followers went walkabout and originates many years before that.

One day, during an official press visit to Syria, I led a party of British journalists out of Damascus and across the desert. A couple of sightseeing hours later, our convoy of Mercedes limos arrived at the last outpost, Maaloula, in the Rif Dimashq mountains.

Our arrival was years ahead of the ongoing Syrian uprising against the Assad regime that has seen more than a decade of fierce fighting between Government forces and rebels that has seen control of towns, including Maaloula, changing hands.

Going back to Biblical times

At an altitude of more than 1,500 metres, Maaloula's cave homes are built into the rugged mountainside. At the time of our visit, there was little motor transport, but the many donkeys were able

to negotiate the steep, narrow streets. Our sweating but fascinated journalists were pretty nimble as we explored churches, a mosque and a monastery.

Our Arabic-speaking Syrian Government minders from Damascus could hardly converse with the villagers we met. International sign language saved the day and helped dispel the surprise of our party's arrival. The Syrian Government had not hosted the international Press in numbers previously. A gang of UK media types can be disconcerting anywhere in the world. But we were welcomed and assisted by officials and the public in Maaloula, Damascus and other places.

It was like going back to Biblical times. I estimated fewer than 4,000 people still lived in the village, many of whom appeared to own working donkeys. These donkeys often had wicker panniers, some with building materials, others offered goods for sale.



Western Aramaic was the language used for the Old Testament. Greek for the New Testament.



Homes tumble down the cliff face to the main access road to Maaloula.



Stop me and buy one - donkey vendor in Maaloula, Syria



There are plenty of donkeys in Maaloula, Syria used in construction, sales and transportation.



This Arab resident of Maaloula speaks Aramaic, as do his wife, children and grandchildren.



Orphans are being taught to speak Aramaic by nuns at the convent of Saint Thecia.



Christians and Muslims of Maaloula, use Aramaic - Muslims say "We speak it stronger and quicker".

There was a Coca-Cola vendor donkey in the shade near the base of the cliff-face village. I was dehydrated and still suffering from the gut-busting spit-roast lamb banquet we'd shared in Damascus a few days before. Our group wandered over to see what was on offer. I selected a standard-size Coke bottle. Then I showed the kaftan-wearing donkey owner my loose change displayed in the palm of my hand. He took the local equivalent of 6p and looked happy. Whatever happened to inflation

over the 2,000 years since St Paul was last seen in these parts?

Last outpost saves Jesus' language

It might have been a gesture to have learned to ask for a drink in Aramaic, but it's unlikely that anyone in my local pub would understand it... A shepherd in Maaloula talks to his sheep in Aramaic *and* Arabic and he swears they understand both languages. His favourite movie was Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* (2004), which he claimed to have seen many times. The dialogue is in Aramaic throughout.

Aramaic was one of the major languages of the ancient Near East. Since the Middle Ages, it has largely been replaced by Arabic, but it has survived as a spoken language in some Jewish communities in the mountainous regions of northern Iraq, south-eastern Turkey, and western Iran down to modern times. Spoken Aramaic also survived to modern times among Christian communities in the same regions and a few remote villages in Syria.

Aramaic speakers in Maaloula seemed determined to keep the language alive in the Christian and Muslim communities, and they coexist happily in the village.

Our Press party was surprised at the extent of the community commitment to safeguarding Aramaic across sectarian lines. Although some Muslims claimed to speak it better than the Christian villagers it would need an expert to verify that. But there seemed little doubt that sharing such a rare language has helped to secure Maaloula's unity and community spirit.

Listen as Maaloula villagers speak Aramaic

Aramaic is a Semitic language that originated in Syria and has been spoken and written for more than 3,000 years. It is closely related to Hebrew and Arabic and is part of a group of Ethiopic and Akkadian

languages. The Aramaic alphabet has 22 characters and is the ancestor of the Hebrew, Syriac, and Arabic alphabets. Jewish Palestinian Aramaic (JPA) was a Western Aramaic language spoken by the Jews during the Classic Era in Judea and the Levant. Specifically in Hasmonean, Herodian and Roman Judea and adjacent lands in the late first millennium BCE and later in Syria Palaestina and Palaestina Secunda in the early first millennium CE. The Son of God Text (4Q246), found in Qumran, is also written in this language. *Source: Wikipedia.*

The Hollywood actor Mel Gibson funded and starred in the movie *Passion of the Christ* (2004), which, despite the dialogue being in Western Aramaic, became a worldwide box-office success. The actor/director invested the full \$30 million production cost and received 50 percent of the £611 million box office take - plus \$75 million from DVD sales.

is the carefully curated online home for creative storytelling. You are invited to share your family's history or parts that link to important days or happenings affecting your family, your hometown, your country, or the world at large.

Here's a typical tale for the family tree: *Hands-on with naked goddess of love*

Bar brawl in Bahia Blanca

Category: Argentina, Blog-Tips, Stories
written by AS Media | 23 November 2024



Every family history is unique and the brutal bar brawl detailed in this seaman's story came after a month of fierce Atlantic gales that drove Tyne-based cargo boats hundreds of miles off-course, flying the signal "Not under command" because "we could just not steer" ...

by Bob Harrison	AS8042024	8 minute read
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They were heading for the Eastern seaboard of the USA but finished up in Bahia Blanca, the first peaceful haven for our author's ship in 45 days. But the port, known as "The Gateway to Patagonia", was about to have its own "Perfect Storm"...

Bahia Blanca is in Argentina. What a place, and how lucky we were that the dockworkers decided to call a strike. In Argentina, everything was state-owned in 1958. The dockworkers went on

strike, so everyone else did, too. Our cargo boat - part of the Chapman and Wilan fleet - was trapped in port and, as its radio officer, so was I. We were there for about a month and the only ship that managed to get away was a German twin-screw vessel that did not need tugs to get off the quay.

Several other vessels were stranded in port, and a great camaraderie was all about the place between the various international crews. I hardly ever ate onboard. The morning would be spent onboard, poking about catching up with corrections - the bane of a radio/officer's life.

Come noon; it was my habit to disappear ashore to a local cantina just outside the dock gate and tuck into a "bife de lomo completo con huevos y patatas fritas" - along with a bottle of the local vino tinto.

Sometimes I had company; sometimes I managed to meet up with one of the other R/Os later on. But, whatever, I never made it back aboard that same day. I would sit for a good while over my meal and then wander down the road to another cantina for a beer or two.

Free plates of local gambas

One never seemed to get too drunk - there were always things to eat. All bars automatically put a soup plate of large prawns (gambas) on the table as soon as you ordered a beer and these were renewed regularly. They were caught locally and cost next to nothing. My lunch of steak and wine cost around 2/6d (around 12 pence)!

The other choice for the languid days was to catch the bus up the road to the town of Bahia Blanca, but one had to be a bit canny to return. There was a rush hour, and unless you had good elbows and no manners, you stayed until later. The night usually ended in the local nightclub to watch Paula who could do quite amazing things with various parts of her body.

Then back to the ship to repeat the whole thing the next day. The second

local cantina was the scene of one of the most amazing bar brawls I have seen. It happened on a day that everyone from the ships had decided was to be a “day off”.

These days seem to happen on ships and occasionally seem to occur to all ships at the same time. So the bar was quite full of all nationalities and the beer was flowing. A perfect storm was forming... Bar Brawl family history is coming up.

Bit of slap and tickle

About halfway up the wall in one corner they had a square balcony platform. An attractive girl was stationed on the balcony to play record requests. Or, just what she fancied. Unfortunately, what she fancied most was a bit of slap and tickle in the many intervals...

This particular afternoon there were two hombres involved. One would give her the wink and she would manufacture an interval and return a few minutes later dabbing at the make-up. Then the other guy would become interested and the same procedure would follow.

Of course, the inevitable happened and through an alcoholic haze, the signal winks coincided. Both hombres retired behind the cantina with spectacular results.



Bar brawl as Bahia Blanca hit by strikes in docks and town



Strikes in Bahia Blanca Docks trapped ships and crews for a month.



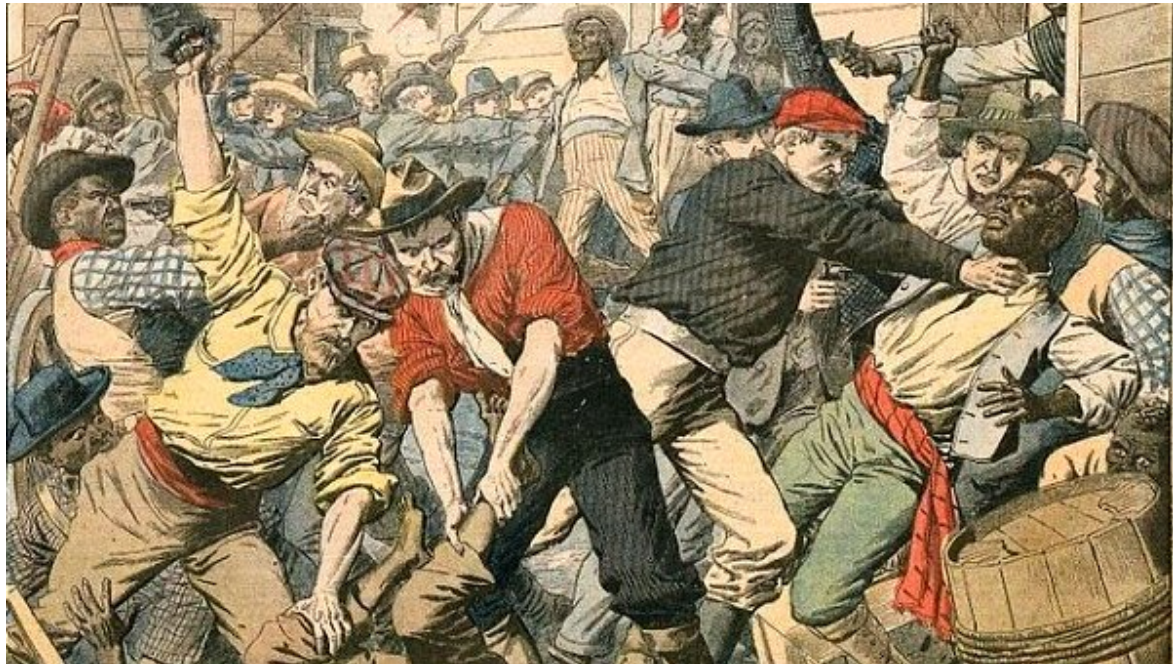
Family history bar brawl with bottles in Bahia Blanca



Family history bar brawl with fists in Bahia Blanca



Family history bar brawl with chairs in Bahia Blanca



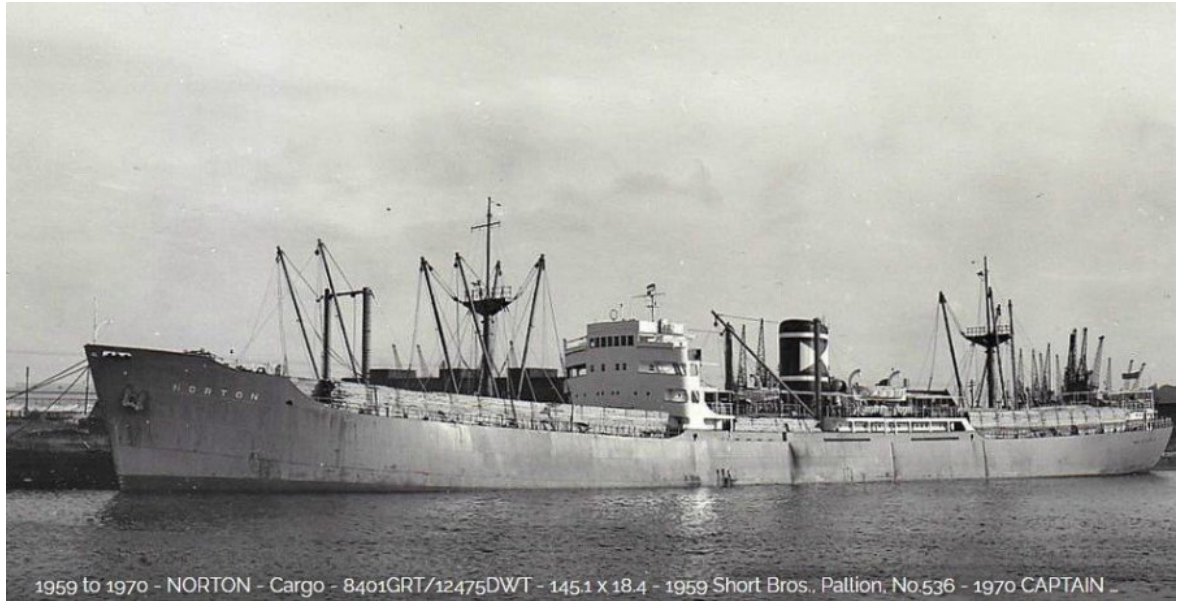
Family history bar brawl with brawlers from many countries in Bahia Blanca



Family history bar brawl with mounted police in Bahia Blanca



Sextant was the main navigation aid for many tramp ships in 1958



Bar brawl as Bahia Blanca dock strikes strands ships

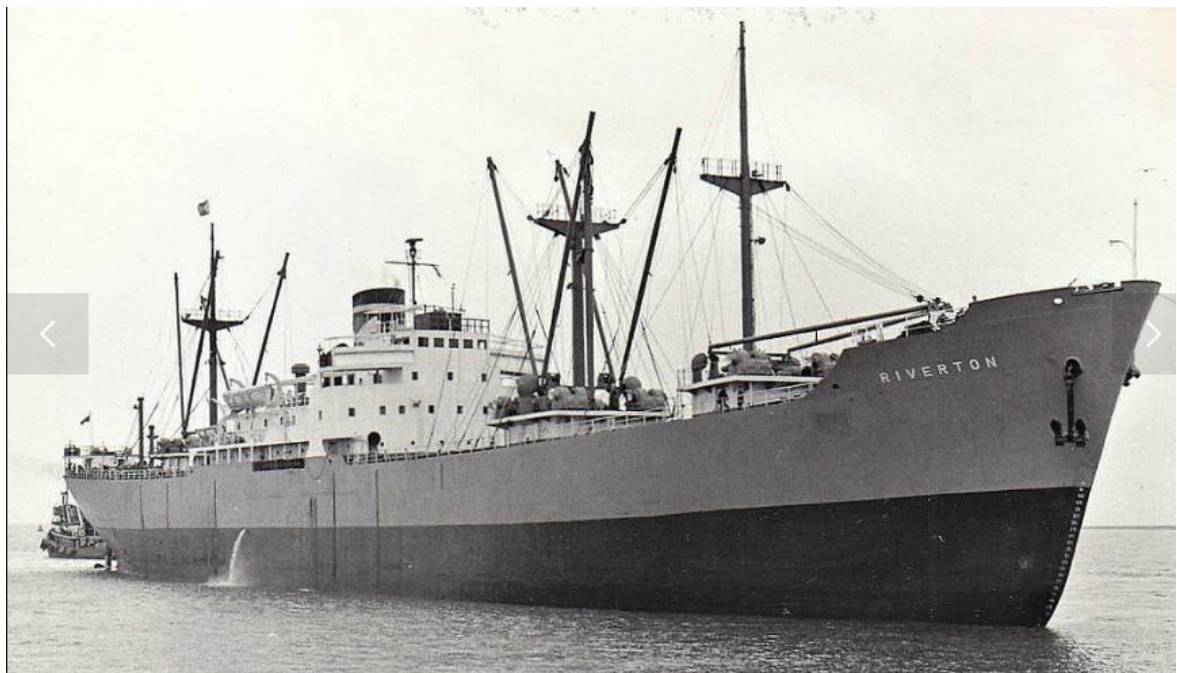


Greyhounds of the North - tramp steamers with many ports of call





Greyhound of the North ships blow off-course in Atlantic gales.



Greyhounds of the North - tramp steamers drifted with no way to steer.

A bar brawl kicks off...

Round one - Brief fisticuffs

A fight ensued between the hombre rivals, but this was quickly suppressed by amigos on both sides. That, however, was not to be the end of it. A bar brawl is about to be added to my family's history.

Round two - DJ senorita's treachery

As the day progressed and the beer flowed, the two aggrieved hombres rallied. In fact, in a way, they had joined forces. They were equally aggrieved at the senorita's behaviour - nay treachery! Soon, Spanish comments were directed to the stage. Then came the derogations...

Round three - Pump the bilges

Now, the two-timing senorita was right in the line of fire of insults from both hombres and their supporters. Finally, the nail in the coffin. "Putá!"

A hush descended on the cantina. Fists, bottles and glasses were in suspended animation. Several faces disappeared into beer glasses, and other men decided too much had gone on and it was necessary to 'pump the bilges'.

Round four - All hell from the balcony.

Quite what was being said was not clear, but the general meaning was understood by all. Especially when a 78-rpm gramophone record was launched like a spinning frisbee and headed into the crowd below. Do you remember the 78s? They could decapitate a drunk if one landed in the right (erm, wrong) place.

Round five - Risking life and limb

Now was definitely the time to take cover. The 78-rpm records were coming thick and fast, as the DJ senorita worked her way through the cantina's library. Tables were put on their sides to provide missile cover. Those 78s that survived impact - surprisingly, many did - were hurled back to the balcony. The launching punter risked life and limb in the process. The air filled with whirling missiles.

Cantina's record library fully weaponised

Opening salvo: A recording of *She's My Baby* by Tennessee Ernie Ford on Capitol Records skimmed over the contestants, followed by Eve Boswell's *Pickin' A Chicken With You* on Parlophone.

Then, flying across the cantina in quick succession came: *Got A Head Like A Rock* by Josh White and *Rumble Boogie* by Roy Vaughan's Boogie Trio, both on the Jazz Parade label.

Another salvo included Dorsey Brothers' Orchestra's *I Get A Kick Out Of You* on Capitol Records. Then, music aficionados noted new platters flying into the crowd. These included *Things Got Worse* and *County Jail Special* recorded by Champion Jack Dupree.

Then, a **salvo** of Argentinean tango band 78rpm records was launched from the balcony. These included a rare recording of *La Yumba* by Orquesta Osvaldo Pugliese - an indication shellac ammunition was running low at this stage.

██████████ - Flying platters of prawns

Bottles, glasses and records as weapons gave way to platters of prawns flying through the air. Soon followed by chairs and anything else detachable. Crewmen from the many nations were now in newfound alliances and slugged it out - mainly with fists and chairs. It was getting hairy with groaning victims in recovery mode.

Round seven - Enter the cavalry.

My party decided to make for the door in an honourable retreat and started a move to do so. Suddenly, the doors burst open, and our chance was gone. Someone had called the police. Without warning, enormous horses burst into the cantina; their riders were waving long batons that quickly connected with skulls. They

do not take any prisoners down in Bahia Blanca.

Round eight - Western-style exit

When I last saw the DJ girl she was directing operations from on high... I did a spaghetti western exit from a window into the street. Later, the brawl survivors gathered in a bar up the road and spent an enjoyable session recounting, with increasing elaboration, the afternoon's main event. It was a bar brawl worthy of any family history, confirmed by all of us...

The sequel - Sentry boxed

Some Dutch seamen returning to their ship in the early hours of the next day decided to comment on the police action. It was not until the shift change that they found the policeman on gate duty, still in his sentry box. It was horizontal, lying with the door down on the ground. Heavy things them!

UPDATE

The author has only a vague recollection of the name of his ship in Bahia Blanca. It was one of the so-called "Greyhounds of the North" cargo ships owned by Chapman and Willan of Tyneside, England. This firm of ship-owners had a reputation for "running a tight ship". Tyne folklore suggests every "Greyhound" in the fleet was painted grey to save on paint costs. All the ships included in the fleet had names ending in "ton" so it is assumed that this was the company naming convention. Their crews had to learn to steam into the River Tyne backwards and reverse onto the berth. This was to avoid paying for a tug on the way out.

Ships' radio was used to navigate vessels and make distress calls in emergencies safely. It enables communication with coast stations, port/harbour authorities and with other vessels. On many of the author's ships, there was only Morse code signalling and Aldis lamps for shore and nearby shipping. Chief navigation aid was the sextant invented in 1731.

Watch video: Bahia Blanca - Gateway to Patagonia

Browse more authentic family history short reads

Fire reveals the family secret of Peterboat inn

Category: England, Stories

written by AS Media | 23 November 2024



A fire revealed an ancestors' long-held secret. There were surprising revelations when a family history researcher discovered the secret of Peterboat Inn, which her innkeeping ancestors owned. What they had been up to for 300 years at the River Thames fishing village was finally exposed in a 150-year-old official forensic report on the blaze recently found in Town

Hall archives.

by Terry Walker 04032024 7 minute read

Heather Gentry's ancestors were known for centuries as respectable innkeepers, cocklers, watermen, and even farmers until the diligent family history researcher discovered the dark side of their lives.

Ancestors can be honest and upright or dishonest and dishonourable, but they remain an ancestor hanging on the family history tree forever. Being an "innkeeper" is probably an upright occupation. But what does it take to shift that newly discovered forebear into the dishonest and dishonourable category?

The Peterboat pub had been recorded at the heart of the waterfront at the picturesque fishing village of Leigh on Sea, Essex, England, since the early 1600s. Records indicated that Samuel Osborne was the most likely early owner until he died around 1695. One of his 21st-century descendants discovered Samuel's son, John Osborne, who became the landlord in the same year his father's death was recorded.

Confusing for family history researchers

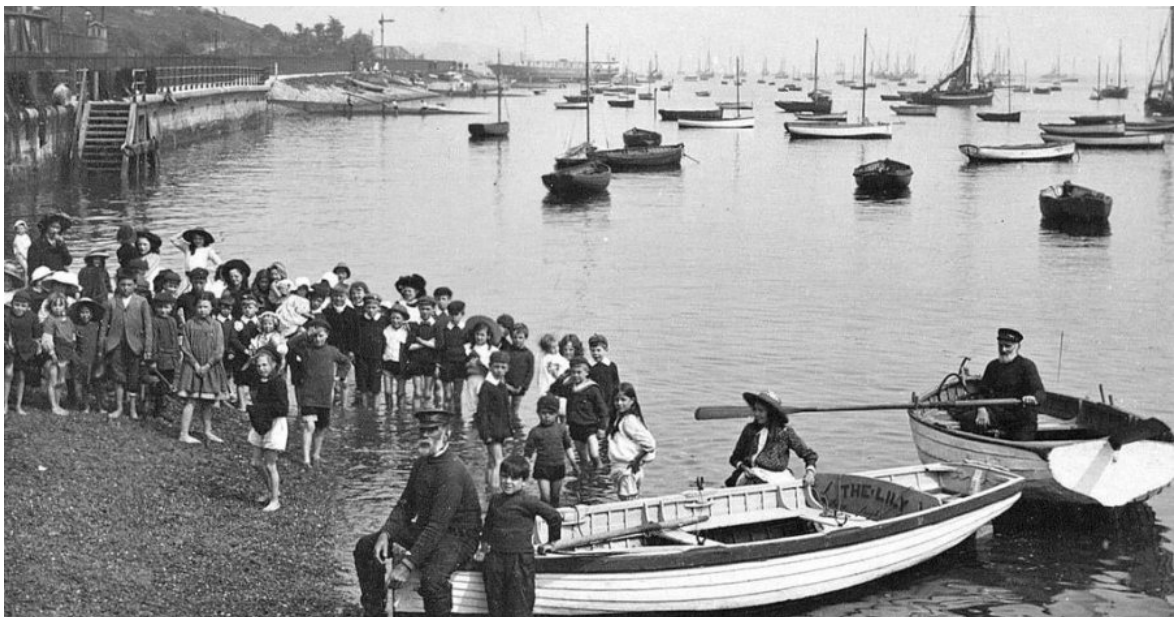
John Osborne died in 1739, while further records showed the Peterboat pub had passed not to his son John Osborne (II) but to his grandson John Osborne (III). Local documents confirmed he was the licensee in 1769. Giving a son the same name from generation to generation was a standard practice in the olden days. However, it can be confusing for family history researchers.

The Osbornes continued this for four more generations. So many Johns, including Grandpa John (VI). A total of six John Osbornes could have been serving pints of cockles and pints of beer at the

Peterboat Inn.



Old Town Leigh on Sea, a place for cockling and smuggling



From the 19th century Leigh on Sea was a popular day out for Londoners



Still a working fishing village, Leigh on Sea produces the finest cockles exported around the world



One from the family album - ancestors snapped in the Peterboat yard



More ancestors - enjoying plates of cockles and a warming fire



Fire reveals the family history secret of Peterboat Tavern



Fire reveals the family history secret of Peterboat Tavern - Popular riverside venue



Fire reveals the family history secret of Peterboat Tavern - booze, food and live music



Fire reveals the family history secret of Peterboat Tavern - Thames cockle boat



Inn and homes destroyed

All were socially “respectable” enough, with no cause for concern, even when one of the Johns showed his occupation as a waterman and farmer. It was a departure from beer pulling but a logical expansion given that fields overlooked the pub and the River Thames estuary flowed right by it.

“Respectable” until 1892, when a disastrous fire destroyed the Peterboat Inn and nearby. It started during some after-hours drinking, during which the ancestor landlord and his nephew knocked over an oil lamp... They then had to knock down the wall of the house next door to rescue his wife and children and help evacuate other neighbours as the blaze spread along the street.

Villagers were shocked at the fire and the damage caused to the waterfront properties and felt a lot of sympathy for the Osborne family. But then came gossip-worthy disclosures following a closer inspection of the inn’s fire debris.

Evidence found in secret cellar

Town hall officials discovered a hidden cellar and passages extended beneath the quayside. A door provided direct access for boats tied up to the quay. The authorities found “contraband and evidence of smuggling in the cellar.” The Osbornes were suddenly in big trouble.

Leigh on Sea was suspected to be a haunt of the smuggling fraternity along the Kent and Essex coastlines. So when, in 1892, the Peterboat pub burned down, few locals were surprised at the smuggling allegation. The cellar and secret passages directly accessed the waterside adjoining the Alley Dock. A path from the dock ran up to Daws Heath — a notorious area for lawless highwaymen, transients and drifters.

For nearly 300 years, the Osborne family were seen as respectable innkeepers at the heart of the local community. Now it looked like their big secret was out, and they were lawbreaking smugglers and part of a network of “Free Traders”. Two Osborne brothers, Joseph and Joshua, were alive at the time of the discovery.

More research after discoveries

Their customers might not have been surprised at the smuggling revelations. However, should the current family history researcher re-

categorise her ancestor's social standing? It seems harsh, but maybe "dishonest" and "dishonourable" might be more accurate for the Osbornes on the Leigh on Sea waterfront.

The family's researcher, Heather Gentry, says: "I wasn't really surprised at the revelations, so why should I judge them? After all, many family trees include black sheep ancestors who have strayed from the straight and narrow path. I was taught on my mother's knee that Essex folk have been 'Free traders for centuries'. To discover I was a descendant of 'Free Traders' adds a new dimension to my life."

More research might establish if there had been enough evidence to convict them as smugglers and if they were punished by banishment in Australia. The transportation lists contain many Osbornes.

How we catch cockles in the River Thames

Our cockle boat *Mary Amelia* goes out from Leigh on Sea into the Thames Estuary when the tide is coming to reach its destination to begin cockling. The boat is well equipped with radios and plotters used to plot a course to the permitted cockling areas.

Cockles are fished using a dredge placed into the water when the boat is floating between five and 15 feet above the cockle beds. During this time, the vessel will be moving at a speed of around five knots. A blade is submerged into the ground while high-pressure pushes water into the ground to dislodge the cockles to be sucked up through a pipe onto the boat.

These cockles then pass through a screen that rotates around. The screen bars are spaced so any small, young cockles, plus mud, sand and water, fall back into the sea. Cockles then move onto a conveyor belt and fall into the boat's hold. It can take as little as three hours to fish 10 tonnes of cockles. This is the amount permitted by the *Kent & Essex*

Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority.

Once the boat reaches its permitted quota, it will return to Leigh-on-Sea. Depending on how quickly it has managed to fish them, it may be able to return to Leigh on the outgoing tide. If it misses this, the boat sits on the mud until the next tide.

: : *Written by Graham Osborne* of the Peterboat pub and Thames cockler.

Leigh on Sea has been the first port of call for smugglers for centuries. There were plenty of customers in surrounding towns like Rayleigh and Southend. London is a mere 30 miles upstream for local cockleboats. Contraband can be easily concealed among cargoes of cockles, oysters and other seafood. The Peterboat pub is still owned and run by a branch of the Osborne family. They also own the best-known cockling business in Essex County.

Economics finally signalled the end of the great smuggling era. In the 1840s, Britain adopted a free-trade policy that slashed import duties to realistic levels. Within ten years, large-scale smuggling was just a memory... or just a “diminished” family concern in some cases?

The boats used by fishermen up to the mid-20th century were much smaller than those in current use. The earliest type seems to have been the ‘Peter boat’, originally a double-ended boat without gunwale or rim. But as solid and safe as a fisherman’s boat should be.

Related ancestry story: *Bar brawl in Bahia Blanca*

Another true ancestral smuggler story

Secret agent served Britain and four terror groups

Category: Cyprus, Stories

written by AS Media | 23 November 2024



A secret agent served Britain and four terror groups in 1950s Cyprus but 30 years later he discovered how his multiple PSYOP roles brought peace to the strife-torn island of spies, Cyprus. Armed with a 9mm Sten sub-machine gun and a pistol he was ever-ready for action, but never fired a shot in anger.

by Kevin Barnett	06042024	Read time 13 minutes
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Plus image Album

His main armoury in the escalating battle for the hearts and minds of Cypriots was his typewriter and a hand-cranked Gestetner duplicator that produced thousands of propaganda leaflets in what became Britain's biggest post-war psychological warfare operation (psycho-ops).

He was a super secret agent provocateur in an RAF sergeant's uniform who later discovered he had been tricked into working for three Greek Cypriot terror groups in addition to British Military Intelligence and a British army breakaway organisation threatening death and destruction to locals.

In five years of anti-British and ethnic strife, his activities with the printed word helped to pave the way to peace and prosperity for the Mediterranean paradise. Codenamed "Phillip" he typed up propaganda messages for British MI5 and produced 1,000s of leaflets using his Gestetner printer.

As an active serviceman, "Phillip" had joined the search for the leaders of EOKA and other paramilitary groups opposed to British rule. Secretly, he also produced propaganda leaflets for a clandestine militia of disgruntled British military who wanted to toughen the fight against the terrorists killing Brits and any Cypriots who failed to toe the EOKA line.

While, by now, this social and military history story might look more like the plot of a new John le Carré novel, it is the real-life true story of a British family's ancestor who survived the marauding death squads only because he was helping their cause. This unsung hero was a secret agent whose activities helped to prove that "The Pen is mightier than the Sword" and so shaped a nation's future.

"Phillip", a sergeant in the Royal Air Force Regiment was based in Nicosia. But lived off-base, in a nearby village, where the Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots were ethnically divided. The demarcation was close

to the rented bungalow where agent “Philip” had a large windowless safe room. His wife and their two young sons used it during skirmishes between the two communities. “Philip’s” landlord, Yiannis and his wife and family also shared the safe room when Greeks and Turks were killing each other in nearby streets.

Killings as British troops seek EOKA

Agent “Phillip” and his family were never threatened by any of the insurgents. He said later: “There were many skirmishes by the Turks against my village. Some became massacres because both Greeks and Turks would be killed and the bodies abused. I was ordered not to take any action other than to protect myself, and my family. I never needed to do that.”

In other parts of the island, Greek Cypriot para-military groups were killing British servicemen and Cypriot police as part of their campaign for Enosis - union with Greece. Led by Colonel George Grivas, whose codename was “Digenis”. EOKA murdered British military personnel and local police. Greek Cypriot opponents of EOKA were punished and some of those working for British organisations were shot dead on Nicosia’s “Murder Mile” or in their villages.

At one time 30,000 British soldiers and local police were trying to capture the man who issued edicts via leaflets signed “Digenis” as EOKA pushed its Enosis aims. The leaflets were aimed at the British authorities and the local Cypriot population. “Philip” was ordered to join patrols seeking to destroy EOKA and arrest its leaders. With an EOKA-coerced population and dense mountain forests, this proved to be an impossible task. The conflict evolved into a stalemate between EOKA and the British military.

RAF planes dropped 1,000s of leaflets on towns and villages urging support for continued British Rule. The government-controlled Radio Cyprus beamed out the same message:” You are better off with the British.



EOKA terrorists were hunted by 30,000 British troops, but words not bullets brought peace; Secret agent Phillip with his Gestetner duplicator that produced propaganda for terrorists and the British Government.



The picture that shocked the world. Three British policemen shot dead in Nicosia.



Villagers in Ayios Theodoros remove EOKA slogans from the roadway



Weapons were discovered in mountain villages and insurgents arrested.



British military stop and search excluded schoolchildren and priests - who smuggled weapons and leaflets



20,000 British troops failed to capture Gen Grivas in five years of conflict on Cyprus.

TOP SECRET Copy No. 57

C. (57) 265
12th November, 1957

CABINET

CYPRUS

MEMORANDUM BY THE MINISTER OF DEFENCE

The Cabinet on 30th July, 1957 (C.C. (57) 59th Conclusions, Minute 2), invited me—

- (i) to arrange for an examination of the possibility of establishing adequate control over the areas of territory indicated in the map annexed to C. (57) 178, other than the enclaves of Akrotiri-Episkopi and Dhekelia-Pergamos, by means of the acquisition of leases in perpetuity;
- (ii) in consultation with the Colonial Secretary, to arrange for further consideration to be given to the desirability of enlarging the Dhekelia-Pergamos enclave to include the whole of the Cape Greco peninsula south of Famagusta.

Top secret proposal by Ministry of Defence to expand Britain's spying operation on Cyprus.



Archbishop Makarios and General Grivas lead motorcade celebrating the independence of Cyprus

War of words for hearts and minds

EOKA produced streams of leaflets demanding that the island become a part of Greece and threatening any Greek Cypriots who opposed this view. Minority Turkish Cypriots were happy with the status quo of British rule, but fearful of increased ethnic oppression if EOKA became victorious.

Soon it became a war of words, as all sides fought for the hearts and minds of locals. Greek and Turkish “sides” attacked each other, while EOKA continued its campaign for Enosis. RAF planes increased leaflet drops over towns and villages to push the benefits of British rule. EOKA’s efficient courier and leaflet distribution service countered with opposing messages and new threats. Turks stepped up their demands for change but the United Nations had little impact on the conflict. They were dangerous times for the super secret agent, his comrades in arms and all Cyprus residents.

British forces began to lose the propaganda war with EOKA. Many military commanders claimed this was due to the politically imposed soft

rules of engagement. One rule banned stop and search on priests of the Greek Orthodox Church. Many of them smuggled rifles, pistols, and hand grenades beneath their cassocks. Schoolchildren, who often couriered pistols from the scenes of shootings, could not be searched.

In 1958, a group of British intelligence officers decided to “fight dirty, like the enemy.” Using the nom de guerre “Cromwell” they set up a clandestine organisation to directly confront EOKA. “Cromwell” threatened EOKA members that British soldiers would affect swift retribution by killing two or more Greek Cypriots for each murdered Brit. If Grivas ordered the bombing of a British establishment, “Cromwell” would destroy Cypriot property.

Terrorist propaganda to British intelligence

Agent “Philip” was recruited by “Cromwell” to type and print off thousands of warning leaflets. These were then handed out in towns and villages around the island. British military chiefs ordered a crackdown on “Cromwell’s” activities. To avoid bad publicity in the UK and the United Nations, service personnel involved in “Cromwell” were secretly shipped back to the UK. Others were removed from their posts or reduced in rank.

But our super secret agent continued to be involved in the conflict, his printed leaflets were directly assisting British intelligence in its psychological war against EOKA. At the same time, he was being supplied with clandestine EOKA leaflets by his landlord, Yiannes who claimed he collected them when visiting his mother’s village in the mountains.

Yiannes also collected and handed over streams of leaflets from other Greek Cypriot anti-British groups that fought against the British and Turkish Cypriots for the union of Cyprus with Greece. These included:

-
- PEKA (Politiki Epitropi Kypriakou Agona - Political Committee of the Cypriot Struggle, the political wing of

EOKA;

- ANE (Anikimos Neolaia Tis EOKA - Valiant Youth of EOKA) was the youth movement.

“Sword” armoury outgunned the insurgents

British Intelligence received their EOKA propaganda leaflets via “Phillip” who continued to live with his family in their rented village bungalow. No threats against them came from EOKA or any of the other insurgent groups.

The secret agent was surprised their home was never attacked by EOKA or by warring neighbours. He told an interviewer: “My landlord, Yiannis, knowing I was armed, would plead to be allowed to move with his family into my blocked-off safe room. I always agreed. Yiannis gave me lots of EOKA, PEKA, ANE, and other leaflets telling me they were in gratitude for my protection.”

The leaflets handed over included threats against “traitors” - Greek Cypriots opposed to EOKA and its stated aim of union with Greece.

“Phillip” assumed he was never attacked because his “sword” armoury outgunned the weaponry of the insurgents, mainly country shotguns. His vital work with his “pen” was never discovered by the terrorists and this proved to be more effective in ending the island’s insurrection.

Shock as 30 years later the full story is revealed

However, 30 years later Agent “Phillip” returned to Cyprus and was shocked to discover the full truth of the time he was based on the isle of spies:

- ***Yiannis was an EOKA operative and go-between under threat of death.***
“Phillip” kept alive for EOKA propaganda to reach British Intelligence.

EOKA tactics were influenced by “Cromwell” leaflets produced by him.

His brave and heroic story may still be unknown to his family, so if any readers suspect they might be related to Agent “Phillip” please get in touch with to share information etc.

In a letter that arrived unexpectedly, Agent “Phillip” revealed details of the deception that tricked him into the war of words as an agent provocateur for British Intelligence, a British rogue terror unit, and three Greek Cypriot terrorist groups.

“In 1990, I went back to Cyprus on holiday and contacted Yiannis. He invited me to spend a day at my old bungalow where he and his wife now lived. He asked me if I remembered that he regularly visited his aged mother. I replied that he was a good son. He said that, in this case, that was not true.

“He told me that whenever the British found and destroyed an EOKA hideout EOKA forced him to use his skills as a carpenter to build a new hideout. He said he did it under death threats against his family. EOKA also told him he must develop a relationship with me and give me their leaflets as if he had found them in the street. He told me from that time my life was useful to EOKA and I was safe from assassination. I was the unknowing conduit for EOKA propaganda to reach the British authorities.

“On the bright side, I recently discovered that the Cromwell leaflets affected Grivas’s thinking. How satisfying to think that his use of me may have saved some soldiers’ lives.

“Yiannis and Cromwell are dead. Both were good men. Cromwell became a prominent member of the government.”

Pen victory over the sword as insurgency ends

The end of the Cyprus insurgency proved to be a victory for the pen over the sword. It was words and not bullets that eventually brought peace to the country.

It had become obvious to all sides in the conflict that a military solution was unlikely and there had to be a negotiated settlement. At one stage, there were 30,000 British troops in Cyprus under Field Marshal Sir John Harding, His opponent, Colonel Grivas, had 300 Greek Cypriots in his EOKA. The ratio between regular troops and guerrillas was 110-to-1 in favour of the British. Grivas remained at large in the Troodos and Paphos Mountains for years, although he had a narrow escape when his diary and EOKA accounts were seized in a raid on his discovered headquarters.

After five years of strife, the British Government preferred to come to terms with the rebels. The independence agreement for Cyprus was negotiated in Zurich and London in 1960. It was a compromise that gave each of the main protagonists something of what they had sought. But none could claim an outright victory.

When Cyprus became a republic, EOKA and demands for Enosis faded away. Increased factional in-fighting between the Turkish and Greek communities, led to the introduction of a United Nations Force to keep them apart. It remains in post 60 years later...

UPDATES

On the night of 31 March 1955, 16 bombs exploded in Nicosia and several other main towns on the island of Cyprus. The insurgent organization, EOKA (Ethniki Organosis Kyprion Agoniston or the National Organization of Cypriot Combatants), proclaimed that it was acting to induce the British to grant Enosis - the union between Cyprus and Greece.¹

The following day, Grivas distributed a first leaflet that said in part: "With the help of God, and faith in our honourable struggle, with the backing of all Hellenism, and the help of the Cypriots WE HAVE TAKEN UP THE STRUGGLE TO THROW OFF THE ENGLISH YOKE, our banners high, bearing the slogan which our ancestors handed down to us as a holy trust - DEATH OR VICTORY.

A second Grivas leaflet said in part: "To the Cyprus People. Cyprus must get rid of the English and will do so. Our slogan: self-determination, with the dire warning that if anyone loses his courage and attempts to cooperate with the ruler he will be struck implacably."

A third Grivas leaflet said: "To all British soldiers and citizens and to their families now on Cyprus. You have been sent to Cyprus to slaughter innocent Cypriots at the behest of a narrow and selfish clique of politicians in London. The sooner and stronger you object and resist these forces of Colonialism, the faster this man's slaughtering of British and Greek people in Cyprus will come to an end. This will be done by giving the Cyprus people the Divine Right of Self-determination."

Who or what was Cromwell? Some believe he was a member of the Royal Horse Guards in Cyprus because they trace their origins back to a force raised by Oliver Cromwell prior to the second invasion of Scotland. Others believe the Cyprus "Cromwell" adopted the name because the original Oliver Cromwell was the last strong man to govern England."

Cyprus has been called the Isle of Spies; a clearing house for secret agents of friend and foe. The island was a key location for London and Washington during the Cold War, a military and data collection base for the wider region of the Eastern Mediterranean.

The British moved their Middle East Headquarters to Cyprus in December 1954, making it clear that they intended to stay on the island for the immediate future. The main MI5 station for the Middle East was based in Nicosia and the Middle East High Command was in Episcopo.

Permanent radio signal monitoring stations were placed on Aghios Nikolaos and Mount Troodos, Olympus, and Pergamos.

British radio stations targeting Arab populations in the Middle East transmitted from Cyprus. The Arab Near East Radio Station transmits from Polemydia, and its signal reaches as far as Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Northern Egypt, and parts of Saudi Arabia. A source of British propaganda, this station was a major means of PSYOP against the Arabs.

Documents in the National Archives (released in 2018) reveal that there was resistance within the Colonial Office to the concept of psychological warfare. One unnamed official said that the propaganda efforts in Cyprus failed partly because people had made up their minds. "Reason, logic, thought, common sense, analysis, all the processes which are usual in the Western mind are absent," the official wrote. "Once the Greek Cypriot has taken a side in an issue, he will tenaciously cling to a belief in that side."

Agent "Phillip" revealed his multiple secret agent roles in a letter to the author, David French who was researching material for his book, *British Intelligence and the Origins of the EOKA Insurgency* (David French, British Journal for Military History).

Details and texts of the leaflets and other propaganda from all sides in the 1951-1960 Cyprus Troubles are available online. *Psychological Operations in Cyprus 1954-1959* by Herb Friedman and Brigadier General Ioannis Paschalidis

Read what happened next in *Cyprus Bombed out of Cyprus as Turks go to war in*

More revealing short stories of our ancestors