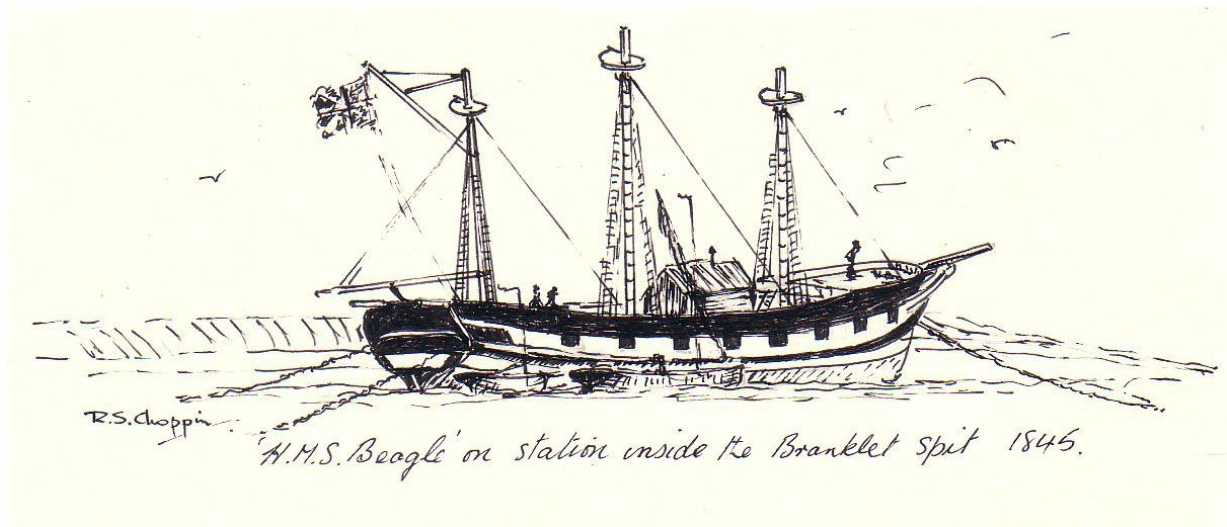


H.M.S. BEAGLE

Ever since a professor of history from America arrived here at Paglesham and started digging and prodding in the mud along the saltings in search of Darwin's ship the "Beagle" interest has been shown locally. I felt it was time to do "a search" and find out as much as possible about this ship myself. Most of us have heard of Charles Darwin's exploits and his papers "On the Origin of Species", but what of the ship? I have rummaged deep to find out the history of the Beagle's ascendancy to fame, based on a naturalist's voyage around the world. It should not distract from the fact that besides playing host to a man who was later to become world famous, the exacting completion of her assignments alone would have earned this ship a place in the history books.



In 1807, Sir Henry Peake, surveyor of the Navy [1806-22] designed a 235 ton Brig Sloop, armed with ten cannons, eight short-range and two long range guns, which was to become the "Cherokee, Cadmus, Rolla" class. More than one hundred were built to this design during the course of the next thirty years of which the Beagle became the forty fifth. Their main roles in life were for coastal defence, anti-piracy or smuggling duties, surveying, intelligence gathering and communications work. In 1817. The Beagle was ordered as one of a group of twelve to be built. June 1818. Her keel was laid at Woolwich Dockyard, her measurements being 90 ft. long x 24 ft.6 ins. beam with a draught of 12 ft.

11th. May 1820. Launched and placed "in ordinary" (In regular or customary attendance). Her costs were £7803.. July 1820, Coronation of King George IV. The Beagle took part in the Review of the fleet and had the distinction of being the first man-of-war to sail fully under the Old London Bridge [from main mast truck to waterline, height 112ft. It must have been a glorious sight!]. At this time The Hydrographic Office, with its survey ships and personnel, had the arduous task of providing up to date, where possible, information regarding tides, reefs, inlets, depth of ocean floors, and new coast lines etc, as safe sailing instructions for guardians of the British Empire, the Royal Navy and British merchant ships. As one would expect the logbook[s] of the Beagle as a Royal Navy survey ship would record all details of her activities as a surveying ship and also her every day "in house" duties and disciplines. This is all well documented and recorded, and lack of space does not allow me to mention all incidences and events that took place on her travels. I will therefore be brief and highlight only certain events that occurred on her five commissions.

1825, FIRST COMMISSION: under Commander Pringle Stokes. 27th Sept 1825. Docked at Woolwich for repairs and fitted out for her new duties. Reduced her guns from ten cannons to six, deck raised by 18 inches and her rig changed from Brig.sloop to Barque by the addition of a mizzen mast. The mizzen made her easier to handle under sail and the raised deck increased the space below. Orders from the Admiralty as follows: "An accurate survey be made of the Southern Coasts of the peninsula of South America, from the southern entrance of the Rio de la Plata round to Chiloe Island, and of Tierra del Fuego: In such

manner and order, as the state of the season, the information you may have received, or other circumstances, may induce you to adopt. You are to continue on this service until it shall be completed.” This survey took nearly three and half years to complete, during which time on the 1st August 1828 the exhausted and depressed captain, Cmdr. Pringle Stokes, committed suicide by shooting himself. He was buried at Port Famine. First Lieutenant Skyring took interim command.

1828, SECOND COMMISSION: under Commander Robert FitzRoy. 13 Nov. 1828. Commander-in-chief of the South American Station, Admiral Sir Robert Otway, commissioned Commander Robert FitzRoy to take charge of the Beagle for the duration of present survey. 30th Jan. 1829 Lost two men overboard during a bad storm at the mouth of Rio de la Plata. Masts and spars damaged, one whaleboat lost and another badly damaged. Only a quick letting-go of the bowers saved the ship from destruction. Late February. On her way to Port Desire the ship lost another boat in a gale. 9th July. San Carlos. Lost another boat on the way. Refitted the ship, and carpenter, J May, built new boats. Note, the Beagle carried a total of seven boats, a 26ft yawl, and a 23ft cutter, [these were shipped on deck, one on top of the other midships between mainmast and foremast], two 28ft whalers which were upside down on skid beams between mizzen and mainmast, two 25ft whalers hung in davits adjacent to the mizzen, and finally a jollyboat [dinghy] in horn davits astern. These boats were the eyes and ears, the essential tools, of a survey ship and did most of the inshore work. 24th Nov. 1829. Reached the western entrance of the Magellan Strait and surveyed the southwest coast of Desolation Island. 2nd Aug. 1830. Reunited with HMS Adventure and HMS Adelaide in Rio de Janeiro. 6th Aug. HMS Beagle and HMS Adventure sailed for home. 14th Oct. Returned to Plymouth. 27th Oct. 1830. Ship paid off.

1831, THIRD COMMISSION: under Commander Robert FitzRoy. 25th June 1831. Re-appointment of Commander Robert FitzRoy; ship extensively refitted and improved, partly at the expense of FitzRoy. It should be noted that it was standard naval practice to combine hydrographic work with general scientific observations on land and to collect rare or unknown flora, fauna and geological species for the betterment of scientific knowledge. His restricted interest in these fields made FitzRoy pledge after returning from his first command to comment: ...”if I ever left England again on a similar expedition, I would endeavour to carry out a person qualified to examine the land while the officers and myself attend to hydrography.”.

5th Sept. 1831. Charles Darwin met Robert FitzRoy and was accepted by the latter as an unpaid naturalist. This twenty two year old Bachelor of Arts with studies in medicine and religion and an intense interest in natural history would embark on a journey to study the natural history of all countries visited. This journey took in most of South America, the Falkland Islands, the Galapagos Islands, Tahiti, Bay of Islands, near New Zealand, the southern coastline of Australia, Cocos Islands, Mauritius, Simons Bay, near the Cape of Good Hope, St. Helena, the Ascension Islands, then back across the Atlantic to Bahia in Brazil [to check errors in longitude] and finally the Cape Verde Islands and then the Azores before heading for home. No fewer than 76 personnel were aboard her 90 foot hull when she sailed for South America.

2nd Oct. 1836. After a voyage around the world lasting four and three-quarter years, HMS Beagle arrived again in England and anchored at Falmouth. During the following weeks Beagle travelled to Plymouth and Portsmouth. 28th Oct. Arrived at Greenwich, where observations were made and chronometer rates ascertained. 17th Nov. Ship paid off.

1837, FOURTH COMMISSION: Commander John Clement Wickham, and the FIFTH COMMISSION: Commander John Lort Stokes took the Beagle to Australia for the next five and a half years, in which time by tedious work the officers and men eradicated all the blank spots from Australia's coastline not filled in by previous explorers. They also made Endeavour Strait, Bass Strait and the entrance to Port Phillip Bay safe for large ships.

30th Sept. 1843, After more than six years of absence, arrived at Spithead. 14th Oct. Paid off at Woolwich Dockyard. The captain, Commander John Lort Stokes, left HMS Beagle at the same place he had first stepped on to the ship's deck as a young midshipman eighteen years before. Talk about dedication to duty!

20th Oct. Sent to Sheerness Dockyard.

14th June 1845. After spending eighteen months at Sheerness, she was sold to the coastguard authority, and the ship was fitted out as a watch vessel. The Coast Guard reforms put forward in 1822 aimed at 'an uniform system controlled by one authority. In this system the primary force would be that which is now called the Preventive Water Guard, although from the change in the nature of its duties since its first establishment the term "Coast Guard" would be a more appropriate distinction.' This was the beginning of the Coast Guard service, a body of boatmen who were expected to patrol ashore when the weather precluded the use of their boats. While demobilised Navel officers and ratings were largely employed, the Coast Guard remained a civilian force under the control of the Customs for the first twenty-one years of its existence. The boatmen were employed not less than twenty miles from their homes, to avoid collusion, thus ending the 'local' tradition of the Revenue cutters, and incidentally introducing many new families into previously close-knit, inter-bred coastal communities. These new measures were needed against a new type of smuggling. Naval supremacy and military power had ended the old gallant system of the eighteenth century, when smugglers carried arms and fought their way. Speed had replaced guns as the smuggling vessel's first need, and, more important, clandestine sinking of contraband in rivers and creeks had largely replaced the open landing on shores and beaches. A new force was required to link the cruisers at sea and the Riding Officers ashore, hence the use of watch vessels, or "floating police stations."

11th July 1845. Left Sheerness for Paglesham on the River Roach to be stationed at the mouth of the river. There is a deep hole [11ft at low water springs] just inside the Branklet Spit just under Wallasea Island that we all know so well, and I imagine the Beagle was kept there out of harm's way, free of all commercial traffic which would be using the river, but in full view of both the River Crouch and Roach. For her stationary duties her upper masts were dismantled and taken away. [One would have thought that her upper masts would have been removed at Sheerness, but one assumes that these were necessary for her passage to the Roach.]. In September, a small caboose [a ship's kitchen] was installed on deck.

Little is known of the Beagle's coast guard activities, but it is worth mentioning of an incident that took place on Foulness Island, which as one would expect was another favourite haunt of smugglers. It is an island which can be reached from the Crouch or the Roach or at high water across the Maplins from the Thames estuary. It also has a "back door" through Haven Gore, navigable at high water, but also has an exit at low water along the Broomway to the mainland. Because of its isolation it was clearly a lawless place. It is said bare knuckle fights under Queensberry Rules also took place near the inn, the George and Dragon. You wouldn't want to 'mix it' with that lot!

When the Glasgow brig "Conqueror" was wrecked on the Maplins in 1849, bound from Bremen to Rio de Janeiro, with the loss of all her crew, 600 demijohns of spirits were missing! The Wivenhoe Lloyd's agent, J G Chamberlin, found much wood from the wreck at Foulness and suspected the spirits also finished up there. He accordingly asked the Customs for a 'strong force at the 'Dove' watch vessel at 10am on Saturday to search the island. The Dove watch vessel was possibly stationed in deep water on the North side of Foulness. Officers and men of the Beagle could have been involved in the search too. But that is purely speculative.

Other watch vessels which were stationed on the River Crouch at different times included the Chanticleer [1837], Ruswarp [date unknown], Kangaroo [1872-1890 which was stationed off the shore where the present Royal Corinthian Y C is sited], and no doubt there were others. If in sight of each other, one would imagine flag communication and cannon signals would have been used to inform for assistance, etc.

About this time [1845] most cargos were conveyed by water. On the River Roach and its tributaries, there were many industries and trades. At the head of the river was the Stambridge Mill where grain was ground into flour, where also supplies and freight for the nearby town of Rochford would be off-loaded at the quay. Wakering had its brickfields, and Paglesham was a hive of industry in the oyster-fishery business; it is said that up to fifty large smacks laid off Paglesham in those days, and I can quite believe that too, for example, between Frank Shuttlewood's boat shed and the first 'kissing' gate on the sea wall

in Paglesham Pool, there are about 100 oyster pits alone; there are also oyster pits on the marshes of Potton Island, Wakering, Barling, and further up the reaches on the Roach. All in all, a considerable amount of oysters must have been harvested when you think of 1,500 to 2,000 oysters per pit. Besides the Thames barges coming to and fro, trying to earn an honest living, but making a bit on the side too, there was obviously a lot of traffic on the rivers for the men of the Beagle to keep an eye on.

1850, Beagle is removed from the mouth of the river and moored at Paglesham. It is not known why the Beagle was sent to Paglesham, but the oyster trade was becoming a lucrative business and perhaps the oystermen required some added protection as much pilfering and smuggling took place. The Beagle was to spend the last twenty years of her life at Paglesham, and as far as we know remained a watch vessel at least until 1863, when after the Royal Navy integrated coastguard operations in 1859, all watch vessels were stripped of their former RN names.

25th May. 1863. HMS Beagle was redesignated WV 7. At this time the local oyster company [Wiseman] and local merchants petitioned for the Beagle to be laid ashore, she was probably becoming a hazard as no doubt very little money or maintenance would have been spent on her, and she more than likely leaked like a sieve.

13th May, 1870. WV 7 sold to Murray & Trainer for the sum of £525 to be broken up, a lot of money in those days, but her copper plating alone would have accounted for most of the sale price.

If one looks across the marshes towards the pillbox at Paglesham these days, one will see a large tug being converted into a houseboat. Why I mention this is because of her size, she is 72 feet long, with a draught of 8 feet, and was brought up on the edge of the salting on a good tide. This will give some idea of the comparative sizes, and I doubt that the Beagle ever ended up on the saltings. The Beagle, 90 feet long, had a draught of 12 feet at the beginning of her life, a further 15 tons were added to her displacement in 1831 due to extensive alterations, and with her ageing I would imagine she drew no less at her laying ashore. It is possible she was brought up to the 'hard ground' in front of the boat shed, assisted by barges to be broken up. This would make it convenient for horses and wagons to load the removed copper, deck beams, grown frames, and anything else that could be salvaged from her hulk. The remains would have probably been burnt. A sad end to such a historical ship.

Rodney S. Choppin.