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JOHN GLADSTONE'S SHIPPING INTERESTS

by W G Williamson

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The almost insatiable demand for sugar during the latter part of the 17th and the early years of the 18th centuries led to a significant rise in maritime trade between Britain and the colony of Demerara and to the West Indies.

John Gladstone (1764 – 1851) was a Liverpool based merchant who, over the years, had acquired mortgages on sugar plantations in Demerara and the West Indies. Owning the plantations and producing sugar was all very well but there was an obvious problem, how to transport it to your principal market in Britain? One answer of course would be to hire or charter from reputable ship owners' vessels to carry your goods. This, however, would involve extra costs and cut into potential profits and ships might not be available for charter at the time required. The alternative was to operate and own a fleet of ships, to exclusively carry the produce from the plantations.

John Gladstone, who had quite a bit of experience in using his own ships for trading purposes, adopted this second method. He had bought his first ship, the **Susannah** for £2000 in 1798/99. His company, Gladstone & Co., began acquiring more ships in the early 1800s. For example, in 1805 he acquired an ex-prize ship and called her the "**Anne**." On the 29th January 1807 he is listed as the registered owner of another ex-prize ship which he called the **Guyana**. Thus, by the 1820s, the company was a major importer of sugar and rum, principally into Liverpool. The company gradually built up a fleet of seventeen sailing ships which, with a couple of exceptions, were used almost exclusively on the Demerara trade.

All the Gladstone fleet were described as ships apart from the **Ann McKenzie** which was a brigantine. All the fleet were described in Lloyds Register as being single deck with beams and all the ships were sheathed in copper. They generally had PIC or Proven Iron Cables used for anchoring and some also carried hemp cable for attachment to the anchor. They were registered either A1 or E1 at Lloyds.

The definition of a ship, from the Sailor's Word Book is: Any craft intended for the purposes of navigation, but, in a nautical sense, it is a term for all large square rigged vessels carrying three masts and a bowsprit. The masts being composed of, the lower-mast, the top-mast and the topgallant-mast, each of these being provided with tops and yards.

Gladstone's seventeen ships were:-

Ann 259 tons, **Guyana** 248 tons, **Intrepid** 340 tons, **John O'Gaunt** 449 tons, **Corinthian** 390 tons, **Richard** 355 tons, **Roscoe** 453 tons, **Ann McKenzie** 266 tons, **Indian Chief** 416 tons, **Seaforth** 357 tons, **Chatham** 354 tons, **Duke of Lancaster** 565 tons, **Kelton**

245 tons, **Kingsmill** 516 tons, **Susannah** 369 tons, **Theodosia** 391 tons and **Cornwall** 384 tons

Voyage times

The distance from Liverpool to Georgetown, Demerara (British Guiana, now Guyana) is 4,442 miles or 3,860 nautical miles. The ships that were typically employed on this trade route would take, on average, about 43 days on their outward leg. It is worth noting that the shortest outward voyage was 26 days. The return trip was, of course, longer due to prevailing weather conditions, with the average time being 51 days. The longest recorded passage was a massive 77 days. The Demerara sugar trade was principally conducted from Liverpool and London, while Glasgow also played a regular but smaller role in this trade.

Another factor which had to be considered was the hurricane season in the western Atlantic which lasted from June to November with the worst period being between August and October.

Ships typically remained anchored off Georgetown for six or seven weeks, discharging and then loading, their cargoes. A further consideration was the availability of the sugar. Sugar canes take about a year to ripen, then they have to be cut, processed and refined before, finally, being packed into hogsheads before shipment. Weather conditions in Demerara, for example the lack of adequate rainfall in some seasons, restricted the canes growth, reducing yield and affecting quality of the sugar. A poor harvest and a resulting slowdown in the grinding of the canes resulted in ships waiting patiently at anchor to obtain a full cargo. A round trip from Liverpool to Demerara could therefore take, in total, about 26 to 27 weeks and with a time included in, perhaps, making a few repairs, realistically the ships would make only one round voyage to South America each year, possibly two.

Outward Cargoes

It was impossible for colonies such as Demerara to survive without the importation of an extensive quantity of manufactured goods from Britain. A look at any of the Liverpool Customs, Bills of Entry, documents from the 1820s to 1840s shows the enormous variety of good shipped to the colony at that time.

For example, the itemised list below is taken from a Georgetown newspaper of the period and shows a typical and diverse range of cargo carried by an individual ship. It is known that coal was loaded into wooden hogsheads and shipped out for sale in the colony. Most of the buildings in Demerara were constructed of imported wood. Thus a vigorous and prosperous timber trade existed between the colony and Newfoundland in Canada. Occasionally, the Gladstone company's ships would be sent there from Liverpool for timber. This is particularly so in 1828 when the great fire of Georgetown occurred. This was witnessed by Robertson Gladstone, John's son, and he instantly saw the opportunities for a quick profit, and immediately diverted one of the ships, the **Richard**, to Newfoundland to load timber.

FOR SALE
by the Subscribers,
just received per **Belmont**, Capt. Knublely, from Liverpool: -

4-4 Irish linen from f55 to f135 per piece
Superior black, blue, green, and grey fashionable coats
Cassimere pantaloons and quilting waistcoats
Superfine black, blue, and scarlet broad cloths
Milled black cassimere
40-inch Inverness cotton bagging
Jockey and Hessian boots
Planters' shoes
Half-dress shoes and pumps
Youths' shoes
Window glass 16 by 12, 15 by 11, and 12 by 10
Sash-pullies, screws, and sash cord
Iron hoops and iron truss-hoops
Double-refined sugar, per puncheon or single loaf
Cumberland hams
First-quality Cork butter
Half barrels mess beef
Barrels prime mess pork
Firkins of neats (beef)' tongues
Tripe in jars
Raisins, currants, and almonds
Mustard, salad-oil,
Pickled gherkins, and red cabbage
French and Spanish olives
Oyster catsup, mushroom do.
Capers
Candles, long and short 6's. and 4's.
Brown soap
White, brown, and green paint, and oil
Lamp oil in 8-gallon jugs
Nails, from 4d. to 4 1/2 inch spikes
Cutlasses and shovels
Sein-twine
Temper lime, &c

Return Cargoes

Return cargoes were principally the products from the plantations, the main one, of course, being sugar, but coffee and rum could also be a significant part of an

individual ship's cargo. Certainly, in the early years of the Gladstone fleet, cotton was a major constituent of a ship's cargo. For example, the **Guyana**, on one voyage from Berbice was loaded with 690 bales of cotton, 400 bags of coffee, subsequently she picked up five hogsheads of Madeira wine on her passage home.

Although not specifically a passenger service, nevertheless most of the Gladstone ships were able to carry a small number of passengers, perhaps about five or six. When John Gladstone's son Robertson went out to Demerara in 1828 on the **Roscoe**, he was one of four passengers. Although small in number these passengers were a useful source of income to the company. This is what he wrote to his father from Demerara about one of the company's ships, the **Indian Chief**.

*"I have been very anxious to get justice done to the stowage of the **Indian Chief's** cargo. She will have in all 400 - 460 Hhds of sugar with some tierces, 150 puncheons rum and about 100 Hhds rum with 25 bales cotton, which, on reference, you will find considerably more than her last cargo from hence. Her cabin is considered one of the best here, but owing to the season she has no passengers for her early return."*

Then he lists cargo on board the **Indian Chief** as: 468 Sugar (Hhds), 10 Tierces Sugar, 130 Puncheons Rum, 83 Rum (Hhds) and 25 Bales Cotton.

Customs import duty had to be paid on all inward goods as well as a Town duty. This latter duty was set at 4 pence per hogshead, 3 pence per tierce, and 2 pence per barrel for sugar. It is no wonder that Liverpool became very rich on the back of her maritime industry. The Dock Rates on sugar was 2 shilling per ton, and for rum (and other spirits), was 9 pence per 100 gallons.

Peril of the sea and ship maintenance

Of course, in this period of history, seafaring was a very dangerous occupation. The Gladstone ships were relatively small, typically between 250 to 400 tons, and thus storms and heavy seas would often cause severe damage to ships. The men too were at risk, moving about on deck and up masts in filthy weather, this meant injury, or even death, were distinct possibilities. In several of Robertson's letters he makes mention of such incidents.

Letter of 22nd February 1834

*"The **Ann McKenzie** has discharged her cargo in excellent order; She will require one new beam (Quebec oak) and 6 iron knees below. This and new coppering will make her run for two or three voyages".*

Letter of 11th April 1834

"In the Channel we encountered, for 12 days, very severe weather, where we became more fortunate and had made the most of our way till reading the parallel of Barbados when we lost our mizzen mast in a squall, about 12 feet above the deck."

The extract from another letter reveals the apparent indifference to the fate of the crew men on the **Elizabeth**. There was no emphasis of the final sentence in the original correspondence.

*“The **Harmony** has not yet come in and Captain Tobin tells me that it is very probable she would put back for Liverpool owing to the severity of the weather she had encountered. The **Elizabeth**, some of her bulwarks are gone. One man overboard and another dead occasioned by extreme fatigue.”*

Not only were the seamen subjected to risks while afloat, the prolonged periods they spent at anchor off-shore at Demerara also had their risks, as this letter from 1828 shows.

“The advantages of this were that ships could anchor off the estate although a bit away from town. Presently ships anchor near Georgetown and the consequence is that the sailors are constantly buying new rum, which is most poisonous in its effects from the boats coming alongside at all times. Captains and officers should prevent this but it was not always possible due their other duties. The fact is well known here that new rum is the cause of more deaths among sailors than anything else, and to put a stop to their getting it, is almost impossible.”

Shipping casualties to British vessels were commonplace. **Lloyd’s List** of 1826 gives the following figures: Foreign voyages, 157 wrecked or driven on-shore. 35 abandoned, 8 them afterwards carried into port; condemned as unseaworthy; 5 upset, one of them righted; 27 missing.

Apart from the dangers of the elements at sea the ships’ crews had to contend with acts of war and attack by privateers. The Napoleonic War lasted from 1803 to 1815 so Gladstone's ships were at risk from the French navy and privateers during this period. Many ships sailed in convoy at this time for mutual protection. The American War of 1812 led to many British ships being taken by US privateers, and the Gladstone fleet was no exception.

Typical conditions on board

Living conditions for the ordinary seamen of this period were extremely primitive. An account written by W.S. Lindsay of conditions at sea he experienced gives a good account of the general life that the lowly merchant seamen had to endure. It should be noted that Lindsay was **NOT** an employee of the Gladstone company, however, Lindsay had served on a 420-ton timber and sugar carrier in 1834 and, therefore, is relevant to the type of trade and ships the Gladstone company were engaged in.

The cook, ten seamen and three apprentices had their abode in the forecabin. This place, which was in the 'tween decks', at the extremity of the bow, may have been about twenty-one feet in width at the after or widest part, tapering gradually away to a narrow point at the stem. The length in midships was somewhere about

twenty feet, but much less as the sides of the vessel were approached. The height was five feet from deck to beam, or about five feet nine inches from deck to deck; the only approach to it being through a scuttle or hole in the main deck, about two and a half feet square. Beyond this hole there was no means of obtaining either ventilation or light, and in bad weather, when the sea washed over the deck, the crew had to do as best they could without either, or receive the air mixed with spray, and sometimes accompanied by the almost unbroken crest of a wave, which in defiance to all tarpaulin guards, too frequently found its way through the scuttle.

Here fourteen persons slept in hammocks suspended from the beams and had their daily food. There was no room for tables, chairs or stools so the tops of their sea-chests in which they kept their clothes and all their worldly possessions were substituted for those useful and necessary household articles. At all times it was a foul and suffocating abode, and in bad weather the water and filth, which washed about the deck and among the chests and casks, created the most intolerable and loathsome stench. Here, however, these fourteen sailors and apprentices slept, washed, dressed and had their food, except in fine weather, when they took their meals on deck, their food consisting almost entirely of inferior salted pork or beef, which was sometimes as hard and unpalatable as the kids in which it was served, and brown biscuits, too often in [a mouldy condition](#) and full of maggots.

The “Free Traders” and trade with India

John Gladstone and some of his fellow Liverpool merchants had been advocating for some time about the monopoly of the East India Company in trading with India. They were called Free Traders and wished to break this monopoly. Finally, in early April 1814, the government issued licences for trade with India. Gladstone was quick to send his ship the **Kingsmill** to India in 1815 and made a considerable profit on the voyage. Over the next few years the trade to India built up and formed a substantial part of the company's business. In the four years from 1814 to 1817 a total of 47 trips to India were made and the total income from these trips amounted to £720,000.

Conclusions

Following the emancipation of the slaves in 1834, exports of sugar fell over a number of years. In 1836, planters had exported 35,475 tons of sugar; that had dropped to 25,870 tons by 1841. This was partly due to the fact that many ex-slaves did not want to work on the plantations. Also, without slaves, many smaller plantations, heavily mortgaged, could not make any profit and were in severe financial difficulties.

When asked by a Select Committee in London to what degree had sugar production decreased, Henry Barkly, a merchant and mortgagee reported: “The average production of British Guiana, I believe, for six years before the introduction of the free system, was about 63,000 hogsheads of sugar; I believe the average of the

last three years has been about 37,000. I think that that is pretty nearly the rate of decrease with regard to my own estate.”

A further consideration around this time was the age of some of the ships. For example, the **Theodosia** and the **Cornwall** had set sail from India had to put back due to the age of the vessels **Theodosia** was forty years old while the **Cornwall** was 39. There was a concern that the underwriters might not pay out compensation if any major incident happened to the ships because of their age. John Gladstone transferred the ownership of his plantations to his four sons in 1834 and Robertson Gladstone sold Vreed en Hoop for £35,000 in 1841.

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