

SEAMANSHIP AND KINSHIP

One Shetland Family's Connection with the North East of England

Keith Gregson

Captain Andrew Robinson was quite a character. A Shetlander born and bred, he emigrated to the north east of England during the latter part of the last century. He was a master mariner by profession and so impressed the seaman's champion, Walter Runciman, that a whole chapter was devoted to him in Runciman's autobiographical 'Collier Brigs And Their Sailors'¹. As a sailor, he possessed great natural ability. According to Runciman, Robinson "hadn't good tools to work with" but "managed to be on the alert and take advantage of the fluctuation of strength and direction of wind when on a passage". Because of this, "he made his voyage in less time and more economically than most of the men who commanded more modern craft in the same trades".²

Once Robinson's reputation as a sea captain was secure, he brought his younger brother, Gordon, down from their native Lerwick. Gordon did not have his brother's flair but possessed the native intelligence necessary to obtain his master's certificate. He served as his brother's first mate and eventually gained a ship of his own.³

Thus a combination of seamanship and kinship brought success for two Shetlanders in the north east of England. That these were the 'qualities' needed for such success is borne out by the experiences of another Shetland family — my own ancestors — the Pottingers of Burra Isle.

Burra Isle lies off the west coast of mainland Shetland and is overlooked to the north by the port of Scalloway. Until recent years, the only means of reaching Burra from the main island was by boat but a modern bridge has forged a more permanent link. During the middle of the last century there were only upwards of a hundred households on the isle and these were

mainly gathered into tiny hamlets. At this time my ancestors shared in common with other islanders the joint occupations of crofting and fishing. As Pottingers, they also shared a name which was far from unusual on Burra. Indeed families of that name had to go a long way back – even in the 1850's – to find ancestral links.⁴

James Pottinger, my great great grandfather, was born on Burra in 1809. He lived the whole of his life on the island and died at the Taing of Houss on its very southern tip in 1889. Between 1832 and 1851, eight sons were born to James' wife Grezzel. They all survived to manhood and, according to the census returns, began their working lives as fishermen.⁵ Of the eight, three brothers seem to have kept their roots firmly on Burra. Lawrence (1837–1917) became captain of a Faroe smack; Charles (born 1843) remains something of a mystery but may have been in charge of a Baltic schooner and John (born 1840) continued fishing in an attempt to maintain the large family his wife produced on Burra between 1868 and 1888. The remaining five brothers – George, William, James Innes, Walter and Thomas – became captains of merchant ships sailing from ports in the north east of England. As with the Robinsons, the combination of natural ability and close family ties had an important role to play in moulding their individual careers.⁶

The natural ability of the Shetland seaman was generally recognised by those connected with the maritime trade in the north east of England. According to a South Shields historian writing in 1857, Tyne shipowners “had agents in Lerwick . . . to procure suitable youths” and there was hardly a year passed by when “they did not succeed in inducing numbers to come south”.⁷ Once ‘south’, they signed on as apprentices. James Innes, the middle of the five brothers, began his maritime career as apprentice to John Dryden of North Shields at the age of 14.⁸

Apprenticeship records for the early period are incomplete so it is impossible to say whether all the brothers were secured “as suitable youths”. What is certain is that their rise through the ranks to mate and then captain was quite rapid and a possible

sign of their ability. George became a first mate at 22 and captain of a Mediterranean cargo vessel at 24. William was given his first command at 27. James Innes was appointed first mate at 25 and became captain two years later. Walter became second mate at 22, first mate at 24 and captain of an Australian bound vessel at 26. Thomas, my great grandfather, became first mate at 24 but had to wait until he was 30 before captaining the 'Spero' — a ship he was to command for ten years.⁹

It could be argued that, in pre-Plimsoll days, the mere survival of an officer of moderate competence would eventually ensure command. Fortunately other sources have survived which point to the natural ability of some of the brothers. William, despite occasional clouds over his career caused by an apparent love of strong liquor, was "well known and much esteemed in local shipping circles."¹⁰ He was a leading member of the Sunderland Shipmasters' Society and, according to Lloyds' Lists, was constantly given command of ships fresh from launch. Such a ship was the 'Dunraven' which he captained from its launch in 1873 to 1875. It was, according to the 'Shields Gazette' of May 4th 1876, "a large steamer of 1,300 tons" and it regularly carried expensive cargoes to India via the Red Sea.¹¹ In 1877 he was entrusted with the 'Parthenon' — a large steamer built in Sunderland for Greek customers. William took the ship on trial runs then delivered it to its owners at Malta.¹²

However it was the eldest brother, George, who carried the flag for the family and created a reputation for seamanship which can have done the careers of his younger brothers no harm. In the 1860's, the accidental death of a sea captain would only merit a line or two in the local paper. George's death by drowning in January 1865 earned the following obituary which, with slight amendments, appeared in the 'Newcastle Daily Journal', 'Shields Daily News' and 'Newcastle Courant';

Melancholy Death of Captain Pottinger

It is with regret we have to announce that, on the night of the 27th inst., Capt. George Pottinger of the ship Ocean Bride, of Newcastle, fell overboard and was drowned, while on his passage

between the Tyne and the Downs, bound to Malaga. The late lamented captain, who was only thirty two years of age, was one of the most able and successful seamen that ever belonged to the merchant service. He entered the employ which now has to deplore his loss as chief officer of the ship *Britannia* and was rapidly promoted to the command of the *Equator* 717 tons. On this ship, he made several most prosperous voyages. At the outbreak of the American War, he ran the blockade off Pensacola and made a remarkably fast passage to Greenock when he took command of the *Ocean Bride* in which he made some of the most rapid passages on record. In 1862, he brought the said ship waterlogged from the Banks of Newfoundland to Falmouth with decks swept and under jury masts. He was presented with a gold chronometer by the underwriters of the cargo and 100 guineas by Milvain and sons. He continued to make the most rapid passages. His last voyage from the Tyne to Malaga (1,400 tons of cargo) and back to the Tyne was completed in two months and six days. He is deeply lamented by the owners and his premature death will cause sincere regret to all who knew him. The deceased was well known and well respected in North and South Shields.¹³

Part of George's success seems to have been due to firm captaincy. Ships logs have survived for a number of his voyages and they show him to have been a hard taskmaster. The turn-over of crew on the 'Equator' in 1861 was quite rapid and crew members were disciplined for the slightest offence.¹⁴ His ability to move goods quickly and, in the case of the 'Ocean Bride', to save a valuable cargo must have opened doors for his brothers. Here, as in the case of the Robinsons, kinship played an important role.

Family ties worked in other ways too. When William was given the captaincy of the 'Dunraven', brother Walter soon gained the position of first mate. This was the first position he held after gaining his master's certificate. Their ways parted in 1875 but Walter came back again to serve as first mate to William when he took the 'Parthenon' (see above) to its new owners. After the sale of the 'Parthenon', Walter became a captain himself and the two brothers did not serve together again.¹⁵

Thomas Pottinger, the youngest of the brothers, was similarly reliant upon his elder brother James Innes. In October 1874,

James Innes was appointed as captain of the 'Manfred', a Sunderland barque of 586 tons. It was his first command and he was soon joined by Thomas who became his second mate. In February 1875, Thomas gained his master's certificate at Dundee and was immediately appointed first mate on the 'Manfred'. Both brothers were on board the ship in February 1876 when she put into Falmouth on the way back from Indo-China. James Innes was discharged sick here and died a few days later. Thomas was left to captain the ship back to her home port.¹⁶

Two years after the death of his brother, Thomas moved his home from Burra and brought his wife and young family to settle in South Shields. Here, a glance at the family tree will show that ready made links were already in existence. Brother William was still alive and working from Sunderland some eight miles away. Thomas' wife, Jannet (née Inkster) had a first cousin (Lawrence Inkster), an uncle (William Umphray) and a relative by marriage (Sinclair Inkster) all living in South Shields, all Burra born and all ship's masters.¹⁷ This, yet again, can have done her husband's maritime career no harm.

Thus the story of the Robinson family told in Walter Runciman's book does have a parallel in my own family. Whether this 'proves' anything, in historical terms, it is more difficult to say. Certainly those with maritime interests in the north east of England were aware of the Shetland seamen, their ability and their family ties and this is reflected somewhat in the tribute paid to them by the South Shields historian William Brockie;

"The remote isles of Orkney and Shetland have sent us some thousands of their hardy children in the capacity of sea apprentices. Many of these have risen to be mates and masters and now form, with their families, a most respectable class"¹⁸.

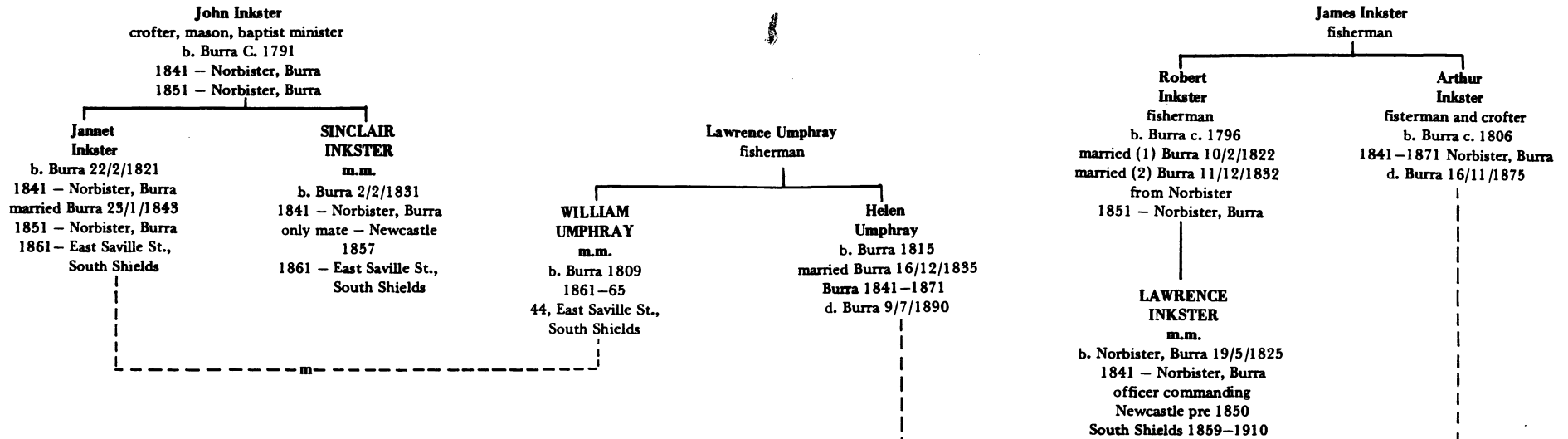
References

1. W. Runciman *Collier Brigs and Their Sailors* (London 1926 rep. 1971) Ch. VII.
2. Runciman *op.cit.* p. 59

3. *ibid* pp. 60–65
4. Genealogical research has involved use of parish records, census returns and registration certificates both at the Registry Office, Edinburgh and at Lerwick. Thanks are also due to Erling Clausen, Andrew Williamson and William Johnson of Lerwick and the Pottinger family of Hemnavoe, Burra for their help.
5. Census returns for Burra 1841, 1851 and 1861 (Edinburgh)
6. A family tree is appended to sort out problems of relationship. Every effort has been made to make this work more than a family history.
7. W. Brockie *The Folks of Shields* (South Shields 1857) p. 51.
8. Public Records Office, Kew (PRO), Board of Trade records (BT) 150/29 James Innes Pottinger signed as apprentice on the 'Moderation' (reg. no 44291) 20.7.1861.
9. The major source for this article is the *Register of Certificates of Competency, Master and Mates, Foreign Trade* PRO/BT/122. The records are listed under ticket numbers viz; George (11306), William (15944), James Innes (95822), Walter (96970) and Thomas (99277). An excellent account of records available for research into merchant seamen is N. Cox – The Records of the Registrar-General of Shipping and Seamen in *Maritime History* vol. 2. no. 2. September 1972 pp. 168–189.
10. *Sunderland Daily Echo* 8.11.1915. In 1888, William was captain of a ship belonging to Greenwells of Sunderland. The same Greenwell family attended his funeral 27 years later.
11. The 'Dunraven' was lost in the Red Sea in 1876 soon after William relinquished the captaincy. The recent discovery of the wreck formed the subject of an intriguing BBC television programme *The Mystery of the Red Sea Wreck* (World About Us 23.3.1980).
In 1870, William was captain of the freshly launched 'Nevada' and in 1883 he was put in command of the brand new 'Lord Warwick' – a large cargo vessel. *Lloyd's List* 1870/1 & 1889/90 and PRO/BT/122 (ticket 15944).

12. PRO/BT/122 (ticket 15944) & *Lloyd's List* 1889/90
13. *Newcastle Daily Journal* 30.1.1865; *Shields Daily News* 30.1.1865 & *Newcastle Courant* 3.2.1865.
14. PRO/BT/99/20 no. 7279 – the logbook for the ‘Equator’ (1861). Earlier logs for George’s voyages appear in PRO/BT/98.
15. PRO/BT/122 (tickets 15944 & 96970)
16. PRO/BT/122 (tickets 95822 & 99277). *Shields Gazette* 28.2.1876 & 2.3.1876.
17. PRO/BT/122 – Lawrence Inkster (ticket 61643), Sinclair Inkster (ticket 15856). Also South Shields census 1861 & 1871 & Burra Parish Registers.
18. Brockie *op.cit.* p. 51.

INKSTERS OF NORBISTER, BURRA, SHETLAND



POTTINGERS OF DUNCANSCLETT, BURRA, SHETLAND

