

VOYAGES TO SOUTH GEORGIA, 1795-1820

By A. G. E. JONES*

AMONG the shipping arrivals and departures in *Lloyd's List* in July 1775 there was a brief entry:

"Portsmouth.

30 *Resolution* Cook S. Seas."

In this simple way was announced the end of James Cook's second voyage round the world in the *Resolution* and the *Adventure*. In the course of this voyage, on 14 January 1775, Cook discovered the "Isle of Georgia" of which he made a running survey (Figs. 1 and 2). He described the island as "very Mountainous and rocky and almost wholly covered with Snow" and as "savage and horrible". Of the animal life he wrote in his journal:

"Seals or sea Bears were pretty numerous; they were smaller than those in Staten Land; perhaps the most of those we saw were females; for the Shores swarm'd with young ones. Here were none of that sort which Lord Anson describes under that name at least they appear'd to us to be of the same sort . . ."

Cook was concerned with exploration not commerce and he made no suggestion as to their commercial exploitation, and indeed his description of the country gave no encouragement to go there.¹

The years immediately following Cook's discovery are obscure, but according to H. R. Mill (1905):

"As early as the year 1778 the English sealers brought back from the Isle of Georgia and Magellan Strait as many as 40,000 seal skins, and 2800 tons of sea-elephant oil, the latter valued at £40,000, and by 1801 the import of oil from these regions reached 6000 tons worth £172,500. In 1791 no less than 102 vessels, averaging 200 tons burden and manned by 3000 sealers, were engaged in securing fur seals and oil in the Southern Ocean, and the value of their cargoes in that year was estimated at £235,000."

It is impossible to check or verify these statement as *Lloyd's List* did not record ships as visiting South Georgia; merely as being on voyages to the "South Seas". The only continuous statistics are in the *Abstract of Imports*² compiled by the Customs and Excise, and they suffer from two defects: that they include South Georgia under the general heading of "South Seas", and that while the number of seal skins is stated separately, sperm oil and other oil were included under one heading until 1829. The figures for imports, for what they are worth, are:

Year	Seal skins	Year	Seal skins	Year	Seal skins
1777	2,100	1785	22,159	1793	6,590
1778	76,445	1786	25,563	1794	104,599
1779	72,010	1787	n.a.	1795	59,459
1780	73,798	1788	10,277	1796	1,522
1781	36,694	1789	67,909	1797	66,557
1782	150,718	1790	100,327	1798	125,138
1783	361,903	1791	80,379	1799	36,889
1784	77,492	1792	18,842	1800	100,327

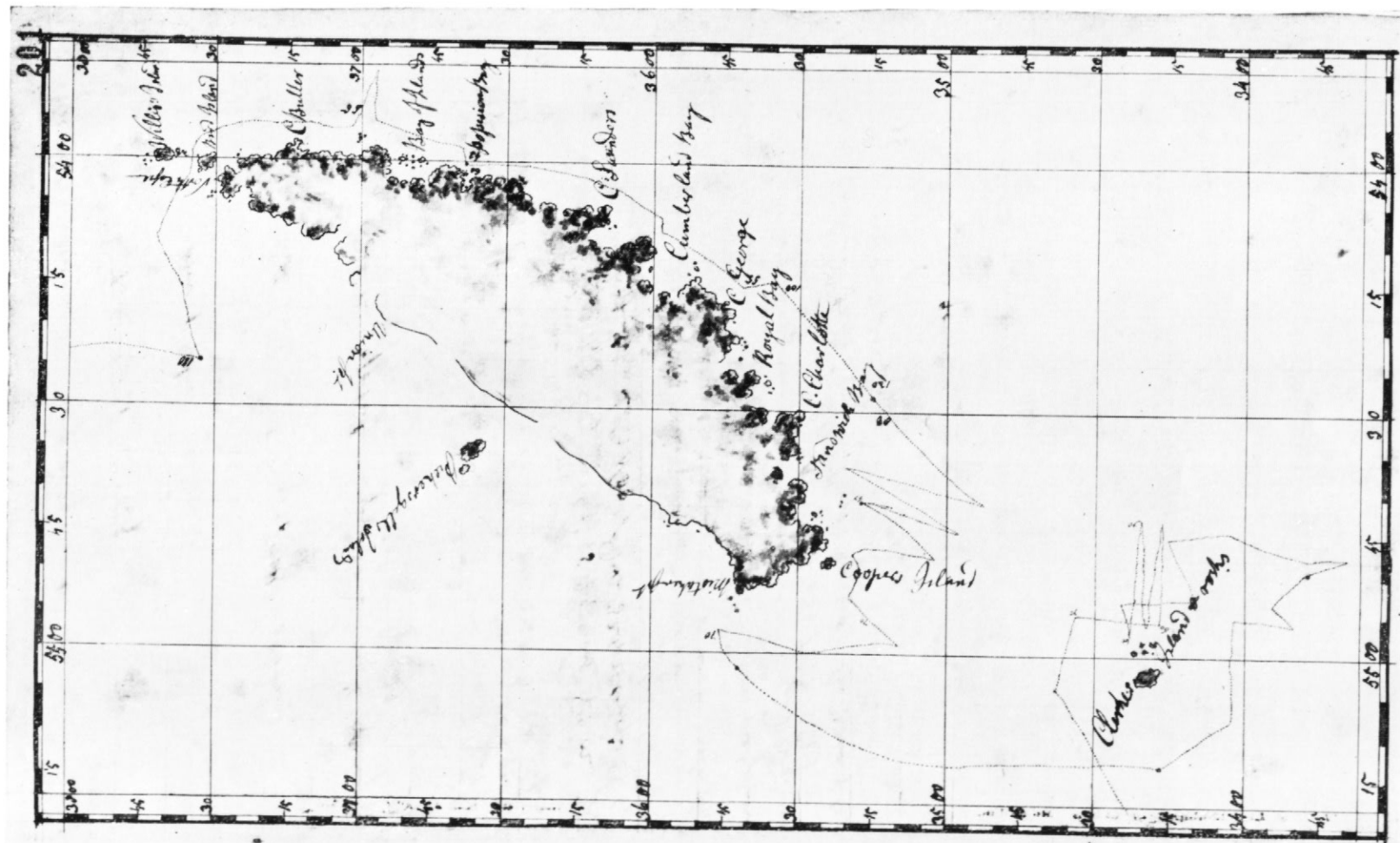
In the years 1786-90 many British ships went to the Falkland Islands in search of seals and they may not have needed to go to South Georgia. In the 1790s most of the ships went to Peru and Walvis Bay.

The economic importance of the trade was increased in 1799 when Thomas Chapman (1799) found a means of treating the fur on the skins, to be followed by John Brunswick with a similar process in 1801.

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¹ *Lloyd's List*, July 1775. Public Record Office, ADM 55/108, *Journal of the Proceedings of his Majesty's ship "Resolution"*, ff. 218-29. ADM 55/107, *Log of the Proceedings of his Majesty's sloop "Resolution"*, Jos. Gilbert Master.

² P.R.O., Customs 17/5-22, *Ledgers of imports and exports. Lloyd's List, 1779-90*. Mill, 1905, p. 87-88; Fanning, 1834, p. 287, 295; Allen, 1899, p. 307, 314; Chapman, 1799.



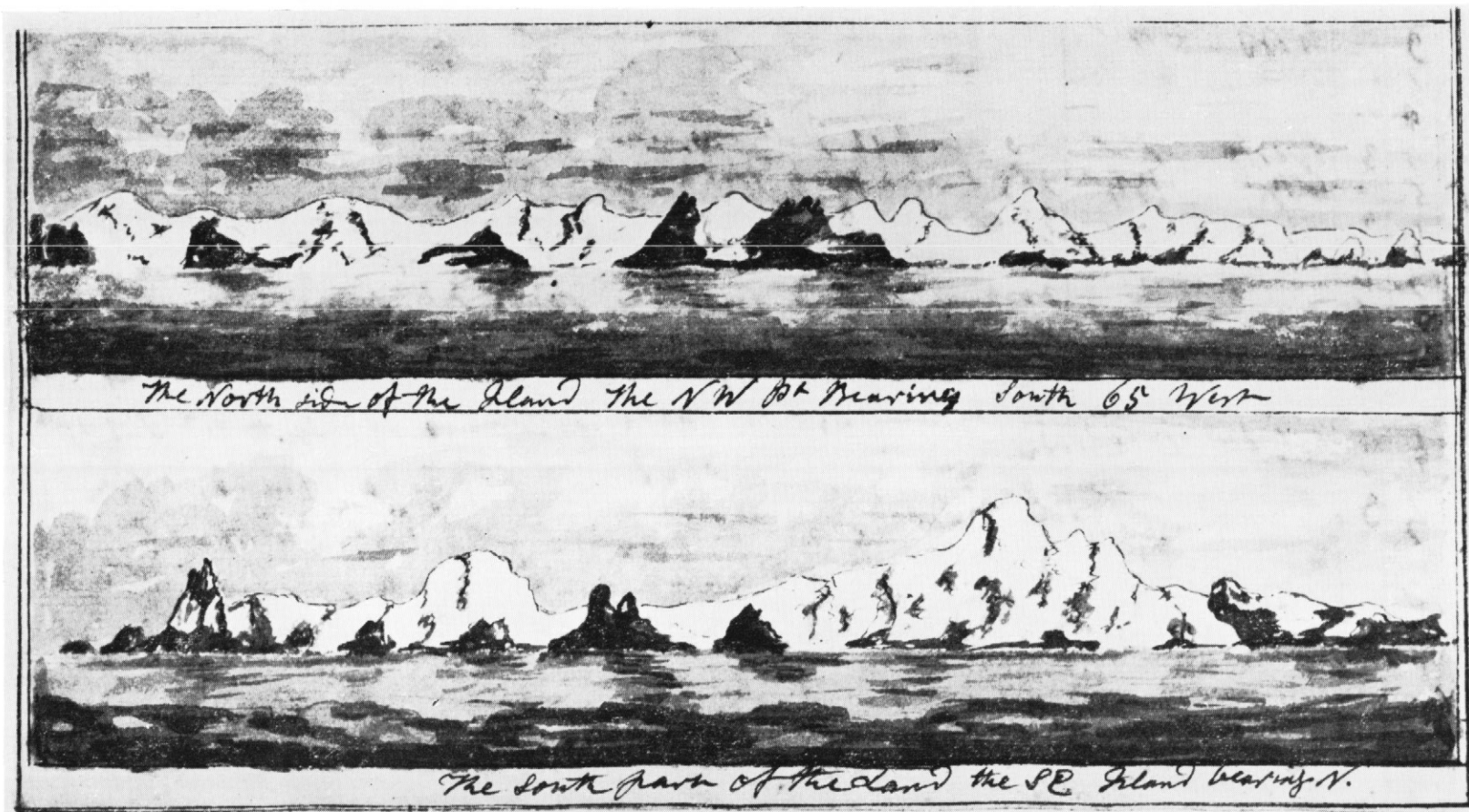


Fig. 2. Sketches of the north and south coasts of South Georgia by Joseph Gilbert, 1775. (Crown copyright; reproduced by permission of the Public Record Office, London; ref. ADM 55/107.)

Bonner (1968) stated that "The first commercial sealers known to have visited South Georgia were Roswell Woodward and Daniel F. Greene, who fitted out at Connecticut for a sealing voyage to the Falkland Islands. Some time during their voyage between 1790 and 1792 at least one of their vessels visited South Georgia and there obtained part cargoes of fur seal skins. Captain Greene was an innovator not merely in opening new sealing grounds but also in pioneering the route to the Canton market, being the first recorded sealer to carry skins direct from the sealing grounds to China. In 1791 an English sealer, the *Ann* (Captain Pitman), visited South Georgia (Roberts, 1958) but it is not certain if there were other vessels in that year."

Two other English ships, the *Young William* and the *Sally*, were at South Georgia in the 1795-96 season.³ The *Young William*, a ship of 330 tons, Henry Mackie master, was owned by Daniel Bennett of Wapping, who by now had become the leading owner in the "South Seas" trade. The *Sally*, an A1 brig of 171 tons, was owned by Thomas Guillaume and Company, shipbuilders at Limehouse Bridge, and was commanded by Captain Farmer or Captain F. Ellis. The *Young William* left the Downs for the "South Seas" on 23 July 1795 and returned on 14 June 1796. The *Sally* must have sailed much about the same time, and when she was lost at South Georgia the crew was taken off by Captain Mackie. At that time Lloyd's premium for a "South Seas" voyage was 20-25 guineas per cent, and the ship may well have been uninsured, resulting in a total loss to the owner. There is no record of their catch.⁴

During the next two seasons, English ships, instead of going to South Georgia, went to Peru where they found fish more easily, off less dangerous shores. Then, on 3 October 1798, the *Sybil*, a ship of 340 tons, was sent by Messrs. J. Hill and Company, merchants and insurance brokers of Paradise Row, Rotherhithe, to the "South Seas" under Captain Lewis Llewellyn, returning to Plymouth from South Georgia on 25 June 1799. The quick voyage suggests that it was successful. It was probably in this same season that Messrs. Hills' *Prince Edward*, 294 tons, which had been repaired and strengthened with iron beams a few years earlier, was lost under Captain Clark on the coast of Brazil on a return passage from South Georgia.⁵

In the following season, 1799-1800, an American ship, *Regulator*, four British ships, the *Aurora*, *Lively*, *Earl Spencer* and *Hercules*, went to South Georgia. Peter Mellish, a Shadwell shipowner, sent the *Aurora*, 300 tons, now put into thorough repair and armed with four 6 pounder guns. The master was Stephen Macey, one of a family of New England masters who came to England when the War of Independence started. Daniel Bennett's ship, the *Lively*, 241/140 tons, was sheathed with copper, strengthened with iron beams and put in good repair, as was prudent for a risky voyage. Bennett obtained a Protection from the Admiralty for some of his crew on the outward passage in May 1799* and sent the ship out under Captain Magnus Smith. These two ships sailed for South Georgia from Portsmouth as part of a convoy on 18 June 1799.⁶

We do not know when the *Aurora* returned though it must have been in the summer of 1800 as she went out again to the "South Seas" in 1801 under Captain James Birnie, who (like Llewellyn) later became a shipowner. The *Lively* returned to Gravesend from the "South Seas" on 5 February 1801. Messrs. Hills also sent the *Canada*, 213 tons, to South Georgia under Captain Llewellyn. She arrived there about March 1800, being later reported as lost, which was not entirely surprising as her last major repair had taken place in 1782.⁷

Messrs. Hills' ship, the *Earl Spencer*, 520/600 tons, was the largest ship to visit South Georgia up to this date. She was shortened, sheathed and repaired in 1799 before being dispatched under William Beacon, who had been in the "South Seas" trade for some years and who was probably engaged in the trade for a longer period than any other master. The ship was armed with 20 6 pounder guns. Beacon arrived at South Georgia in the middle of 1799, and again in March 1800, returning to Gravesend on 31 January 1801. Messrs. Hills fitted

* Listed in *Southern and Greenland Fisheries, Protection, 1793-1811* (Public Record Office, ADM 1/650).

³ Registrar of Shipping and Seamen, *London Foreign Trade, 1795/81, 1793/7. Lloyd's Register, 1796.*

⁴ *Lloyd's List, 24 July 1795, 22 July 1796, 23 May 1797. Prince's London Price Current, 22 July 1796.*

⁵ *Lloyd's List, 9 July 1797, 5 October 1798, 6 August 1799. Lloyd's Register, 1796, 1801.*

⁶ *London Foreign Trade, 1804/230. Lloyd's List, 21 June 1799. Lloyd's Register, 1800, 1801.*

⁷ *Lloyd's List, 2 May 1800, 6 February 1801, 26 June 1801. London Foreign Trade, 1798.*

out the *Earl Spencer* once more and she left Portsmouth for the "South Seas" on 25 May 1801. She was lost at South Georgia, but Captain Beacon and the crew were saved and Beacon continued in the trade for many years, largely in the employ of Messrs. Enderby.⁸

Messrs. Wilton and Company were among the smaller owners in the "South Seas" trade, and in 1799 they sent their ship, the *Hercules*, 230 tons, which arrived at South Georgia about the same time as the *Earl Spencer*, returning to Gravesend on 28 June 1800 and was recoppered. The master, Captain Shuttleworth, made a number of voyages to the Antarctic in later years and in 1830 was ship's husband for Messrs. Enderby.⁹

Captain Matthew Swain brought the *Eliza* back to England in 1800 after a voyage of over 2 years to Australia, China and New Caledonia, bringing back a full cargo. In August, the owner, J. Richards, sent him to South Georgia and he returned to England in April 1801. The quick voyage suggests that he might have obtained a full cargo of skins and oil; but the fact that the *Eliza* left under another master for the well-known Galapagos fishery for the next voyage suggests that going to South Georgia had not been worth the risks involved. The profits will never be known.¹⁰

In the same season, 1800-01, D. Starbuck (who came from a New England family of masters) sent his ship, the *Duke of Kent*, 214 tons, to South Georgia. She was spoken on 28 September 1801 about 500 miles [800 km.] north of the Equator on her homeward passage towards London. But such are the mists which surround such voyages that we do not know when she sailed, nor when she returned, nor the catch; and even the name of the master is uncertain—Captain F. Porter or Captain E. Clark.¹¹

Two ships sailed in the next season, 1801-02, the *Sprightly* and *Dragon*. The *Sprightly*, Holden Barton master, a ship of 241 tons owned by Daniel Bennett, returned to the Downs on 1 April 1802. In the following year the ship was sold to another shipowner, Charles Price, and this voyage was the last venture of Messrs. Bennett for a decade. The *Dragon*, a square-sterned brigantine of 121 tons, captured from the French in 1800, was owned by Francis and James Todrig, who had both been masters, and who lived in Shadwell. This vessel returned to the Downs under Francis Todrig on 11 June 1801 from Ascension, and may well have been to South Georgia in 1800-01, but she was reported only as having returned from the "South Seas". On this occasion, Francis Todrig returned to Portsmouth from South Georgia on 2 July 1802, reaching Gravesend 9 days later. These are the only details of the voyage, the last to South Georgia for a number of years—possibly until the visit of a British sealing expedition in the *Recovery*, in 1814-15 (see below). Messrs. F. and J. Todrig continued as South Seas shipowners for over another 20 years, and in the 1820s sent the *Dragon* and the *King George* to the newly discovered South Shetland Islands, and sent the *Royal Sovereign* to Desolation Island.

At this time, 1801, the sealing fleet to South Georgia numbered 30 vessels, and many of them, unrecorded, would have come from New England. Captain Edward Fanning, master of the American corvette, *Aspasia*, who visited South Georgia in 1800-01, later wrote an account of his voyage (Fanning, 1834). He secured a cargo of 57,000 fur seal skins and he stated that 16 other vessels which were also there procured 65,000 skins between March 1800 and February 1801. One of these, the British ship *Morse*, purchased 14,000 skins salvaged from the *Regulator* which had been wrecked on South Georgia in 1799 (Fanning, 1834, p. 296). Later in 1801, the number of vessels at South Georgia reached a peak total of 30. Many of these were unrecorded but would have come from New England (Allen, 1899, p. 307 and 314). These totals help to explain why there was a lapse of 10 years before these voyages began again.

The cessation of hostilities against France encouraged Daniel Bennett to try South Georgia again. It was 12 or 13 years since William Beacon's visit in the *Earl Spencer*, and the depleted stocks of fur seals and elephant seals would have had time to grow again. For most of the time since 1802 Captain Beacon had been master of the *Recovery*, and after making a number

⁸ *Lloyd's List*, 3 February 1801, 22 May 1801, 16 February 1802. *Lloyd's Register*, 1801. *London Foreign Trade*, 1799/288.

⁹ *Lloyd's List*, 2 May 1800. *Lloyd's Register*, 1801. *London Foreign Trade*, 1799/306.

¹⁰ *Lloyd's List*, 19 August 1800, 16 April 1802, 24 August 1802. Public Record Office, ADM 1/650.

¹¹ *Lloyd's List*, 17 November 1801. *Society of Merchants, Register of Shipping (Red Book)*, 1802.

of voyages to the South Seas returned to Deal on 19 August 1813. Daniel Bennett clearly had another Antarctic voyage in mind for he had given the ship a new deck and upper-works and topsides, had sheathed her with copper and armed her with six 12 pounder carronades. Having a gross tonnage of 526, she was among the largest vessels to make this voyage. Beacon must have sailed some time in 1814, returning from South Georgia and St. Helena to the Downs on 1 June 1815. There are no details of his catch as it was a couple of years before *Bills A and B* were published from the Custom House. However, it must have been poor since his next two voyages were to the South Seas and no other owners were interested in South Georgia in the next season, 1815-16.¹²

In the next few years two owners predominated in the trade to South Georgia—Daniel Bennett who had a large enough fleet to be able to take some speculative risks, and Francis Todrig and Company, who were able to rely on the first-hand experience gained by Todrig in the *Dragon* in 1802.

The *Admiral Colpoys*, a ship of 250/274 tons, was bought by Messrs. Todrig in 1813 and regularly repaired, and in 1813-14 and 1815-17 was commanded by James Todrig. He came back to the River on 27 January 1817, spent a few months in fitting out and left the Downs on 6 May 1817 for the "South Seas". The ship was wrecked at South Georgia on 28 November 1817 and became a total loss, but the crew was saved. We do not know how they returned to this country, but, as they could scarcely have made a crossing in boats, there must have been another ship at South Georgia.¹³ A British sealer, *Norfolk*, is recorded as having been there sometime during 1816-18 and again in 1818-19 (Roberts, 1958). She was also there at the end of 1819.

In 1818, Daniel and William Bennett sent four ships—the *Indispensable*, *Echo*, *Arab* and *Grand Sachem*, while Messrs. Todrig sent three ships—the *Ann*, *Mary Ann* and *King George*—to South Georgia. It was common for ships in the South Seas trade to be either old ships or prizes, and the *Indispensable* came under both headings. She was a ship of 351/362 tons, a French prize built in 1787. The master appointed on 5 May 1818 was Captain J. Brown, who since 1800 had commanded the *Young William* and the *Recovery*. He cleared out of the River in ballast on 9 May 1818 and left Deal on 17 May. He was reported at South Georgia by the *Echo* on 3 February 1819 as having 120 tons of oil, and returned to Deal on 25 May. The *Echo*, 350 tons, Captain Thomas Mowatt, cleared out of the River on the same day as the *Indispensable*, having taken less than a month to turn round in order to sail in good time for the sealing season. Messrs. Bennett usually turned their ships round quickly. Leaving South Georgia on 3 February 1819, the *Echo* reached Plymouth on 28 April and Gravesend on 6 May, in good time to make another voyage. The catch of 280 casks of oil and 850 seal skins was worth about £1,400.¹⁴

Of Messrs. Bennett's other two ships, the *Grand Sachem* an American prize of 216 tons was commanded by David Littlejohn, appointed on 16 August 1818. Captain G. Barclay was already master of the *Arab*, a French prize of 489/500 tons. Barclay had already made two voyages to the South Seas in his ship, but in this expanding trade Messrs. Bennett had to employ Captain Littlejohn who had no previous experience. Littlejohn cleared out on 19 June 1818 and left Deal on 29 June. Barclay left 10 days later. When the *Echo* sailed from South Georgia for London, the *Grand Sachem* had 50 tons of oil on board and the *Arab* had 150 tons. The *Arab* returned on 6 May 1819 with 300 casks of oil and 5,000 seal skins worth about £3,700. The *Grand Sachem* reached Gravesend on 22 May with 150 casks of oil and only 180 seal skins, worth about £1,300. These two voyages must have brought Daniel Bennett a handsome profit.¹⁵

The *Ann* was owned jointly by Messrs. Todrig and Thomas Duell, the master; she was

¹² *Lloyd's List*, 20 August 1813, 2 June 1815, *Western Luminary*, 8 and 16 March 1813. *Lloyd's Register*, 1816. *London Foreign Trade*, 1810/134, 264, 1813/206.

¹³ *Lloyd's List*, 28 January 1817, 6 May 1817, 27 March 1818. *Lloyd's Register*, 1816. *London Foreign Trade*, 1813/188.

¹⁴ *Lloyd's List*, 19 May 1818, 30 April 1819, 21 May 1819. *Lloyd's Register*, 1816. *London Foreign Trade*, 109/8326, 1812/226. *Customs, London, Bill A*, 7 May 1819. *Bill B*, 9 May 1818, 6, 7, 21 May 1819.

¹⁵ *Lloyd's List*, 2 June 1818, 23 June 1818, 30 April 1819. *Lloyd's Register*, 1819. *London Foreign Trade*, 1813/275, *Register of London Shipping*, 1816/196. *Customs, London, Bill A*, 6, 22 May 1819. *Bill B*, 6, 22 May 1819. 19 June 1819.

an American prize of 266/273 tons, and they had the coppering repaired for this voyage. The *Mary Ann*, a ship of 430/447 tons, built at Rhode Island in 1800, was partly re-coppered, was strengthened with a pair of iron standards and given a proved iron cable in preparation for the dangers of the voyage. The *King George*, a ship of 230/334 tons, built on the River and once owned by William Mellish, was commanded by Peter Kemp who had been a South Seas master for some years and who later in 1833 made his name by the discovery of Kemp Land. Todrig, knowing the risks which would have to be faced, had the ship coppered and put in good repair.¹⁶

The *Ann* sailed on 21 May 1818 in ballast and was at South Georgia in February 1819. The master must have returned to London in the summer of 1819 as the ship sailed for the South Seas under Peter Kemp on 28 January 1820. The *Mary Ann* was commanded by James Todrig, who had lost the *Admiral Colpoys* in 1817. He was reported at South Georgia by the *Echo*, called at St. Helena and Ascension, and reached Limehouse on 8 June 1819 with 690 casks of oil and 900 salted seal skins for J. Todrig; this suggests that he chartered the ship from the firm as a private venture.¹⁷

The *King George* was owned jointly by Francis and James Todrig and Captain Duell, and on 22 May 1818 they sold 16/64 shares to Peter Kemp, when living at Mill Pond, Bermondsey. Kemp was appointed master on 6 June and cleared out of the River on 22 May. The *Echo* reported the *King George* with 120 tons of oil. Kemp returned to England on 21 October 1819, much later than the other ships. Like Messrs. Bennett, Messrs. Todrig must have made a good profit in this season.¹⁸

The rewards of the 1819 season encouraged both owners to send ships to South Georgia again. Since his last voyage in the *Recovery* to South Georgia in 1814-15, William Beacon had made two voyages to the South Seas, during the course of which he visited Iles Kerguelen. He now sailed from Gravesend on 8 June 1819, was reported at South Georgia with 17 tons of oil on 1 December, and came back in 1820.¹⁹

The *Echo* was sent out again under J. Spence, sailing from Gravesend on 23 September 1819, rather later in the season than usual. After calling at South Georgia and St. Helena, the *Echo* returned to Gravesend in the middle of 1820.²⁰

The *Arab*, Captain J. Allen, came back on 23 October 1820 with a cargo worth about £3,500—750 casks of oil, 550 seal skins and whale fins. However, though there is no proof of it, she may well have been to South Georgia, and the fact that her copper was repaired in 1819 and she had a proved iron cable tends to support that view.²¹

The *Mary Ann* (sheathed with copper in 1819, and given a proved iron cable and strengthened with a pair of iron standards) was sent out again by Francis Todrig. She came back from South Georgia and St. Helena (which she left on 23 April) in the middle of 1820, and was broken up in the following year, having been damaged.²²

A new owner who was active at this time was Ebenezer Thompson, a Rotherhithe ship-builder, who for 20 years had owned the *Norfolk*, a French prize of 1784, a ship of 650/642 tons. She came back from the South Seas some time in 1819 and, after being sheathed with copper and put once more into good repair, was dispatched under Captain William Smith (not the discoverer of the South Shetland Islands), and sailed from Deal on 23 July 1819. The *Norfolk* was reported at South Georgia with 40 tons of oil, but made the cargo up to 160 tons before sailing on 1 December 1819, leaving behind the *Mary Ann*, *Indispensable* and *Recovery*, William Beacon. Like many other masters before and after him, William Smith lost two anchors and cables there. He reached Portsmouth on 18 February 1821 and Deal on 29 February.²³

By the middle of 1820 news had reached England of the discovery of "New South Shetland"

¹⁶ *Lloyd's Register*, 1819. *Register of London Shipping*, 1818/40, 152, 1819/274. 1820/18, 1821/54.

¹⁷ *Lloyd's List*, 30 April 1819, 1 February 1820. *Customs, London, Bill A*, 8 June 1819. *Bill B*, 21 May 1819.

¹⁸ *Lloyd's List*, 16 June 1818, 30 April 1819, 22 October 1819. *Register of London Shipping*, 1817/11.

¹⁹ *Lloyd's List*, 4 May 1819, 11 June 1819, 22 February 1820. *Red Book*, 1820.

²⁰ *Lloyd's List*, 24 September 1819. *Lloyd's Register*, 1820.

²¹ *Lloyd's List*, 24 October 1820. *Lloyd's Register*, 1820. *Customs, London, Bill A*, 23 October 1820.

²² *Lloyd's List*, 23 July 1819, 22 February 1820, 20 June 1820, 11 August 1820. *Lloyd's Register*, 1820.

²³ *Lloyd's List*, 4 May 1819, 22 February 1820. *Lloyd's Register*, 1820. *Register of London Shipping*, 1817/155. *Customs, London, Bill B*, 20 May 1818.

(the South Shetland Islands) by the *Williams*, Captain William Smith, of Blyth. This revealed a stock of fur seals which had not previously been exploited and many ships (including the *Dragon*, *King George* and *Royal Sovereign* owned by Messrs. F. and J. Todrig) made for these new fields. Some of the ships which had visited South Georgia went to the South Shetland Islands, but many reverted to the usual South Seas trade.

Weddell (1825) calculated that by 1822 at least 1,200,000 furs had been taken from South Georgia alone, and that the species was virtually extinct there.

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