

Review of *The Exploits of our Fellow Townsman Mr Wolff 1796-1845*

As reproduced below, the covers of Alan Morton's two-volume book on the life of John Joseph Wolff depict one of the most dramatic moments in 19th century Southampton: 1843 when the brig *Tartar* carrying explosive shells, rockets, guns and probably gunpowder caught fire in the harbour, as reported widely in national and local papers. The painting shows the moment when Wolff, who was responsible for firing the town guns attempted blow up the ship to prevent danger to life. Wolff is the figure on the left in top hat and tails beside the gun, while on the right sailors cower and run to save their lives. Fortunately, the ship had been abandoned before it exploded and no lives were lost in the incident, but the sturdy wooden brig with all her cargo sank, and Wolff himself lost twenty guns which had been just loaded on board and were believed to be bound for Mexico to support her war with Texas – the guns were salvaged but had been damaged by the intense heat, and this was a heavy loss to Wolff.

This incident took place in the last two years of John Joseph's remarkable life, which started in London where he followed his grandfather and father into the Royal Arsenal at Woolwich as an apprentice at the age of 12 years. He became a master gunsmith but wages at the Arsenal were low and in 1828 he left and set up on his own in Southampton. Wolff established a successful business in his East Street foundry in Southampton, manufacturing household items, fireworks and specialising in brass guns for the luxury yacht market. He gained a reputation as supplier of ship's guns to several Yacht Clubs in England and Ireland and through this began to act as ship chandler to supply essential sailing equipment. He became known to the East India Company and in 1840 was secretly engaged by the Company to fit out four gunships to take part in the First Opium War (1840-41) with China: these were heavily-armed iron paddle-steamers with retractable keels, and the first iron vessels to undertake such a hazardous voyage.

But nineteenth century business life could be precarious especially when illness struck: Wolff lost his first wife and several children from both his marriages who died in infancy and early childhood, and he himself developed kidney disease and died before his fiftieth birthday. He had just bought a second foundry in Southampton which he hardly used (except perhaps for storage of the twenty guns lost in the *Tartar*). Wolff was survived by his second wife, Sophia and eldest son James Henry Wolff who between them eventually rescued the business, but not before entering into a disastrous business agreement which resulted in Sophia spending several months in prison, before being released and reunited with her young children.

Each volume has 12 chapters, Vol 1 is a more or less chronological account of Wolff's life while Vol 2 contains a series of extended essays concerning aspects of Wolff's family life and his involvement in local politics, the Poor Law, as well as stories concerning Southampton in the first half of the nineteenth century. In telling the story of Wolff's seventeen years in the city, Alan Morton has used his archaeological skills to 'unearth' information from many thousands of documents: press reports, advertisements, law suits, letters, invoices etc, many of which are illustrated throughout both volumes; and footnotes on almost every page help to supplement the argument. The books are a treasure trove of information and present a fascinating insight into Southampton's past at a time when the town appeared to be on the threshold of a great future.

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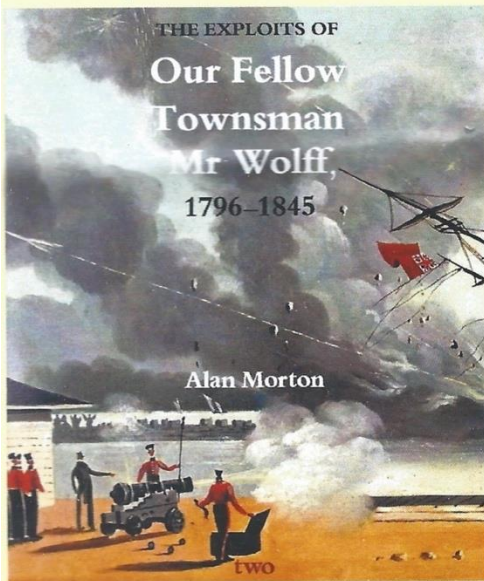
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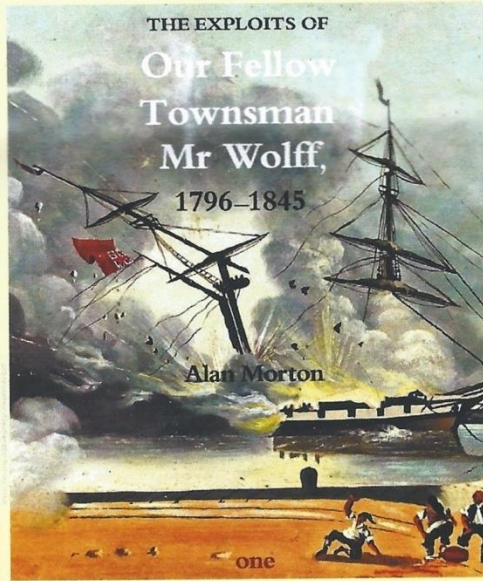
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to order and arrange delivery, contact Alan Morton directly (admorton@btinternet.com)

The Exploits of Our Fellow Townsman Mr' Wolff, 1796–1845



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topics include the anti-corn-law movement assassination attempts & other semi-public violence begging brass founding bribery & corruption builders & other risk-taking capitalists cannons & cannon foundries cast iron the Channel Islands China & the First Opium War Conservatism dead-cat throwing death & burial debt divers & salvage work the Docks drapers & other businesses involving woollen cloth the East India Co the English Channel ports feeds filth in towns fires & rival firemen fireworks foreign policy as it evolved France & other concerns Freemasons friendly societies frigates & gunboats guns of every sort imprisonment & the law Laird's iron ships (& others) Lizardi & Co mental discomposure Mexico armed in Britain the mob deployed money musicians nauticalia newspaper ethics P&O policing the public political factions & other diversions poor life Portsmouth & district Radicalism railways reinvention respectability/gentility roguery the Rookery the Royal Arsenal the Royal Yacht clubs ship-builders & -changers shops Southampton & district steam engines town myths water supplies (desperately sought) the workhouse &c &c &c

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Reviewed by Sarah Hanna