

Southampton's Opium War by Alan Morton

For our September 2020 lecture, Alan Morton posed the questions: 'Southampton was officially a third-class port in the 1830s, better known by yachtsmen than by merchants. Whatever possessed the East India Company to make it its base for operations in China? Just what was going on? And why were the French so anxious to find out?' The answers concerned the First Opium War 1840-41, when Britain was desperate to increase trade with China. They had sent an envoy, McCartney, offering manufactured goods such as a weathercock, agricultural tools, gas lamps, a globe and other 'modern' inventions, which the Chinese rejected. The East India Company (EIC) had surplus stocks of opium in their warehouses (or 'go-downs') at Kolkata although this trade was illegal in China. They engaged JJ Wolff, ship's chandler of Southampton and agent to the EIC, to secretly fit out four gunboats bound for Canton (Guangzhou) to enforce this trade. Southampton was chosen as a south coast port distant from EIC headquarters in London and suitable for such covert purpose, while convenient for the naval officers who were to command the boats (with tacit agreement from the Admiralty).

Four iron paddle steamers were built by two boatyards: Lairds, Birkenhead (Nemesis and Phlegethon), and Ditchburn & Mare, Deptford (Pluto and Proserpine). Nemesis suffered damage in sea trials and was repaired and fitted in Portsmouth but the other three were fitted out in Southampton. Large swivel mounted cannon were fitted at bow and stern, and other armaments on deck, with ammunition and stores. Paddle steamers were used to enable the boats to navigate the relatively shallow waters of the Guangzhou estuary, the only Chinese port permitted to trade with foreigners; but they were flat-bottomed and not ideal for the open seas so they were equipped with sliding retractable keels which could be lowered in order to navigate rough passages such as the Cape of Good Hope. The crews were recruited locally and not told their destination which gave rise to speculation, and rumours spread that the boats could be destined for use against France (relations between Britain and France were strained at this time). A French war-steamer appeared off Southampton and it was suspected she was there to find out more about the destination of the gunboats.

The four ships all made the voyage to Guangzhou, the first steamships to do so though it took them over six months. Once arrived they were successful in attacking local shipping and promoting the opium trade, but the first Opium War was fairly short-lived and ended with a treaty in 1841. The only reminder of this unexpected incident in Southampton's past exists in the names of Amoy and Canton Streets in Bedford Place, as recounted in Alan Morton's book 'The Exploits of our Fellow Townsman Mr Wolff', a history of the enterprising James Joseph Wolff, nineteenth century iron-founder and manufacturer of ordnance in Southampton, also a ship's chandler. The book was published in 2018, available from admorton@btinternet.com.

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