

Then and Now 10 - Cutty Sark

Cutty Sark 1869



Top Picture - Cutty Sark - by JE Cooper 1869
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Built in 1869 in Glasgow, Scotland as a tea clipper, Cutty Sark was one of the last sailing ships ever built for transporting goods before steam propelled ships took over. She now rests at Greenwich and is a major tourist attraction. The painting of Cutty Sark at sea was painted by J.E. Cooper just after she was launched.

Cutty Sark - 1869

1: This painting shows the speed and power of Cutty Sark in full sail. The ship, made of wooden planks attached to an iron frame, is 212 feet long (64.61m) and 36 feet (10.97m) in the beam (width). She was built for the Jock Willis Shipping Line to compete in the Far Eastern Tea Trade to bring the first of the new crop of fresh tea leaves back to England from China as fast as possible. There was strong competition to be first back to London with another tea clipper called Thermopylae built for the Aberdeen White Star line. On Cutty Sark's maiden voyage to Shanghai in China in 1870 she carried beer, wine and spirits and she brought back fresh tea. The shortest route back to London was via the Suez Canal (newly opened in 1869), which was a 3200 nautical miles (6,000 km) shorter route. However, the narrow Red Sea and the canal were difficult and expensive for long sailing ships to tack back and forwards. The tea clippers worked best on the open ocean with steady winds so they took the longer 14,000 nautical miles (26,000 km) route around the Cape of Good Hope on the southern tip of Africa, with the risk of stormy weather and big waves. Look at a World Atlas and plot these two different routes. On her return maiden voyage Cutty Sark left Shanghai with a large cargo of nearly 600,000kg of dried tea leaves on 25 June, arriving in London on 13 October. She covered the west bound journey of 14,000 nautical miles (26,000km) in 105 days. Work out her average distance each day in nautical miles and find out how speed at sea is measured in knots.

2: In 1872 Cutty Sark had a head to head race from Shanghai (on the East coast of China) back to London with Thermopylae, her principle rival. This race was more than just about getting the first tea leaves back to London but a serious sporting challenge, typical of the Victorian era. Both ships left Shanghai with their cargo of tea on June 18th, 1872. Although Cutty Sark was well ahead for the first half of the journey she lost her rudder in stormy seas near The Cape of Good Hope and had to build a new one at sea. Thermopylae, arrived back in the River Thames on 11th October after 115 days at sea. Cutty Sark, delayed by the repairs arrived on 18th October, 1 week behind.

3: Cutty Sark carried tea back from the Far East for 8 summers. The days of fast sailing ships were coming to an end by the new technology of steam propelled iron ships. In 1873, when Cutty Sark took 117 days coming back from China, Thermopylae did the 14,000 nautical miles (26,000km) journey in 103 days, only slightly faster than Cutty Sark's maiden voyage. However, both of these time were beaten by an iron clad steam ship, Hallowe'en, which took the shorter route of 10,800 nautical miles (20,000 km) via the Suez Canal in only 90 days. It was the new steamers that took all the tea trade. They were cheaper, they needed less crew and were faster. The tea clipper races, which lasted only one decade, were over by 1880.

4: Both Cutty Sark and Thermopylae switched from the Far East tea trade to the Australian wool trade. Cutty Sark did set a speed record on an East bound journey of 13,750 nautical miles (22,130 km) from London to Sydney in southern Australia in 1885 of 72 days. The return

journey took 73 days. Compare the average daily distance (and speed) for the west bound wool trade route to the west bound tea trade routes. The speed of the clippers on this more southerly route gave the tea clippers the competitive edge for about 12 years. But by 1895 the steam ships had taken over this trade as well. In the 20th century Cutty Sark was used to carry goods in Europe and then as a sail training ship until she was taken out of the River Thames and preserved in the dry dock at Greenwich in 1951.



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5: Cutty Sark is now preserved as a museum ship in a dry dock at Greenwich, next to the Old Naval College. The ship receives over 300,000 visitors a year. On 21st May 2007, during a restoration, there was a major fire on the ship, which damaged some of the steel structure and the decks. Most of the masts and rigging were off site at the time so it was fortunate more was not lost. The ship was restored and repaired, reopening in 2012. The ship now sits 3m above the ground so that visitors can see the keel of the historic ship. There is a plan to launch a replica sea going ship in 2019, the 150th anniversary of the launch of the one of the last great sailing ships.

