

HMS Trincomalee at St Helena



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Many readers of this article will already be acquainted with the diary of Eliza Bunt, the widow of an officer of the Trincomalee dockyard. She kept the diary whilst on her voyage back to England from Ceylon on board HMS Trincomalee, having joined the ship on 27th October 1818, Captain Philip Henry Bridges at that time being entrusted with bringing the newly built ship to England from India.

From 15th December 1818 to 1st February 1819 her diary entries stop for over six weeks, except for a few notes, with no mention of St Helena where HMS Trincomalee arrived on 24th July 1819 and departed six days later on 30th January. The ship had a cargo of bullocks and other supplies taken on board at Table Bay, Cape Horn, to deliver to the squadron based at St Helena with the duty of preventing Napoleon escaping. Interestingly it was only 4 miles from the port of James Town at St Helena that Napoleon was held captive at Longwood House since his arrival at the Island on 17th October 1815 until his death in 1821.

Is it possible that HMS Trincomalee was docked at St Helena for six days without some further involvement in Napoleon's plight?

Apparently not! The following entry in the 'Monthly Magazine' of 1819 adds a little more colour to those six days and I quote it in its original words and spellings:

'The Portsmouth Telegraph, of the 3d inst. contained the following letter dated St Helena, Jan. 29, 1819.

There has been no occurrence here of any interest to our friends at home, for some time; all has been as vapid and monotonous as the harbour duty on a home station, only, with far greater privations. But, at length, a buzz has been created – Mr. Stokoe, the surgeon of the Flag-ship, whom Bonaparte accepted as his medical attendant, after the return home of Mr O'Meara has incurred the displeasure of the governor, and he returns to England in the Trincomalee.

The facts are, I understand – When Mr. Stokoe consented to succeed Mr. O'Meara, and before he had made any visit to Bonaparte, he made it the 'sine qua non' of his accepting the situation, with Sir Hudson Lowe, that he should not be required to detail any familiar conversations into which he may be drawn, or any circumstances which he might overhear, at Longwood; but pledging himself, as a British officer, that, if any thing should come to his knowledge in which his allegiance to his king and country would be compromised by his secrecy, he would then instantly give information to the governor. This was passed on until a few days since, when Bonaparte was suddenly seized with serious illness, in the middle of the night. Mr. Stokoe, as soon as the necessary forms were gone through, visited him, and found that he had had a slight apoplectic fit. After a few hours he appeared free from the attack, but it had left a considerable degree of indisposition.

Mr Stokoe made official reports of the circumstances to Sir Hudson Lowe and the Admiral (Plampin), and gave copies of them to Bonaparte. Whether it was this latter circumstance, or whether Mr. Stokoe had represented Bonaparte as being in a worse state of health than suited

the predisposed notions of Sir Hudson, is not known; but he was instantly forbid to go to Longwood – was threatened to be tried by a court-martial, - or as an act of mitigation of his offence, he was told he might invalid home.

Of course, he preferred the latter, as the least incommodious to him, and he sails tomorrow in the Trincomalee. The reports were drawn up, of course, with conscientious accuracy, and were such as the case demanded.- I understand Bonaparte is really in serious state of health. His dwelling is sealed against all visitors.'

I thank Paul Brunyee of Malton, a Friend of HMS Trincomalee, for the following photograph of modern day James Town, not so different from the description of the port made in 1817 by a surgeon, Walter Henry, visiting at the time:



‘.....the ugliest and most dismal rock conceivable, of rugged and abrupt surface, rising like an enormous black wart from the face of the deep. Not a blade of grass or trace of vegetation could be perceived from our ship, as we sailed round to get to leeward of the island, until we came to our anchorage, when James’s Town, the metropolis, and only town, was first descried; sunk in a deep ravine between two steep mountains – with its white church – English looking houses, bristling rocks and batteries, and two or three dozen of trees.’

HMS Trincomalee arrived at Spithead on 29th March 1819.

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