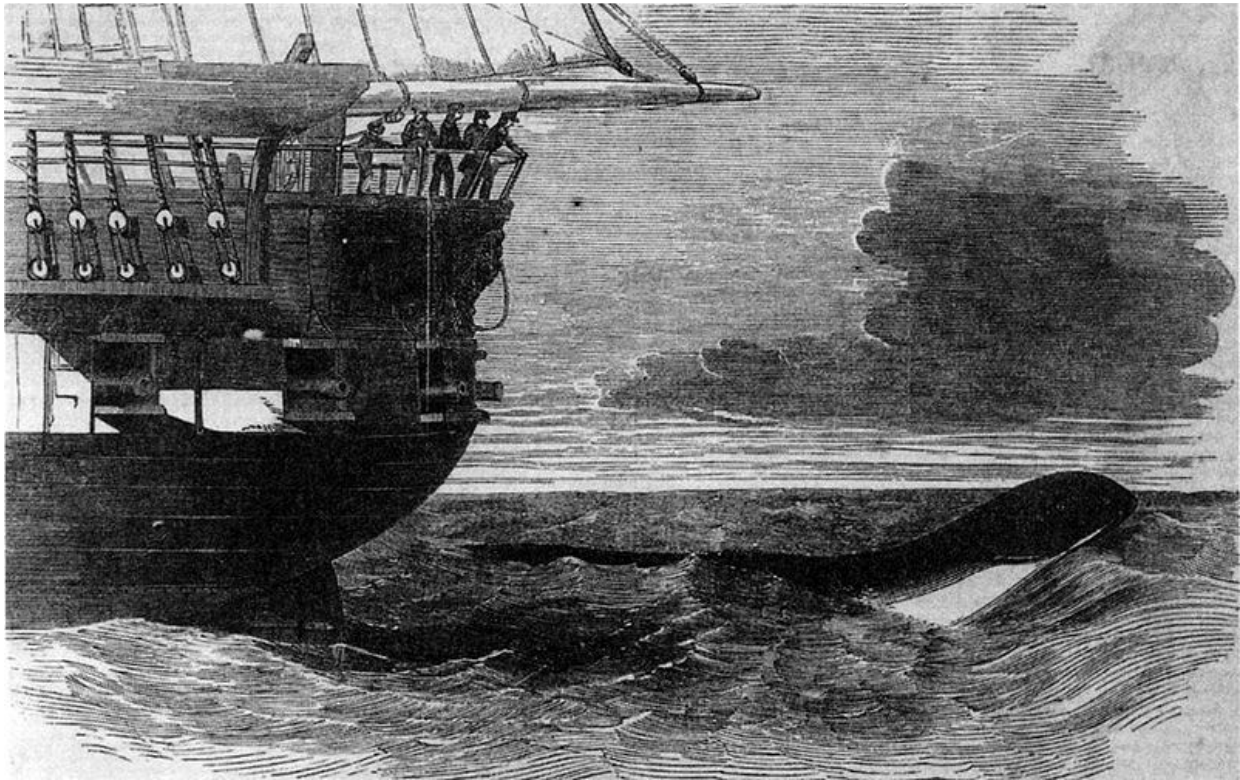


# The strange tale of the Daedalus sea-serpent



## The strange tale of the Daedalus sea-serpent



Picture from *The Illustrated London News* of October 1848

Leda-class frigates like HMS *Trincomalee* have many stories to tell. The class was very successful for the Royal Navy, with numerous victories in battle during the Napoleonic wars and the War of 1812 against the United States. Undoubtedly the strangest tale ever told in relation to ships of this class did not relate to battle, but the natural world. The story belongs to HMS *Daedalus*, whose officers made a detailed report in 1848 of a giant sea serpent they claimed to have seen in the South Atlantic.

The sea serpent sighting is one of the best known in history. On the one hand it is still considered one of the best pieces of evidence for the existence of giant sea serpents and one of the most detailed reports of 'cryptids' (creatures that have been recorded, or their existence suggested, but with little or no scientific proof). On the other, it may have contributed to the scientific community failing to take sea serpents seriously ever since.

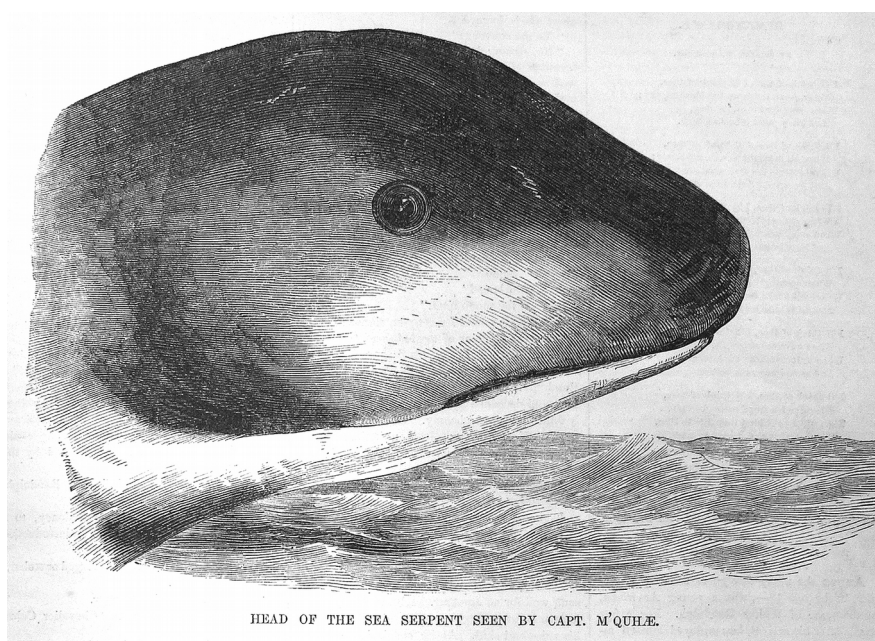
HMS *Daedalus* was built in 1826, one of the vessels bearing the modified stern design similar to that of HMS *Unicorn*. Like *Trincomalee*, *Daedalus* was placed in reserve for a number of years soon after being built. By the end of the Napoleonic wars, the Royal Navy preferred larger frigates and in the period of peace that followed, had more vessels than it needed. By the 1840s, however, the RN began to find uses for the frigates in reserve. *Daedalus*, like *Trincomalee*, was modified with fewer, larger guns and re-rated to corvette.

*Daedalus'* early career showed nothing particularly out of the ordinary. She served with the Mediterranean Fleet in 1836 before being re-rated as a 20-gun corvette in 1843. In April 1845 she was sent to New Zealand to supplement the force under the control of governor Robert Fitzroy (former captain of HMS *Beagle* during Darwin's voyages, and father of modern weather forecasting). In July, *Daedalus* formed part of a force that sailed for Borneo to tackle pirates preying on shipping in the South China Sea.

This was all fairly typical of cruisers in the Royal Navy during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Daedalus* began to head home from New Zealand, via Australia and Hong Kong, in February 1847.

By 6 August 1848, *Daedalus* had reached the South Atlantic and was sailing between the Cape of Good Hope and St Helena. At this point, Midshipman Sartoris alerted the officers on the ship's quarterdeck to an unusual sight.

The captain, first lieutenant and sailing master were all present to witness, approaching from the ship's beam, a very large creature of a kind none had seen before. Captain Peter M'Quhae, in command of the vessel, described the beast in his official report to the Admiralty:



'It was discovered to be an enormous serpent, with head and shoulders kept about four feet constantly above the surface of the sea; and as nearly as we could approximate by comparing it with the length of what our maintopsail-yard would show in the water, there was at the very least sixty feet of the animal a *fleur d'eau* no portion of which was, to our perception, used in propelling it through the water, either by vertical or horizontal undulation. It passed rapidly, but so close under our lee quarter that had it been a man of my acquaintance I should have easily recognised the features with the naked eye... It had no fins, but something like the mane of a horse, or rather a bunch of seaweed washed about its back.' M'Quhae described the creature's head as like 'that of a snake'.

The report continues: 'Its head appeared to be about four feet clear of the water, and there was about sixty feet of body in a straight line on the surface. It is calculated that there must have been under water a length of thirty or forty feet more, by which it propelled itself at the rate of fifteen miles an hour. The diameter of the exposed part of the body was about sixteen inches;

and when it extended its jaws, which were full of large jagged teeth, they seemed sufficiently capacious to admit of a tall man standing upright between them.'

M'Quhae was all for pursuing the creature but it was travelling too close to the wind for the corvette to follow. Instead, the *Daedalus*' First Lieutenant, Edgar Atheling Drummond, made a rough sketch of the serpent, and Captain M'Quhae made a report to the Admiralty.

Perhaps M'Quhae and the *Daedalus*'s officers didn't appreciate the storm their story would create. The media seized upon the sighting. The first public report of the sea serpent was in the Times of 10 October, six days after the corvette's return. The London Illustrated News hailed 'a new attestation to the existence of the Great Sea Serpent'.

In the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the notion of the 'gentleman scientist' had grown popular, and the British Association for the Advancement of Science was formed in 1831 to promote scientific pursuits in the landed classes. Royal Navy officers, overwhelmingly gentlemen themselves, were encouraged to take an interest in science and the natural world. In many respects, M'Quhae and his officers were ideal witnesses – objective observers familiar with the environment and trained to assess what they saw accurately. Despite this, reaction to the *Daedalus* sea serpent sighting was mixed.

Much as the public were fascinated by the reports, the Admiralty and the Government were less impressed. Questions arose in Parliament about how a Royal Navy captain could have allowed the report to be printed. Rather than backing off, M'Quhae collaborated with an illustrator to produce a series of engravings of the encounter, and these appeared alongside a copy of M'Quhae's report to the Admiralty in the *Illustrated London News* of 28 October. In addition to three images portraying the *Daedalus* sea-serpent, the paper reproduced an anatomical drawing of the 'American Sea Serpent, Scolioth Atlanticus' and an illustration representing a 1740 sighting off Norway.

The scientific community also reacted with horror, and search for 'rational' explanations for the *Daedalus* sea serpent sighting began immediately. The Times published comments by the biologist Sir Richard Owen, who claimed that the most likely explanation for the sighting was that it was an elephant seal swimming in open water. Owen, the inventor of the term 'dinosaur', suggested that what the officers had thought to be the creature's tail was the long eddy which typically trailed behind an elephant seal.

Captain M'Quhae immediately and angrily rejected Owen's claims. The creature was nothing like an elephant seal, he insisted, and the officers had seen it very clearly.

Part of the problem with Owen's assessment of the creature was that it was based closely on the Illustrated London News's drawings. Drummond's original sketch suggested a rather narrower head and more pointed snout. But in the months between the sightings and the corvette's return home, M'Quhae had evidently convinced himself that his version was correct.

Another factor in Owen's rejection of any suggestion that the creature could be a sea serpent was the biologist's history. He had looked into the existence of the sea serpent, seemingly taking it more seriously than his contemporaries. However, his studies appear to have taken place from a particularly sceptical standpoint. 'A larger body of evidence from eye-witnesses might be got together in proof of ghosts than of the sea-serpent,' he concluded. He ignored M'Quhae's protestations, apparently satisfied with his interpretation that all sea serpent sightings could be explained as misidentifications of creatures such as whales and seals.

Owen's aversion to any suggestion that the sea serpent might be genuine is more understandable in the light of his work to denounce hoaxes. Three years before the *Daedalus* sighting, a celebrated fraudster by the name of 'Dr' Albert Koch unleashed a 'genuine' sea serpent skeleton on a credulous public. Koch had earlier jumped on the bandwagon created by the discovery and display of fossil skeletons by respectable naturalists and created numerous fake creatures to popular acclaim.

Koch turned to the fashionable sea serpent in 1845. The prehistoric whale *Basilosaurus* had been discovered ten years earlier, and there were several well-known skeletons at this time. The skeleton of the *Basilosaurus* looks like that of a large serpent – as with all whales, the skeleton tends to offer little clue to the bulk of the living creature. Owen had been instrumental in the identification of *Basilosaurus* as a whale, not a lizard as originally thought. Koch cared little, and in the first four months of 1845, he travelled across three counties known to contain *Basilosaurus* remains and assembled parts of at least six skeletons as well as pieces of other whale skeletons and even Ammonite shells. The result was a 114-foot triumph of fakery which Koch termed the 'Hydrarchos – or Leviathan of the Antediluvian World, As described in the Book of Job, Chapt. 41'.

Koch's fraud was immediately pointed out by Owen, but the uncovering of the fake simply created greater publicity for Koch and increased the number of visitors to the exhibit. Koch sold the 'Hydrarchos' and promptly made a second one. It's easy to imagine Owen's frustration, so when the *Daedalus* report was received a few years later, Owen had little reason to welcome it. In fact, his scepticism has been linked to the way in which the scientific community treated sea serpent reports ever since. A recent report by Dr Darren Naish of Southampton University pointed out that scepticism about sea serpents almost became self-fulfilling, with every report in non-mainstream literature hardening a sense that this was not a subject fit for proper scientists.

The story didn't go away, but neither did a desire to explain the *Daedalus* sea serpent as anything but a sea serpent. 'That there is such a creature, however, there can be little doubt,' Gleason's *Pictorial Drawing Room Companion* reported, in a piece on the *Daedalus* sighting nearly five years on, 'as his appearance has been so often alluded to'.

A decade after the incident, Captain Smith of the *Pekin* reported having examined what lookouts identified as a sea-serpent while the ship was becalmed near the Cape of Good Hope. It turned out to be a 20 foot piece of floating seaweed 'with a root shaped like a head and neck.' Smith had little hesitation in declaring that the *Daedalus* sea serpent, encountered reasonably nearby, must have been 'a piece of the same weed.' The 'explanation' was again swiftly denied in a letter in the *Times* of 13 February 1858. The author of the letter insisted that the sea serpent was 'beyond all question a living creature, moving rapidly through the water in a cross sea, and within five points of a fresh breeze, with such velocity that the water was surging under its chest as it passed along at a rate, probably, of not less than 10 miles per hour.' Interestingly, the letter was signed simply as 'An Officer of Her Majesty's Ship *Daedalus*.' All of the officers had been named in the original reports, so it is curious that one of them should want to be anonymous later. Were the officers embarrassed about the sighting? Had it had a negative effect on their careers?

This *Daedalus* sighting was, as Gleason's pointed out, not unique. In fact, the year after *Daedalus*' encounter, a remarkably similar sighting was reported by the sloop HMS *Plumper* in the Atlantic off the coast of Portugal. An officer described 'a long black creature with a sharp head, moving slowly, I should think about two knots ... its back was about twenty feet if not more above water; and its head, as near as I could judge, from six to eight... There was something on its back that appeared like a mane, and, as it moved through the water, kept washing about; but



before I could examine it more closely, it was too far astern’.

There was much less coverage of *Plumper*’s sighting, and it appears that the officers did not engage in further publicity. Perhaps this was wise. While it is impossible to tell if the officers of the *Daedalus* suffered any harm to their reputation or career as a direct result of the sighting, M’Quhae never commanded another ship and Drummond, despite coming from a famous naval family, never progressed beyond the rank of lieutenant.



*The Daedalus as a Training Ship*

*Daedalus* herself lasted well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Like her near-sister *Trincomalee*, she was placed in the reserve and converted to a training ship and served for many years in that role. She finally paid off in 1910 and was broken up the following year. Her strange tale, though, lives on.

**Matthew Willis**

**QD42: Originally appeared In the “Quarterdeck” magazine  
Ref: 2014 Issue 3 (Autumn) pages 35 to 39**