

Aboard the Foudroyant in 1922



ABOARD THE FOUDROYANT IN 1922

The Trincomalee Trust has three diaries on loan from the National Museum of the Royal Navy, these having been kept by Geoffrey Wheatley Cobb, the owner of our ship from 1897 until his death in 1931. Geoffrey saved HMS Trincomalee from being dismantled, acquiring her as a replacement for the Foudroyant, which had been Nelson's flagship, after she had been wrecked near the north pier in Blackpool during a storm in October 1897. Subsequently our ship was renamed the Foudroyant.

The three diaries are dated 1909, 1922 and 1929 during which the Foudroyant was used as a training ship for boys. They are kept in a display cabinet within the exhibition gallery at the Historic Quay in Hartlepool and presently I have been looking at the 1922 diary.

The diary is quite a lengthy affair, the entries vary from accounts of events that occurred each day to highly personal musings. It begins with Geoffrey celebrating the start of the New Year at Caldicot Castle, his home near to Newport, South Wales. Geoffrey had inherited the castle and lived there with his wife Anna, whom he had married the previous year. He enjoyed joining in and encouraging boyish frolics as the first entry in the diary shows:

January 1 Sunday

Saw New Year in on top of keep with 7 boys. ... Let off fireworks, but they were cut short by a spark which ignited what was to have been the remainder of show, and the box was soon full of exploding rockets & squibs. Fred found his own parapet & then tried to play Auld Lang Syne on his cornet, but his lips were scorched and it died away in a melancholy wail.

Later that month he is consulted by a representative of Newport Council, Geoffrey having been made a freeman of Newport in 1912:



Caldicot Castle

January 15 Sunday

... In afternoon Alderman Parry of Newport came to ask my acquiescence in proposal that Newport Corporation should extract water from Castroggi (a stream near to the castle) above Caerwent for purpose of augmenting their supply for 3 years till their new works were completed. I said I could not agree. I had no water now & I could not agree to arrangements whereby that condition should continue for 3 years.

The next day a visit is made to London to see his dentist, Phillips of 5 Grosvenor Square, he has tea out and visits an exhibition of pastels at the Royal Institute in Piccadilly, arriving at his home in Portsmouth at about 10pm when Anna was playing the piano in the drawing room. She “soon went to bed. Boys & Café au lait. Bed very late.”

It is clear that Geoffrey does not enjoy the company of many people and his relationship with Anna is far from ideal. Anna is busy refurbishing Caldicot Castle:

January 21 Saturday

We are very deep in patterns of tapestries and other materials for curtains & wall panelling & the flood of artistic talk is very wearing. I am interested in making the rooms nice but have none of Anna's delicate perceptions. She has completely spoiled the drawing room which was a beautiful room, so I don't mind what more she does there. Fortunately she approves of the dining room & guardroom so I hope they may escape.

It is made very clear that Geoffrey's marriage to Anna was financially motivated:

February 5 Sunday

My whole soul revolts from this marriage. If I could wake & find it a dream I should be wild with joy. But I should have to do it to save the ship.

The ship is Geoffrey's escape from the above and the diary entries from 13 February to 1 March detail how he spent this time away from Anna, living on board the Foudroyant.

February 13 Monday

Fred & I to Falmouth ... Gig on Fish Strand & Jack took my bag down. Ship looking very shabby outside & must be painted. Gig which had her stern torn out is repaired and was in water for first time. Overhead paint in aftern cabin has been burnt off & new paint put on, a great improvement. Jack waited at my dinner.

Just as now the ship required constant upkeep. Geoffrey was also trying to get funds for his other ship, the Implacable:

February 16 Thursday

Cornford sent final proof of Implacable appeal. It has the coloured reproduction of Tuke's water colour which is very nice. Cornford has made some alterations in my part which are not improvements, and has punctuated it to death. I must now get it printed. It is quite a nice thing & I don't think anyone will throw it away without looking at it.

The artist, Henry Scott Tuke, was a friend of Geoffrey and is famously known for his paintings of ships, seascapes and boys posing. Geoffrey commissioned at least one portrait from him:



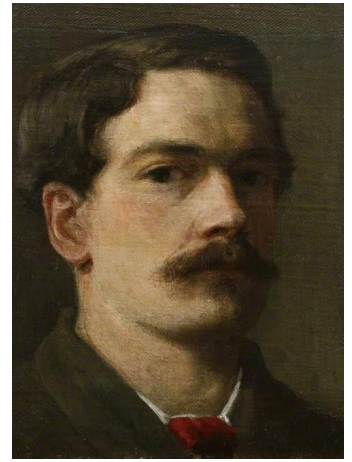
Geoffrey Wheatley Cobb

February 17 Friday

... Got Tuke's portrait of Joe which is now framed & brought on board. It is a beautiful thing and a better likeness than I thought. The mouth & chin are most beautiful, the eyes & hair not good enough. But it is not as a glorious boy; it has a real look of Joe. No picture could give the enchanting moment when he opens his eyes with a smile. I am glad it is in oils not pastels. It is much the most brilliant of the series, and the biggest.

February 18 Saturday

Choir practice 12. A good muster but I want many more. ... I fixed Joe's portrait on the mahogany door on forward side of fore cabin. There were two crossed swords there which I was sorry to displace but it was the best light. Wrote to Tuke telling him I have it & love it and asking him whether he would not like to send it to the R. A. exhibition. It is one of the best things he has done this year. Quiet afternoon aboard & most delightful tea.



Henry Scott Tuke
Self-portrait

There was a band aboard the ship which had been improved "by 3 new clarinets & Teddy's new euphonium. But I don't think they are playing very well."

Other activities included dancing and football:

February 21 Tuesday

... Robinson aboard again this evening & dancing in poop again. Jack can't dance. He has an inflamed bunion as well as the old varicose veins. I can still dance a sword dance ... I shall not be able to do it much longer. I have become very old in the last 6 months.

February 22 Wednesday

Showery. Boys ashore in afternoon for football. They fell in on midday for inspection so they may not go ashore in dirty knicks. Knicks are now worn very short; only half way down thigh & the tall long-limbed boys look very splendid.

7.30 ashore & to a ... concert at Henry's Hotel for the Falmouth Association Football League. Singing not up to much.

February 24 Friday

... Ship with head in south & rolling. Band practice 3 to 4. Tuke dined here. I fetched him from yacht club. Very dark & tide low & could not get to Club steps and went to Greenbank & walked to Club ... Tuke saw his painting of Joe framed. I also showed him the reproduction of his watercolour in Implacable appeal which he said was satisfactory. Took him back to Custom quay about 11...

Choir practice 11.30. Robinson wants to take the boys in hand & make them sing better & so do I ... Only 3 lads attends as a rule, Teddy, Roberts & Price and he asked to have them in poop instead of on main deck as heretofore. So in poop it was, & we sung scales before starting on ... hymns. The old poop piano is a poor substitute for harmonium.

February 26 Sunday

Wet morning but cleared later. Ship rolling hard & there was consequently a long pump on starboard side of main deck ... not dry by church time. Service in consequence on starboard side. Boy Dowles in uniform for first time.

February 27 Monday

Very wet in morning & ship rolling. I less sleepy in morning & bathed. Water intensely cold but did me lots of good. Old & rheumatic as I am &, I fear, fat which is worse I ask. I still enjoy it.

February 28 Shrove Tuesday

Wedding of Princess Mary to Lord Lascelles. I doubtful whether day was fine enough to dress ship, but decided we would & flags flew from 9 am to sunset and were not much the worse.



*HMS Foudroyant and Cutty Sark
at
Falmouth*

March 1 Ash Wednesday

I bathe every morning & hope I have got back the habit. Posted final proof of Implacable appeal to Hudson & Kearns & asked for 1000 copies. 500 to be sent here & 500 to Caldicot, also 500 envelopes to hold it with title printed on outside. Very wet & windy. Anna arrived at Kiln Quay. I shored off at 5.15 & went there, I hoped in time to see her arrive, but she had come & I had to apologise. I had tea with her and she came up here for dinner. I got one silver candlestick & accessories & George gave a nice little dinner. Cabins looked very comfortable much more comfortable than her beautiful house. She would like much to come & live aboard It is not merely that I don't want her. It would change the character of the ship. She would then be a yacht not a training ship.

I have had a month's holiday & now it is run. Sometimes it seems impossible to go back to ... the constant effort. Anna is so good & kind that it is impossible not to be good to her....

It was very dark when we took her back, and blowing & raining. One of our lanterns was out of order ... found a splendid carbide, one which threw a long beam ahead & enabled me to bring the gig alongside quay with ease.

Hugh Turner

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