

## **Surgeons in the South Seas Trade, 1775-1859**

### **Dr Julie Papworth**

British whale ships in the South Seas Trade usually carried a Surgeon on board and on the BSWF data-base today there are the names of Surgeons from over 150 voyages and research is ongoing to discover more about their lives and to understand the contribution they made to the activities of the South Seas Trade.

Although it was never the law that a British whaling ship had to carry a Surgeon the practice had become firmly established in the earlier Greenland Trade and this has been traced through the series of Bounty Acts that were passed from 1733 onwards in order to encourage the British whaling industry. The presence of a Surgeon became customary and when whaling spread to the Southern Seas the presence of a Surgeon on board remained the norm.

In both fisheries some men were only of modest abilities, with some in the early years of the Northern fishery being little more than Barber-Surgeons. They were employed as multi-purpose Surgeon-Stewards and were regarded as servants. Examples of this type of man can be found persisting in the earlier years of the Southern Industry and two men on the data base are described as Surgeon-Stewards, both of whom undertook their voyages in 1804. In contrast others were highly trained practitioners and the earliest Surgeon on the data base is, uniquely, a gentleman Physician, Robert Thomas Crosfield. His recently discovered experiences, on a voyage commencing in 1794, provide insights into early whaling practice and show the perils of sailing during a wartime period when ships were at risk of capture by the French. Crosfield's recollections also supply a vivid description of scurvy and of its prevention and treatment in this period.

The possibility of finding a well-trained Surgeon increased throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> Century as the period saw a huge growth in medical teaching. London came to the forefront of this with a number of private medical schools and the school run by John Hunter was one of the most eminent. Comparative anatomy played a central role in his medical teaching and as Hunter's methods of scientific investigation were disseminated throughout the medical world a generation of doctors followed his examples and a new type of scientific, gentlemanly, medical practitioner began to emerge. Hunter was a friend of Joseph Banks from whom he received several specimens from Cook's first voyage and he went on to receive many exotic new specimens over the following years. Some of these survive today in the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons. Men were inspired by Hunter's example to collect animal and botanical specimens during their travels and the pamphlet he wrote giving 'Directions for Preserving Animals' influenced zoological collecting throughout the nineteenth century. Frederick Debell Bennett provides an example of this practice for he donated specimens to the Royal College of Surgeons and the Linnean Society following his voyage on the *Tuscan*.

The advances in medical training during the 18<sup>th</sup> century saw the beginnings of the emergence of the general practitioner and by the end of the century a new distinct group of successful medical men had arisen. They increasingly identified themselves as Surgeon-Apothecaries and began to lobby hard for a legal system of professional training and licensing. Eventually their efforts succeeded and in 1815 the 'Apothecaries' Act', was passed.

This was the first piece of professional medical legislation enacted in Britain and it stipulated that anyone wanting to work as an 'Apothecary' (in effect a General Practitioner) would, in future, have to complete an agreed system of training then pass an examination before being granted a legal licence to practice. This was the L.S.A. or Licence of the Society of Apothecaries. Over the following decades the number of medical men taking the new examination steadily increased and, although the M.R.C.S. awarded by the Royal College of Surgeons was never a legal requirement, it became customary for an ambitious young medical man to seek a qualification from 'College and Hall' at the end of their studies.

If a whaling ship Surgeon took the L.S.A. the records provide a wealth of information about his training. However, there was no statutory requirement for a whaling ship to hire a qualified man and a considerable diversity of background and experience remained among whaling ship Surgeons even after 1815. For example, Thomas Beale did not have the L.S.A. and, although he was well trained at the Aldersgate Street Medical School, he did not hold any qualification at the time of his voyage. He eventually took the M.R.C.S. some years after his return. William Lewis Roderick made three voyages as a Surgeon yet he had neither the L.S.A. nor the M.R.C.S., although he claimed to have undergone three years training with a doctor in Wales, followed by a year walking the wards at Guy's Hospital. Four of the Surgeons were too young to have been admitted to the L.S.A. examination with one apparently only 16 at the time of his voyage.

The disparity of qualifications and experience among the Surgeons and the variety of treatment they experienced during their voyages suggests a number of areas that require further research but it is anticipated that examining their lives in relation to medical practices of the period will assist in understanding their contribution to the South Seas Trade.