

Mr Gilbert, I Presume!

This story starts with the discovery of a brief article in the Bucks Examiner in 1916 about the funeral in Cholesbury of an army pensioner, John Gilbert. As John's story was gradually uncovered it revealed his was no ordinary life. In an age when the furthest place most villagers might have been was to Chesham, his exploits had taken him halfway round the world. His family life was no less intriguing. Here is the story so far unearthed.....

On 21st October 1916 three volleys rang out across Cholesbury followed by the sound of the 'Last Post' played by a lone bugler. A little earlier, a company of men from the Suffolk Regiment had marched up the hill from their training camp at Halton with horses pulling a gun carriage. The **cortège** wound itself from Buckland Common up Sandpit Hill and turned into the entrance to St Lawrence's Church. Carried on the gun carriage were the remains of one John Gilbert, and it was followed by John's wife Emelia, and a small group of friends and neighbours.

But why had this unusual spectacle for an otherwise remote village come to pass? The answer lies in what was then known as the Dark Continent and Dr Livingstone. But we must start by going back nearly seventy years, and to the small village of Hindon in Wiltshire where John Gilbert was born in 1842. His father John Snr., who had been a Coldstream Guardsman at the Battle of Waterloo, died when John was three and he grew up with his Mother, Mary Ann, an older sister Elizabeth, and a step-brother from his Mother's previous marriage, George (Norris). It is thought John left Hindon around 1855 and that between 1858 and 1860 he became a gunner in the Royal Marine Artillery.



HMS Gorgon

He was assigned to *HMS Gorgon*, a wooden steam paddle frigate with 6 guns and manned by 165 seamen, excluding marines. The ship, described as a 'Man of War', was commissioned in 1837 and soon after saw action off the coast of the South Americas and later in the Arabian Peninsula. In

1858 it was overhauled and assisted with the first attempt to lay a transatlantic telegraph cable between The British Isles and New York. In November 1860, with John onboard, the *Gorgon* set sail from Plymouth, *en route* for the Cape of Good Hope where it arrived in March 1861. Its principle mission in southern Africa was the suppression of the slave trade perpetrated by Portuguese-sanctioned colonists and to support the spread and territorial influence of the British Empire. To this end in November that year the *Gorgon* arrived in Madagascar with a large party of dignitaries, representing Queen Victoria at the Coronation of King Radama II.

On 30th January 1862 the *Gorgon* arrived at the mouth of the Zambezi River to rendezvous with missionary and explorer Dr David Livingstone. It was escorting the *Hetty Ellen*, a small brig which had brought Mrs Livingstone, and wives of other missionaries, from the Cape. The *Gorgon* also brought twenty-four sections of a new iron steamer, soon to be named the *Lady Nyassa*, which was to be navigated up the rivers Zambezi and Shire and explore Lake Nyassa. Because the Zambezi was in flood, unloading the cargo was a more onerous task than expected, and the *Gorgon's* crew, which would have included Gilbert, stayed on to assist with unloading the sections of the dismantled *Lady Nyassa* further upstream at Shupanga and then assemble the hull there. In April 1862 Mrs Livingstone succumbed to fever and died. This did not distract her husband, Dr Livingstone, from his mission. The plan was to use the expedition's own boat, the paddle steamer *Pioneer*, to tow the half-assembled *Lady Nyassa* up the Shire and over or around the major obstacle of the Murchison Cataracts. The *Gorgon's* Commander seconded Gunnery Officer, Lieutenant Young, to remain with his marines - which we assume included our John Gilbert - to assist with this mission. Meanwhile, the rest of the crew departed on board the *Gorgon* bound for the Cape of Good Hope. To illustrate the unstable nature of southern Africa at this time, with rival tribal factions stirred up by competing European empires, the *Gorgon* was forced to divert to Madagascar to suppress rioting and insurrection following the assassination of the King, Radama II.

September came and went and the expedition was still struggling to get past the cataracts. The morale of the group was affected through loss of life from fever. Damage to the *Pioneer's* engine forced them to return downstream to wait out the winter months while the boat was repaired.

Disagreements amongst Livingstone's comrades led to some departures and increased the doctor's reliance on Lt Young's Marine Artillery Corps.

In February 1863, with repairs completed, they set off again, only for both the Pioneer and Lady Nyassa to become grounded in the treacherous shallows some way short of the rapids. Breaking free they eventually reached the Murchison Cataracts on 10th April. With no prospect of taking the Lady Nyassa further upstream, it was decided to dismantle the boat so that the expedition could carry sections of the boat overland to Lake Nyassa. To reach the lake, over 40 miles of new roads would need to be built and large numbers of African labourers would be required. Severe famine had rendered many of the Africans unfit for the heavy work. Fever also took its toll of missionaries, officers crew and the expedition's doctor. (The Bucks Examiner mentioned what Gilbert must have recounted many times that, of the 130 or so who went up the Zambezi, only nine returned and he had believed he had been the last of the nine alive).

Lt. Young, who had stayed loyal to Livingstone's cause, cautioned him that continuing the expedition would be reckless. However, Livingstone was in denial that the mission was at breaking point and wanted to press on. A lot rested on the outcome of the venture, not least Livingstone's own reputation. Over the past five years of the expedition Livingstone's supporters back home had been hard at work whipping-up church missionary zeal and lobbying for the Government's continued support. Speculators had also funded the expedition; they were interested in exploiting the untapped resources and opening up trade routes in the previously unexplored Dark Continent. However, the loss of life, lack of expeditionary progress, and critical reports of Livingstone's poor leadership and dogged-mindedness had brought clamours in the newspapers and from politicians for Livingstone to abandon the mission. An Instruction to this effect arrived with Livingstone from England on 2nd July 1863. During September and October 1863, as floods prevented a return downstream, Livingstone made one final attempt to reach Lake Nyassa, a 700 mile excursion on foot. Lt. Young had meanwhile navigated the Pioneer downstream. It is not known whether any marines, such as John Gilbert, accompanied Livingstone. Livingstone's party returned in the Lady Nyassa to where the Pioneer was berthed in November 1863.

Almost immediately Lt Young, together with his marines, sailed on the Pioneer to the Cape where the Gorgon was stationed.

The Gorgon with its complement of marines headed for Portsmouth, arriving on 29th January 1864. It took a further six months, until February 1864, before Livingstone finally left the Zambezi,



Descending the Murchison Cataracts

sailing the Lady Nyassa to Mombasa and then, after a perilous journey, on to Bombay. Livingstone departed for England in late June, arriving back in London at the end of July 1864. His account of the expedition painted his own exploits in a wholly positive light and failed to acknowledge at all the contributions of officers and crew. However, subsequent accounts from others revealed how poorly Livingstone had led the expedition.

So what of John Gilbert? The Gorgon was decommissioned on 11th February 1864. Gilbert continued as a marine artilleryman and in September 1866 married a Jersey girl, Louise Bovey, in Alverstoke, Hants. In 1871 John and Louise were living close to the marine barracks at Portsea. However, on the 1881 census Louise is recorded as 'wife of pensioner' and a laundress living in Ropley near Winchester. Meanwhile, John turns up in Greenwich working as a house gardener. Living in that house is also a servant called Matilda Gilbert. In 1891 Louise Gilbert, still referring to herself as 'a pensioner's wife', has returned to Jersey where she is also to be found in 1901 and 1911. John is recorded, both in 1891 and 1901 in Deptford, working as a labourer at the Woolwich Arsenal and Matilda Gilbert is living with him, now denoted as 'wife'. Yes, a second wife! By 1911 John has moved to nearby Prestwood and, lo behold, he is not with Matilda but with Emelia Ann Gilbert. His third wife!

Sometime after 1911 John and Emelia came to 'The Ciders' in Buckland Common for, as yet, unknown reasons. Perhaps the connection could have been down to the factory making use of the renowned 'Prestwood black cherries' for its alcoholic cordials. After John's death Emelia moved into the Aylesbury Workhouse where she died in 1921. She was also buried at Cholesbury. Unfortunately no headstone has been found marking their graves.

I would like to thank Barry Warr for finding the Bucks Examiner article. I'm also most grateful to Brian Horridge for his advice and assistance with the ongoing genealogy research, and for helping me make sense of the various accounts of Livingstone's expedition.

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