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READING MUSEUM SERVICE

EAST INDIAMAN 'PITT' H263



The British East India Company began life in 1600 when Elizabeth I granted a charter to the 'Company and Merchants of London trading with the East Indies'. Other countries also set up companies to trade with India, including France, Denmark and the Netherlands. Eventually the British company came to dominate all of India except for the Punjab, Sind and Nepal. The Indian Princes became dependents of the Company. But the expense of wars leading to the total control of India strained the Company's finances to the breaking point. The Company was forced to petition Parliament for assistance and in 1813 an act of parliament asserted the sovereignty of the British Crown over the Indian territories held by the Company and deprived the Company of its Indian trade monopoly.

The Company managed to maintain its monopoly over the lucrative China trade in tea and silk until 1833. Throughout this period it was a rich, powerful and well-organised body using the largest ships that frequented the Port of London. Every season, its fleet of ships sailed between London and the East, laden with the merchandise of two civilisations.

At first, the Company leased the ships from their owners, usually for no more than four voyages. Although it continued to lease ships, by 1720 the Company operated nearly 40 ships of its own. Later on, the Company established its own shipbuilding facilities, both in London and in India.

Ships built in India were constructed using superior tropical hard-woods such as teak. They were more resistant to the sea-worms which ate through the bottoms of many ships than vessels built from English oak. Wherever they were built, each East Indiaman ship had a limited life expectancy - four voyages to Asia over eight to ten years was the norm. Between 1600 and 1833 the East India Company's ships made about 4,600 voyages from London.

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There were at least two East Indiamen called *Pitt* (and three called *William Pitt*). They were all probably named after William Pitt the Elder (1708-1778), Prime Minister of Britain from 1766 to 1768, although it also possible some were named after two other members of the Pitt dynasty - his father, Thomas 'Diamond' Pitt (1653-1726), or his son William Pitt the Younger (1759-1806), who was also Prime Minister (1783-1801) and (1804-1806).

Thomas 'Diamond' Pitt (right) made his fortune through the East India Company, for whom he was governor of Madras. In 1701 Pitt purchased a 410 carat uncut diamond acquired from an Indian merchant named Jamchund. The merchant had purchased the diamond from an English sea captain, who had probably stolen it from a slave. The slave found the diamond in one of the Golkonda mines on the Kistna River and had concealed it inside a large wound in his leg. Another version of the story claims the diamond was a stolen from the eye of a Hindu statue. Pitt bought the diamond for £20,400 and sold it to the French Regent, Philippe II, Duke of Orléans for £135,000. With this fortune he bought a country house at Swallowfield, near Reading, and retired to a life of luxury.

Whatever the origin of the name, this model of the *Pitt* probably represents the 775 ton vessel which, between 1785 and 1795 made four voyages to and from the East Indies. East Indiamen were designed to carry both passengers and goods and to defend themselves against piracy. In the period of the Napoleonic Wars they were often painted to resemble warships, and some carried a sizable armament. A number of these ships were in fact acquired by the Royal Navy and in some cases they successfully fought off attacks by the French.



Left: A fleet of East Indiamen, painted about 1780. In the foreground one of the ships is shown broadside, to port. It flies the red ensign from the stern as well as short pennants to indicate that it is a merchant ship.

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By the late eighteenth century the Company's ships carried nearly 1,000 passengers a year, often in damp, overcrowded conditions. They were squeezed in wherever a space could be found. At the rear of the ship, beneath the poop deck (the raised deck), was a large space known as the 'roundhouse' which was divided into living spaces. These 'cabins' were made of temporary partitions such as canvas screens or light wooden panels, and could be cleared away quickly if the ship became involved in a battle.

Despite passengers having to put up with the noise of sailors working on the poop deck immediately above them, the roundhouse cabins were the most expensive and were favoured by wealthy passengers, and ladies travelling alone. The partitions were arranged so that each living space had access to a window, giving the occupants light and fresh air. This contrasted with the situation of poorer passengers, who were frequently in darkness and had to endure the stench of the ship. A British passenger, Emma Roberts, (1845), described the advantages of a roundhouse cabin:

To ladies, whether married or single, the upper, or poop-cabins are certainly the most desirable, the disadvantages of the noise overhead being more than counterbalanced by the enjoyment of many favourable circumstances unattainable below… [The roundhouse cabins]…are much more light and airy: It is seldom, even in the very roughest weather, that the ports [windows] are compelled to be shut.

Beneath the roundhouse was the great cabin where single gentlemen travellers were accommodated. Because the great cabin was closer to the waves, in rough weather the windows had to be screened to prevent the sea coming in. These window screens were known as 'dead lights' and didn't always work very well, with the result that passengers, their bedding and other possessions became soaked.



The East Indiaman the Essex, the morning after a storm, with an upside-down flag as a signal of distress. Another ship is sailing to the rescue.

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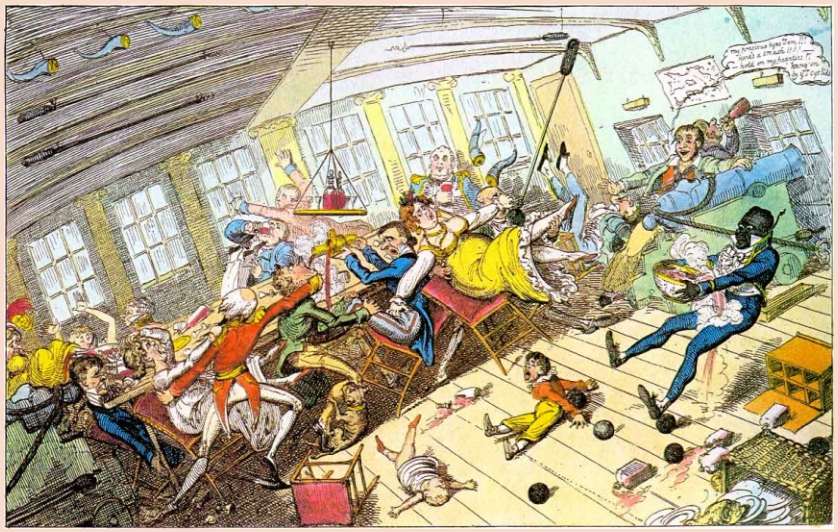

'An Interesting scene, on board an East-Indiaman, showing the Effects of a heavy Lurch, after dinner', print by George Cruikshank, Nov. 9th 1818.The sailor on the right is saying 'My precious eyes, Tom!!! here's a smash!! !! -- hold on, my hearties!! hang on by y'r eyelids'.

During rough weather special arrangements had to be made. Chairs and tables were lashed to the deck and long rolls of cloth were fastened across the table to prevent plates and dishes sliding around. If such measures were not taken, mealtimes could be disastrous. Surgeon James Wallace, a passenger in 1810, described the chaos:

The dishes would forsake their place on the table, and mutton, gravy and all deposit itself in the lap of him who sat nearest it: whilst, on rising from the desolate meal, it was an even choice whether to retire to the dark, close, uneasy cabin, or to parade the deck in the midst of the spray.

Rough seas might put out the cooking fires, and made even the simplest of chores such as getting dressed, very awkward:

Some who…got out of bed, had scarcely reached the floor, when a tumble of the vessel sent them tumbling to the other side of their cabin; and before they had time to recover themselves another roll would send them as quickly and roughly back again. Others who got the length of beginning to dress, in the attempt to draw on a stocking, or in any other act which occupied both hands, and put the body on rather a ticklish balance, were thrown down with such violence, that for some days afterwards they had cause to remember it. And to increase the misfortune, the same lurch that upset the man, generally upset along with him, some of the cabin furniture.