

Packett Prize winner 2015

WILLIAM WILSON

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On Sunday 24th October 1762, Captain Ralph Clark of Stockton docked his ship called the '*Mary*' in the Tees. On board, he had the household furniture of Commodore William Wilson.

We know this because Commodore Wilson's brother-in-law, Ralph Jackson recorded the details in his journal. Jackson kept a journal from 1749 until his death in 1790, and these journals afford historians the opportunity to look through the window of history and observe the daily life of our predecessors. But this passage is about William Wilson, who married Rachel Jackson in 1755 at Greenwich, London with her elder brother, George, listed as one of the witnesses. Wilson would feature greatly in many of Ralph's journals, as well as the people who visited the family home, Ayton Hall.

Ayton Hall had been the home of Thomas Skottowe, whose lasting claim to fame was being Captain James Cook's first patron, paying for Cook's early schooling. This was to be the retirement home of William and Rachel with their three daughters: the twins, Hannah and Esther and Rachel Jr., who had previously resided in London. Rachel was no stranger to the area; having been born at Richmond, her uncle held property at Guisborough and a sail factory there. In addition to this, Rachel's mother owned houses at Great Ayton, her sister, Esther and older brother, George also held real estate in the vicinity. The Wilsons would have two boys, George and William Jr., both born at Ayton and christened in All Saints church in the village. William had been a Captain in the service of the Honourable East India Company, which he had joined as a 14-year-old midshipman in 1729. He served on several ships, gradually advancing through the ranks until he became Captain of the '*Suffolk*' in the year 1749, which he sailed from England to China via India following tried and tested routes.

Each voyage could bring the Captain up to £10,000 profit in 'private trade'; Captains would complete on average three voyages, before retiring from the sea and invest their fortunes in stock of the company and live in the vicinity of London. William Wilson began his final voyage as Captain of the '*Suffolk*' on the 9th January 1756; in a letter of that date to his pregnant wife, Rachel, he wrote: 'If it please God to prosper this voyage, the Riches of India shall not tempt me from you again.' In the same letter, Wilson refers to 'a packet of News Papers' sent to him by 'our brother, Jackson.' This referred to Rachel's elder brother, George who would become the deputy secretary to the Admiralty

in 1762. Fate and the French would take a hand in the future of William and Rachel during this voyage; this is found in Ralph Jackson's journals, entry dated March 1756 informed him about the birth of his nephew.

*'I got a letter from Sister Esther dated Mar. 18 inst. with news of Sister Wilson being brot to bed of a boy on Thursday 17th instant at seven in the morning, to be called Harry after his Grandfather and Uncle Wilson.'*¹

A later entry, which was written a month later on Wed. 7th April 1756, is not a happy one.

*'...got a letter from Richmond from sister Dolly advising me of the death of my sister Wilson's child, but that she recovered as well as could be expected.'*²

This sad information did not reach William Wilson until a year later, as it was usual for mail to be delivered to St Helena by outward bound vessels. Homeward bound vessels would collect their mail from the island. Long before it became 'the storm tossed desolate rock in the Atlantic', ergo the final prison of Napoleon, the island was the company's staging post. Purely coincidentally, one of St. Helena's Governors was John Skottowe, son of Thomas; who when Captain James Cook called at St. Helena, would greet Cook as a visiting dignitary and invite him to stay in the Governor's house.

In a letter dated 15th April 1757, Wilson wrote: 'On arrival at this place I was favoured with two letters from you. I bless my God for your recovery and Health. As to the loss of our son and sister it cannot miss of being an Affliction to me.' The depth of sorrow is plain for all to see in this short sentence, as is his faith in God. Personal grief now is put to one side; Wilson is forced to address matters of state, as shown in this excerpt from the same letter: 'Our Brother Jackson has been so obliging as to send me the Magazine, Newspapers etc. with a long Epistle on the situation of Affairs in Urope [*sic*] wherein many circumstances occur which we do not find in the Papers. And have given me an opportunity of obliging several of my friends with them who have made many compliments on ye Author.'

Reading this passage opens one of the portholes of history, this is eavesdropping on the 18th century at its best. George Jackson has in truth grasped an opportunity seldom afforded to one man at any time in history. Since the war of Austrian Succession, Europe had been nominally at peace; however, in India and other provinces, no such peace had ever been reached. England, France, Spain, Portugal and Holland vied continually for dominance

¹ Ralph Jackson Diaries are held at Teesside Archives and can be read online greatayton.wdfiles.com/.../ralph-jackson-diaries/...67.pdf

² As last.

in trade; this often necessitated backing one side or another in local disagreements with the use of force. Updates from home kept those in the provinces aware of alliances in Europe; Jackson provided this information to the friends of William Wilson whilst they were abroad, which would be fed back to ship owners and stock holders in the Honourable Company, many of whom were Members of Parliament and nobility. Therefore when the expected war between England and France (the Seven Years War) did break out, the necessary precautions could be taken, as demonstrated by the next excerpt from Wilson's letter of 15th April 1757: 'We left China the 30th. Dec. in company with the '*Houghton*' Capt. Walpole and the '*Godolphin*' Capt. Hutchinson.' Sailing in convoy provided greater security from the perils of attack by hostile forces in the high seas. Unfortunately, the French knew the routes used by East India men and waited to capture or sink the English vessels.

On 9th March 1757, the three heavily laden merchantmen were approaching the Cape of Good Hope, their cargo has been estimated to be worth in the region of half a million pounds. This cargo greatly affected the speed and manoeuvrability of the three ships. Two French vessels were sighted; as senior Captain, Wilson assumed overall command of the convoy. The ships engaged for three hours, by holding the line and adhering strictly to Wilson's instructions, the three merchantmen damaged the French frigates sufficiently to cause them to break off the action. The two vessels were the '*Compte de Provence*' of 74 guns commanded by Monsieur de-la-Chaise and the '*Sulphide*' frigate of 36 guns.

The Court of Directors of the Honourable East India Company had a reward scheme for crews who defended their valuable cargoes. They issued £2000 to each of the ships' crews, to be divided amongst the officers and crew in proportion to their holdings in the company and their wages. Wilson, as Captain and largest stockholder, was entitled to the largest share; however, he believed this to be unjust and donated his share to the officers of the '*Suffolk*'. He and fellow Captains, William Hutchinson and Richard Walpole were given 100 guineas each for a piece of silver plate. Wilson stipulated in his will that his silver plate should be passed down to the eldest surviving daughter in his family.

This sea battle took place during the Seven Years War, when Britain was led by the Earl of Chatham, better known as William Pitt the Elder. Pitt, the greatest promulgator of all English things, especially those that proved to be better than the enemy France. However, unless you knew the battle occurred, you would not be aware that it took place as this is not recorded in any official documents. The battle is recorded in the log of the voyages of the '*Suffolk*' between October 1755 and September 1757. It is also mentioned in *The East Indiamen* by Sir Evan Cotton, which quotes directly from the previously mentioned log of the

'Suffolk' showing Wilson's own record of the battle and the positions of the vessels by the hour during the battle.³ The third is an article written by T.Pape to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the battle; however, the article was not published until 1969 in the 'Navy' magazine.⁴

The importance of this battle can now be brought to the attention of all; the Court of Directors of the Honourable East India Company had begun in 1755 discussing the employment of larger and more heavily armed ships. This action off the Cape of Good Hope expedited the need to do just this, especially at this time of war with France. The company began with the newly 'taken' French ship, the '*Pondicherry*', it was re-fitted as a 50 gun East Indiaman. This ship was 600 tons, a break with the tradition of the East India Company; it was maritime law that any vessel exceeding 500 tons had to carry a minister of the church: Priest, Vicar or Pastor, each choice was fraught with religious complications. But of greater importance to the Company was, that he would have to be paid, berthed and permitted 'private trade' according to his stock holdings. Prior to this action, the vast majority of East Indiamen had been 499 tons in weight and though sparsely gunned, most were proficient at using their armaments. Following the introduction of the '*Pondicherry*', most merchant shipping tonnage increased incrementally year on year. The next break with East India Company tradition was the fact that this vessel, in addition to the 'usual' employment of an 'Indiaman', was to be used for exploration as its Captain was given special dispensation to 'proceed as he saw fit'.

It was this dispensation which seduced William Wilson to continue as a servant of the Honourable East India Company, despite his promise to his wife, as mentioned in the letter quoted earlier in this article: 'The Riches of India shall not tempt me from you again' and the promotion to Commodore of all East India vessels and Commander of all marines. He was the first to hold this post since the very first expedition led by the 'merchant warrior', Sir James Lancaster in 1601. The other two Captains, Richard Walpole and William Hutchinson took other paths; Walpole retired from the sea and became a Member of Parliament and eventually a Baronet. Hutchinson, however, amassed a fortune and in 1773, is thought to have taken a position as Dock Master at Liverpool⁵.

The '*Pondicherry*' was renamed the '*Pitt*' by Wilson and in November 1757, he oversaw the refit of the ship and sailed from Spithead on 6th March 1758. This voyage would become 'a turning point in East India Navigation.' R.P.Crowhurst

³ Sir Even Cotton *East Indiamen* (1949) p152-155.

⁴ Commodore William Wilson of the English East India Company North Yorkshire Archives CRONT 147

⁵ George McGilvary: *East India Patronage and the British State: The Scottish Elite and Politics* pg.116.

in the Mariner's Mirror ⁶ argues that the details of this voyage 'did not reach the general public or the government.....because information concerning the voyage was like to be of interest only to members of the East India Company.'⁷ Throughout 1757, Wilson held correspondence with his ex-first mate from the 'Suffolk', William James, now Commander of the Bombay Marine and Captain of the 'Protector.' James would become famous for the taking of Severndroog; he would also become Chairman of the Court of Directors of the Honourable East India Company. Wilson and James discussed the possibility of a new route to China, one which could be used all year round, in all weathers and that would be unknown to the French. These objectives were all completed in full; Wilson and the 'Pitt' sailed from England to India and on to China, leaving Spithead in March 1758 before returning to London in April 1760.

The following passage is taken from the London Evening Gazette, published on 26th April 1760, which is the sum total of public notices.

*'The Pitt, Wilson, armed ship, in the India Company's service, of 50 guns, and the Warren Indiaman, are arrived at their moorings in the river, from China, last from Portsmouth. The arrival of the Pitt was six months earlier than expected, the commander having conducted her there and back, by the Eastern Passage of the India Ocean, through straits among the Spice Islands which, not being particularised by name in the charts, were denominated Pitt's Straits, in honour of the great minister from whom the ship was called. From hence by New Guinea and the Phillipine [sic] islands to Canton.'*⁸

There are records within the archives of the Honourable East India Company held at the British Library, which were not public knowledge until the company ceased trading. Once more, the details did not reach the public or the government as the information was only of interest to the company. The Court of Directors of the Honourable East India Company awarded a gold medal to William Wilson, a bronze copy of which can be viewed at the National Maritime Museum, in Greenwich. The log of the 'Pitt' is available at the British Library, Asia Collection, ref. L/MAR/B/525A. This document is heavily quoted in both the Crowhurst and the Pape articles; however, little contemporary coverage is available.

Ralph Jackson in his journal records the achievement, as followed: 'April 1760, Tuesday the first, I walked upstreet, and got a Lett: from Bro: Geo: with advice

⁶ R.P.Crowhurst: The voyage of the Pitt – A Turning Point in East India Navigation, The Mariner's Mirror Vol.55 no1. Jan. 1969.pg43-56.

⁷ Ibid pg43.

⁸ The Annual Register, or a View of the History, Politicks, and Literature, of the Year 1760, London R and J Dodsley in Pall Mall, 1761.

of the *Pitt*- my Bro: Wilson's safe Arrival at Portsmo having being only 3 mos in Compa wth the Warwick from China to Kinsale, the quickest Passage ever before known, he sailed from England in February 1758, I wrote several letters.'⁹ Later in the same month, Jackson was in London as his journal records: 'Sunday the twentieth, my Brothers Jackson, Wilson, Messers Hick & Bensley & and myself walked down to Woolwich, @ there on-board the *Pitt* my Bro. Wilson's vessel, we returned to dinner, Doctor Linn of Portsmouth dined with my Bro. Wilson, after he was gone, we walked into Greenwich Park - & laid at Greenwich.'¹⁰ This account showed a group of family and friends sharing in the afterglow of William Wilson's monumental achievement; following his previous voyage in the '*Suffolk*', shipping grew ever larger, as this voyage of exploration changed navigational experiences and expectations.

The Doctor Linn of Portsmouth, was in fact Doctor Lind of Portsmouth, who had published '*A Treatise on Scurvy*' in 1753. In this treatise, he advocates the consumption of citrus fruits for the prevention of scurvy; both Pape and Crowhirst cite from Wilson's log of how he called into port to obtain Limes for 'his people suffering with scurvy' and as Pape points out, this is some twenty years before Captain Cook was honoured with the Copley medal by the Royal Society for his work on scurvy.

This voyage of the '*Pitt*' also inspired a new intense interest in the East Indies, the spice trade and a free trade port. One of the new breed of explorers was Alexander Dalrymple, he had joined the East India Company as a writer in 1752 and was posted to India on 26th December 1752 to board the '*Suffolk*', captained by William Wilson. The then 16-year-old Dalrymple impressed Wilson so greatly that he became the young man's mentor and gave him lodgings in his own house in India. Dalrymple would always visit Wilson at Ayton Hall whenever he journeyed from his home in London to his family home in Scotland. Ralph Jackson's diary for 1765 states: 'Thursday 12th September 1765. While we were breakfasting at Ayton, Mr Dalrymple, an acquaintance of Bro. Wilson in the East India came, we all rode over Great Busby Estate, but cou'd not meet with a hare.'

The following day, Jackson wrote: 'Friday the Thirteenth, after breakfasting at Ayton, my Brothers Jackson & Wilson & Mess. Allen & Dalrymple, with myself rode over Barnaby Moor, by Nordale Beck, & came into Gisbro' by Northoutgate to dinner, we found the ladys from Ayton,' and then later in October, Sunday the Twentyeth, 'Bro' Wilson & Mr Dalrymple (who has called at Ayton for a few days from on his rode from Scotland to London) came before dinner.'¹¹ These diary entries are evidence of Dalrymple and Wilson's close friendship, which would continue until Wilson's death in 1795.

⁹ Ralph Jackson Diaries as before described.

¹⁰ Ralph Jackson Diaries as before described.

¹¹ Ralph Jackson Diaries as before described.

William James, Wilson's old friend, who was now Chairman of the Board of Directors of the East India Company, would use his influence to get George, Wilson's eldest son, a post as a writer (the lowest of four administration posts) in India. Dalrymple would supply George Wilson with letters of introduction to the Governor Madras. George would become paymaster and quartermaster to Cornwallis during the Mysore wars; Cornwallis also visited Ayton Hall and went hunting with Wilson and Ralph Jackson. In 1783, Cornwallis received secret instructions from the Court of Directors of the East India Company to investigate the 'Pitt' straits for a location to develop a 'free trade port', the idea which eventually gave birth to Singapore.¹²

Ayton Hall was intended to be the retirement home of Wilson, who can with all humility be called a master mariner; however, in a diary entry dated 15th September 1764, Ralph Jackson introduces a new string to William Wilson's bow: 'I to Ayton where I found Collo. Hale attending my Bro. Wilson's drill plow (*sic*) w.ch was at work sowing Wheat, this is the first of its being used & is his own invention, after dinner I rode to Stokesley.'

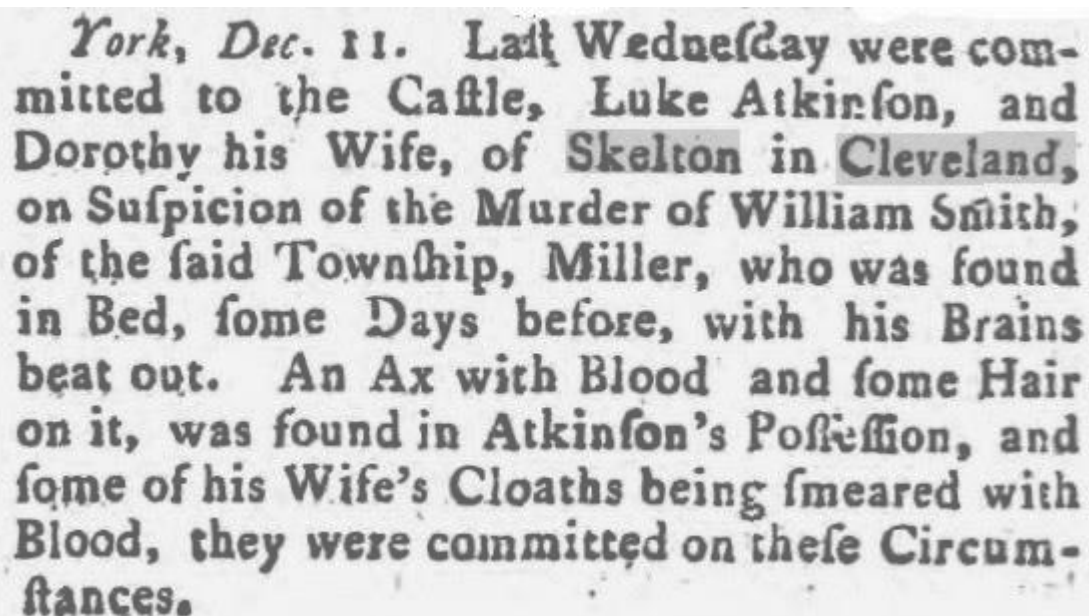
Wilson's invention of a 'drill plow' and other innovations attracted the attention of Arthur Young, who was famous for his agricultural journeys throughout Britain and Europe; he had a following of 18th century notaries including Catherine the Great, Marquise de Laffeyete, George Washington and George III. Young specialised in seeking out the new in the agricultural revolution that was changing farming from the self-sufficient manor house system to capitalist farming methods, which would in time, end famine in Europe. In 1769, Young spent six months on a tour in the North of England; during this tour, he called upon William Wilson at Ayton Hall. In one of his books, he wrote: 'At Ayton, I stopped to view the experimental agriculture of Mr. Wilson: It consists chiefly of trials of the drill husbandry.'¹³ Young continues with a detailed technical description of the Wilson seed drill and how it worked. On page 95 of this book, Young wrote: 'Mr Wilson has likewise a levelling machine, which deserves to be generally known.' This levelling machine is to the uneducated eye, a horse drawn bulldozer and it was to Young, who was an expert in this field, something new. On the following page, Young details Wilson's method for industrially growing Cabbages. Wilson had set upon a new ocean of exploration, agriculture. He was not the only East India Captain to be involved with agricultural innovation; Robert Walpole's relative and cabinet member,

¹² Andrew Griffin: London, Bengal, The China Trade and The Unfrequented Extremities of Asia: The East India Company's Settlement in New Guinea, 1793-95. Pg 163. L/P&S/I/9, f.145. (Secret Committee minutes)

¹³ Arthur Young: A Six Month Tour Through the North of England: Containing an Account of the Present State of Agriculture Manufactures and Population. W. Strahan, W. Nicol, T. Cadell at Edinburgh 1771 B. Collins at Salisbury and J. Balfour.

Viscount Townshend (better known as 'Turnip Townshend'), died at sea as Captain of his ship.

Ralph Jackson wrote in October 1769 about the following: 'Bro. Wilson & I mean to Qualify to Act as Justices of the Peace next Tuesday, Mr. Smith & my Servant Geo. are our Witnesses of our Comunicating,'¹⁴ They did so, as shown in a later entry of Jackson's diary, which stated: 'Tuesday the Third: after breakfast my Bro. Wilson, Mr. Mauleverer & myself went to Thirsk to attend the Quarter Sessions held there; the Justices that Qualified under the new Comission were my Bro. Wilson, Messrs. Thos Dundas, Wm. Chaloner, Wm. Marwood, & myself'.¹⁵ Wilson and Jackson began their new career on this day. In the 18th century, a Justice of the Peace or Magistrate was, in essence, the law in the local area. Sometimes called 'thief-takers', Magistrates enforced all aspects of law; Ralph Jackson would record many of the cases that he and Wilson were involved in, which were many and varied. No reference can be found in any letter of William Wilson's covering this aspect of his life; however, as a ship's Captain, he had been accustomed to taking charge and ruling on law. It was the Captains of merchant ships that took law, and in particular Common Law to India and other areas under the control of the East India Company. In Ralph Jackson's journal covering the years 1770 to 1774, he documents the actions of the two brother-in-laws from the issuing of licences to alehouses, overseeing the surveying of new turnpikes to murder most foul.



York, Dec. 11. Last Wednesday were committed to the Castle, Luke Atkinson, and Dorothy his Wife, of Skelton in Cleveland, on Suspicion of the Murder of William Smith, of the said Township, Miller, who was found in Bed, some Days before, with his Brains beat out. An Ax with Blood and some Hair on it, was found in Atkinson's Possession, and some of his Wife's Cloaths being smeared with Blood, they were committed on these Circumstances.

An extract of 'Murder Most Foul'

¹⁴ Ralph Jackson Diaries as before described.

¹⁵ Ralph Jackson Diaries as before described.

On 18th March 1771, Luke Atkinson of Skelton, was convicted of the murder of William Smith at York assizes. He was executed at the York Tyburn without Micklegate Bar and his body sent to the hospital for dissection.¹⁶ This enticing glimpse through one of history's portholes has enabled an observation into a murder which William Wilson and Ralph Jackson officiated. Jackson recorded the details of this case in a diary entry dated November 1770 and he also attended the hanging of Atkinson in York the following year.

William Wilson's correspondence consisted mainly of family mail, updating family members of news on each other; however, contained in these letters, is another form of life in the 18th century. His letters can be read as a manual on social life and how to make progress in status and standing. In a letter dated 11th May 1784, (to his son, George, who was working in India for the Honourable East India Company at this time) Wilson wrote: 'It gives me pleasure to hear of Mr Russel's civility to you, he is certainly a very respectable man. I hope the letter of recommendation from Admiral Hugh's will be of service to you.... Mr. Alexander Dalrymple, who was a very confidential friend of Lord Pigots,....is also on a very friendly footing with Mr. Russel. It would not be amiss if you was sometimes to intimate the friendship which subsists between your Father and Mr. Dalrymple whom you may remember to have seen at Ayton.' A better example than these letters of 18th century social etiquette would be hard to find, this is networking at its finest.

William Wilson played host to one more esteemed guest, Captain James Cook; Ralph Jackson recorded the visit: 'Thursday the Twenty Sixth; (December 1771) spent all day at Ayton; this afternoon came Capt. Jas. Cook (& his Wife) whose father lives in that town, this Gentleman lately Commanded the King's Bark, the Endeavour on her voyage round the World & made many discoveries in the South Seas & in Southern Latitudes.'¹⁷

Alexander Dalrymple, Wilson's old friend had been the original first choice to lead this expedition; Dalrymple's appetite for exploration has been accredited to Wilson in the '*Pitt*'. Professor H.T. Fry has claimed that had the voyage of the '*Pitt*' not happened, then Cook would not have found the East Coast of Australia. Fry claimed the heightened interest in the East Indies nurtured by Wilson's '*Pitt*' voyage created a greater interest in the area of Australia. Captain James Cook was awarded the Copley medal for his work on 'scurvy', many of Cook's practises were those espoused by Dr Lind in his 1753 '*Treatise of the Scurvy*'; as he was a friend of William Wilson, Lind joined him on board the '*Pitt*' in 1760. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Wilson and Cook became firm friends and continued a correspondence until Cook's death.

¹⁶<http://homepage.ntlworld.com/bandl.danby/Skelton.ack.html>

¹⁷ Ralph Jackson Diaries Book O pg 35 as before described.

A review of the achievements, the acquaintances and the strategic importance of Wilson's life and work makes it difficult to understand why so little has been written and reported about him. The voyage of the '*Pitt*' was clouded in secrecy because the '*Pitt*' straits gave the East India Company vessels a safe route to China in the middle of the Seven Years War and when the war was over, Wilson had retired to North Yorkshire for a life as a husband and father. He assimilated into the life of country squire, content in his family life and in his role of magistrate and farmer.

It would appear Wilson died at the age of 80 due to some mishap, possibly falling from his horse. As recorded in the North Riding of Yorkshire Quarter Sessions Q.S. B.1795 4/16, which states: 'Michaelmas Quarter Sessions Coroner's records, William Wilson held at Ayton 19th June, verdict: accidental.' A marble memorial stone was erected by his family in All Saint's Church, Ayton; it has a carving of a ship, most probably the '*Pitt*' or possibly the '*Suffolk*'. There is a pillar at the base of which carries a blank circular disc, which may have held a copy of Wilson's gold medal; at the bottom of the memorial, there is a frieze of the sea battle between the '*Suffolk*', '*Houghton*' and '*Godolphin*' against the '*Compte de Provonce*' and the '*Sylphide*'. It is substantial, elegant and a fitting reminder of one of England's unsung heroes.