



A personal selection of local, British Isles and world, history.

EDITOR: Mark Brandon

WEBPAGE: [jot-and-tittle.com](http://jot-and-tittle.com) EMAIL: [jandthistory@gmail.com](mailto:jandthistory@gmail.com)

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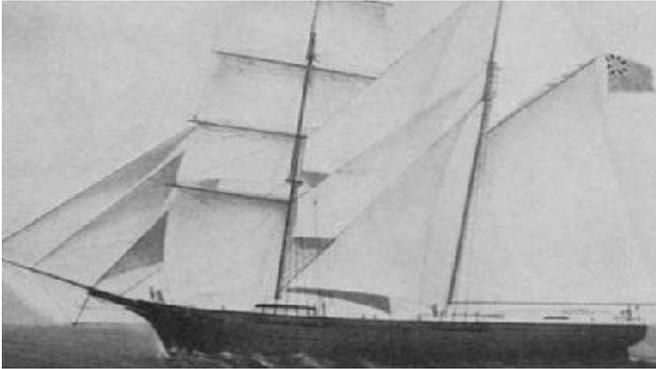
The brigantine *Mary Celeste* off Marseilles, painted in 1861 when named *Amazon*. In the Public Domain.

## THE MARY CELESTE<sup>1</sup>

Note the spelling. It is commonly written *Marie Celeste* after an 1884 short story by Conan Doyle.

The brigantine *Dei Gratia* had reached a position of 38°20'N 17°15'W, midway between the Azores and the coast of Portugal at about 1 p.m. on Wednesday, December 4, 1872, land time. Captain Morehouse came on deck, and the helmsman reported a vessel heading unsteadily towards *Dei Gratia* at a distance of about six miles. The ship's erratic movements and the odd set of her sails led Morehouse to suspect that something was wrong. As the vessel drew close, he could see nobody on deck, and he received no reply to his signals, so he sent Deveau and second mate John Wright in a ship's boat to investigate. The pair established that this was the *Mary Celeste* by the name on her stern; they then climbed aboard and found the ship deserted. The sails were partly set and in a poor condition, some missing altogether, and much of the rigging was damaged, with ropes hanging loosely over the sides. The main hatch cover was secure, but the fore and lazarette hatches were open, their covers beside them on the deck. The ship's single

lifeboat was a small yawl that had apparently been stowed across the main hatch, but it was missing, while the binnacle housing the ship's compass had shifted from its place and its glass cover was broken. There was about three and a half feet of water in the hold, a significant but not alarming amount for a ship of this size. A makeshift sounding rod (a device for measuring the amount of water in the hold) was found abandoned on the deck.



They found the ship's daily log in the mate's cabin, and its final entry was dated at 8 a.m. on November 25, nine days earlier. It recorded *Mary Celeste's* position then as 37°1'N 25°1'W off Santa Maria Island in the Azores nearly 400 nautical miles from the point where *Dei Gratia* (left<sup>2</sup>) encountered her. Deveau saw that the cabin interiors were wet and untidy from water that had entered

through doorways and skylights, but were otherwise in reasonable order. He found personal items scattered about Briggs' cabin, including a sheathed sword under the bed, but most of the ship's papers were missing along with the captain's navigational instruments. Galley equipment was neatly stowed away; there was no food prepared or under preparation, but there were ample provisions in the stores. There were no obvious signs of fire or violence; the evidence indicated an orderly departure from the ship by means of the missing lifeboat.

Deveau returned to report these findings to Morehouse, who decided to bring the derelict into Gibraltar 600 nautical miles away. Under maritime law, a salvor could expect a substantial share of the combined value of rescued vessel and cargo of industrial (denatured) alcohol, the exact award depending on the degree of danger inherent in the salvaging. Morehouse divided *Dei Gratia's* crew of eight between the two vessels, sending Deveau and two experienced seamen to *Mary Celeste* while he and four others remained on *Dei Gratia*. The weather was relatively calm for most of the way to Gibraltar, but each ship was seriously under-crewed and progress was slow. *Dei Gratia* reached Gibraltar on December 12; *Mary Celeste* had encountered fog and arrived on the following morning. She was immediately impounded by the vice admiralty court to prepare for salvage hearings. Deveau wrote to his wife that the ordeal of bringing the ship in was such that 'I can hardly tell what I am made of, but I do not care so long as I got in safe. I shall be well paid for the *Mary Celeste*.'

The salvage court hearings began in Gibraltar on December 17, 1872, under Sir James Cochrane, the chief justice of Gibraltar. The hearing was conducted by Frederick Solly-Flood, Attorney General of Gibraltar, who was also Advocate-General and Proctor for the Queen in Her Office of Admiralty. Flood was described by a historian of the *Mary Celeste* affair as a man "whose arrogance and pomposity were inversely proportional to his IQ", and as "... the sort of man who, once he had made up his mind about something, couldn't be shifted". The testimonies of Deveau and Wright convinced Flood unalterably that a crime had been committed, a belief picked up by the New York Shipping and Commercial List on December 21: "The inference is that there has been foul play somewhere, and that alcohol is at the bottom of it." Right, Captain Benjamin Briggs, his wife Sarah and daughter<sup>4</sup>.

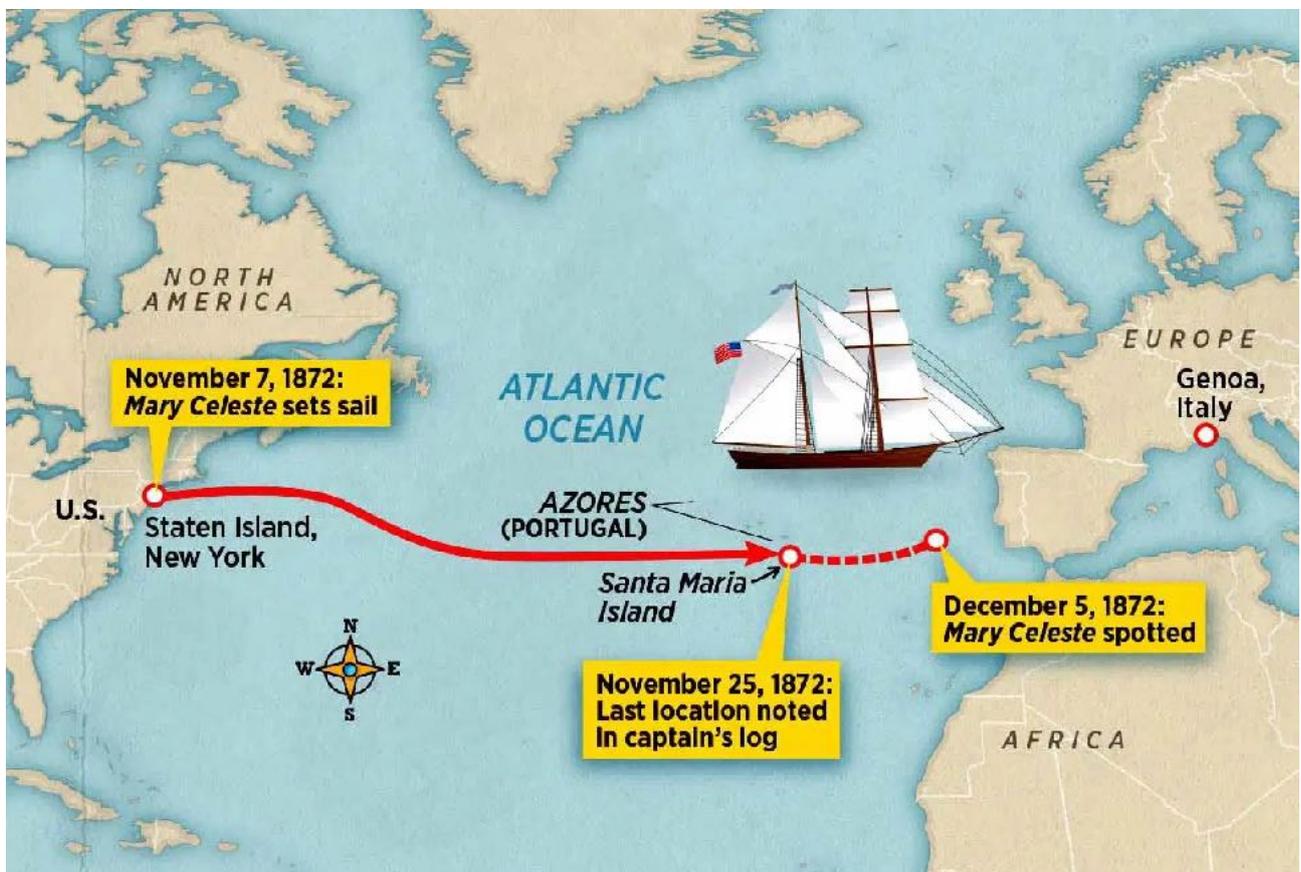
On December 23, Flood ordered an examination of *Mary Celeste*, which was carried out by John



Austin, Surveyor of Shipping, with the assistance of a diver, Ricardo Portunato. Austin noted cuts on each side of the bow, caused, he thought, by a sharp instrument, and found possible traces of blood on the captain's sword. His report emphasised that the ship did not appear to have been struck by heavy weather, citing a vial of sewing machine oil found upright in its place. Austin did not acknowledge that the vial might have been replaced since the abandonment, nor did the court raise this point. Portunato's report on the hull concluded that the ship had not been involved in a collision or run aground. A further inspection by a group of Royal Naval captains endorsed Austin's opinion that the cuts on the bow had been caused deliberately. They also discovered stains on one of the ship's rails that might have been blood, together with a deep mark possibly caused by an axe.

These findings strengthened Flood's suspicions that human wrongdoing rather than natural disaster lay behind the mystery. On January 22, 1873, he sent the reports to the Board of Trade in London, adding his own conclusion that the crew had got at the cargo of alcohol and murdered the Briggs family and the ship's officers in a drunken frenzy. They had cut the bows to simulate a collision, then fled in the yawl to suffer an unknown fate. Flood thought that Morehouse and his men were hiding something, specifically that *Mary Celeste* had been abandoned in a more easterly location, and that the log had been He could not accept that *Mary Celeste* could have traveled so far while uncrewed (map below<sup>3</sup>).

James Winchester arrived in Gibraltar on January 15, to enquire when *Mary Celeste* might be



released to deliver her cargo. Flood demanded a surety of \$15,000, money Winchester did not have. Winchester became aware that Flood thought Winchester might have deliberately engaged a crew that would kill Briggs and his officers as part of some conspiracy. On January 29, during a series of sharp exchanges with Flood, Winchester testified to Briggs's high character, and insisted that Briggs would not have abandoned the ship except in extremity. Flood's theories of mutiny and murder received significant setbacks when scientific analysis of the stains found on the sword and

elsewhere on the ship showed that they were not blood. A second blow to Flood followed in a report commissioned by Horatio Sprague, the American consul in Gibraltar, from Captain Shufeldt of the US Navy. In Shufeldt's view, the marks on the bow were not man-made, but came from the natural actions of the sea on the ship's timbers.

With nothing concrete to support his suspicions, Flood reluctantly released Mary Celeste from the court's jurisdiction on February 25. Two weeks later, with a locally raised crew headed by Captain George Blatchford from Massachusetts, she left Gibraltar for Genoa. The question of the salvage payment was decided on April 8, when Cochrane announced the award: £1,700, or about one-fifth of the total value of ship and cargo. This was far lower than the general expectation— one authority thought that the award should have been twice or even three times that amount, given the level of hazard in bringing the derelict into port. Cochrane's final words were harshly critical of Morehouse for his decision, earlier in the hearing, to send *Dei Gratia* under Deveau to deliver her cargo of petroleum— although Morehouse had remained in Gibraltar at the disposal of the court. Cochrane's tone carried an implication of wrongdoing, which, says Hicks, ensured that Morehouse and his crew "...would be under suspicion in the court of public opinion forever."

The evidence in Gibraltar failed to support Flood's theories of murder and conspiracy, yet suspicion of foul play lingered. Needless to say, theories have abounded ever since and vary from insurance fraud through giant squid to alien space craft.

#### NEW YEAR POLEMIC

I received for Christmas *The Blazing World* by Jonathan Healey (Bloomsbury 2024); Geoffrey Robertson KC comments: *The Blazing World tells the story of that crucible era when Englishmen began to think. About God and government, how to limit the monarchy and how 'the poorest he' (if not the poorest she) might share in some kind of democracy.*

There are many ways in which the beginning of that period of history, mirrors our own - increased population but economy not keeping up, poverty and unemployment, rocketing rents and falling birthrate, war in Europe and religious divisions - but as this is the New Year, perhaps we too ought to think about what sort of democracy we really want. After all, if the British can't successfully come up with the ideas to tweak democracy, who can? The big difference with the 17<sup>th</sup> century is that women now have the vote so there are double the number of minds to apply to the problem.

The period portrayed, encompasses the career of Edward Coke (1552 - 1634), pronounced *cook* (right<sup>5</sup>), Attorney General and one of the greatest legal minds in History whose enactments still affect the working of the Law today. It was he, when faced with the autocratic Charles I, dug *Magna Carta* out of the archives and used it to prove that the king was not above the law. This work was taken to heart by the colonists in the US when framing their constitution.

After the horrors of the Civil War and the difficulties of dealing with Stuart monarchs, Parliament took control



(along with General Monck) and invited William and Mary to take over the throne but on Parliament's terms. This *Glorious Revolution* showed that major change could be made without bloodshed; alas a concept not taken up by the French.

Jonathan Healey writes: *We too are living through our own historical moment in which a media revolution, social fracturing and culture wars are redefining society and politics, creating issues that, dare we say it, not every leader has proved entirely adept at navigating. Comparisons between our own society and those that came before are often rather excitable and over-blown, but it does seem worth thinking about what can happen when social change, cultural conflict and political mistakes combine. The answers are not always comforting, but neither are they uniformly negative. Crises can be creative as well as injurious.*

So, get your blue-sky thinking caps on. Democracy wasn't perfect even in ancient Athens. A slave

economy gave the men time for thought but a largely uneducated electorate (the demos) led to demagogues appealing to their baser emotions (thoughts of Trump cross my mind). A voting *ostrakon* shown above<sup>6</sup>: when a citizen gained great political power and became dangerous for



the functioning of the state itself, there was the penalty of *ostracism* which meant 10 years of exile (more thoughts of Trump).

Perhaps our biggest stumbling block is our adversarial system in which whoever gets elected, a large proportion of the country are ideologically opposed to them. So *imagine if you will* a cooperative system where all parties are banned and we just vote for who best represents the wishes of our constituency. Then when a subject came up for discussion in parliament, instead of whips forcing MPs to vote against their conscience, the MPs can form groupings of like-minded parliamentary colleagues to argue their case. A different subject would result in a different grouping. I am sure you get the idea - now it's your turn.

#### REALLY IMPORTANT INFORMATION<sup>7</sup>



**D**id you know that Isaac Newton invented the cat-flap? Newton (1642 - 1727) is said to have devised it so his cats could enter his study without spoiling his optical experiments. Max Born, Nobel Prize winner and the man who coined the term *quantum mechanics*, was the grandfather of Olivia Newton-John. The only world heavyweight boxing champion to have lectured on Shakespeare at Yale University was Gene Tunney (right<sup>8</sup>). His gloves now belong to the Smithsonian. At the battle of Nicopolis in 1396, French Crusaders hacked off the tips of their shoes so they could run away. The world's first traffic lights were gas-powered and were erected in Parliament Square in 1868 to make it easier for MPs to reach the House of Commons. The following year they exploded, seriously injuring the police operative. The last words of HG Wells (1866 - 1946) were *Go away. I'm all right.*



1. Courtesy of Wikipedia.
2. Dei Gratia at Messina in 1873 from a painting by Giuseppe Coli, courtesy of Echo Live.ie.
3. Map courtesy of Quad City Daily News.
4. Wikimedia Commons.
5. 1615 portrait of Edward Coke, courtesy of Guildhall Art Gallery, in the Public Domain.
6. In the Archaeological Museum of the Athenian Agora shown in Patterns of Evidence.
7. Taken from *Mr Hartston's Most Excellent Encyclopedia of Useless Information* by William Hartston (Metro Publishing 2006).
8. Image from United States Library of Congress (Prints and Photographic Division).
9. Courtesy of Bradford-on-Avon Museum.

**E**ponyms are words derived from a person's name: *Leotard* was worn by James Leotard on the flying trapeze in Paris' Cirque Napoleon. *Bloomers* were advocated by 19<sup>th</sup> century social reformer Amelia Jenks Bloomer. *Boycott* from Captain Charles Boycott whose high rents so annoyed the Irish Land League that they would not speak to him. *Cardigan* from James Brudenell who led the Charge of the Light Brigade. *Derrick* from London hangman Goodman Derrick. *Shrapnel* after General Henry Shrapnel, inventor of the shell - and resident of The Close, Salisbury. Right, the gateway to Midway Manor, birthplace of Henry Shrapnel, displaying his invention<sup>9</sup>.