

What the 'Ink-slingers' told us

September 2025

The disbursement book of The *John Cobbold* was in the possession of **John Whitmore**, to whom the Trust is indebted for this story. It records faithfully in magnificent copperplate handwriting the costs of operating her over a 12-year period from 1847. The term 'ink-slinger' was adopted by **Joseph Conrad** to describe "those poor, miserable scribbling devils" he found in the poisonous air of stuffy London.

John Cobbold, a schooner, was built by **Wm. Bayley & Sons**, one of the four ship builders in **Ipswich** in 1847, **Wm. Jas. Handley** her commander, taking her on her maiden voyage to Jaffa on April 20th that year. It was usual then for vessels to have more than one owner and Wm. Bayley retained 40/64 shares, **John Cobbold (#77 on the web family tree)** 16/64 shares and **J. R. Sheppard** 8/64 shares. In her early days she sailed world-wide to places like Genoa, Mauritius, Jamaica, Malta, and Ceylon carrying a huge selection of cargoes which included sugar, rum, wheat, coal, bricks, deer horns, jute and on one occasion even windmills for Chile!

Although she started life as a **Schooner**, in 1851 a heavy shipyard cost recorded in the disbursements book tells of her conversion into a **Brig**, but one assumes this was not entirely satisfactory because only 4 years later she becomes a **Barque**. For this she is cut in two and a new centre section 26 feet in length is inserted amidships complete with an additional mast, spars and rigging at a cost of around £2000. Particularly to the layman, this appears to require shipwrights' skills of enormous proportions. They must have done a good job because on 1st March *John Cobbold* renders assistance to the barque *Derwent* during the great Atlantic storm of 1874.

The disbursements book's primary concern is with figures but almost inadvertently it tells us something of the crew's lives. Poor **George Spiers** died of some infectious disease and it cost the owners £1 8s 2d to bury him, but the book records (almost joyously) that he will require no further wages! In Burma, an expense was incurred for paying coolies to carry on board 290 tons of rice, for which they received £1 13s 0d. between them.

We know of *John Cobbold's* extraordinary transformation from Schooner to Brig, to Barque and that during those 27 years amongst the names of the commanders were **W. J. Handley**, **John Elwood**, **Sheppard Giles**, **W. Buck**, and **John T. Rendle**, but we know next to nothing about the brave seamen who manned her. They faced many life-threatening vicissitudes with their vessel and it is to them that our closing thoughts turn.

Anthony Cobbold