

**THE BRITISH  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
OF PORTUGAL**

TWENTY EIGHTH ANNUAL REPORT  
AND REVIEW 2001

Quinta Nova  
Carcavelos  
2777 PAREDE

**FROM FOO CHOW TO CASCAIS BAY  
AND  
A LADY OF THE ROSE**

**by Allen Gilham**

The story of a ship, once the racing pride of the China Tea Clippers of London whose remains now lie in Cascais Bay.

The Green Goddess of the Sea, the Clipper Ship *Thermopylae* of 1868 which, became between 1896 and the 6<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> of October 1907, the Royal Portuguese Navy Sail Training Ship *Pedro Nunes*.

Her story however starts, in 1868, well to the north of Cascais in the ship building yards of Walter Hood and Company of Aberdeen, Scotland. Here she was built to the designs of Bernard Waymouth, arguably the most famous designer ever of Tea Clippers, for George Thompson and Company of London and Aberdeen.

Now in case dear reader you are not familiar with the reasons that a ship to an Englishman is always "she", I will not bore you with all the complexities as to why this is so. My personal reason is quite simple. A racing Tea Clipper, the fastest sailing ship of her time, was always beautiful but sometimes temperamental so in my book always a lady, always a "she".

Well she slipped into the water, just like a lady and her maiden voyage gave just a few clues as to how exceptionally fast she was.

It will help you to know that the outbound voyage of Tea Clippers was not direct to China. Prevailing winds and the demands of trade took the Clippers first to Australia.

Under the command of Richard Kemball she broke the Britain to Australia record by three days on her maiden voyage. Remarkable enough for a tried and tested ship but quite amazing for a ship new to her crew and captain.

For the technically minded from leaving the Lizard on 8<sup>th</sup> November 1868 she took only 60 days to the sighting of Australia's Cap Otway on 7<sup>th</sup> January 1869. This equalled 63 days Gravesend to Hobson's Bay, Melbourne compared to the previous record of 63 days from Rock Light or 65 days from Liverpool by the *James Baines* in 1854-1855.

Northwards then to China in 31 days was again a new record, 10<sup>th</sup> February to 13<sup>th</sup> March 1869.

All of this presaged something quite amazing for her homebound run to London laden with the new seasons tea of 1869 but no one could have remotely thought how amazing it would be.

Prior to 1869 the tea trade know only of the great homebound races of 1868 when the Clippers *Ariel* and *Spindrift* had made London River in 97 days out of Foo Chow and 1866 when the Clippers *Ariel*, *Taeping* and *Serica* had made London in 99 days.

I guess Richard Kemball by then knew he had a ship of magic under his command.

*Thermopylae* took departure from Foo Chow on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1869, 25 days out she was off Anjer, 49 days out she was off Cape Agulhas, 89 days out she was off the Lizard and two

days later, 91 days out and a full **six days faster** than any previous voyage ever she docked in London.

Why the *Green Goddess*? Easy – her hull was painted green. Why the name *Thermopylae*? That I cannot say. It was perhaps because of a classical Greek education for a ship owner, perhaps a memorial to the Spartans who held the pass against Xerxes of Persia.

1869 was towards the end of the Tea Clipper trade for the Suez Canal cut off, to avoid the long haul of the China Clippers around the Cape of Good Hope and Africa, would soon destroy their reason to exist.

*Thermopylae* last raced home with the news seasons tea in 1881.

However all was not lost for like her half-sister *Cutty Sark*, *Thermopylae* now turned to the wool trade from Australia.

Here she was not the fastest however *Cutty Sark* averaged 73 and a quarter days Sydney to Start Point while for *Thermopylae* her fastest homeward run was 76 days.

Even the wool trade would not last and by 1890 at 22 years old she was becoming a tired ship and was sold.

Her new owners were the Mount Royal Milling and Manufacturing Company of Montreal Canada and she was destined for the Trans Pacific Timber and Rice Trade out of Vancouver British Columbia, Canada.

Cut down to a barque, that is a three masted ship, square rigged on the fore and main masts and fore and aft rigged on the mizzen she plied the Pacific for only four years.

The standard reference books about Clippers such as the "Final Clipper Ship Book" then almost invariably state something like:-

"In 1896 she was sold to the Portuguese Government for use as a training ship and was renamed *Pedro Nunes*. After eleven years she was towed out of the Tagus on 13<sup>th</sup> October 1907 and sunk by gunfire."

Now I am not a professional Naval Historian. I am simply an Englishman, married to a lovely lady from the Alentejo who spends his professional career as a Surveyor of Historic Buildings. I am however that quite curious breed of Englishman, the enthusiastic amateur and in my case the enthusiastic amateur naval and military historian.

To me sinking a worn-out tea clipper by gunfire was pretty unlikely. All right, navies do use old ships as targets but they tend to use old warships to see how effective their weapons are against armoured ships.

Then another chance reference to the *Pedro Nunes* that she was sunk in a torpedo exercise in the Bay of Cascais in 1907" seemed even more implausible. Torpedoes were very expensive new forms of Naval weaponry in 1907 and to me using one against an old timber ship was not very likely. Also, torpedoes are intended to be used against moving enemy ships, the other side tends not to stay still to let you throw anything at them and being on board a sailing ship while someone from your own side aims a torpedo at you is a bit too dangerous.

Here in 1997 curiosity, aided by Dr Faria the then newly appointed Portuguese Ambassador to London, took over.

A while later a pack of papers arrived including a very nice but grainy photograph of *Museu de Marinha Arquivo Fotografico Ficha No. 5034/440 – Navio Escola/Pedro Nunes (ex Thermopilae)*. Yes, that was indeed her still with her barque rig from Canadian service. Certainly the Royal Portuguese Navy Sail Training Ship and looking fairly well cared for. This is reproduced below.



No date was given for this photograph but patently from the background it was taken somewhere in the Tagus Estuary.

The second photograph, on the other hand, was quite incredible. *Museu de Marinha Arquivo Fotografico – Navio Escola Pedro Nunes (ex Thermopilae) – 1907*. A dismantled hulk shorn of her masts and part bowsprit patently sinking with what looks very much like a torpedo track heading towards the forecabin and seemingly on fire with smoke everywhere. This photograph is reproduced below.



The package of papers that accompanied the photographs was fascinating. Various newspaper cuttings which had been generated by a Canadian enquiry about *Thermopylae*.

One of these included the reference to the *pontão* (pontoon) *Pedro Nunes* being sunk by a torpedo. Various references to the fact that prior to this she had been used to store on board coal for the steam powered warships of this period and lots of references to the 13<sup>th</sup> October 1907 and “in Cascais Bay”.

Cascais Bay is a big place, so where? On the next page you will find an extract of the British Admiralty Chart of 1879 showing this part of the Tagus Estuary, as updated to 1915.

Then someone had included in the information pack along with all the extracts about Royal Portuguese Navy Torpedo Boats Number 2 and 3 having fired the two torpedoes that hit her, a plan of *Festival marítimo em 6 de outubro de*

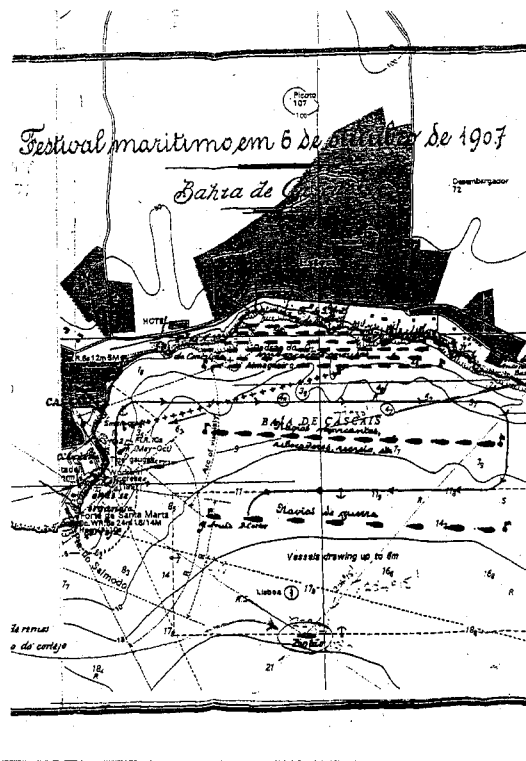
1907 – *Bahia de Cascais* with layouts of ships and right to the southward of everything *Pontão* alongside a ship outline.

There was also in the references to this Maritime Festival – *Parte Quarta – Explosão de minas – Torpedeamento de um pontão pelos torpedeiros*.

So she was sunk by two torpedoes and she was stationary being observed by among others King Carlos I and Queen Amélia of Portugal.

Following the Admiralty Chart extract of 1879 you will find a further page with an overlay of this plan on top of a current naval chart of Cascais Bay.





One of the newspaper extracts also spoke of the ships figurehead – *The Lady of the Rose* going down with *Thermopylae/Pedro Nunes* and a careful look through a magnifying glass of the second photograph above shows this to be true.

The story does not stop here for through the kindness of Ambassador Faria the Portuguese Navy did get an “ROV”, a remotely controlled unmanned mini-submarine with a TV camera on board down to one of the possible wreck locations.

Now I personally would echo the wishes of one of the authors of the newspaper cuttings:- *e um dia possamos ver exposta a carranca do Pedro Nunes, clipper famoso que um*

*dia se chamou Thermopylae* – “and one day to be able to see on exhibition the figure head of the famous clipper *Pedro Nunes* once upon a time known as the *Thermopylae*.”

It would be so nice to see the *Lady of the Rose* once again. It would be even nicer if the figurehead could be located in time to be raised and conserved and put on exhibition by the 6<sup>th</sup> of October 2007, the first of the two possible dates of her sinking. If you aimed for the second date, the 13<sup>th</sup> October 2007, you have another week to get it all ready.

One small point though, the conservation and stabilisation of waterlogged wood with the water content replaced with chemical stabilisers takes three to four years at least. So it really would need someone to aim to locate the *Lady of the Rose* by the summer of 2003 to be able to raise her in time to stabilise her and put her on exhibition by October 2007.

--ooOoo--

**Allen Gilham is a specialist surveyor of historic buildings and a town planner who works for Davis Langdon and Everest in London. He and his wife Maria Julia (originally of Portalegre Alentejo) are long time members of the Anglo-Portuguese Society of London and of the Corunna Society. He is also a lecturer at Greenwich University in London on heritage, museum arts and cultural tourism management masters degrees. He is quite a good amateur naval and military historian of matters Anglo Portuguese.**

**The two photographs from the Museu de Marinha Lisboa archives are reproduced with the kind permission of the Director Adriano Beça Gil, Captain P. O. Navy.**