

From the Kitchen

6 March 2013



An interesting discovery was made recently in an attic in a very old house in Guilford, England. It is a metal box, like a biscuit tin with a hinged lid, containing scores of small pieces of paper, each with a short message in tiny writing.

Research has indicated that they date from the early seventeen hundreds. The media has referred to them as ‘squawks’, a fanciful eighteenth century ‘equivalent’ of tweets. They are fascinating one-way communications from a merchant ship plying the spice routes. I have been able to obtain a copy of the complete collection and will share some with you here.

It appears that one of the trading ships was part of an experiment. It carried on board ‘homing’ birds – the species is not specified anywhere. It was apparently the brainchild of one Captain Runnian Quill. The house where the ‘squawks’ were discovered belongs to his descendants. Quill was eager to develop a method by which ships that were away for the best part of a year could get messages back to their owners. The medium he chose – a small metal tube tied to a bird’s leg – dictated the brevity of the messages: limited to around 144 letters, although they seem to have squeezed in more in many cases. He called them ‘gross miniatures’.

2 MAY. CANARIA ISLES. RAIN, SWELL 8 FT. SPAR CRACK. LAID UP. 3 MEN LOST 2 DAYS.
STORM. FRESH WATER DISTANT. DOGS NUISANCE. WIFE ILL. PREGNANT? GOAT PREGNANT. NO
MILK! BOSON IN BRIG. HIT MATE. CPT MP.

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17 MAY. PURSUED BY FRENCH. HID MINDELO. SPANISH HELPED. NEW GOAT. WIFE PREGNANT!
SUSPECT BOSON AND MATE. LEFT 3 ON MINDALO. PLEASE HAVE LAWYERS START DIVORCE.
GOOD RUN SOUTH. PROMOTED LT. MP.

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Some research has shown that the ship was probably the *Landmark* under a Captain Penrith, as this would explain his not claiming his wife’s pregnancy as his. A Mortimer Penrith had lost his testicles in a naval battle in 1702 and had left the navy to command a merchant ship. Records are scant and the *Landmark*’s log seems to have been lost, probably at sea. There is a record of a Penelope Penrith, wife of Mortimer Penrith, having been divorced by him for adultery. One wonders if she made any sort of life for herself on the mid-Atlantic island with either, or both, of her male companions.

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22 JUNE. RECIFE IN TURMOIL, TROUBLE WITH OLINDA FARMERS. TOOK ON 12 DUTCH WITH
SUGAR, COFFEE, TOBACCO, 5 SLAVES AND SUPPLIES. SOLD MUSKETS, NAILS, BEETS, WINE.
RELIEVED BACK AT SEA. MP

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17 JULY. REST AT CAPE. DUTCH LEFT SHIP. KEPT ONE WOMAN, MARRIED HER. HAS 2 SONS.
LOCALS SUSPICIOUS OF ENGLISH. D. E. I. CO. INSPECTED SHIP, IMPOUNDED TOBACCO.
SUGGEST SHIPS AVOID CAPE. MP.

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9 AUGUST. LANDED MAHENBERG. SHELTER FROM STORMS. LOCALS WILLING FOR BARREL
PORT. GOOD REPAIRS WITH MAHOGANY. BOUGHT MALAGASY SLAVES. DUTCH WIFE ILL.
INTEND TAKE HER BATAVIA WITH DUTCH SETTLERS. MP.
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We can assume from the welcome the ship received in Mauritius that this was before 1721, when the French seriously occupied the island. The Dutch settlers mentioned were probably ones left over from the earlier Dutch occupation and wanting to escape before French influence became uncomfortable for them.

The above was the last 'squawk' in the collection and we can only hope that they made it to Batavia, although there are no local records of the ship having made landfall there around that time. There are, however, Penriths in Kolam, southwest India, and they claim to be descended from a shipwrecked captain in the eighteenth century, so the squawking captain may have survived; or at least his two stepsons may have, to pass on his name if not his genes.