John Willis and the “Cutty Sark” Tea Clipper
By Walter V. Holden

Readers of this Family History Forum may remember seeing an article about an omission to the Eyemouth War Memorial and how the writer Joan McGiveron (née Spouse) was proposing to visit the unveiling of the correction in July 2008, some 90 years after her grandmother John Spouse had been Killed in Action at Arras on the 21st July 1918. Joan had researched her grandfather’s career, from when he was born in Eyemouth, to his death in World War 1.

The omission was spotted by Joan's cousin David Spouse of Duns. David, after consultation with Joan and with the assistance of the British Legion, made it his duty to correct this omission. Fortuitously, there was sufficient room on the memorial inscriptions. Joan made the journey from Vancouver to Eyemouth to honour her grandfather’s name with the help of friends, relations and the British Legion, she fulfilled her duty on that July date. The unveiling ceremony was reported in the Berwick Advertiser at the time.

Joan McGiveron is a keen family historian and without a doubt her expertise helped her fulfil her promise to the grandfather she never knew. However behind her fulfilment, she unearthed a more unique piece of maritime history when a query arrived from a descendant of John Willis Sr. of Eyemouth, asking Joan if there was a family connection. This story deserves to be recorded on the Burnmouth Community family history forum.

Joan’s Great Great Great Grandparents were William Willis and Mary Maltman both of Eyemouth. William was born in Eyemouth on 25Jan1794, the second son of George Willis and Isobel Patterson. William married Mary on 14May1814. Both those family names are well known in Eyemouth and there have been Willis or Whillis families in Burnmouth. A quick look at the present local telephone directory will show that they still exist in Eyemouth today. William had an older brother John born on 23Oct1791 and it transpired that this brother ran away from home when just 14 years old after a violent disagreement with a relative. John went South and it seems he found work on coastal sailing boats, before eventually finding seafaring experience on ships sailing from London. From a voyage on one of these ships which berthed in the then New India Dock, John found other employment in a pub frequented by captains and crews and became the pub assistant at times and accumulated a considerable amount of pocket money.

John obviously had good money sense, was thrifty and “invested” some of his savings in fiddle strings, because he found that returning seafarers were always in need of repairing their ‘sea shanty’ musical instruments. He accumulated worthy profits. The sea called him back and eventually he became a second mate and eventually chief mate on one of the West Indiamen sailing ships. The experience he was gaining in sail ships was of great importance to him. In a book entitled the “Great Days of Sail” one of his grandchildren told the writer of another story about his
grandfather, which describes how on a voyage up The Channel the ship he was serving in, ran aground in bad weather. The captain and crew went ashore, but his grandfather stayed on board to prevent plundering. As a reward for this praiseworthy act, the owners gave him command and invested in the ship money given by the underwriters. His accumulated savings and the knowledge he had gained of trade by sailing ships made John determined to have ships of his own and it was not long before he decided to have his own ship built to his particular and very exacting specifications.

Whatever happened in Eyemouth when John was a young lad apparently was forgiven or forgotten for he returned to court Janet Dunbar, an Eyemouth lassie. They were married in London on 23 July 1815. While John was at sea Janet lived in Eyemouth and over the course of the next nine years four sons were born. By 1826 the family had settled in London and it was there where five more children were born - two sons and three daughters.

The eldest son was “Young John”. So, with sons he had groomed for the sea, it was inevitable that he should form his own company known as John Willis and Sons of London. He gradually increased his fleet of ships and gave them Berwickshire names such as Lammermuir, Whiteadder, Blackadder and of course The Tweed. With the overwhelming need for shipping trade with Australia, the Far East and China, especially the China tea trade, John Willis senior saw where his calling was taking him and he became known as “Stormalong” John. During his active sea going days he lived near Wapping in London, which was convenient for him because he invariably wanted to be present when his ships docked. Having given his sons all his good seafaring experience he died in 1862, leaving a long detailed Will which has helped later family historians with this account of his life. His principal executor and trustee was his son John, for whom more can be revealed. In his Will dated 30th. June 1862 he signs as John Willis and this appears to confirm the story handed down that his John persuaded his father to change the spelling of their surname from WHILLIS to WILLIS - presumably making the name more recognisable in business circles. Apparently, the words ”Where there's a Will is a Way” was adopted as a motto and the same words were painted on the stern of WILLIS ships.

John junior, or as he became known, John “Jock” Whitehat Willis saw the need for fast sailing ships if he was to capture the honour of being the first Tea Clipper home with the season’s crops from China. He knew the shortcomings in his magnificent ship The Tweed, so with the right help and advice from Dunbarton shipbuilders of the Clyde, he commissioned the building of the sailing barque he was to call the “Cutty Sark”.

Any reader of this article who has any sea in his or her blood will know the evocative emotions that the name Cutty Sark creates. But how many know that it was one of Eyemouth’s men who ran away from home, under a dark cloud, who brought up a family who were involved with that famous name now immortalised in British sea faring history? She was the pride of the Tea Clipper fleet and in later years transported wool and metal ores from Australia. The picture shown here was taken about 1886 and shows her under full sail. She ended her sailing days under the
Portuguese flag and renamed “Ferreira” but her crewmen fondly called her “Pequina Camisola” (small chemise) thus maintaining her connection with poems of Robbie Burns. She was bought again by a British captain, but in 1954 eventually placed in a dry dock in Greenwich as a maritime historical monument. Some two years ago, during a period of refurbishment, workers left an industrial vacuum cleaner switched on and the historic ship caught fire. A Trust Fund was set up to recover the Cutty Sark to its former glory and it is expected to be open to the public again later in 2009.

But for Joan McGiveron’s laudable quest to learn more about her Eyemouth family, the above story relating to her ancestry and the connection to the Cutty Sark, might never have been discovered. Notwithstanding that however, it is still worthy of inclusion on the Burnmouth family history Forum, because she would like to know if the Willis families of Burnmouth were in any way connected with those of Eyemouth. Both are nearby communities linked by the sea and many of their young men and lassies have sought their respective spouses from “Heymooth” or “Burnmooth” because of their nearness. Any reader of this article who might know of the family connections, is invited to get in touch with the editor of the Forum.

"Where there's a Will is a Way"