

Surprising seafarers...

ADMIRALTY OF ENGLAND
SESSIONS 1829
12TH JANUARY
6TH APRIL
14TH & 15TH JULY.

110

Cover of the Admiralty of England Sessions 1829, which include Sibson's trial, in The National Archives.

The story of Sibson Bragg and his brothers has been the most surprising story that I've uncovered in researching my partner's ancestry. The vast majority of the Braggs were Cumbrian farmers, worthy but not especially interesting. But this lot were different.

Seafaring tragedies

I knew that granny Mabel Bragg's family had a seafaring connection as the Bragg family farm still has ships' cannon in its gateposts. My research using census returns, wills,

gravestones, and birth, marriage and death certificates quickly took me to the Cumbrian coast and confirmed the maritime connections. At least four generations of Bragg men had sailed, owned and built ships.

Mabel's 2x great-grandfather William (William 1) Bragg had a ship building business and in his will he mentions the death of his son William (William 2). William 2 drowned in the Solway, within yards of the Cumbrian coast. William 2's wife Elizabeth (née Sibson), was expecting their 10th child when he died in 1805, aged just 39 years old.

Sarah Lee recounts her research into the Bragg family of Cumberland – and it's a colourful tale of murders, trials, shipwrecks, romance... and even cannibalism.

Elizabeth not only had to cope with the loss of her husband but also of some of her children; at least three of the couple's six surviving sons drowned between 1820 and 1839. All six were ships' masters, owners and builders.

Using a wide variety of sources including wills, *Lloyds Lists*, newspapers and various online records, I was able to find the names of at least a dozen ships that had been owned, partially owned or captained by members of the Bragg family. In researching these ships I discovered Sibson's horrific story. Visits to The National Archives (TNA) at Kew and Lancashire Archives in Preston followed, as I traced Sibson from cradle to watery grave.

Captain Sibson's trial

In 1827 Sibson was sailing as master from Liverpool on the *Francis Watson* with a man called Lewis Sinclair as his steward. After the ship left Batavia (Jakarta), Sibson dismissed Lewis as steward for drunkenness and put him to general duties on board. Evidence given at a later trial, the records of which are held in TNA, reveals that Lewis gave tobacco to his fellow crew members. Sibson presumably was very unhappy at his personal drink and tobacco rations being stolen.

Between Batavia and Singapore,

(Eastley, 1952, 3–4). On 7 November 1835, it was cleared from Launceston bound for Hokianga, a trading settlement in New Zealand. Captain Sibson Bragg had bought the ship exactly one month previously, and this was his first voyage in charge. On the way, William Keys, the mate, argued with one of the sailors and Captain Bragg threatened to turn the men over to the cannibals of New Zealand when they got there. The fear of the Maoris so terrified the men that after breakfast on the same day, they set upon the Captain and threw him overboard, taunting him as he floundered while they sailed away from him.

Keys, the mate, was at the helm and, under threat of the same treatment, was told to navigate them to South America. Keys managed to convince them to stay on course for Kokianga, which was then a major hideout for escaped convicts from Van Diemen's Land, by promising them he would support their story that the skipper had fallen overboard. On arrival, he reported the murder and the ringleaders were taken into custody, and put in chains for the return journey on the same ship. Unfortunately, their chains were stapled into rotting wood and they escaped, threatening the crew but surrendering when they were unable to get the guns they needed. The three, two sailors and a cook, were executed on their return to Hobart.

Sarah used newspaper reports to trace Sibson's incredible story.

Lewis became unwell. While the ship was docked at Singapore, a doctor came on board several times to treat him and on one occasion he was taken ashore to be bled.

Seaman Hugh Murray gave evidence about what happened after the ship left Singapore. He stated Lewis was recovering and was, 'getting around by degrees but not altogether well... as soon as we got out to sea the Captain forced him to work. I cannot say how long we had sailed then, but he stopped his allowance of water after we left Java Head, it was in our passage home very shortly after we left Singapore he was not well, but was forced to work, he was willing to do

what he could, but was not altogether well. The captain did not give him so much water as he did us nor so much bread or meat.'

Seaman Murray added: 'Sinclair was no seaman, he used to be put to scrape the ship's side from morning until dark at night, and sometimes till 12 o'clock. I have gone to the ship's side and seen him over there scraping... he sometimes would be over head and ears in water from the vessel going so fast she was going at the rate of six knots... he was on short allowance for a long time and very weak. I have seen him in the chains and the Captain striking him with the ropes end.'

Tree-tracing adventures

Was it murder? Report from the second day of Sibson Bragg's trial in 1829.

He further commented that scraping the ship's side was normally carried out in port. The voyage from Singapore lasted two months, and Lewis eventually died off the Scilly Isles. The catalogue of ill-usage continued to the end and was harrowing to read, with evidence from several crewmates.

This sums up the opinion expressed by the crew: 'I know he died through being kept without victuals I don't suppose the flogging with the birch caused his death... I will swear.'

Charles Beckman's conclusion was similar: 'Death was caused by ill-usage starvation, being knocked down many times and beating him with the capstan bar.'

When the ship put into the port of London, Sibson was arrested along with the first mate, Peter Miller, on 30 June and they were held in Newgate Prison. Their trial was held in the Admiralty of England Sessions on 14 and 15 July 1829.

There was evidence that the crew were very upset because Sibson hadn't paid their wages when they reached England. After months at sea, he did not pay the men for nearly a fortnight, so they were understandably unhappy, and the inference was that they were trying to get Sibson in trouble. Press reports of the trial also show that Sibson had called a doctor to Lewis several times while docked at Singapore. The jury 'professed themselves desirous of proceedings no further' and found Sibson not guilty.

Reading through the evidence at TNA, and in newspaper reports from across the country, it seems incredible he was found not guilty.

Another Bragg brother

While looking at the online indices at TNA, I discovered a second trial. In 1827 Joseph Bragg was tried for a similar murder. Joseph was master of the *Valiant*, a ship owned in part by Sibson and his widowed mother Elizabeth. It seems likely that Joseph was Sibson's older brother. The catalogue of ill-treatment was almost identical. When Joseph was acquitted, public opinion was so great that he had to be housed in Newgate Prison overnight for his own safety.

BARBAROUS MURDER OF THE MASTER OF THE Schooner "INDUSTRY," AT SEA.—The *John Duncombe* brings the distressing intelligence of the murder of Mr. BRAGG, the master of the schooner *Industry*, by his own crew, two days' sail from Hokianga. It will be remembered by most of our readers that that vessel left Launceston a few weeks ago for New Zealand, to bring up a cargo of pine. She arrived at Hokianga on the 1st instant, without the master. The particulars of the horrid event, as detailed to us from New Zealand, are as follows:—

On the morning of the 24th November, a dispute took place between the mate and cook, in which high and threatening words were used by each, and BRAGG, the master, of course interfered; struck the cook with a light of a pipe, deprived the mate of a cutlass he had, and stated his determination of being "upside" with his crew when he got to New Zealand. He soon after went below to breakfast, and during his absence the crew, four in number, agreed to throw him overboard the moment he came on deck. The unfortunate victim having completed his breakfast, came on deck, and was about to proceed with the repairing of

a sail, when the four men walked aft and deliberately threw him overboard. The mate, who was at the helm on attempting to render the master some assistance, was threatened with the same fate if he did not mind the helm and keep the vessel on her proper course. After the unfortunate man, BRAGG, was in the water, one of the seamen got on the rail and desired him to 'pray to God for mercy,' for that as he had done to others he must expect to be done by. About four hours afterwards the men leave the vessel to, and consulted as to where they should steer to, and it is supposed, would have finally agreed upon South America but for the mate, who himself was not an experienced navigator, but busily advising them to allow the vessel to proceed to Hokianga, where they might leave the schooner and "bush it" among the natives. To this course they agreed. During the time occupied in piloting the vessel up the river, on her arrival at Hokianga, the mate took means of disclosing the facts of the horrid scene that he had witnessed to Capt. Youse, the pilot, and he ran the schooner up to the establishment of Lieut. W. D. S. NIEL, the Assistant British Resident, where the four men were instantly secured. They were shortly afterwards confined on board the *Industry*, under a strong guard of New Zealanders, and may be daily expected at Hobart Town.

Shipwreck & murder!

In January 1830 Sibson was shipwrecked with the *Francis Watson* at Algoa Bay. He survived the incident only to meet a grim fate in November 1835. All my information about this I gathered from the *Hobart Times* of 16 February 1836.

Sibson had bought the schooner, *Industry*, in October 1835, and sailed as master on 13 November from Launceston, Australia bound for Hokianga, New Zealand. The crew consisted of Sibson, William Keys the first mate, Hibbell the cook, four other seamen and a ship's boy.

From the report it seems that it was a fractious voyage; Hibbell and Sibson had words over tobacco and beef. There were other disagreements too between members of the crew. Sibson threatened to leave them with the cannibals of New Zealand when they got there! Interestingly in the evidence there is a quote attributed to Sibson: 'Tom, if I am such a bad man as you talk about, and I kill people, what made you sail with me?'

Three of the men, Hibbell, Smith and Harris, said they were so frightened that one morning they threw Sibson overboard. William Keys managed to convince them that he could hold his tongue and said he would go along with their story that Sibson had fallen overboard. However, when they reached Hokianga he reported the murder and the two seamen and the cook were arrested, returned to Hobart and tried. After being found guilty, Hibbell is reported to have said: 'I will confess it now I threw him overboard to save my own life, he would have given us to the New Zealanders, and we should have been eaten, so I only saved my life a little longer by taking his.'

The trio were hanged three days later.

Cannibalism...

The family's seafaring traumas continued with Sibson's nephew Robert, son of his brother John. Robert was on the *Nereides* when it sank in the Ganges Delta in 1852. By the time Robert and four of his shipmates were rescued it was reported that they had been reduced to eating the flesh of their dead fellows! By 1857 Robert had retired from the sea and bought a farm. Robert's son and grandson found greater fame, jointly winning the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1915.

News report on Sibson's unsavoury demise in the *Launceston Advertiser*, 31 December 1835.

Look online

- discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk – The National Archives Discovery catalogue;
- www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/ – British Newspaper Archive (also at Findmypast);
- www.lancashire.gov.uk/libraries-and-archives – Lancashire Archives;
- trove.nla.gov.au – National Library of Australia, including historical newspapers online.



Martha Wray.

... & romance

All this seafaring research also led me to a romance. I had tried several times to find where Mabel's grandparents William 3 and Martha Wray had married. Martha was born in Whitby, so I had presumed there was a maritime connection; I'd had visions of William sailing into Whitby and seeing the beautiful Martha on the quayside. I'd looked in vain for

the marriage in Cumberland and Yorkshire. Purely by chance, while in searching records for Van Diemen's Land for Sibson Bragg, I found the couple's marriage on 30 January 1830 in Hobart. It seems Martha had travelled out to Van Diemen's Land with her sister-in-law and her children. Martha's brother George was also a sea captain and he had bought land in Van Diemen's Land to settle on,

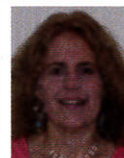
Tree-tracing adventures

and presumably had then sent for his wife and children to join him. William Bragg 3 was the captain of the ship they sailed out on! Romance must have blossomed on the voyage as they married within days of the ship docking. By September the couple were back in Workington, sadly burying their first child Elizabeth.

My Bragg family research is still a work in progress, and as yet there's no link to Cumbria's other famous Bragg, Melvyn! But this lot has kept me busy for starters.

About the author

Sarah Lee's parents began researching their family tree before she was born and some of her earliest memories are of graveyards and record offices! It's still a work in progress and one line goes back to c1300. Sarah spent three years researching the 'old boys' of Carlisle Grammar School who died in WW1 and is the co-author of a book and website about them. She also gives talks on the WW1 project and family history. At present she's studying for a postgraduate degree in family and local history.



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Marriages solemnized in the Parish of		in the		Marriages solemnized in the Parish of		in the		
County of		in the Year 18		County of		in the Year 1830.		
No.	of th Parish	and	No.	of th Parish	and	No.	of th Parish	
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married in this	by	with the consent of	married in this	by	with the consent of	married in this	by	
this	day of	In the year 18	this	day of	In the year 1830	this	day of	
	By me			By me			By me	
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	By me			By me			By me	
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Romance at last: the marriage record for William Bragg and Martha Wray.