

## **Michael Kick Murphy: voyaging around the world before the mast at fifteen**

A few years ago, a Hull family were clearing the house of an old relative who had recently died when they came across a small, battered suitcase. Inside, they found a batch of letters, photographs and documents which, when pieced together, revealed the story of a forgotten life at sea, that of Michael 'Kick' Murphy.

Michael Murphy, who was known as 'Kick' to family and friends, was born at 50, Blackfriargate in Hull's Old Town on the 23rd August 1876; the eldest of the three sons of Michael (born 1842) and Fanny (nee Buckley, born 1850). His father Michael senior was a dock labourer and the son of an Irish immigrant who had probably come to Hull in the 1830s.

Young Michael Murphy grew up amidst the hustle and bustle of the Victorian Old Town. In those days this was a densely packed area: many families lived in the myriad of small back to back houses that filled dozens of crowded yards, often known as entries or alleys, found behind most of the Old Town's main thoroughfares. The Murphy's were no exception: in 1881 they were living at 3, Royal Oak Passage and by the early 1890s they had moved to Blue Bell Entry, behind 107, High Street. Even by the standards of the day these were poor buildings, lacking decent sanitation and usually relying on a communal tap or pump for their water supply.

Michael was a bright lad and passed an entrance examination for Hull's Trinity House Navigation School, enrolling there in September 1887. He completed his studies at Trinity House in June 1891, receiving a leaving certificate which described his conduct as good and recommending him for service at sea. The following year his father paid £10 for him to begin his seagoing apprenticeship with the Glasgow firm of Andrew Weir and Company. He joined his first vessel, the *Thistlebank*, a four masted sailing ship at Barry Docks in Wales in July 1892.

The *Thistlebank* was expected to make a twelve month voyage. She was a steel hulled sailing barque and had only been launched by Hall Russell & Company of Port Glasgow, the previous year. The ship left Barry on the 21<sup>st</sup> July 1892 and the first leg of the voyage was to Cape Town with a cargo of Welsh coal. After about a month at sea the ship approached the equator and, of course, crossing the line, as it is called, was one of those rites of passage that had to be observed as Kick and his companions discovered. Afterwards, he described the events quite graphically in a letter home to his family:

*'On the night two men got dressed up one as Father Neptune the other as his wife Trident. oakum wig and whiskers with a tin, cut into a crown, they also had the barbers with them. They pretended to come over the side and shouted out. Ship ahoy and they rigged a platform and a large tub of water and had lighted lanterns all round. Us three apprentices, the sailmaker and two ordinary seamen were to be shaved as we had never crossed the line. We shook hands with Father Neptune and his wife then set on the edge of the tub and was then lathered with grease,*

*Stockholm tar and pig-shit and scraped off with a big wooden knife and daubed on our heads. We were then put clean into the tub with all our clothes on and wet through with buckets of, water but we was all right again next morning except being a little greasy and a extra washing day.'*

Young Kick wrote home regularly to his family on his voyages and his letters provide a vivid description of various aspects of life at sea under sail in the late nineteenth century. His letters are often full of talk of food:

*'When we are at sea we get coffee every other morning, breakfast biscuits butter and salt beef and pork potatoes, soup and biscuits and tea we get biscuits tea butter and all the meat that is left from dinner is chopped small with potatoes and fried in fat. We get caravanca beans and rice and marmalade on Sunday we get fresh tinned mutton, soup, potatoes, barley and a loaf of soft bread. I only miss the puddings but I make them myself now we are in port.'*

He also provides some interesting accounts of the places the ship calls:

*'Cape Town is a splendid place situated on a fine harbour and all mountains in the background one of them being the celebrated Table Mountain. There are fine buildings, a palace, castle, batteries and gun boat. I have never seen such a nice place.... There is a breakwater about ½ a mile long on which all convicts have to work to make larger under guard. Table Mountain is nearly covered by clouds most of the time but it is a grand scene on a calm day to see it and the smaller mountains the sun shining on the houses which are all white. The bay like a pond and in the other side of the bay the mountains which run right along the coast of Africa. We can see the smoke rising from Native villages behind the mountains on a clear day.'*

The *Thistlebank* was originally expected to sail from Cape Town onwards to Chittagong in India but the orders were changed and the vessel instead headed for Newcastle in New South Wales. What had been expected to be a year's voyage looked like turning into one of around eighteen months. Although Kick was disappointed at the prospect of spending his next birthday so far from home he did look forward to the extra money that his trip would bring him and all the time at sea he was learning, becoming a more accomplished seaman, and gaining experience of what the oceans could throw at a ship.

*'Dear Father and mother we arrived safe in Newcastle on Monday Dec 19<sup>th</sup> after having had a very stormy passage, the ship rolling that much that it rolled us out of our bunks and the chests went sliding from one side of the cabin to the other and broke from their lashings. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of December about 1 o'clock in the morning the ship was struck by a heavy squall. We had just got turned in at 12 o'clock till four when at 1 o'clock orders were shouted out for to clear the royals up, let go the top gallant and top sail halyards and clear the lower to' gallan sails up. All hands had then to turn out to shorten sail. The royals were blown into ribbons before they could take them in and all the ropes were carried away belonging to it. I went to the main royal to help make it fast when it hit me and skinned my nose. We had another squall on Dec 7<sup>th</sup>, but it did no damage. We left Cape Town on Saturday Nov 12<sup>th</sup> and have had fair winds all the way the ship going twelve, thirteen and fourteen knots an hour, all the time we had one days calm They call it runnin' the Eastern down.'*

The voyage had proved eventful in more ways than he at first told his parents, as a later letter shows:

*'I can tell you now, when we were about two weeks sail from Cape Town I was struck by a sea and washed down the deck into some iron stanchions and was laid up for three weeks. I couldn't move the first week. I was bandaged up and was as white as a sheet. I was laid up when we entered Cape Town but I started work 4 days after and am just as well as ever now... Dad wanted to know if I could take the wheel... I was at the wheel every night and he (the captain) let me take the wheel on a day time.'*

After an extended stay in New South Wales the *Thistlebank* and crew sailed on across the Pacific, reaching San Diego in California towards the end of April 1893. The voyage took ninety three days instead of the expected fifty because of long periods of fine weather and they were somewhat surprised they had been reported as lost because of the delay. After a few weeks in San Diego they voyaged on to Iquique in Chile where they arrived in August 1893 after a passage of 78 days. Here Kick met up with around six of his school mates on other ships whilst the vessel was loading with salt petre as cargo for a voyage to Hamburg. He was less than impressed with Iquique and no doubt pleased when the *Thistlebank* finally sailed for Hamburg. However, the bringing of nitrates or saltpetre from Chile to Europe by sailing ship in the late nineteenth century by way of Cape Horn was considered to be one of the hardest of voyages. Nitrates were in great demand in the nineteenth century both as a means of improving soil and also for the munitions industry. Ships voyaging from Chile to Europe covered around 7,000 miles. Certainly Kick's voyage to Germany was not without its problems as he outlined in a letter to his parents in January 1894:

*'We have arrived all safe in Hamburg having a very hard passage of 122 days. We had a very good passage up till Christmas when we had heavy gales then the provisions run out and we had to live on maggity biscuits and beef. We had only one days beef on board when we reached Deal. We have been nearly starved this passage and the house has been flooded. Chests were full and clothes wet and I hadn't had a dry change in 2 weeks. Sometimes we could not get along for our dinner there was that much water on board.'*

By now he was still only seventeen years old and had worked his way around the world on a four masted sailing ship. Whilst the ship was laid up in Hamburg young Kick was able to take some leave and snatch a few weeks back home with his family down Bluebell Entry in Hull. He had been away for more than eighteen months.

Back in Hamburg by the end of March Kick sailed once more for the Pacific, and arrived at Santa Rosalia, California in August 1894 after what he described as a fine voyage of 171 days at sea. He was enjoying his time at home but missing family and friends and Hull Fair:

*'Dear father and mother,*

*I am just as happy as when I was at home and am wishing I could have a night off to go to Hull fair, this is the third time I have missed it. We are still in the best of health and are having pretty good times, going for picnics with the captain and his wife. I wish you would write a little oftener as all the other chaps are getting letters every time the steamer comes in, and I have only had two, one when we arrived which was written on July 25<sup>th</sup> and another 3 weeks after.'*

He was always asking in his letters about the fortunes of Hull FC and sometimes of Rovers and eagerly read every inch of the newspapers his family sent him from home.

The *Thistlebank* later moved up the coast to Portland in Oregon and did not make the return voyage to Europe, this time to Queenstown in Ireland until later in the spring of 1895. Kick and his ship arrived in Ireland in August 1895 after a 142 day voyage after which the ship made its way to Liverpool from where Kick seems to have been able to grab a few days leave at home on a couple of occasions.

At this stage Andrew Weir and Company transferred Kick and a number of other crew members to the *Castlebank*, a somewhat smaller three masted sailing vessel which was lying at Rotterdam. He almost certainly passed through Hull, en route for Rotterdam, and probably snatched what proved to be his last and brief stay with his family. His new ship was not without problems and had to turn back to Rotterdam on a couple of occasions after experiencing difficulties with stability which worried both captain and crew. Afterwards, it also ran aground. Nevertheless, the problems were eventually overcome and the *Castlebank* then made a 120 day passage to Port Germain in Australia. Kick was certainly impressed:

*'We have been exactly 120 days on the passage, and it has been the finest passage we have had since we have been at sea. Fine weather all the way and not a gale of wind all the time..... I must tell you that we have got into a floating hotel. We have had plum pudding, beef pies, Rice puddings, fish and nearly every mortal thing. We have had as much as ever we could possibly eat. And the Captain is such a nice man, he comes into our house and plays games and spins yarns every night nearly. And the first night he went ashore he brought us as many grapes as we could eat.'*

A few weeks later they voyaged round the Australian coast where Kick and his companions seem to have thoroughly enjoyed an almost three month sojourn before they left for Peru with a cargo of coal in September 1896.

And that is the last that was ever heard of the *Castlebank*, Kick or indeed the rest of the crew. The vessel was reported missing: the loss was never explained, one of those perennial mysteries of the sea. The weather in the Pacific at that time was reported to have been good. It was thought at the time that the cargo of coal must have caught fire and that the crew had taken to the boats. There was hope that they might have been picked up by a passing ship. Months later and with still no news all hopes for their safety dissolved. A friend of his in Australia, Maggie Gray, wrote a final letter to his family in Hull in April 1897:

*'I received your kind letter on Saturday and very sorry I am to have to tell you that it is only too true of the loss of the Castlebank & I fear all hands. I have made every inquiry & nothing has been seen or heard tell of her since she left here now five months ago.*

*But I can tell you that your son left here in the best of spirits and he seemed to be very happy all the time he was in port. He was third mate on board and he was liked by every body on board as well as on shore where he had a lot of friends. He was up at our house just the night before the ship sailed with a few of his friends to wish us good bye & we are indeed very sorry to hear of your loss as I know he was indeed a good boy and I am sure he would prosper in all his undertakings.'*

Michael (Kick) Murphy was one of many, many Hull people who have lost their lives whilst going about their business in great waters but although his life was cut painfully short his few years at home and afloat were filled with interest and adventure and he had seen much more of the world in his seagoing career than many other manage in a lifetime. As for his family, well they seem to have lived on for some time in Hull's Old Town. His mother, Fanny, died in 1915 in the Old Town and his father, Michael followed her within two years aged 75. Kick's first ship, the *Thistlebank* was sold by Andrew Weir and Company to E. Monsen & Company of Norway in July 1914 and was sunk by the German U-boat, U-24, off Fastnet Rock on the Irish coast on the 30<sup>th</sup> June 1915. Michael Murphy has no memorial, save the

collection of his letters and photographs which recount such an absorbing story of young person at sea.

### **Select Bibliography**

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Sailing Ships: Thistlebank