

1953-2317

The Mary Celeste, disappearance of crew - event, 1872, past.

Tasking:

Move to the optimum position/location and describe the event as it happens. Describe the crew and the event that led to their disappearance.

Additional feedback:

It was 9am on the morning of Friday, December 13th 1872 when people on the waterfront saw a small two-masted sailing vessel entering the Bay of Gibraltar.

The ship was the 'Mary Celeste' of New York, a Canadian built 100 foot brigantine of 282 tons registered in New York. The registered owners were James H Winchester (12/24) Sylvester Goodwin (2/24) and Benjamin Spooner Briggs (8/24).

Her master, Benjamin Spooner Briggs known in Gibraltar to be a staunch abstainer and devout bible reader. At the inquiry the ships main owner James Henry Winchester gave evidence that the Captain was a courageous officer who would not desert his ship except to save his life. The second-in-command, the Mate, was Albert Richardson, who was also considered by Winchester to be fit to command himself.

But of the good Captain Briggs, his wife Sarah, two year old daughter Sophia Matilda, and the crew of seven, nothing was to be seen or found ever again. And so begins the greatest of mysteries, or at least it seems. However, were it not for Dr Arthur Conan Doyle, struggling to establish himself as a writer prior to creating Sherlock Holmes, perhaps the world would not have ever known or cared.

The story, like many a tale, it has grown with the telling, to incorporate speculation of further mysteries, including pirates, creatures from the deep, abduction by aliens, submarines, and time travel.

Conan Doyle's short story about the 'Marie Celeste' (he changed the name from Mary) turned a minor puzzle into one of the most famous legends of the sea. Nevertheless we should recognise it was fiction, for which his editor paid 30 Pounds, which would have been a respectable sum in 1884.

Turning back to the **real story**, which survives because shipping and court inquiries leave behind ample records to be researched, we find the following facts;



A scale model of the "Mary Celeste"
by Steve Allen

Maine Lloyds	\$ 6000
Orient Mutual Insurance Co.	\$ 4000
Mercantile	\$ 2500

The 'Mary Celeste' had sailed from New York on November 7th bound for Genoa with a cargo of 1701 barrels of American Alcohol, shipped by Meissner Ackermann & Co., value approximately \$35,000 the purpose of which was to fortify wine. The value of the freight on the alcohol was \$3,400 and the ship herself \$14,000.

The Vessels cargo was insured in Europe, and the hull insurance was carried by American companies. The Freight was insured by the Atlantic Mutual Insurance Company of New York, today the only survivor of the American insurers.

She was followed on 15th November by the 'Dei Gratia' which followed a roughly parallel course across the Atlantic carrying a cargo 1735 barrels of petroleum.

On the Afternoon of December 5th 1872 half way between the Azores and the Portuguese coast the 'Dei Gratia' came up with a Brigantine which Captain Morehouse recognised as the 'Mary Celeste'. He knew Captain Briggs and had dined with him before he sailed. He was puzzled to see the ship yawing, coming into the wind and then falling off, she was out of control. He knew Captain Briggs to be a good seaman.

Mutual Insurance Co.	
New England Mutual Insurance Co.	\$ 1500

There were no distress signals, and after watching for two hours and hailing her and getting no reply they set off in a small boat and duly boarded her.

The vessel was found to be in good seaworthy condition and the general impression was that the crew had left in a great hurry. They had left behind their oil skin boots and pipes. Captain Morehouse's explanation was that they had left in panic thinking the vessel to be sinking. The chronometer and sextant were not found on board. The last entry on the ships slate showed she had made the island of St Mary in the Azores on November 25th.

Oliver Deveau the Chief Mate of the 'Dei Gratia' was in charge of the boarding party. He found one pump out of order, and only used the other on his way to Gibraltar. He found the fore hatch off and also the lazarett hatch off with a great deal of water between decks. The clock and compass were spoilt and destroyed respectively. The Court record states that he found no beer or spirits in the ship, and the cargo had not shifted.

The Chronometer, the sextant navigation book and the ship's register and papers were also missing. There was not a log line ready for use.

Lets at this point forget about steaming mugs of tea, ships cats, everything in supposed pristine condition. Certainly there were no half eaten breakfasts, and no phial of oil balanced on the sewing machine. Let us remember the vessel was observed out of control for two hours before she was boarded, and had been in heavy seas in the days previous.

The court record states "The Galley was in a bad state, the stove was knocked out of its place, and the cooking utensils were strewn around. The whole ship was a thoroughly wet mess. The Captains bed was not fit to sleep in and had to be dried."

Now we come to a crucial bit, Charles Lurd, crew member states; "We found no boats on board", he could not state how many there should have been he felt sure there had been a boat at the main hatch from the fixing there.

There is much speculation in the fictional accounts about a sword with blood stains, pointing to violence, however in the court record the Mate Oliver Deveau states he did not see any blood anywhere. Although he saw the sword it was in its sheath and was rusty. He gave it little significance. The popular mystery has blood marks and a bloody sword, with the evidence of the inquiry sealed. What it really says is that the sword had been cleaned with lemon, and the result was iron citrate, not dried blood. No need for DNA testing in this case.

The only dry clothes found were dry because they were in a watertight seaman's chest. Everything else was wet. There is a mystery of the clock face being upside down, but not because of any 'time warp' the Mate had removed it to clean it and put it back wrongly.

In his conclusion the Judge praises the crew of the 'Dei Gratia' for their great courage in view of the risk to both vessels in dividing the crew, and their great skill shown in bringing both vessels safely to Gibraltar.