

Geography as Genealogy – Papes Island

The recent discovery that my wife's great-great-grandfather served with the cousin of his future wife on a number of the same Royal Naval ships in the 1870s, led to an unexpected series of revelations and a new resource for genealogical study.

Thomas Papal's birth in 1853 was not propitious.¹ His mother, Eliza, was seventeen years old and unmarried. He was baptized on 2 April 1854 in Stratton St Margaret, near Swindon, on the same day as his 'cousin', Emma Papal. Her circumstances were hardly better. Her mother Ann was a 45-year-old widow, whose husband David had died five years previously. Emma's arrival must have strained Ann's establishment to breaking point; she already had five children, the four youngest being described as paupers in the 1851 census, and only her son Daniel was at work. It was her eldest daughter Jane who saved the day; she was married but with no children, and Emma, her sister Ellen and Thomas Papal came to live with her and her husband William Jennings in London. The exact relationship between Emma and Thomas is not clear; Thomas' mother, Eliza, was probably related to Ann's dead husband David. Evidently they were close – perhaps made closer when the older sister Ellen died in 1861; effectively, they were brought up together as brother and sister.

In 1868, Thomas, now calling himself Thomas David Wallace *Papes*, signed up for the Royal Navy. His guardian, 'Aunt' Jane Ansell, confirmed his date of birth as 29 January 1853 at Stratton, Wiltshire.² (Jane was already on husband number two, William Jennings had died in 1866; her new husband was George Ansell.) Thomas joined the cadet ship HMS *Bristol* as a Boy, 2nd Class. On board *Bristol* he saw the Mediterranean, the west coast of Africa and Brazil. In August 1869 he joined HMS *Phoebe* and a year later in November 1870, now rated Boy, 1st Class, he signed on to HMS *Basilisk*.

HMS *Basilisk*, '...an old fashioned (wooden) paddler of 1,071 tons, 400 horse-power, with 5 guns, and manned by 178 officers and men...' was commanded by Captain John Moresby. Moresby, who had been on half pay for five years without a ship,

expressed disappointment when he was given the command.³ *Basilisk*, launched in 1848, was sister ship to *Niger*, launched two years earlier. Both were sailing warships fitted with steam engines, but *Basilisk* was paddle powered, whereas *Niger* was fitted with a screw. It was an attempt by the Admiralty finally to decide the question many had thought had already been settled by the famous duel between the screw powered *Rattler* and the paddle powered *Alecto*. In 1845, *Rattler* towed *Alecto* backwards through the water at two and a half knots while both ships were steaming ahead at full power. A year later, in 1846 when *Basilisk* was laid down, the Admiralty were still not certain that screw power was superior to paddles.

In 1849, *Niger* and *Basilisk* repeated the *Rattler-Alecto* tests. The outcome reported in the press, was that *Niger* had won hands down,⁴ although David Brown suggests that at equal power developed, there was no difference in speed.⁵ Nevertheless, there were clear benefits with screw power: *Niger* was much better under sail than *Basilisk* and was more manoeuvrable; and of great importance in a warship, because of the space taken up by the paddlewheels, *Basilisk* carried only six guns (later five) compared with the *Niger's* fourteen. The paddlewheels were very vulnerable to gunfire (and heavy weather); the engines, being above the waterline, were also vulnerable to gunfire. Finally, *Basilisk* was more than ninety tons heavier than its rival due to the strengthening required by the paddlewheel mounts.

Basilisk would seem to have been obsolete almost before she was launched, and this probably explains Captain Moresby's disappointment. However, he took comfort in the fact that he had been ordered to the Australian station, 'one of the most interesting stations under our flag...[which] also...offered possibilities of exploration and discovery.'⁶

HMS *Basilisk* slipped her moorings at Sheerness on 4 February 1871, and arrived at Melbourne on 14 June, via Plymouth, Madeira, Ascension Island and The Cape. The Melbourne *Argus* was less than impressed with the display of imperial might:

Her [*Basilisk's*] appearance in Port Phillip waters [Melbourne] is due entirely to accident, and but for serious damage to...her port paddlewheel during a heavy gale...she would have gone right on to

Sydney...To those here who form their estimate of the naval power of the mother country by the *Monarch*, *Hercules*, and other ironclads which they have not seen, or even by *Galatea*, and *Challenger*, and *Blanche*...which have been amongst us, the *Basilisk* will present a very unpretending appearance, and may be considered a disappointment...⁷

The article went on to concede that the ship's service career, '...if not exceptionally brilliant, has not been altogether useless...' (*Basilisk* had seen successful action in the Crimea campaign). If British sailors caused any trouble in Melbourne pubs over the next few days, the crew of HMS *Basilisk* might have been forgiven...

Captain Moresby was ordered to Sydney where the damaged paddlewheel was repaired, and in July *Basilisk* sailed for New Zealand spending the next six months there. While the ship was in New Zealand, a young ordinary seaman, Henry Thomas Doe, transferred into her from HMS *Blanche*. He and Thomas Paples were to serve together on several ships, and judging from subsequent events became good friends.

Basilisk returned to Sydney in December 1871, and in May 1872, after a brief visit to the Torres Straits, the narrow channel between northern Queensland and New Guinea, she embarked on a cruise to the South Sea Islands. Moresby was under orders to monitor and try to check 'Blackbirding', an activity little better than slavery, where unscrupulous operators would effectively kidnap islanders, take them thousands of miles from their homes and force them to work for a pittance without limit of time. The cruise took *Basilisk* as far east as Tonga, north to the Ellice Isles (now Tuvalu) and south to Norfolk Island, the old penal colony. It can be imagined that the officers, sailors and marines on board the ship were not too upset with this work, particularly any of them that had read Sir John Barrow's history of the Mutiny on the *Bounty*, and his descriptions of Tahiti and some of its (female) inhabitants...⁸

After four months visiting the islands and some refitting in Sydney, *Basilisk* was ordered in December 1872 once more to the Torres Strait. The 1872 Kidnapping Act now gave Captain Moresby far greater powers to act against the Blackbirders, and almost immediately he arrested two schooners with 88 South Sea Islanders on board. Some of the natives had been working for six years with no more remuneration than food, clothing and tobacco. More arrests followed.



HMS *Basilisk* anchored in Threshold Bay, New Guinea, 24 May 1874.⁹

Moresby had no direct mandate (or specialised instruments) for surveying, and he was constantly worrying about exceeding his orders. The south-eastern coast of New Guinea was virtually unexplored having been charted from several miles offshore, outside its barrier reef, by Captain Stanley in HMS *Rattlesnake* a couple of decades earlier. Moresby was keen to rectify this deficiency, and having found a gap in the reef, he discovered a large natural harbour which he christened Fairfax Harbour, with Port Moresby at its entrance. Both named after his father.

The Papuan natives of New Guinea have had a fearful reputation for head-hunting and cannibalism, but whenever *Basilisk* anchored, or the crew put ashore for water, food or wood for the boilers, they were met by natives who for the most part were very friendly. Much bartering was done, and Moresby and his crew went out of their way to treat the natives fairly and humanely, and generally this was reciprocated.

Continuing east, Moresby established that New Guinea was around 200 miles shorter than had been thought, the eastern end actually being composed of a number of islands. By dint of patient surveying and sounding, he identified a deep water passage through the islands, thereby shortening the route from Australia to China by several hundred miles. The islands and passage through them constituted Captain Moresby's main discovery after Port Moresby, and perhaps overcome with patrician largesse, he shared the honour of the discovery with his crew. The map shows the area in question¹⁰, and the names of the various features are a positive roll-call of *Basilisk's* crew. Officers and men identifiable are summarised in the table, providing, along with Captain Moresby's two books, an interesting new genealogical resource. What is surprising is not that the officers' names were used, but that the men too were so honoured. There is no doubt about the identification of the five seamen listed; Moresby wrote:

I named the bay [in Basilisk Island] after my coxswain, Jenkins; and the islands scattered on its broad bosom after the boat's crew – fine cheerful young English seamen as ever pulled an oar.¹¹

Map feature	Crew Member	Rank
Hayter Island	Francis Hayter	1 st Lieutenant
Jenkins Bay	John Jenkins	Captain Coxswain
O'Neill Island	Francis St John O'Neill	Paymaster
Haines Island	Charles H Haines	Assistant Surgeon
Mount Haines	Charles H Haines	Assistant Surgeon
Pitt Bay	Stanley S Dean Pitt	Midshipman
Mudge Bay	William Mudge	Boatswain
Goodman Point	Godfrey Goodman	Surgeon
Mount Goodman	Godfrey Goodman	Surgeon
Shortland Island	Frederick W Shortland	Midshipman
Connor Island	Edward R Connor	Lieutenant
Grant Island	A E Craven Gordon Grant	Midshipman
Head Island	Edward Head	Ordinary Seaman
Brewer Island	Thomas Brewer	Able Seaman
McKinley Island	George McKinley	Ordinary Seaman
Didymus Island	Mark Didymus	Able Seaman
Paples Island	Thomas Paples	Ordinary Seaman

Crew of HMS *Basilisk* featured in Captain John Moresby's discoveries.¹³

Thus Ordinary Seaman Thomas Paples had his name immortalized in a small island, one mile in diameter, off the east coast of New Guinea.

Basilisk was ordered to New Zealand in 1873, and then back to England. The normal route home was east to Cape Horn using the prevailing winds and then north past the Falkland Islands. Captain Moresby received special permission to travel back via the Torres Strait and his route through the newly discovered islands at the east end of New Guinea, and then home along the north coast and through the Dutch East Indies. Travelling along the coast, just past the intriguingly named 'Cape Cretin', he could not resist christening two great peaks in the Finisterre mountain range Mounts 'Gladstone' and 'Disraeli'. Both men acknowledged the honour, Disraeli writing from 10 Downing Street, in typical sardonic manner:¹⁴

Allow me to acknowledge the compliment you have paid me ... and in selecting a godfather so distinguished for the peak that faces Mount Disraeli ... I hope we shall agree better in New Guinea than we do in the House of Commons.¹⁵

Basilisk arrived back at Sheerness on 15 December 1874. In four years she had covered 53,000 miles under sail, and 32,000 miles under steam. Port Moresby and a new shorter route between Australia and China had been discovered and much of the coast of what is now Papua New Guinea had been properly charted for the first time.

Having been paid off from *Basilisk*, Thomas Paples and Henry Doe were assigned to HMS *Excellent* for the next eighteen months. *Excellent*, originally *Queen Charlotte*, a 104-gun ship similar in appearance to *Victory* but without its masts, was moored in Portsmouth Harbour and used as the Navy's gunnery school.¹⁶ It seems likely that Thomas used some home shore leave due after nearly four years at sea to go and visit his cousin-sister Emma in Southwark; she had been working there as a dressmaker. It also seems probable that he took his shipmate Henry Doe with him. What they found was that Aunt Jane had moved to Kingston, her second husband, George Ansell, had died a few months previously, and Emma, unmarried, was pregnant.

Emma went to stay with Jane in Kingston for her confinement, and gave birth to a boy, Edward Devoll Paples, in June 1875. Notwithstanding that, Emma and Henry Doe evidently got on well together, and a year later, in August 1876, they were married. Henry and Thomas had just been assigned to HMS *Shah*, and both were probably using some last minute shore leave to attend the wedding. It was none too soon; Emma was five months pregnant.

When Emma's little girl, Emma Elizabeth Doe, was born in December 1876 in Southwark, Henry and Thomas were on board *Shah* en route to Gibraltar and thence to South America and the Pacific. One report from the ship while in Esquimalt in British Columbia said that she was to call at Tahiti en route for Peru if the winds were

favourable (a somewhat long way round).¹⁷ No doubt Thomas and Henry, as old South Sea Islands hands, regaled their shipmates with what to expect if they landed there ...

It was to be November 1879 before *Shah* paid off at Portsmouth; Thomas and Henry had been away for more than three years. Henry stayed in the navy for two more years, mostly in ships in Portsmouth, and then left in August 1881 to pursue a career as a packer. Emma died in 1886 from a complication in pregnancy, and Henry then faded from view, although their daughter Emma Elizabeth married in 1897, and was to become my wife's great-grandmother.

Thomas Paples stayed in the navy until 1907 and served in fifteen different ships. The last sixteen years were spent in Portsmouth on HMSs *Duke of Wellington* and *Victory*. In 1882 he was promoted to Petty Officer, and in the same year married Mary Kennedy. At least one of their sons, Thomas William Paples, became a petty officer in the Royal Navy.

No doubt Thomas dined out on his exploits and 'his' Island for the rest of his life, and spent his time on *Victory* and *Duke of Wellington* yarning younger crew members and visitors with stories about *Basilisk's* voyage of discovery and his own immortal fame.

A number of the crew of HMS *Basilisk* were similarly honoured in naming the various geographical features at the east of New Guinea. Many of these names have now been lost as the land and seascape have been given local names. Paples Island still exists though, as a simple Google search will confirm, and Captain Moresby's map and his crew list provide a new resource for genealogists.

Peter Maggs

¹ The name *Papal* exists in a number of alternative spellings around Swindon. For example, the parish record of the death of Elizabeth *Peapell* in April 1854 in Stratton St Margaret, gives *Paple* and *Paples* as alternatives; subsequently, Thomas was known as Thomas *Paples*, and his cousin Emma also adopted that spelling. At least thirteen different spellings do exist.

² From his naval record, Public Record Office

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- ³ *Two Admirals*, John Moresby, John Murray, 1909
- ⁴ *The Observer*, 13 August 1849
- ⁵ *Paddle Warships*, David Brown, Conway Maritime Press, 1993
- ⁶ *Two Admirals*, Op Cit
- ⁷ *The Melbourne Argus*, 16 June 1871
- ⁸ *The Eventful History of the...Mutiny...of HMS Bounty*, Sir John Barrow, John Murray, 1831
- ⁹ Image Crown Copyright, National Maritime Museum
- ¹⁰ *Two Admirals*, Op Cit
- ¹¹ *Discoveries and Surveys in New Guinea...*, John Moresby, John Murray, 1876, p200
- ¹² *Two Admirals*, Op Cit
- ¹³ The table was assembled by comparing the map with the list of names from the 2 April 1871 census taken on board *Basilisk*, and members of the crew mentioned in Captain Moresby's two books
- ¹⁴ *Two Admirals*, Op Cit
- ¹⁵ *Two Admirals*, Op Cit. It is said that Disraeli was once asked what the difference was between 'misfortune' and 'disaster'. He replied: "If Gladstone fell into the Thames, that would be a misfortune. If someone pulled him out, that would be a disaster..."
- ¹⁶ Information on *Excellent*, *Shah* and some of the other ships is from *Ships of the Victorian Navy*, Conrad Dixon, Ashford Press, 1987
- ¹⁷ *The Times*, Wednesday December 19, 1877