

Barnston 1940 – Tall Ships and Ancient Mariners

By David Hollett

The generations of my maritime maternal ancestors tend to be extended, making me disturbingly close to the 18th and 19th century mariners who are the main subject of this article. My parents were late Victorians, both being born in 1893. My maternal grandfather, Tom Alfred Wise, was the youngest son of Captain Joseph Wise (1821–1882). The advent of war in the late 1930s prompted our family to move to Barnston, Wirral. Unfortunately, the bungalow we moved to had no electricity or gas, so it was here, under the dim light of a flickering paraffin lamp that I listened to father talking continually about the horrors of the Somme where he had served as a stretcher-bearer, and mother speaking occasionally about the Wise family maritime history.

I was advised repeatedly by my mother that Joseph was bitterly opposed to slavery, but why this was so was not clear. I was told the family was a very large one, the boys all being sent to sea but one died young. And a ship had been named after her grandmother. I was assured, that ships 'at this time' were very small and Joseph had once been obliged to make a very long voyage in an exceptionally small vessel.

The family, she understood, were 'involved' with the Brocklebanks and also related to the Glovers and Dysons. The family also had some sort of 'connection' with the port of Whitby. I was assured the Wise family had originally been farmers and somewhere along the line a 'medical gentleman' featured in the family tree, so what were the facts?

Research for my first book soon established that Holm Cultram on the Solway Firth had been 'Home Base' for the Wise family in the 18th and 19th centuries. It was also where Rev. Joseph Wise, the family poet, lived before moving down south (with the assistance of a generous relative, Bishop Law of Carlisle). The 'Medical Gentleman' proved to be one of several doctors and surgeons working at the famous Cockermonth Dispensary, an establishment set up in the late 18th century to give medical attention to the poor, sick and injured of Cockermonth, and without charge!

In 1782, surgeon Wise married Miss Hannah Jones. The young couple moved to Brigham, a suburb of Cockermonth, and it was here that their four children were born: Abraham Vaux Wise, 1784; Joseph, 1787; and twins, Edward and Sarah in 1792.

Intent on a life at sea, young Abraham Wise soon left Brigham, bound for the bustling port of Whitehaven where he must have been placed on a ship as an apprentice officer. Then, on 26th September 1809, records show that aged 25 he had been appointed master of Wilson Fisher's six-gun brigantine *Swallow*. The Wise family links with the Fisher/Brocklebank families had begun. In 1811 Abraham was master of the larger Fisher/Brocklebank ship *Maranham*. Well set up now, on 4th September that year he married Miss Eleanor Braithwaite, the daughter of John Braithwaite, assistant overseer of the port and a hosiery manufacturer. The bride was soon honoured by having the family's ship named after her, the *Eleanor of Whitehaven*.

They set up home in the village of Sandwith on St Bees Head, overlooking Whitehaven. They had seven children, five boys and two girls: Abraham Vaux, 1812; John, 1814; George, 1817; Mary, 1819; Joseph, 1821; Hannah, 1823; and Francis, 1826. Unfortunately, Abraham Vaux Snr died in 1827 when his ship was at Drogheda, Ireland, which prompted grandfather Braithwaite to get all the boys placed as apprentice officers on local ships. Abraham Vaux, George and Francis subsequently becoming master mariners with Brocklebanks while Joseph was placed as an apprentice on Robert & Henry Jefferson's ship the *Lady Shaw Stewart*, a brig he would soon command.

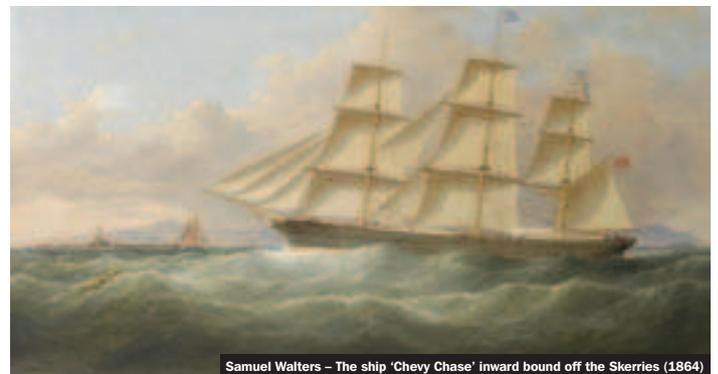
At Whitehaven the Jefferson's (est. 1734) were wine, sugar and rum dealers and at Antigua they were plantation owners and the biggest holders of slaves on the island! Thankfully the slaves were all released in 1834, when the owners were paid generous compensation for their 'Loss of Property'. And the same year young Joseph Wise arrived at Antigua, hence his concern and opposition to the slave system.

Regarding the 'small ship and long voyage' – surprisingly, the crew list for Jefferson's 28-ton sloop *Midge* has survived and c1840 Joseph was taken off the *Lady Shaw Stewart* to serve as mate to Captain Thomas James on a long voyage to Cadiz and back. The sloop was then taken across the Atlantic. Joseph went on to command, in turn, Jefferson's old ship, *British Queen*, then their custom-built clipper-barques, *Antigua* and *Ehen*. The link with Whitby being through the building of the clipper-barque *Antigua* at this port.

Links with the Glover family came in 1850 when Joseph Wise married Hannah Glover, daughter of Captain John Glover, master and owner of the Brigantine *Massereene*. (Hannah's brother was the late Captain James Glover who died at Whampoa, China, in 1848 while in command of the Boadle barque *Rajah Bassa*.) Meanwhile, the Brocklebanks began to develop two distinct trades, one along the coast of South America, and notably to the dreaded Chinha Islands, where working conditions were notoriously bad. As master of the *Kestrel*, Abraham Vaux spent many years in this trade until he died of yellow fever in 1855 while in command of his ship. However, Brocklebanks' main and rapidly developing trade was with India. The ships in this trade were known as 'Indiamen'. George became master of the *Indiamen Patriot King*, *Tigris* and *Aracan*, while Francis commanded the *Harold*, *Arachne*, *Cormorin*, *Cambay* and *Chinsura*.

The story now goes full circle, back to Tom Alfred Wise – via a Captain James Blaxter and his clipper the *Chevy Chase*. Captain Blaxter was born at Leicester on 20th December 1828, the son of another master mariner, Captain William Blaxter who was born in the city of Norwich in 1793. However, James came to Liverpool in the 1840s and served his time on several ships before becoming master of Spratt & Company's ship the *Electric* in 1854. In 1862 he was commanding the Wilson & Company ship *Athelstan*.

Back in Liverpool in 1863 the *Chevy Chase* was under construction at Vernon's shipbuilding yard. The ship was being built to the order of Blythe Brothers, also of Liverpool. She was a handsome iron full-rigged vessel designed for the Cape Horn South Pacific Trade. She made her maiden voyage to Valparaiso, Chile, in 1864 under the command of Captain James Blaxter. His wife Elizabeth decided to accompany him on this long voyage, which was a sound idea for she was pregnant! The couple's daughter Sarah Emma was born at Santiago, Chile, in 1864. (As it happens, the celebrated maritime artist Samuel Walters painted a picture of the ship in late 1864 as she was inward bound when passing the Skerries.)



Samuel Walters – The ship 'Chevy Chase' inward bound off the Skerries (1864)

Time moves on, and 20 years later in 1884, my grandfather, Tom Alfred Wise, married Sarah Ann Blaxter. They had one child, Hannah Gertrude, who was to become mother's half-sister because sadly Sarah Ann died unexpectedly, leaving old Captain Blaxter, quite literally, holding the baby.

However, Tom soon married again, this time to my grandmother, Mary Maria Messenger of 143 Falkner Street, Liverpool. (No 62 recently featuring in the BBC documentary *A House Through Time*.) She was a skilled dressmaker and employed staff at this up-market address to make the garments she designed.

Her father, James Messenger, married Sarah Jane Dyson in 1855 and his son Richard Abraham Dyson founded the world-famous engineering firm of Richard Abraham Dyson, which, in later years, specialised in the construction of military tank transporters. The Dysons once lived at Woodfinlow, Thingwall, near Barnston. The 'modest' 16ft tall Dyson family memorial in Barnston churchyard is almost impossible to miss.

My late mother's more modest memorial lies at the back end of the same churchyard, while an extremely modest stone marks the passing of my father, Frederick William Charles Hollett, who, as a stretcher-bearer on the Somme, had done all he could to relieve the suffering of his wounded comrades. These soldiers will not be forgotten, nor will the brave men who once manned the yardarms of the 'Wandering Beauties' of a bygone age.