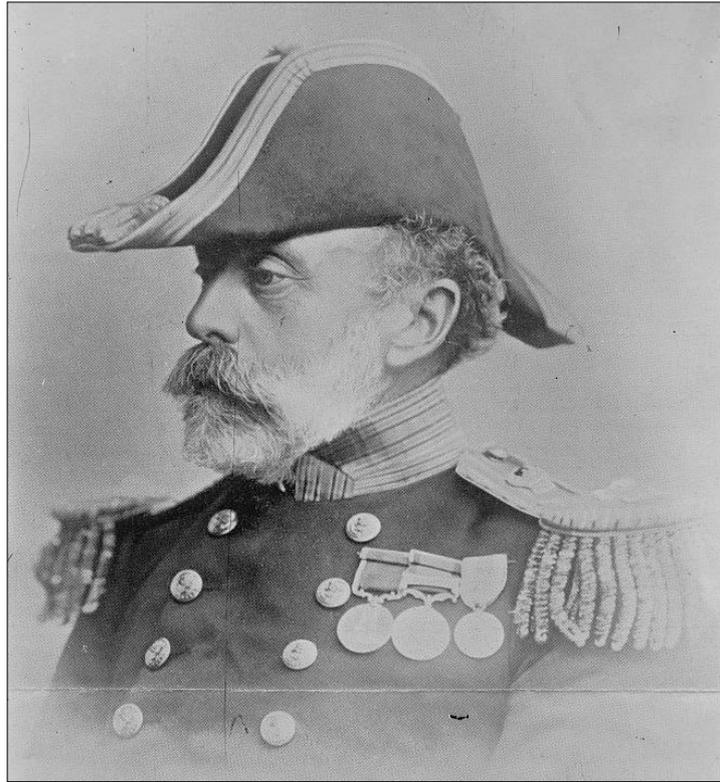


Admiral Henry Craven St. John (1837 – 1909)



Admiral Henry Craven St. John was the son of Charles William George St. John (1809-1856) and Anne Gibson. He was born on the 5 January 1837 in the Ross and Cromarty district of Scotland and entered the Royal Navy in 1852 when he was fifteen.

Between 1869–1873 Henry St John was Commander of the HMS *Sylvia*, a Cormorant class surveying vessel commissioned to sail the seas around China and Japan mapping out the coastline. He was promoted to the rank of Captain in September 1873 "for arduous surveying work in Japanese waters" and continued his association with the *Sylvia* until 1877.

He was commanding officer of the Central battery ship HMS *Iron Duke* in August 1885 and Senior Officer, Coast of Ireland Station in January 1892 before he retired in January 1895. As Admiral Henry Craven St. John he held the office of Naval Aide-de-Camp to HM Queen Victoria between 1887 and 1889.

St John married Catherine Dora Rodney on 8th May 1860 making their home in Stokefield House, Castle Street in Thornbury, Bristol where they raised their nine children.

St John, the Naturalist and Family Man

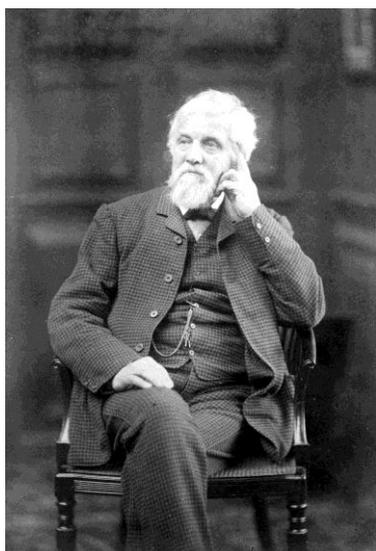
What do we know of St John as a person?

From the age of fifteen St John had spent many long years away from home as he climbed through the ranks at the Royal Navy from midshipman to Admiral, a prestigious position won through hard work and dedication.

Frederick Henry Burchell, a well-known citizen of the market town of Thornbury, recorded his impressions of Admiral and Mrs St John.

*"Excellent people who took a keen interest in all parochial affairs. Also Admiral St. John who lived at Stokefield, a typical Admiral of the Fleet, stern and unbending — not what we should call very sociable — but he was one who required a great deal of homage paid to him and I suppose this was only natural and in accordance with the rules of naval discipline."*¹

Thankfully, we have access to an exceptional collection of letters housed in the Archives of the Natural History Society of Northumbria between Henry and his long term friend and mentor John Hancock which give us a slightly different glimpse into his character.



John Hancock (1808-1890), the North East naturalist and artisan taxidermist, was a close friend of Henry's father, Charles W G St John, visiting the family in their various Scottish highland homes on many occasions. He took a great interest in Henry or 'Harry' as Hancock called him and his brother Frederick Charles (Charlie), demonstrating his taxidermy skills to them and encouraging a love of natural history. Letters in the Society's collection from the two boys beg Hancock to visit them to see the collections they have amassed of shells and eggs.

In later life Henry keeps in touch with Hancock affectionately ending all of his letters with 'Kind Regards' or 'Kind Remembrances.' He sends long letters from HMS Sylvia enthusiastically discussing the birds and animals he has seen, asking Hancock for clarity on species. In one letter his mind turns to the dilemma of Darwinism when he sees so many new species while dredging off the Japanese coast.

"dont suppose me a Darwinite — have not got quite so far yet — but it is difficult to say what one may become in these terrible days of speed — Leaving the sponge as a decided animal — we go a step back, to the Rhizopoda, a creature I presume it may be called, — the development of which almost nothing is known — The point I am after is the line, between the two — It appears evident there is, must be a creature I presume it may be called,— the development of which almost nothing is known — The point I am after is the line, between the two — It appears evident there is, must be a line, but where — by going back & back as science is enclined [sic] now a days. It appears to

me they will suddenly start up by finding themselves, unwittingly gone bang into the clearest, simplest type of vegetable -- and open their wondering eyes & brains with an exclamation, "Good gracious what have we been about" — but let me have your opinion —" (NEWHM:H1996.H67.1048)

St John sends hundreds of specimens back to England for Hancock, including the rare Giant Japanese Spider Crab still on display in the Great North Museum: Hancock today. Both Henry and Hancock display a wry sense of humour when referring to the crab and its history, from being half eaten by Japanese locals to its eventual display in the Newcastle Museum. Hancock writes to Henry, in December 1877,

'numerous visitors have paid their respects to his majesty already'.

There are tantalising glimpses into his family life in the letters when he refers to holidays and his children, like his father before him — he was a family man.

When he completed his book *Notes and sketches from the wild coasts of Nipon with chapters on cruising after pirates in Chinese waters* in 1880 he asked Hancock to review it. Hancock is full of praise,

"I have read it through, which I did aloud to my sister, we are both delighted with the book. Your descriptions of the countries you visited are capital, they make me wish I had been with you."

His mentor, John Hancock, passed away in 1890 so there were no more letters to shed light on Henry's family or his life after his retirement from the Navy.

He died on 21 May 1909 aged 72 and is buried in Thornbury Graveyard with his wife Catherine.

