



Manuscript chart, pen and ink, mounted on linen.

CHARTING THE COURSE OF THE LAST FALMOUTH PACKET

Tracks HMB Penguin W. Leslie Lieutenant and Commander.

Author

LESLIE, W[alter] Lieutenant Commander

Publication date

[1849]

Publisher

Publication place

Physical description

Manuscript chart, pen and ink, mounted on linen.

Dimensions

1000 by 655mm (39.25 by 25.75 inches).

Notes

A fine manuscript chart showing the last four voyages of Her Majesty's Brig Penguin, the last of the Falmouth packets. On her return in November of 1850 Penguin would be refitted as an anti-slavery ship, and saw service between 1851 and 1857 on Africa's west coast.

The Falmouth Packets

HMB was as built and designed as a packet brig for the Atlantic route between Falmouth and Rio de

Janiero. The packet service was essentially a department of the Post Office, under the control of the Post Master General. Packet Commanders would be commissioned by the Post Office to deliver mail along a designated route, using their own crewed and equipped ship, for an annual fee of £1,800. The ships, such as the Penguin, were often built specifically for the packet service, and would be inspected on a regular basis. The ships gained their name from the way the mail was stored aboard ship in packets. The mail was always loaded on to the vessel last so that in the event that the ship was captured the mail, which often contained highly classified information, could be easily jettisoned.

Beginning in the late seventeenth century, the first (and most lucrative) route was from Falmouth to Lisbon. By the end of the Napoleonic Wars new Atlantic routes had opened up, with Rio de Janeiro being one of the more profitable ones. Although the mail contract was not generous, commanders supplemented their income by taking passengers and other freight, usually bullion. For this reason the ships were reasonably well armed to deter would-be pirates or enemy ships – Penguin for instance was fitted with six guns.

By the time Penguin was launched in 1838, the Rio de Janeiro route had become well established, with a packet ship departing each month. The ships would call first at Madeira, then Tenerife, from where they would depart for the Atlantic crossing, either sailing straight to Rio de Janeiro, or first to Pernambuco (on Brazil's northeast coast), then Bahia, and eventually arriving at Rio de Janeiro, where they would dock for between two to three weeks, returning to Falmouth either directly or via Bahia, and Pernambuco. The complete voyage taking around 18 weeks. From 1843 Penguin completed two crossings a year – January-May and July-November.

Even before Penguin's launch in 1838, the sail packets had begun to receive stiff competition from commercial steam ships, and by 1840 the Post Office issued a notice that packet mails would henceforth be dispatched by steam vessels from Southampton instead of Falmouth. The round trip taking nine weeks, half the time of the Falmouth Packets. This was the beginning of the end for the traditional packet service and the start of what we now think of as cruise lines. In May 1851 the final packet ship, Seagull, arrived in Falmouth from Rio de Janeiro, carrying only eight passengers and a small amount of mail.

HMB Penguin

Launched in 1838, the 360 ton vessel sailed the Falmouth to Rio de Janeiro passage from 1839 to November of 1850. Lieutenant Commander Walter Leslie was captain of the Penguin for her last six voyages between 1848 and 1850. At the end of her final voyage (together with Falmouth packet ships: Express, Crane, Linnet, and Pretel) she was fitted out for slave suppression service off the coast of West Africa, where she saw service between 1851 and 1857. From 1857 she was coast guard watching vessel in the Solent. She was broken up in 1871.

Bibliography

Provenance

Price: £2500

Inventory reference: 21957