

Wolff and the Exploding “Tartar”

James Joseph Wolff 1797-1845 contributed much to the gaiety of Southampton in the 1830s and 40s with his flags and firework displays, but nothing came near to the excitement created resulting from his business with the Mexican Government in 1843. First though a bit of background:

Wolff had a flourishing business at 77 High Street with a brass foundry at 43 East Street, and one of his activities was the casting of guns for installing on pleasure yachts, of which there seem to have been many around Southampton at that time. His business was endorsed by the Royal Yacht Club and indeed in August 1838 “*a dozen handsomest brass guns were conveyed to RYS yachts from Wolff’s armoury in the High Street*” - according to the Hampshire Advertiser. The same paper had in 1834 published its approval of Wolff’s products for yachts, and in 1835 the Irish Division of the Royal Western Yacht Club appointed Wolff their armourer, brass cannon founder, etc.

Naturally it was pointless producing cannons without gunpowder, and early in 1838 Wolff put some of his neighbours’ apprehensions at rest by obtaining permission to store 500 lb of gunpowder at the Marchwood Magazines, rather than in his Southampton premises. A sideline resulting from his interest in explosives was the making of fireworks, and on several occasions firework shows were given by Wolff, one such being a great display at a yacht regatta in August 1838 (accompanied by the Truss & Turtle’s excellent band), and in 1840 a huge display with fireworks and flags to celebrate the opening of the Southampton Railway.

FIREWORKS.
of **J. J. WOLFF** Brass Cannon Maker,
of 43, East Street, Southampton, beg to inform
's, the nobility, gentry, and inhabitants of Southampton,
a- that he has always on Sale an extensive assortment of
he FIREWORKS, consisting of Sky Rockets, Jacks-in-
id. the-Box, Mines, Roman Candles, Signal Lights,
Crackers, Sunflowers, &c. Also a great variety of Ser-
pents, from 6d. to 7s. per dozen.
— N.B. Gentlemen supplied with every exquisite dis-
play of Fireworks for evening parties the shortest
notice.
* **WANTED** a respectable steady

Successful as Wolff may have been, he was not a comfortable neighbour to have and the Advertiser reported several altercations involving Wolff. On 15 Feb 1840, John Frampton was on trial for swindling Wolff of goods worth £80, and on 11 April 1840, William Barratt a potential witness found drowned.

26 Sep 1840, Southampton magistrates heard a case against Mr James Knight of the Yacht Agency Office, High Street. James Wolff had drawn the attention of a passing policeman to a display of cannon and carriages left on the pavement. Wolff told P.C.

Friend that he himself had been fined for breaking a byelaw against placing goods on the pavement. An editorial in the same newspaper was severely critical of Wolff's "petty and malignant action".

In April 1843 an indictment was laid against Wolff for a dangerous nuisance, by reason of his erecting at his premises in East Street of a steam engine and melting furnace. The case was postponed to the next assizes by which time it was stated the nuisance would have been abated.

This new equipment may well have been in preparation for an imminent order, which when it finally came to fruition led to the most exciting day's entertainment in Southampton for many a year. As the Advertiser of June 3rd 1843 put it, "***The town of Southampton was yesterday (Friday 2nd) thrown into a state of alarm and consternation, almost indescribable, by the report that the Tartar brig loaded with gunpowder, Shrapnell shells and Congreve rockets, was on fire in the Southampton Docks.***"

Wolff had secured an order from the Mexican Government for twenty cannon of the largest calibre in brass since the ordnance for the Royal George. Ten 18-pounders and ten 24-pounders were required for installation at the fortress of San Juan de Ullos to protect the arsenal. The Tartar, a small brig of 209 tons had been chartered to deliver the order, and it had come from London after loading a number of missiles which had been another part of the order. The ship was moored off what was then known as Westlake's Wharf, now Chapel Wharf, situated at the corner of The River Itchen and Southampton Water. Wolff had delivered his cannon and seen them stowed on board, which accomplished his part of the order worth apparently the huge sum of £14,000 for cannon and fittings. The ship should have sailed on the Thursday, but due to adverse winds her sailing was postponed.

It was on the Friday morning at about 10.30 when the Captain was called from his cabin by a cry of "fire". He saw a mass of sulphurous smoke coming from the after hatchway, and the crew were already in the boat alongside! Unable to do anything alone he joined them and they rowed to the wharf side where they raised the alarm. On shore a calmer Captain Byron decided to try to scuttle the ship, and asked for tools for this purpose, but the wharf was by now deserted and no tools could be found. A man (unidentified) offered to do the job and Byron said he would pay any amount, and eventually an adze and an auger appeared, which the crew used to try to bore a hole and for some reason chop at the bows. Before the hole was completed there was an explosion - a shell apparently - followed by several rockets, and the men pulled away smartly. If the captain had confirmed that there was no powder on board he could have obtained tools and manpower from a nearby shipyard, but as he did not at the time the entire docks area was quickly deserted by men who spread the rumour that there were twenty tons of gunpowder on board, so that nothing less than the destruction of the whole town was talked of.

Most of Southampton soon became aware of what was happening, and two opposing reactions ensued. Those who had heard the gunpowder rumour quitted their houses and fled from the lower town, clogging roads. Those who had not heard the rumour, or who disbelieved it, entranced at the chance of a free firework display sought high buildings and quaysides to get the best view.

The Mayor had been called by Captain Ward, Docks Superintendent, and both worked “with the greatest energy” (read ‘panicked’) to destroy the ship. A message to Lieutenant Yolland at the Ordnance Survey resulted in the arrival of a troop of 30 Sappers and Miners at the dockside. Mr Coster the harbour master had commandeered horses and moved one of the Platform guns into the Dock, where it was pointed at the Tartar and fired by Mr Wolff (under Lt Yolland’s direction). This was after 11 o’clock, the smoke from the after hatch had been followed by flame, smoke came too from the forward hatchway, and then hell broke loose. A huge explosion, apparently from a whole case of shells, made a noise like the roar of artillery. The after deck was torn up and an immense body of flame, splinters of shells (remember Shrapnell?) and wreck of all kinds burst upwards like a volcano, and in a minute the vessel was in flames fore and aft. About 15 shots were fired from the 9-pounder, all of which missed the ship. One shot ricocheted off the dock wall and hit the cliffs on the other side of the Itchen, striking terror into watchers who had gathered there.

The assemblage of spectators was immense – the Marsh, Bridge Road, the walls of the Railway Terminus, the shores of Itchen Beach, Platform, Quay, Pier, vessels in the harbour, the towers of St Michael’s and Holy Rhood, and every spot from which a view could be obtained being crowded. The spectacle was impressive the vessel alternately issuing smoke and flames, followed by an increased number of explosions. Rockets now began to go off, luckily mostly with low trajectories and falling within the harbour, but sometimes directly upwards to a great height, filling the air with columns of fleecy smoke and exploding showers of shells which rained down fire, and one rocket made a direct hit on the great warehouse in the Docks crushing all before it. The bursting of the latter caused great consternation; the Marsh was cleared in an instant; the Dock grounds deserted, and the bugle of the Sappers sounded the retreat! Other buildings were hit; one of the offices of the Railway, and a shed. A large rocket rose to an immense height and exploded like a line of musketry.

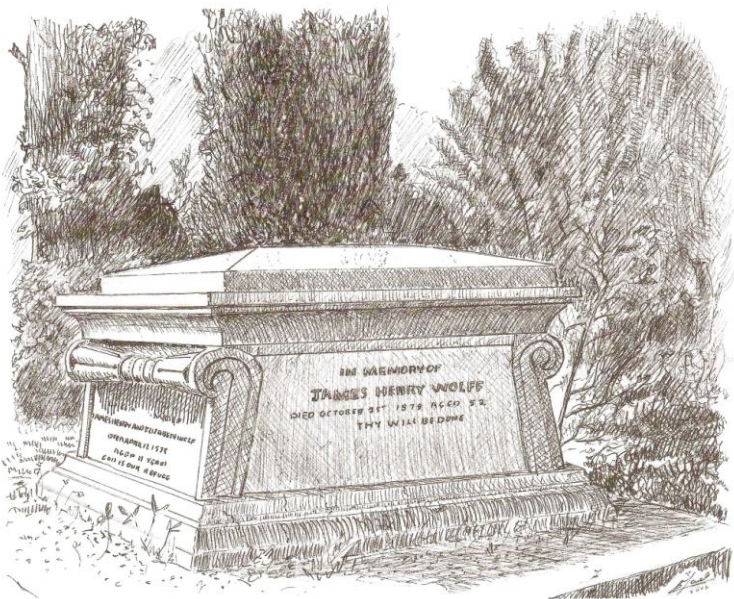
Another ship the *John King* was also in the dock, but the crew had earlier gone aboard and eased her cables, so that when the mooring ropes of the *Tartar* burned through the *John King* was 200 yards away, and luckily none of the rockets hit her. It was after half past one that the explosions became more frequent, including those from ammunition intended for 68-pound howitzers supplied the previous year to the Mexican Government. Finally at half past two the ship now sank bow first so that only her bowsprit was visible above water; her masts had fallen earlier.

An enquiry held by Southampton magistrates a few days later failed to find the cause of the fire.

Although the ship itself was dead loss, it was possible to recover the cannon, and it was luck that the renowned divers Abinett and Son were available, having been about to set sail for Corunna on another recovery job. Two guns that were recovered were tested, but exploded on being fired; this was said to be due to their being made red hot by the fire, and then suddenly being cooled when the ship sank. The whole of the recovered cargo was put up for auction in Southampton on August 15th; this consisted of “20 brass guns weighing 50 tons, 105 tons of shot, five bales of cinnamon, several cases of Port and Madeira wine, porter etc”.

Mexico had been at war with the United States since 1836 (it went on until 1853). At West Point in the US, their trophies include five large brass guns captured at Contreras and Chalultepec in 1847; they were manufactured by in Southampton England in 1842 by J J Wolff.

James Wolff continued in business for a little while longer, although he must have been ailing at the time of the *Tartar* disaster. He had made his will in February 1843, and he died in late February 1845. Although he himself was buried in Holy Rhood on March 1st 1845, there is a vault in Southampton Old Cemetery that is the resting place of no fewer than ten of his descendents, some of whom continued his businesses until the end of the century.



Drawing of the Wolff tomb by Bernard Lavell.

Article by Dave Jacobs November 2010