

Sydney Cove and the Indian Connection

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In 1796, 'a ship nam'd the *Sydney Cove* having been loaded with a cargo of goods upon speculation from Bengal'¹ departed Calcutta and sailed towards the recently established British penal colony of Port Jackson in New South Wales. The ship was owned by the small Calcutta trading company of Campbell and Clark.

During the voyage violent gales battered the ship, eventually forcing Captain Hamilton to run it aground on the 9th February 1797 near a small uninhabited island off the north-east tip of Tasmania. The crew managed to salvage much of the cargo, most of which was eventually sent to Port Jackson where it was either sold at public auction or acquired for the public store. In recognition of this event, the island was named Preservation Island.



This paper looks at what prompted a small Calcutta trading company to undertake such a long and dangerous voyage to an isolated penal settlement with a population of less than five thousand people. Did the cargo contain more than just the '... sweepings of an Indian bazaar ...' as Lieutenant David Collins disparagingly referred to goods from Calcutta? ² To what extent did the *Sydney Cove* cargo impact on colonial taste and lifestyle?

The Penal Colony of NSW

When the *Sydney Cove* left Calcutta in 1796, the New South Wales penal settlement was just eight years old. The 'European' population was tiny, with just 2788 convicts, 634 military officers and civilian administrators, 540 free settlers and some time-served convicts.³ The isolated colony faced a precarious existence, surrounded as it was by inhospitable terrain and almost completely dependent for all its material needs on supplies imported by the government from Britain and other distant places.

In the early years, the government struggled to provide even basic necessities and whenever British supply ships were delayed or lost at sea calamity beckoned. When

the supply ship *HMS Sirius* was wrecked off Norfolk Island in 1790 for example, the provision store '... contained only four months of flour and three of pork at half allowance.'⁴

Supply problems continued to dog the colony for many years. In 1798, a few months after the *Sydney Cove* left Calcutta, Governor Hunter commented on '... the distitute (sic) state of our public store in regard to slops of every kind ...', noting the people were '... nearly naked and great numbers without bed or blanket to lie upon'.⁵

The increasing number of free settlers arriving in the colony complained bitterly at the 'exorbitant prices that are charged for every article that a settler has occasion to use', such as sugar ('this very essential article'), tea ('not less essential than the former'), tobacco ('this article is more in use in this colony than even in Virginia'), soap ('this is a necessity wanted by everyone') and spirits.⁶

To avert starvation and provide appropriate consumer goods it became increasingly apparent that the colony needed to source supplies closer to home. In 1791 Governor Phillip was forced to order the *Atlantic* to sail to Calcutta for urgently needed provisions. During the next 30 years over one third of all ships arriving in New South Wales came from the Indian ports of Bombay, Madras and especially Calcutta.⁷

The Indian Connection

The voyage from Calcutta to Port Jackson was long and treacherous and over ten percent of Indian ships foundered on the outward or return journey. What persuaded the Indian-based merchants to risk such a hazardous voyage when the financial rewards were so uncertain?

As well as being considerably closer to NSW than England, India was the centre of a vast global trading network. Throughout the 1700s and 1800s, a seemingly insatiable demand for oriental goods fuelled an explosion of trade between Asia and Europe. By the late 1700s the Indian-based English East India Company dominated the market and held a monopoly on all direct trade between Britain and countries east of the Cape of Good Hope. The East India Company was not interested in trading directly with New South Wales however, as the potential market was too small and there was little prospect of a return cargo. Private merchants in Britain could not trade directly with the colony because of the East India Company monopoly. It was therefore left to the Indian Agency Houses to fill the void. These were small trading companies owned by British merchants resident in India. Under licence from the East India Company they carried out what was known as the 'country trade', supplying European settlements in the East, from the Cape of Good Hope to Japan. The first Agency House ship to arrive in New South Wales was the *Shah Hormuzear* in 1793. Three years later, the *Sydney Cove*, owned by Campbell and Clark left Calcutta for New South Wales. In total thirty-six Indian vessels arrived in the colony by 1810.⁸

Campbell and Clark was one of the smaller Calcutta Agency Houses. The company was involved in a variety of trading activities, regularly advertising a range of European, Indian and Chinese goods for sale in the *Calcutta Gazette*. As well they had real estate interests and owned a rum distillery near Calcutta.

The Sydney Cove Cargo

Although no cargo manifest has been located, the archaeological evidence and Captain Hamilton's 'Protest' (his description of the events leading to the wrecking and

salvage of the *Sydney Cove*) indicate that for the voyage to Port Jackson, Campbell and Clark assembled a speculative cargo that included soap, candles, tar, vinegar, European spirits, Chinese porcelain and tea and a variety of Indian produce such as rum, rice, sugar, peppercorns, tobacco, leather hides and shoes, salted beef and pork, livestock, indigo and cotton textiles.

‘Spirituous Liquids’

Excessive alcohol consumption was a feature of British life in the 1700s and this was certainly the case in colonial New South Wales where it was readily available from visiting whaling and merchant ships such as the *Sydney Cove*, as well as from the government store, illegal rum stills, and two local beer breweries. Governor Hunter was greatly disturbed by the ‘horrid abuses of spirits’ in the colony and unsuccessfully tried to limit the amount being imported, ‘...the last ships which arrive have brought spirits enough to deluge again this colony ... my positive refusal to suffer this poisonous article to be landed has given much offence ...’¹⁹ In particular Hunter’s anger was directed at the Indian Agency Houses who repeatedly tried to flaunt government restrictions by importing huge quantities of alcohol.

FOR SALE.	
At Messrs. Campbell & Clark's.	
GENUINE OLD LONDON PAR-	
TICULAR MADEIRA WINE,	
at per Pipe,	Sicca Rupees 900
LONDON MARKET DITTO, at per	
ditto,	350 & 500
The above Wine in Chests, at per do-	
zen,	14, 18, & 26
ENGLISH CLARET, from different	
Houses, at per ditto,	45
OLD RED PORT, at per ditto,	20
COGNAC BRANDY, bottled in Europe,	
at per ditto,	30
JAMAICA RUM, at per ditto,	16
HOLLAND'S GIN, at per Cask,	32
PALE ALE, SMALL BEER, in butts,	
at	150
DITTO DITTO, in hogheads,	80
PORTER, in ditto,	80
In Chests, at per dozen,	7
Calcutta, October 12, 1796.	

Campbell and Clark sent over 7000 gallons of alcohol on the *Sydney Cove*, including at least 105 casks of Bengal rum, 4 pipes of Madeira wine, 2 casks of brandy and over 1500 English, French and Dutch glass bottles. Analysis of the sealed contents of two of the squat English-made bottles found they contained a type of beer while ten English-made wine-style bottles contained either a fruit cordial or more likely red wine, an expensive drink in the late 1700s, enjoyed by English officers and gentlemen. Other bottles are thought to have held Dutch gin, expensive French cognac brandy and Spanish Madeira.

In Calcutta, Campbell and Clark specifically advertised their most prestigious spirits (such as cognac brandy) as having been ‘bottled in Europe’. However, the Campbell and Clark seal found on many *Sydney Cove* bottle corks suggests the company were also filling bottles in Calcutta with European spirits they had imported to India in bulk.

This was a common practice in Calcutta as it generated greater profits for the companies.

By far the largest quantity of alcohol carried on the *Sydney Cove* was casked rum, a very popular drink, consumed by all classes of society in the 1700s. Campbell and Clark produced rum from locally produced sugar cane at their large distillery near Calcutta. Indian rum was not highly thought of, '... the rum at present used here is the pernicious spirits distilled by contracts ... produces rum equally sour and unwholesome as the very ingredients from which it is distilled ...'¹⁰ Possibly the company was trying to get rid of surplus stock when they included Bengal rum in the cargo rather than the superior Jamaican rum which they were regularly advertising for sale in Calcutta.

Food

A variety of different foods were sent on the *Sydney Cove*, including salted beef and pork, sugar, rice, vinegar, peppercorns and live cattle, sheep and chickens. While these foods were probably all grown and processed in India, they mirror the growing British preference for commercially prepared foods such as boiled and stewed meat (particularly beef), sweet foods and glass packaged goods.

On board were an unknown number of cows, horses and chickens, which were probably intended to be used to develop the colonial breeding stock. In 1797, there were only 327 head of cattle in the colony and the slaughter of domestic animals for food was prohibited until a self-sufficient breeding stock had been established.¹¹ The quality of breeding animals imported into the colony was frequently criticised. Writing in 1823, John Atkinson observed,

... the horned cattle of the colony are derived from various countries, England, the Cape of Good Hope, India and other places; they have been bred with little distinction, and are of a mixed and mongrel description ... a very large proportion of the horned cattle of the colony are derived from the Bengal (Zebu) breed ... they are small, and of little use for the dairy, but fattened upon inferior keep, and make very strong and hardy working stock.¹²

Over 385 butchered beef and pig bones were recovered from the wreck. They represent at least 36 salted rib and vertebrae sections of mature pigs and cows, neatly chopped into standard 4lb (2 kg) victualling portions which would have been small enough to fit into the wooden casks in which they were pickled and transported. In 1797, when the *Sydney Cove* sailed, fresh meat was difficult to come by in the colony. The conservative colonial population generally shunned eating native game, relying instead on salted meat rations from the government store as their principle source of subsistence. In spite of the scarcity of supplies, the government attempted to provide 7lb (3.5 kg) of beef or 4lb (2 kg) of pork per person per week, considerably more than rural labourers in England and Ireland were then getting.¹³ Salted meat deteriorated rapidly during transport and the colonists frequently complained about the quality of their rations. Indian meat had a particularly poor reputation compared with meat from Ireland and England and analysis of the *Sydney Cove* beef bones confirms they derived from the cheapest, boniest part of the small Zebu Indian breed.

Clothing and Leather Goods

The *Sydney Cove* carried a variety of Indian clothing items, including at least 160 shoes and small cubes of indigo, a natural deep blue fabric dye, widely grown and processed in India in the 1790s. Although none have survived, written records indicate the cargo included cotton squares known as 'chopped ramouls' and large silk and

cotton 'bandan handkerchiefs' which were commonly used as neck scarves, head coverings and bundle wraps.

India exported huge quantities of brightly painted and printed cotton and silk cloth in the 1700s. The European trade declined with the advent of textile manufacture in Europe during the Industrial Revolution and the *Sydney Cove* voyage possibly provided an opportunity to get rid of a consignment of cloth from the Indian coast which the company had recently received.¹⁴

The pointy-toed, low-heeled, straight (right and left the same) goatskin shoes were almost certainly made and assembled in India, although their style is typical of the shoes worn by fashionable British men during the 1790s. They were transported in bundles of about ten shoes. These shoes are quite delicate and an English observer commenting on Indian shoes in the 1790s noted, '... the leather has a fine lustre, and they look very well, but could scarcely be used in rainy weather.'¹⁵ Shoes became a regular cargo item on Calcutta Agency House ships, including the *Thynne* in 1800, the *Betsy* in 1803 and the *Union* and *Venus* in 1810.¹⁶



The *Sydney Cove* carried at least six rolled-up sheepskin hides. The lack of livestock meant there was no tanning industry in the colony and consequently a lack of leather hides for making shoes, clothing and tools. Leather tanning was an established village industry in Bengal and these hides most likely came from India. Campbell and Clark again sent a cargo of 'hides for bellows' on their ship *Castle of Good Hope* in 1803.¹⁷

Chinese export porcelain

Huge quantities of Chinese porcelain were exported to the West throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Chinese potters developed new forms and decorative styles for the Western market, quite different from the wares produced for their domestic and imperial markets.

From the 1700s, the Indian Agency Houses became increasingly involved with this trade and Calcutta became the main distribution centre for Chinese tea and export porcelain, which was sometimes referred to as 'Indian China'.

Although the emergence of European porcelain production led to an abrupt decline in the European trade in the 1700s, the Indian Agency Houses continued advertising 'useful' domestic wares for sale in India.¹⁸ The recovery of over 250kg of Chinese

export porcelain from the *Sydney Cove*, as well as numerous fragments from other colonial archaeological sites indicates it was also being transhipped from India to New South Wales.

At least 182 (15 dozen) dinner plates, 48 hot water plates and an unknown number of soup plates and large bowls were recovered from the wreck, but no matching dinner sets or dishes for the preparation, mass serving or storage of food. The excavated items are all handpainted with European-influenced landscape scenes. Very similar pieces have been excavated from a number of late eighteenth-century archaeological sites in Australia, the USA and Canada.

The enamelled salad bowls are decorated with five different colours in what the Chinese referred to as 'foreign colours'. Although only of medium quality, these bowls were probably quite expensive as enamelling required a double firing.

The *Sydney Cove* carried bales of tea and a large number of traditional Chinese porcelain tea bowls and matching saucers, handpainted with at least four different blue and white landscape designs and two enamelled blue and gilt designs. There is no archaeological evidence of single purpose items such as milk jugs or sugar bowls. Tea was introduced into Europe in the 1600s and by the 1790s 'black' tea with milk and sugar had become the universal British drink. Elaborate social rituals and expensive Chinese porcelain bowls became associated with the drinking of tea and the high price (twenty-two shillings) paid at auction in Port Jackson for 'a common cup and saucer'¹⁹ salvaged from the *Sydney Cove* indicates both the quality of the wares and the willingness of Port Jackson residents to pay for the trappings of a refined society.

The soap, hairbrushes and porcelain washing wares carried on the *Sydney Cove* reflect the growing western interest in personal hygiene in the late 1700s. Divers found at least 12 crudely-painted matching Chinese export porcelain washing sets consisting of covered chamber-pots (potties), deep washing basins and water bottles (gugglets). The Chinese did not use chamber-pots; these were made specifically for the European market.

Similar porcelain items have been found on late eighteenth-century ships wrecked in California, the Solomon Islands and Goa, India, indicating the flourishing, global reach of these mass consumption articles.²⁰ In Sydney, fragments of almost identical chamber-pots were recovered from two archaeological sites at opposite ends of the social spectrum; at First Government House and the pre-1815 home of George Cribb, an emancipated convict and butcher.²¹

Conclusion

The *Sydney Cove* cargo and, by extrapolation, the Indian Agency House cargoes had a profound impact on life in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century colonial Australia. Between 1793 and 1810, the majority of the consumer goods sold in the colony arrived on Indian Agency House ships. They contained a wide range of goods of varying quality which the British transport and supply ships were unable to supply to the colony because of distance, lack of space and because they served a different function. The cargoes originated from three main sources: India, China and Europe, via the transshipment centres of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay.

The cargoes consisted of goods which the East India Company and Agency Houses already had access to through their global trading activities and these goods would have been familiar to British settlers in New South Wales. Some of the Indian and Chinese goods were beginning to fall out of favour in Europe with the emergence of

manufacturing industries during the European industrial revolution, and New South Wales may have represented a welcome new market to offload otherwise unfashionable stock.

Generally the goods were functional and useful rather than purely ornamental. They included basic necessities, recreational goods and more luxurious items. The cargo reflects changing social practices occurring in western society in late 1700s such as an increasing interest in consumerism, personal cleanliness, a hankering for comfort and attractiveness in the home, fashionable dress and the adoption of social rituals associated with smoking, drinking alcohol and tea.

- 1 *Historical Records of NSW*, Vol. 3, p. 277.
- 2 D Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in NSW*, Vol. 1, London, 1798, p.452.
- 3 M Nash, *Sydney Cove: The history and archaeology of an eighteenth-century shipwreck*, Hobart, 2009, p. 17.
- 4 *HRNSW*, Vol.2, p. 332.
- 5 *HRNSW*, Vol.3, p. 493.
- 6 *HRNSW*, Vol.3, pp. 367-368.
- 7 M Staniforth, *Dependent colonies: the importation of material culture and the establishment of a consumer society in Australia before 1850*, Adelaide, p. 118.
- 8 Staniforth, *Dependent colonies*, pp. 122-123.
- 9 *HRNSW*, Vol. 3, Sept 1796.
- 10 Nash, p. 149.
- 11 Nash, p. 161.
- 12 J Atkinson, *An account of the state of agriculture and grazing in New South Wales*, Facsimile edition, Sydney, 1823, p. 63.
- 13 G Karskens, *Inside the Rocks: the archaeology of a neighbourhood*, Sydney, 1999, p. 64.
- 14 Nash, p. 169.
- 15 Nash, p. 165.
- 16 Staniforth, *Dependent colonies*, pp. 122-123.
- 17 Nash, p. 166.
- 18 *Calcutta Gazette*, 23 February, 1795:2
- 19 Collins, *An account of the English colony in New South Wales*, Vol. 2, pp. 147-148.
- 20 Tripathi, AS Gaur and Sundares, 'Exploration of a Portuguese shipwreck in Goa waters, western coast of India', *Bulletin of the Australasian Institute for Maritime Archaeology*, Vol. 30, 2006, p. 131.
- 21 M Staniforth, *Material culture and consumer society: dependent colonies in colonial Australia*, Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, New York, c.2003. pp. 97-98.

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