

William Henry Millgate

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A “Cape Horn” Sailor.

DEATH OF MR. W. H. MILLGATE, OF NEWPORT.

As briefly announced in our last issue, the death occurred on September 24th, at the age of 77, at 95 Castle-road, Newport, of Mr. William Henry Millgate, an old sailor with a very interesting experience of the China tea clippers, and brother of Ald. J. C. Millgate, J.P., of Newport.

Mr. Millgate served his apprenticeship in the tea clipper, the James Shepherd, trading to China. He knew the Cutty Sark well. To him steamships were contemptible things, and “steamboat sailors” land lubbers. Even when the Queen Mary sailed on her maiden voyage he was still contemptuous. “She won’t last,” he would say. “She’s too big. I can remember the time we threw out a rope to the steamboats and offered to tow them along.” He was what he called a “Cape Horn Sailor,” having sailed round the Cape in a gale, an experience which few men still alive can claim. When relating the events of that voyage he would describe how he climbed aloft and, while there clung on by his eyebrows, adding “That’s why I haven’t any now.” He could tell harrowing tales of typhoons and other storms in the China Seas, when to use his own words, “Ships were going down all around us.”

ENTERTAINED BY CANNIBALS.

Once, in a hurricane, the James Shepard was blown off course and grounded on a coral reef called Lord North’s Island, inhabited by one-time cannibals. The natives swarmed aboard and, seizing the arms of the men, rubbing their noses along them, this action being interpreted by the sailors as a bad sign, that they were being sniffed before being eaten. It was imperative, therefore, that the Chief should be propitiated, and Mr. Millgate was sent ashore with a bottle of rum and a bucket of ship’s biscuits. The natives followed him along the coral, and between the trees, stopping when he stopped and refusing to go in front, until he was in a thoroughly nervous state. This however, turned to anger, when he realised that they were merely stealing his biscuits which, by the time he reached the Chief, were considerably depleted. A girl was standing by the Chief wearing a necklace of shells. With great ceremony the Chief removed the necklace and put it round Mr. Millgate’s neck as a token of welcome and friendship. After that all was well. The natives remained friendly and when Mr. Millgate returned from that voyage he brought with him (and his relatives still have) a native canoe carved with flints (their only implements) from a tree-trunk, a number of tattooing instruments made from fish bone, cut into wonderfully fine points again with flints, and fishing tackle consisting of shells cleanly cut in two, with feathers stuck in one end, and twine, infinitely stronger than ours, made by hand from the bark of a trees. The necklace he gave to Harry Arnell, another apprentice on the James Shepard, also a native of Newport, in exchange for the canoe. To lighten the ship, so she might be refloated, her cargo of tea was thrown overboard. Mr. Millgate used to describe how the natives dived and brought up large cases, with which they swam ashore without effort.

He knew all the old shanties, but those he sang most were “Heave for Rio,” “Whisky, Johnny, whisky,” “Leave her Johnny, leave her,” and “Reuben Renzoa.”

Mr Millgate gained his mates certificate in the old sailing days and has been living in retirement for many years.

Transcribed by Roger O'Nions for the Friends of Newport & Carisbrooke Cemeteries

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