

JRA Hall of Fame ~ Brian Platt

by Graham Cox

Chempaka & High Tea

Brian Platt: 1930 – 1989

Western sailors have long been fascinated by Chinese junks, particularly by their rigs. Joshua Slocum called it the handiest small boat rig in the world and fitted it to *Liberdade*, the 35 ft sampan/dory he built in Brazil after being shipwrecked there. However, until Blondie Hasler converted *Jester* to junk rig in 1960, the usual way to sail under the rig was to do so in a Chinese-built junk. A number of people made long voyages in junks in the first half of the 20th century. The only one to do so singlehanded, however, was a young Englishman, Brian Platt.

Brian was working for the British Colonial Office in Malaya when that country gained independence in 1957. Finding himself retrenched from his career at the age of 27, he decided to sail to North America and start a new life there. To that end he bought an old 27 ft teak cutter, *Chempaka*, and set off for Singapore, on what was intended to be the first leg of a Pacific crossing. The boat proved less suitable than he'd hoped, and the typhoon season was more daunting than he'd anticipated, so he shipped the boat from Manila to Hong Kong, intending to refit there. Taking stock once he'd arrived, he decided to sell *Chempaka* and build a

new boat, along the lines of a Chinese junk.

Brian's original idea was to get the builders extensively to modify the design, to make it more like a Western yacht, but he was unable to find a builder willing to do this. In the end he decided to build a fairly traditional junk, 32 ft LOA, with 9 ft beam, displacing 7.79 tons and with three, stayed, deck-stepped masts. The design was modified by adding an external, cast-iron ballast keel, and using fibreglassed plywood for the decks and streamlined cabin.

The builders did not approve of these modifications. To their eyes, the traditional junk was a superior model, and Brian later concluded that this type of vessel was indeed more capable than he'd thought. In time, he came to believe that the junk's tight turn of bilge, high buoyancy and freeboard, combined with shallow draught, contributed to excellent sea-keeping characteristics.

At times, negotiations with the builders took on farcical proportions. They flatly refused to handle the 3000 lb ballast keel, saying it could not be done. They were somewhat embarrassed when three elderly Chinese men delivered it from the foundry, manoeuvred it off the truck, down a set of stairs and under the boat, using a

combination of tackles, levers and rollers.

The builders also refused to fit the interior Brian designed. He had to rebuild it after taking possession of the vessel. He also had to redo a number of other items, such as leaking skin fittings. The masts were cut down from a large, second-hand, racing-yacht spar. Brian was later to find that a crucial error had been made with these, no doubt due to the builder's unfamiliarity with hollow spars. Nonetheless, they were essentially good builders, and the boat proved to be strong, dry and seaworthy.

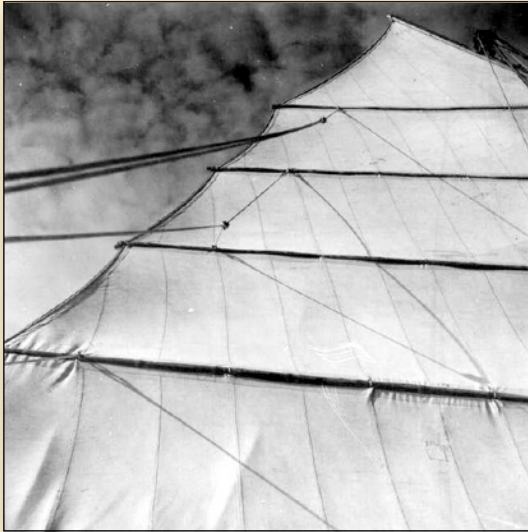
All this took more time and money than planned. It was not until 7th May 1959 that *High Tea*, as he'd named his junk, left Hong Kong for North America via Japan. He found that she would sail at 45° to the wind in smooth seas and steady winds, but in rougher weather he had to fall off more. Strong headwinds initially drove him back towards the Philippines. Comparing *High Tea* to *Chempaka*, he was delighted with how powerful, stiff, buoyant and dry she was, noting that the boat stood up well to the pounding. He did wish he'd fitted baffles to the bilges, discovering the broad, shallow bottom



Brian

made it difficult to clear bilge water when heeled.

High Tea was made to steer herself to windward, by sheeting the mizzen more loosely than the main, as you would any ketch or yawl. Thus the mizzen spills wind as the boat rounds up, the centre of effort moves forward and the boat falls off again. If the boat falls off the wind, the mizzen fills and drives the boat back up. On *High Tea*,



The mainsail

the mizzen was too small to be totally effective, so the mainsail was also sheeted to spill some wind. As Brian noted with pleasure, the fully-battened sails never flogged. In light winds the vessel would hold its course unassisted for long periods, even under power. Not that he could power for long. *High Tea* was fitted with an ancient diesel engine and it proved to be a nightmare. It used oil at a prodigious rate, much of which ended up in the bilges.

After an initial scare about a typhoon that failed to materialise, Brian pushed on east, developing, as all voyagers do, a routine that suited his temperament and the needs of the ship. He slept at night but woke every two hours to check things, more frequently in

unsettled weather. Sometimes, when the moon was bright, he took his latitude from the Pole Star. In the mornings he studied Japanese over a pot of tea, took a sun sight, bathed, ate the first of his two daily meals, and did necessary maintenance, followed by a noon sight. An afternoon sight was recorded in the log but not plotted unless discrepancies in his position occurred.

In the late afternoon he prepared and ate his evening meal, and then washed up, aiming to be finished before nightfall. Then he made a vacuum flask of hot chocolate for the night lookouts, retiring to bed when the sun set. If possible, he let the boat look

after herself, except in the afternoons when he paid particular attention to the course. Self steering wasn't always possible, of course, and then his routine suffered.

Shortly before landfall in the Philippines, he was approached by a Formosan fishing boat. He invited them to come alongside, something he quickly regretted, as the crew swarmed aboard and wanted him to give them much of his equipment. He got rid of them with difficulty and was pleased to see the mountains of Luzon appear the next day.

After repairing a broken batten by fishing it together with split bamboo and fencing wire, he sailed on to Okinawa. It was a hard passage, with strong following winds. At first he had to steer by hand, forgoing food

and rest, as *High Tea's* high, buoyant stern and wide mainsail made the boat round up all the time. An experimental self-steering device, based on a windmill, was a failure.

Eventually, after being knocked down and suffering a gybe that broke two battens, he ran downwind under foresail alone. *High Tea* had double sheets, so that by hauling them both in tight, he could keep the foresail sheeted amidships,

with the leech on the centreline. The boat ran sedately at two knots, although it rolled furiously. Occasionally the wind caught the stern and broached the vessel, bringing her beam on to the waves, where she lay quietly, effectively hove to. He could tell when this happened because the motion would suddenly ease. He would then go on deck and run off again.

Landfall on Okinawa proved testing. After accidentally passing it and having to beat back, a current almost swept them onto a reef. He only saved *High Tea* by

anchoring with a 200 m warp attached to the bitter end of his anchor chain. Then he got disoriented and couldn't find the harbour. Luckily it was high tide because he was later horrified when he saw all the coral he'd sailed over while making his approaches. When he finally made it ashore, he discovered that his father had reported him overdue.



High Tea sailing

Apart from some pleasant social engagements, a lot of excellent milkshakes and a supply of good bamboo for new battens, Okinawa proved disappointing. No progress was made on fixing either the recalcitrant engine or the abortive windmill self-steering device.

Brian then sailed to Yokohama, where a final refit was undertaken. On the way up, he experimented with ideas to improve downwind sailing. He'd hoped to pole out an old trysail on a bamboo pole, as a sort of spinnaker, but it was not a success. Instead, he used the spar as a bowsprit and carried an extra headsail. Another sail set between the main and the mizzen increased speed and improved balance with the wind on the beam, but he still had to steer most of the time, which was inefficient and exhausting.

High Tea sailed from Japan on 21st September 1959, and almost immediately ran into Typhoon Vera. At first, he ran off under deeply-reefed main, hand-steering and trying to outdistance the storm, but eventually exhaustion and increasingly strong gusts of wind forced him to drop the sail. He then hoisted the mizzen and foresail, lashing the tiller for a while, before hoisting a triangular, loose-footed sail athwartships, with sheets led back to the tiller. Nothing worked, and by sunset he was forced to take in all sail and lie ahull. He was not keen on doing this with his shallow, flat-bottomed vessel, but *High Tea* rode the waves without trouble.

Luckily for Brian, the centre of the typhoon passed well south of him and

by the next day he was underway again with reefed sails. Suddenly, the mainsail fell down. Looking aloft, he discovered the top of the mast had snapped off, bringing down not only the sail but the shrouds too. The mast, deck-stepped in a tabernacle, was obviously going to come down next, so Brian pulled it down with a rope before it could do more damage. The spar ended up over the side.

While he was attempting to recover it, a Japanese fishing boat came up and offered to help. They took the spar on board their boat and towed *High Tea* into Hanasaki on the island of Hokkaido. Unfortunately, they were inattentive rescuers and collided with his vessel several times during the tow, cracking the foremast as well. In port, he discovered that the carpenters in Hong Kong had cut the original spar down incorrectly, so that the solid section at the truck was only nine inches long, instead of three feet.

Two weeks later, *High Tea* was underway again, close-hauled against a NE breeze. Eventually the wind backed into the north and he managed to self steer on a broad reach, by taking a line from the middle foresail batten to the windward side of the tiller, counterbalanced by shock-cord to leeward. With the foresail sheeted in as tightly as possible and the mainsheet slacked, the boat held course. When *High Tea* rounded up, the main feathered and the foresail drove the bows off. When the ship fell off, the foresail was blanketed by the main and the shock-cord pulled the tiller to leeward.

Later, when the wind backed into the west, he used the same technique to run downwind. He reefed the mainsail and hauled the luff in to the mast, so that it took longer for the foresail to be blanketed. He called the technique "teetering", which sounds appropriate. Once, the boat gybed when a control line tangled. The topping lifts were in need of repair on this occasion, so the sail was too low down the mast. It caught on the main hatch, resulting in a torn sail and broken battens.

In stronger winds he sailed downwind with just the foresail set and the helm lashed. Strong and steady following winds saw him half-way across the Pacific in just three weeks.

In a brief calm, he saw a sunfish alongside. Having never heard of these creatures, he thought he'd discovered an unknown sea-monster and was a bit disappointed when later he discovered he hadn't.

The weather was shockingly cold, given that it was 16th October when - against advice - he'd finally cleared Japan (a winter crossing of the North Pacific was considered foolhardy). As a result, self steering became essential to survival. He never changed his clothes or washed, and spent most of his time shivering in his bunk with a book.

After a brief calm in mid-Pacific, *High Tea* got underway again, beam-reaching in a moderate northerly, Brian's favourite wind. The northerlies were always moderate and steady (though they must have been cold, coming off the Arctic), while the Westerlies built up large following seas that made self steering difficult, and the southerlies were often gale-force. The wind always blew from one of these directions.

One night, alerted by a change of motion, he came on deck to discover the mainmast once again over the side. After a difficult struggle, he managed to get the mast and sail back aboard, using the rolling of the boat to his advantage.



Brian helming



High Tea at anchor

The mast had snapped off at the truck yet again. Brian came to the conclusion that the timber in the old spar had not been as sound as he'd assumed.

After considering his options, he carried on for America under foresail and mizzen, being uncertain of what sort of assistance he could get at any of the islands nearby, and being reluctant to return to Japan. The foresail and mizzen represented only 100 sq ft of his original 500 sq ft of sail area, but at least the winds were fresh and fair. He had plenty of food and water, a strong boat,

and was confident of completing the voyage as long as nothing else went wrong. Unfortunately it soon did.

At first, all went well. He continued to self steer with the helm lashed when the wind was abeam. When the wind backed into the west, he sheeted in both foresail sheets, hauling the leech amidships, and took lines from the foresail's middle batten up both sides of the deck to the tiller, which was also loosely lashed. If the bow paid off in either direction, the windward line pulled the tiller across and put the boat back on course. To give the vessel more drive, he squared the mizzen off, tying the lee sheets to the rigging to stop the sail gybing.

Broad-reaching, when the wind went SW, was more problematic. He tried unsuccessfully to set a storm jib forward, using the broken mainmast as a bowsprit, but the flogging sail threatened the rest of the rig and eventually tore out its clew. Determined to keep the vessel self steering, he then beam-reached in SW winds, going off course towards the south. He expected milder weather further south anyway. It was now winter in the North Pacific and he could expect gale-force winds about 20% of the time. He found that F5-6 winds gave him all the drive he needed, however. Stronger winds just created rough seas that slowed progress.

Until he left Japan, Brian had always put into port when he had problems and found someone to fix them. Now, with 5000 miles of ocean to cross, he had to fix things himself. Repairing his

reading glasses, replacing running rigging, rewiring battens to the sails, and otherwise tending his ailing rig, all kept him busy. He even baked bread, though was disappointed that he could never produce a loaf with a crispy crust.

By 10th December, he was well east of the longitude of the Hawaiian Islands (although a lot further north). They were the only practical, alternative landfall if he could not continue his passage to the east. He knew now that he could make landfall on Hawaii if necessary, but was confident of making the mainland. Then, on 11th December, he struck further trouble. The foremast had taken some severe blows when he was winching the broken mainmast aboard, and he'd later damaged one of its chain plates when trying to use the broken spar as a bowsprit. This chain plate now pulled out and the foremast broke. The mast and sail ended up over the side.

Because it was a much smaller spar, he was able to drag it aboard without too much difficulty. He re-stepped the mast after trimming the broken stump to fit the tabernacle. Getting it up proved to be something of a struggle in the large swell that was running. The sail, however, was damaged beyond repair. He set an old lifeboat mainsail he carried for just such an emergency, though it was baggy, and *High Tea* was more under-canvased than ever.

He also had to hand steer

much of the time now. The winds became fickle and he motored for a few hours every day, but he was still only making 30 miles noon to noon. Overcast skies prevented him from getting sights after 20th December, but he made landfall on the Californian coast on Christmas Eve. That night he identified several lighthouses and discovered he was 20 miles north of his intended landfall at the township of Eureka, an excellent result under the circumstances.

On Christmas morning he attempted to approach the harbour entrance under power but ran out of fuel at a critical point. His voyage might have ended on the rocks but, luckily for him, a US Coastguard vessel was out having a run and towed him in. The Coastguard crew shared their Christmas dinner with him and gave him his first hot bath in 70 days.



Cat

High Tea had completed the first single-handed crossing of the North Pacific, and shown that a traditional Chinese junk, albeit modified, was a suitable vessel for long sea voyages. It was also a considerable personal achievement. Brian had shown himself to be a competent and resourceful ocean voyager. He was briefly fêted by the press, articles appearing in newspapers all over the world.

High Tea was fitted with new masts in Eureka and eventually sailed down to San Francisco, but the boat took a long time to sell. Long after he'd left for Montreal to start a new career, Brian trucked the boat to New York where she eventually found a buyer. She ended her days in a boatyard of broken dreams, where she still lies today, forlorn and unloved, probably beyond restoration.

Even more unfortunately, the voyage of *High Tea* proved to be the highlight of Brian's life. He experienced a series of failures in business and ended up struggling with bankruptcy and depression in later years. In 1989 he fell from a ledge in his warehouse in France and died.

In recent years, his brother, Anthony, began reading Brian's unpublished manuscripts and documents relating to the voyages of *Chempaka* and *High Tea*. Struck by the quality of the material, he edited the text, and, along with his other brother, Colin, self published a charming book, *Parallel 40 North to Eureka*.

The result is a unique record of the adventures of an unusual and

resourceful man in a bygone era. The story describes the end of British Colonial days in the Far East, and tells a riveting tale of a sea voyage in the days before electronic navigation, self-steering devices and synthetic materials made our lives so much easier. It is sad that Brian didn't publish the work soon after he completed his voyage, when interest in such adventures was more widespread than it is today. He was a talented writer and may have found the success that ultimately eluded him.

Parallel 40 North to Eureka is now available for purchase from the JRA, while copies last. It is a worthwhile addition to the library of anyone with a serious interest in the history of small-boat voyaging and junk rig.



High Tea