THE LIFE AND TIMES OF
CAPTAIN SAMUEL CORNEL PLANT,
MASTER MARINER AND SENIOR INSPECTOR,
UPPER YANGTZE RIVER,
CHINESE MARITIME CUSTOMS
A.C. BROMFIEL WITH ROSEMARY LEE

How it started!

Grave Number 8496 28479
Section 12
Hong Kong Cemetery
In memory of Captain Samuel Cornell Plant
Upper Yangtze River Inspector of the
Chinese Maritime Customs
The first to command a merchant steamer plying the river (1900).
Born Framlingham Suffolk 8th August 1866
Died at sea 26th February 1921
Also in memory of Alice Sophia Plant,
Captain Plant’s wife and devoted companion throughout
his 20 years of toil on the dangerous section
of the Yangtze River between Ichang and Chunking.
Born 29th November 1870. Died at Hong Kong 28th February 1921.
(Restored by members of the Merchant Navy Guild, Hong Kong
1957. Researched by
Rosemary J. Pyatt, 23rd December 1997)

Archibald Little and the Three Gorges

In 1859, a young Scot named Archibald Little, (he was a very
large man), started working as a tea-taster for a German company in
Kiukiang. He came of a prominent, expatriate, Shanghai family, one
of his brothers being a doctor in Shanghai and another the editor of the
North China Daily News. He soon became bored with tea-tasting and
set up in business for himself, becoming interested in many aspects of
trade, brokering and insurance. He was one of the first expatriates to
see the immense possibilities of trade in Szechuen Province and beyond in Tibet. He became convinced that the only way to develop this was to find a way to bring steamers through the Three Gorges between Ichang and Chunking.

Little, still of the opinion that the Upper Yangtze could be navigated by steamships, made the passage in a junk from Ichang to Chunking in 1887. En route he carefully surveyed the main areas of risk and, on completion of this 400 mile journey, was even more sure that he was right.

He raised the money to build "Kuling," a stern-wheeler, built on the Clyde and designed specifically for service on the Upper Yangtze. She was shipped out to Shanghai in pieces and reassembled there. However, when she arrived in Ichang, the Chinese authorities would not let her proceed. Apparently the Chefoo Convention stipulated that Chinese steamers had to be the first to ply this section of the river. (This restriction was abolished after the Sino-Japanese War by the Treaty of Shiminoskei in 1895.)

In any event, Little had to abandon this attempt to realise his dream. "Kuling" was sold to Chinese owners at a vast profit and traded on the Yangtze up to Ichang for many years, but never beyond.

Not in the least deterred, in 1898, Little built a wooden-hulled, twin screw, steam launch named "Leechuan." Once again he made the passage from Ichang to Chunking. Apart from having to be pulled up the stronger rapids by trackers the trip was a brilliant success. (Trackers were Chinese coolies who lived in villages near the rapids on both banks. Several hundred would be employed to haul vessels up the rapids.) Unfortunately, being only 55 feet long and full of engine, "Leechuan" carried no cargo.

Heartened by his achievement with "Leechuan," Little returned to London in 1899 to raise money to build a vessel that could navigate the Three Gorges and carry sufficient cargo to make its service financially viable.

**How Samuel Plant came to China**

Little was successful in raising money to build "Pioneer." By the
beginning of 1900 she was under construction at the yard of Dennys of Dumbarton. She was a side-wheeler, 180 feet long, 60 feet beam across the paddle boxes, drawing 6 feet and having a deadweight of 150 tons with accommodation for many deck passengers.

Having made all the arrangements for “Pioneer” to be shipped to Shanghai in pieces, Little returned to London. Whilst having lunch at the Oriental Club with some of his backers and advisors, he was introduced to Captain Samuel Cornel Plant. Captain Plant had recently returned to England having served for several years in command of steamers on the Tigris and Euphrates, rivers well known for their navigational difficulties. When Little learned of the captain’s previous experience, he did his best to persuade Plant to come to China and take command of “Pioneer.” Plant promised to give the matter some thought. For whatever reason, he subsequently agreed to go along with Little.

“Pioneer” was shipped to Shanghai and reassembled. Plant and his wife, Alice Sophia, took ship to China, joined “Pioneer” and in early June 1900 the attempt on the Three Gorges began. With Plant in command, “Pioneer” made the trip from Ichang to Chunking in 73 steaming hours over seven days. She was held up for three days at Hsin T’an Rapids. On arrival at Chunking she was greeted by most of the expatriates living there and it is said that the banks of the river were black with hundreds of junkmen who had crowded to see this latest barbarian wonder.

The Aftermath

Bad luck again struck Little. There were rumblings of trouble along the river that were to culminate in the Boxer Uprising. The British Consulate in Chunching commandeered “Pioneer” and used her to evacuate expatriates from the trouble spots. (It is not known whether Little was compensated for the loss of “Pioneer” or not. She was eventually handed over to the Royal Navy, renamed H.M.S. “Kinshi” and finished life as H.Q. Ship, Senior British Naval Officer on the Yangtze River.)

Plant’s Career

Plant, having left the employ of Little, bought himself a houseboat
junk and used this to trade up and down the river between Ichang and Chunking, all the while studying the river and its treacherous rapids. He soon gained the deep respect of all the junkmen he came in contact with and was given the name Pu Lan Tian by them.

After trading in this way for some years he was approached by the Chinese owned Szechwan Steam Navigation Company to assist in the design of a purpose built steamer to trade on the Upper Yangtze. This vessel “Shutung” was built in Southampton by Thorneycrofts for £6,000. She was 115 feet long, 16 feet beam and drew 3 feet. Under Plant’s command “Shutung” operated a 14 day service between Ichang and Chunking. She carried 12 First Class passengers, 66 deck passengers and 60 tons of cargo in lighters lashed alongside the vessel. The service proved to be very popular and a second vessel “Shilling” was commissioned.

In 1910 Plant was offered the post of Senior Inspector, Upper Yangtze in the Chinese Maritime Customs (CMC). He accepted and, in the course of the next few years, compiled a ‘Handbook for the Guidance of Shipmasters on the Ichang-Chunking Section of the Yangtze River.’ He also wrote a slim volume entitled ‘Glimpses of the Yangtze Gorges.’

Plant retired from the CMC in 1919. In recognition of his outstanding service, the CMC and the Chinese Government built him a small bungalow on the outskirts of the village of Xintang. This bungalow perched on a small promontory overlooking the mouth of the Xiling Gorge and the Hsin T’an Rapids. Steamers using this stretch of the river saluted Captain Plant by sounding their whistles and he would reply by waving his hat or handkerchief.

1921 and the Plants decided to return to England for a short holiday before returning to Xintang to live out the rest of their lives. They were feted everywhere they stopped on the journey downriver to Shanghai. Here they took the Blue Funnel ship which was to take them to England. Sadly, en route to Hong Kong, Captain Plant came down with pneumonia and died at sea on 26th February, 1921. Tragedy struck again when Mrs. Plant died in Hong Kong shortly after arrival. They were buried together in the Colonial Cemetery, Happy Valley (now called Hong Kong Cemetery).
The British Consulate in Chunking collected subscriptions from amongst the expatriates and other interested people to raise a memorial to Plant. This took the form of a 30 foot high obelisk constructed of dressed blocks of pink granite on a brown sandstone base. It was erected at Xintang Village where the Dragon Horse Stream flows into the Yangtze. The inscription, which was in both English and Chinese, was eradicated by the Red Guards in 1968 after they had, unsuccessfully, tried to blow it up.

Unless it is moved, the monument will be inundated by the raising waters when the dam across the Three Gorges is completed. Plant’s beloved rapids will become small eddies on the surface of a huge man-made lake. Hundreds of tracker villages will have been moved to other locations, some far from the river. A tradition of 5,000 years endurance will be gone forever.

The above is an account of Captain Plant’s professional life in China. However, gaps occur in both his early professional life and in his private life.

As you have read, Archibald Little met Samuel Plant at the Oriental Club in 1900. Prior to this time Plant had commanded steamers on the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates but we have been unable to find information on his Mesopotamian career.

We know Samuel Cornell plant was born on 8th August, 1866 in Framlingham, Suffolk. His wife, Sophie Alice Peters was born on 29th November, 1870 in Hoddesdon in the County of Hertford to an illiterate shoemaker and his wife. Samuel Cornell and Alice Sophie, as she appears on the Entry of Marriage, were married in the Consulate General in the District of Bushire in the Province of Fars, Persia on 16th April, 1894. His profession is listed as a master mariner, nothing is given for Alice Sophie.

What was a young woman of 24 years doing in Bushire and how did she meet Captain Plant?

In 1921, en route to Hong Kong and home leave, Samuel Plant died on board the “Teiresias” on 26th February. His death certificate gives as the cause of death ‘right lobar pneumonia and heart failure.’
He was 55 years old. His wife died on 28th February, 1921 in the Hong Kong Civil Hospital. Both are buried in Section 12 of the Hong Kong Cemetery. (photograph)

On reading the report of their funeral in the Hong Kong press, another mystery emerges - that of their two adopted daughters.

In our research we found mention of them only once, in the detailed report of the funeral in the South China Morning Post of 3rd March, 1921. Theirs was a large funeral conducted by the Bishop of North China and attended by representatives from the large shipping companies as well as the Navy. We read...'The chief mourners were the two Chinese adopted daughters of the deceased...,' whom, it goes on to say, were to be looked after by Butterfield and Swire 'pending ascertainment of the provision made for them by their deceased guardians,' No where else have we found mention of these children.

What happened to them?

In publishing this short article we hope to hear from readers who may be able to contribute to the completion of the Plant story.

Acknowledgements

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1 [Hon. Ed. – Does anyone know what became of it?]
Plant Memorial Xintona Village
The Plants’ Grave, Happy Valley Cemetery, 1999