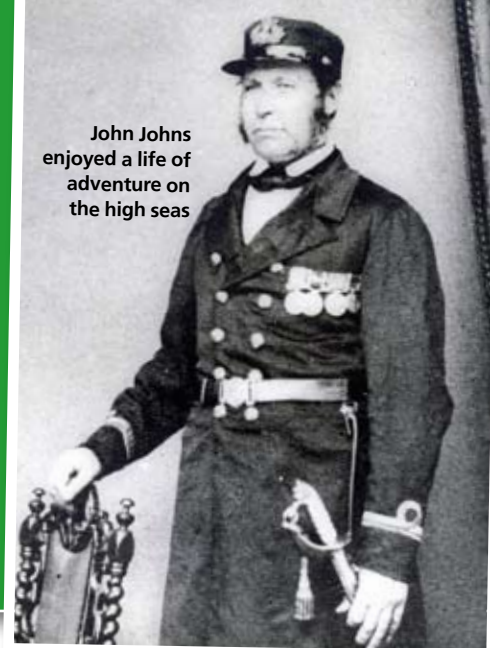


My ancestor sailed the world with Charles Darwin

John Johns' life at sea began as a 15-year-old boy when he joined HMS *Beagle* and set sail on a celebrated voyage of discovery



John Johns enjoyed a life of adventure on the high seas



Jac Lee works as a development director for a global medical education company. Jac is keen to hear from other *Beagle* descendants.
✉ email jjonathan.lee@btinternet.com

AS HMS BEAGLE set sail from Plymouth in December 1831, no one could have imagined that such an unremarkable vessel would sail into the history books as the most famous voyage of scientific discovery ever undertaken. It was on that journey that Charles Darwin forged the theory of evolution, changing our view of the world forever. But also among the crew that day was 15-year-old John Johns (JJ), who had signed up to the navy as a First Class Boy, under the command of Captain Robert FitzRoy.

As Jac Lee, John's great great grandson, has discovered, John spent five years sailing the world with FitzRoy and Darwin. He later took part in five wars, including the Crimean War. But it's John's time on the *Beagle* that has truly captured the imagination of Jac, who has a PhD in evolutionary biology.

"It's all absolutely fascinating," says Jac. "JJ went on to have a distinguished career in the navy, but the main thing for me is that he was on the *Beagle* with Darwin. The fact that John travelled the world on a journey that went down in history really makes his life resonate with me, especially considering my background in biology."

Having grown up around Devonport Docks in Plymouth in the 1820s, John

would have heard stories of the ill-fated first voyage of the *Beagle*, which saw the Captain shoot himself after a bout of depression. He would have also been aware that 'coffin brigs,' the nickname given to ships like the *Beagle*, were likely to sink in heavy weather.

SAILING INTO THE UNKNOWN

"It's that human aspect that fascinates me," continues Jac. "This was a young lad going off to sea, sailing into the unknown. As an apprentice sailor, he was a 'main top boy' so he had to climb the top mast and release the sails, which must have been pretty frightening. On the previous voyage one of the main top boys was washed off and drowned. A lot of the same crew were on the second trip so John must have heard these stories."

At least John had a good captain in FitzRoy, who refitted the *Beagle* to ensure it would cope with rough seas as part of a lengthy hydrographic survey. To get an

It was dangerous, but it must have been a wonderful adventure

idea of life on board ship, Jac has read widely about the voyage: "FitzRoy wanted a companion because he knew he was prone to mental illness; that's why he picked Darwin. And John just happened to find himself on this ship, which defined the rest of his life, really."

To verify the family stories he'd heard as a child, Jac tracked down John's service record, which details his adventures. "He was clearly a decent sort because while some of his shipmates disappeared into exotic ports, JJ completed the entire voyage before being paid off in 1836," says Jac. "He was promoted twice, he didn't run away and, as far as I'm aware, he wasn't flogged, though I shudder to think about the number of giant tortoises he might have eaten."

Circumnavigating the globe, John managed to visit the Cape Verde Islands, Brazil, Chile, the Galapagos Islands, Australia, Tahiti and Cape Town. "It was dangerous, but it must also have been a wonderful adventure," says Jac. "For that reason I have a lot of admiration for John and a certain amount of jealousy. I wish I'd had similar adventures."

But what did John make of Charles Darwin? It's a question Jac has pondered: "He must have seen this curious man collecting specimens. I'd love to know how he reacted when the *Origin of the Species* came out because I suspect he was a religious man. I can only speculate, and I wish he'd kept a diary, but I'm intrigued by his thoughts on the issue."

One thing is for certain: John's life at sea earned him respect. The obituary of his daughter in the *Oldbury Weekly News* said of John: "He was a veteran of five wars and had the medals of the Crimean

War, the China War, the Baltic War, and the Russian War of 1854. He also had the distinction of

sailing with Captain FitzRoy and Professor Charles Darwin in the memorable voyage of '*The Beagle*'."

That's quite some career, so it's hardly surprising that Jac has spent more time researching John than other ancestors. As Jac says, "I have plenty of agricultural labourers too, but JJ is a great character so I think he deserves all this attention. There's a rich seam of adventure there and, as I'm sure you can tell, I'm proud to tell his story." ■ Daniel Cossins

TAKE IT FURTHER

- View the *Beagle* crew list at our website
- 📄 www.bbcwhodoyouthinkyouare.com

NEXT MONTH → My ancestor rescued Bradfordians stranded in Brazil



HMS *Beagle* in the Straits of Magellan, off the southern tip of South America