

In the same vein

by Przemysław Myszka



Photos: SOIC Ship Management AB

We wrote about the Gothenburg-based Greencarrier Group taking over *The Swedish Ship Götheborg (Göteborg III)*, the replica of the 1738-launched *Göteborg I*, in the previous issue's *Transport miscellany*. The sailing ship has just undergone critical maintenance. Its jib mast, which shrunk over the years, was taken off. New iron rings, heated to almost 800 centigrade, were placed to hold the mast below the deck. All so that *Göteborg III* could set sail again. She'll go on a sea trial this August, from Gothenburg to Stockholm. Then, in April 2022, the ship will embark on a seven-month-long journey, with Shanghai as her easternmost destination point.

Sweden joined the Far East trading race on 14 June 1731 when the Swedish East India Company was formed. Securing a 15-year-long monopoly, the Gothenburg-based enterprise could start carrying Swedish timber, tar, iron, and copper to the East, importing tea, porcelain, and silk on the backhaul. The venture went bankrupt after 82 years but managed to generate substantial wealth by carrying out 131 voyages with 37 different vessels. Among them was the 58 m-long (incl. bowsprit, almost 41 m without it) and 11 m-wide 830t *Göteborg I*, constructed at the Terra Nova shipbuilding yard in Stockholm.

As if by some mysterious force

On 12 September 1745, the ship was about to make a third back-from-Asia call to Gothenburg. Having only 900 m to the berth, *Göteborg I* veered to starboard, lost her rudder function, and hit a well-known navigational obstacle (since that time known better as the "*Göteborg's* rock" or the "East India Shallow").

Fortunately, none of the crew died (originally 130-men-strong). Much of the cargo was salvaged, too, including tea, porcelain, spices, and silk. The sinking was a mystery, however. *Göteborg I* had an experienced pilot, while the weather and sea conditions were favourable on that day. Or at least it seemed so on the surface. The winter-through-spring climate of 1744-1755 created the perfect storm for a navigational phenomenon called dead water on that very day.

Dead water, regarded as a sailor yarn back in the day, posed an unexpected, grave threat. The Norwegian Arctic explorer, polymath, and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Fridtjof Nansen described it, "When caught in dead water *Fram* appeared to be held back, as if by some



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mysterious force, and she did not always answer the helm. In calm weather, with a light cargo, Fram was capable of 6 to 7 knots. When in dead water, she was unable to make 1.5 knots. We made loops in our course, turned sometimes right around, tried all sorts of antics to get clear of it, but to very little purpose."

Göteborg I didn't even have the chance to wrench herself free. Captain Eric Moréen declared, "The impact was so hard that the front of the ship, which had struck the rock, was lifted 4.5 feet (1.4 m)



Photos: Wikimedia Commons



out of the water, and as the side had been holed, the ship soon began to take in a lot of water; it could be seen from the pump's water-level gauge that the water was 20, 30 and within a few minutes 60 in (1.5 m) deep inside the ship."

With fanfare

The ship was pinned to its resting place for several years but eventually sank to the bottom. *Göteborg I* had to wait till 9 December 1984 for divers from the Gothenburg branch of the Swedish Society of Maritime Archaeology who retrieved 38 pieces of porcelain. Two years later, it was confirmed that the finds come from the vessel in question. The Gothenburg Maritime Museum received a green light from the country's National Heritage Board to excavate the site. During the summers of 1986-1992, a total of 5,750 finds was fished out (some 10% of the original load). It was mainly porcelain, but also tea, mother-of-pearl shells, galangal, pepper, silk fabric, ingots of tutanago, cannonballs, lead shots, rapier handles, sword hilts, rigging material, and objects belonging to the officers and crew.

Just as her insides surfaced, so to say, so did an idea to build a replica of *Göteborg I*. The concept quickly caught fire – and sponsors. On 11 June 1995, the keel-laying ceremony took place in Gothenburg. Two silver coins, one from 1745 and the other from 1995, were placed in the halved joints of the 33 m-long keel. Joakim Severinsson was responsible for the construction and historical design of the ship, while Det Norske Veritas for approving the blueprints. Still, to build a vessel, one needs a shipyard. What remained of the disused Eriksbergs quay gave life to Terra Nova, honouring the historical yard. A ship hall was erected, alongside timber and rigging workshops (incl. a sail loft) and a forge.

The plan was to build *Göteborg III* using traditional techniques. That said, due to regulations, the ship's interior and bowels house a few modern solutions (apart from the headroom being 10 cm



higher than the original one, to make, well, room for sailors' heads who are today taller than their counterparts two centuries ago). There's a diesel engine that powers propellers (thanks to which another dead-water accident won't occur), plus satellite navigation and communications equipment, modern facilities for the crew

(incl. lavatories, washing machines, desalination gear, ventilation, refrigerators), watertight bulkheads, and fire protection. The rigging – ten tonnes of hemp ropes, 1,000 blocks, and almost 2,000 m² of linen sail – was also made after the fashion of the 18th century.

Göteborg III was launched on 6 June 2003 and finally completed in 2005 at the cost of SEK250m (about €40m), out of which 40% came from public funds. The same year, in October, the ship embarked on an 18-month-long voyage to China. The rotating crew of 80 people sailed from Gothenburg to Shanghai via Vigo, Cádiz, Recife, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, Fremantle, Jakarta, and Canton. On the way back, *Göteborg III* visited Hong Kong, Singapore, Chennai, Djibouti, Alexandria, Nice, Gibraltar, and London. In Gothenburg, she was greeted by China's





Photos: SOIC Ship Management AB

President Hu Jintao (who, interestingly, visited Sweden chiefly to do so) and the Swedish royal couple Carl Gustaf and Silvia.

Alas, stormy clouds began gathering over the ship's masts. The East Indiaman Götheborg Foundation, whose members included such heavyweights as Volvo, SKF, Stena Line, and the Port of Gothenburg, discontinued its economic support in 2010. A non-profit organisation operated by Swedish East India Company was quickly set up to take over. Yet, the question of financing remained unresolved. The Gothenburg Municipality was willing to shoulder the maintenance costs, stating that sponsors should cover the expedition costs. After 2010, *Göteborg III* made two European tours only, a short one in 2012 (30 June-3 August) and a longer one the year after (6 May-7 September).

The mission

In mid-2019, Greencarrier declared the company would fund *Göteborg III*'s future sailings, rescuing her from becoming a stationary museum. "Better still," somebody in Gothenburg probably thought, "Let's take over the Swedish East India Company from the Ostindiefararen Götheborg foundation, including the replica." The deal was cut.

Greencarrier subsequently established SOIC Shipmanagement, whose "[...] mission [...] is to ensure that *The Swedish Ship Göteborg* is kept in an excellent condition and will continue to sail the oceans of the world." To that end, an expedition with a mission is in the making. "International trade has positive effects on all three dimensions of sustainability; economic, social, and environmental. The expedition's aim



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is to bring forward Swedish innovations as an important and necessary part of the solution towards our vision of creating a sustainable future. East Asia comprises a number of important and growing markets," SOIC Shipmanagement says on its website.

As for the April 2022 voyage, Greencarrier's subsidiary underlines, "*The Swedish Ship Göteborg* will head out on an East Asian expedition. In the same vein as in our history, the mission is to create new business opportunities for Swedish companies."