

Notebook

In the wake of the Beagle

Peter Davies

From the all-too-modest service career of *HMS Beagle*, it could never have been divined that she was destined to become one of the most famous ships ever to sail the seven seas. Commissioned in 1820 as a ten-gun brig — a two-masted square-rigger, and one of the lowlier forms of naval life — she never saw action, and spent most of her first few years in reserve, moored and unmanned.

In 1825 the pace of her life quickened, when she was adapted as a survey ship. A third, fore-and-aft rigged, mast was added, turning her into a barque, improving her looks and, more importantly, her sea-keeping qualities.

Her first voyage, a hydrographic survey of South America which began in May 1826, was, however, a less than auspicious affair. Much useful data was collected for Admiralty charts, but her commanding officer, Captain Pringle Stokes, became so depressed by the problems of surveying in the dreary waters around Tierra del Fuego that he shot himself, and died a lingering death.

Beagle's apotheosis began with the appointment of Stokes's successor for her second survey voyage which began in October 1831. Her new captain was Robert Fitzroy, a meticulous surveyor and meteorologist who had had temporary command of *Beagle* after Stokes's death.

Far from holding in contempt his unfortunate predecessor, Fitzroy had been made aware not only by Stokes's fate but by the suicide of his uncle, Viscount Castlereagh, in 1822, of the dangers — all too real in the splendid isolation of command — of allowing oneself to become mentally beleaguered by adversity. (He was prophetic in his fear that his uncle's mental illness might run in the family, ending his own life by slashing his throat with a razor in 1865.)

Casting around among colleagues for a "gentleman companion" whose conversation might alleviate the solitary rigours of the voyage, Fitzroy accepted the recommendation by a friend of one Charles Darwin, a young naturalist in search of opportunities to widen his knowledge. Neither man could know that this decision would have such momentous conse-



The Beagle off the Galápagos by John Chancellor

quences on the voyage of the *Beagle*, leading in 1859 to the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, a book whose enunciation of the theory of evolution rocked religious beliefs to their foundations and shook the scientific thinking of a century and beyond. In this process the reputation of *Beagle's* master was, of course, totally eclipsed in history's pages by that of his illustrious passenger.

One of the ironies of their companionship was that Fitzroy was an austere religious fundamentalist, whose convictions were not in the least swayed by the five path-breaking years he spent in Darwin's company. Politically, he was as staunch a Tory as Darwin was committed Whig. Yet both men, who perforce had to make the best of each other, acknowledged the other's qualities. Darwin admired Fitzroy's endurance and workrate, while *Beagle's* skipper found his passenger to be "a very pleasant mess-mate".

It is to recall these events, and to inspire a rising generation of scientists and young mariners, that the *HMS Beagle* Project Wales, a non-profit company, charitable status pending, has been founded by David Lort-Phillips, a Pembrokeshire farmer and social entrepreneur, and Peter McGrath, author and yachtmaster.

It aims to celebrate the bicen-

tenary of Darwin's birth in 2009 by building a full-scale replica of the *Beagle* at Milford Haven and sailing with a crew of some 30 young scientists and mariners in the wake of *Beagle's* 1831-36 voyage. The project will be relying for the £33 million cost of the replica on donations from corporate sponsors and individuals.

After a shakedown cruise in British waters, the replica will begin her circumnavigation of the globe. Thereafter, she will take on a new lease of life as a sailing classroom and laboratory. She will have dedicated space for sampling and research — focusing on climate change and its impact on biodiversity and human society. She will provide a platform for experiments and fieldwork, which can be flashed from her cameras via a website to labs and classrooms the world over.

Thus, as David Lort-Phillips — appropriately a descendant of John Lort Stokes who accompanied the 1831-36 voyage and then commanded *Beagle* during her third voyage, to Australia in 1837-43 — points out, this reconstruction of the *Beagle* and her historic voyage is not a single act of celebration. It will ramify in the years to come, to provide a continuing source of education and adventure.

further details from
www.thebeagleproject.com