

BY THE NOT SO OLD CURATOR

As it Was

European hydrographers surveying distant waters in the 18th and 19th centuries whenever possible used the native names for the features on their charts. When communication with local tribes proved difficult names had to be devised; often descriptive of the features concerned or flattering senior naval officers or government ministers towards whom the Captain was well disposed.

Captain John Moresby R.N., when surveying off the north-east coast of New Guinea in HMS Basilisk during the years 1873-74, virtually transferred the names of the persons or places he had known and loved as a boy in a beautiful corner of West Somerset in England to a tropical seascape nearly half the world away.

John Moresby spent his childhood (during the 1830s) in the village of Allerford and his autobiography records many fond memories of the 'peaceful valley, bounded on the north by Porlock Bay . . . still untouched by railroads and the devices of modern science, still unsophisticated and infinitely charming to mind and eye'. His father, then a captain on half pay, rented a large farm called Allerford House (the dower house of the Acland family) from 'his close friend and distant connection Sir Thomas Acland, the bountiful and beloved lord of all the broad acres and moorland surrounding Allerford'. As a teenager he joined the Royal Navy as a Volunteer 1st Class in H.M.S. Victor, and after rising through the ranks he eventually found himself as a captain, commanding HMS Basilisk in the seas surrounding New Guinea.

The north-east coast of New Guinea, even at this late date, had not been fully charted and what information was known was patchy, being based on the work of Bougainville in 1768 and D'urville in 1840, with some off lying islands being charted by D'Entrecasteaux in 1793 and Capt. Simpson in 1872. The question of the charting of this area had been raised in June 1872 when it was suggested a ship of war based at Cape York should go and survey this area, but the Hydrographer thought this was unsatisfactory and 'the Basilisk might examine [the coastline] with advantage, while not otherwise employed'. Although the Basilisk was not a surveying vessel and there was no surveyor on board the Hydrographer thought 'Capt. Moresby has shown himself an intelligent officer in such matter and has a taste in this direction' and he informed Moresby of the work which needed to be undertaken. In addition to the surveying duties Moresby was trying to find a new and shorter route between Australia and China; he had already visited the south coast and discovered, surveyed, and named Port Moresby (after his father) in 1873.

He arrived in the Fortescue Straits just before Easter 1873, working his way north-west into Milne Bay which he surveyed and named after the Senior Naval Lord of the Admiralty (Sir Alexander Milne, Bart., Admiral of the Fleet, G.C.B.) who Moresby had met in the 1840s, and the 'cluster of islets at its head, after the home of my childhood, The Allerford Group'. The choice of Allerford reflects the happy time spent there during his youth as he describes Milne Bay as a 'secure haven . . . fringed all round by graceful cocoa-nut palms [with] pretty native houses . . . there was no unfriendliness', sentiments which reflected his description of Allerford. They left on April 30 and shortly afterwards came across a group of islands which he named the Killerton Group.

When Moresby returned to the area the following year he continued his journey to the north-west, passing anxiously around East Cape in a zigzag course, whilst the crew were cowering in their light clothing from the pitiless rain. This time he was accompanied by a hydrographic surveyor, Lieut. Dawson who in September 1873 had been appointed by the Admiralty to the Pearl and he was instructed by the Hydrographer of the Navy to be attached to the Basilisk to 'proceed on surveying duties to the North Coast of New Guinea - where you will be under the orders of Capt. Moresby'. After passing Cape Nelson the Basilisk moved into the newly named Porlock Bay where 'the natives were absolutely naked, and repulsive-looking in the extreme; they were of a darkish colour, and wore their hair in long ugly ringlets like pipe-stems'. When Moresby landed here all the villagers fled taking every article with them, except one native who threw a spear at the party, and he noted that they had no human bone ornaments like those villagers to the eastward. After leaving Porlock Bay they came to a third large bay 'which I named Dyke Acland, after my old friend the late Sir Thomas Dyke Acland'.

Upon leaving Dyke Acland Bay the party came into another large bay named Holnicote Bay, at the western end of which is Caution Point named on account of the uncertain soundings they obtained. Moresby records the great excitement generated by their arrival.

We anchored about half a mile from the shore opposite a considerable village, which was immediately plunged into the wildest excitement. Conches were blown, and a tumultuous gathering of armed savages took place on the beach opposite the ship. It happened to be one of our penny reading nights, and they evidently took the singing and loud chorus, borne to them across the waves, for a defiance, for they chanted back a war-song in return.

The Basilisk was on her way home and she eventually paid off in 1874. However, there are several original documents relating to the nomenclature of this area which have survived. The first two running surveys of the area were drawn in 1874 by Lieut. L.S. Dawson, R.N. assisted by Navigating Lieut. T.L. Mourilyan and the officers of H.M.S. Basilisk under the direction of Captain John Moresby. They cover East Cape to Cape Killerton including the D'Entrecasteaux Islands, and Cape Killerton to Cape Cretin, both of which are colour manuscript surveys with graduation. These surveys in addition to portraying the general topo-graphy and hydrography, also show the problems which

the surveyors faced when undertaking this work. A note under the heading of 'General Remarks' explains why so many names were given by Moresby to this stretch of coastline, 'The general nomenclature by order of Captain Moresby, added to in minor details, by Lieut. Dawson:- opportunity not offering for obtaining Native names' which is further exemplified at the north-east end of Porlock Bay where a legend states 'Natives troublesome', and at the north-west end of Holnecote Bay (sic) is a note underneath Caution Point which read 'Natives suspicious'. The surveys were approved by James G. Goodenough, Captain and Commodore 2nd Class commanding the Australian Station, who after all could hardly refuse to approve as Moresby had named a bay and an island after him.

The resulting changes to the Admiralty Charts were quite dramatic and the extract printed here is based on the revised chart (number 2764) showing all of the new work undertaken by Moresby and Dawson, the previously known coastline, and the route from Eastern Australia to China.

These features he named are still shown on the current Admiralty charts, although charting this part of New Guinea is the primary responsibility of the Australian Hydrographic Office. However, when Navigating Lieut. Mourilyan copied out his survey he made a small error and incorrectly named the Allerford Group ã he called them the 'Aleford Islands'. This incorrect name has been on the printed charts since September 1873.

<https://www.hydro-international.com/content/article/as-it-was-24>
