

Curtis Lampson

Born 1806. Fur trader and financier of the first transatlantic cable.
Life story by his great great grandson James Trelawny Day.

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Contents

1. Introduction
1. John James Kennedy (1821-1885)
2. Curtis Miranda Lampson (1806-1885)
3. Charles Arthur Day (1813-1892)
4. George Fiott Day (1819-1876)
5. Family Tree
6. Principal Sources and Notes

This life story sets the story of Sir Curtis Lampson in the context of three other members of his extended family. All four are ancestors of the author, James Trelawny Day, who contributed this life story to Lives Retold in 2021. The article previously appeared in the Genealogist's Magazine, and is archived here with acknowledgement and thanks.

1. John James Kennedy (1821-1885)

I am sure that many people must have stumbled across some strange connections and coincidences when researching their family history. This is certainly true of my own family as described below.



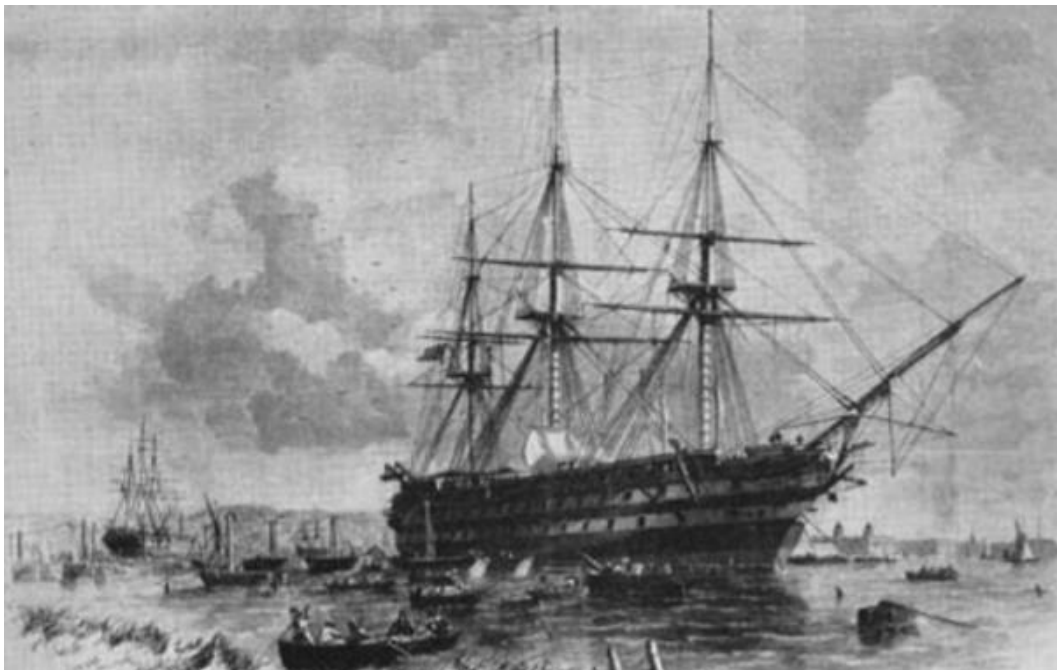
My Mother's grandfather, John James Kennedy, was born on the 21 April 1821 at Waterford in Southern Ireland, where his father was the Archdeacon of the Cathedral. At the early age of 12 he decided to join the Royal Navy and entered the Royal Naval College at Portsmouth in June 1833. As a Midshipman he took part in the first opium war of 1840 and subsequently spent time on the South African station off the Cape of Good Hope. John James Kennedy. At the outbreak of the Crimean War in 1854 he was serving as a Lieutenant in the Mediterranean fleet.

The Emperor Nicholas of Russia had deemed that the moment was favourable to annex a large portion of the ailing Turkish Empire, including Constantinople. In view of the possibility that the Russian fleet from Sebastopol might hazard a sudden raid on Constantinople, Great Britain and France decided to despatch a combined fleet into the Bosphorus.

John James was part of the 1000 strong sailors and fifty officers of the Naval Brigade that were landed with their ship's guns to take part in the siege of Sebastopol. Sailors manned thirty seven of the eighty guns in action, including Naval thirty-two pounders that replaced twenty-two guns disabled in the batteries. John James served for the whole year that the Naval Brigade was on shore, from the 1 October 1854 until 15 September 1855, including the battle of Inkerman. A contemporary witness to the aftermath of this battle (5 November) describing the horror, wrote:

'Monday 6th. Henry told me that Alma was child's play to this! Compressed into a space not much exceeding a square half-mile, lay about 5000 Russians, some say 6000; above 2000 of our own men, exclusive of French, of whom I believe, there were 3000; lines upon lines of Artillery horses, heaps upon heaps of slain, lying in every attitude, and congregated in masses - some on their sides, others with hands stiffening on the triggers of their muskets; some rolled up as if they died in mortal pain, others smiling placidly, as though still dreaming of home: while round the batteries, man and horse piled in heaps, wounds and blood - a ghastly and horrible sight.'¹

On 13 November 1854 John James was promoted to Commander, 'for courage and endurance displayed by him whilst serving in the Naval Brigade in the trenches before Sebastopol'. Shortly afterwards, on 1 February 1855, he was appointed as Commander (i.e. second in command) of HMS *Agamemnon* 91 guns, the first ship of the line to be designed for screw and sail. *Agamemnon* had been laid down at Woolwich in 1849 and launched in 1852.

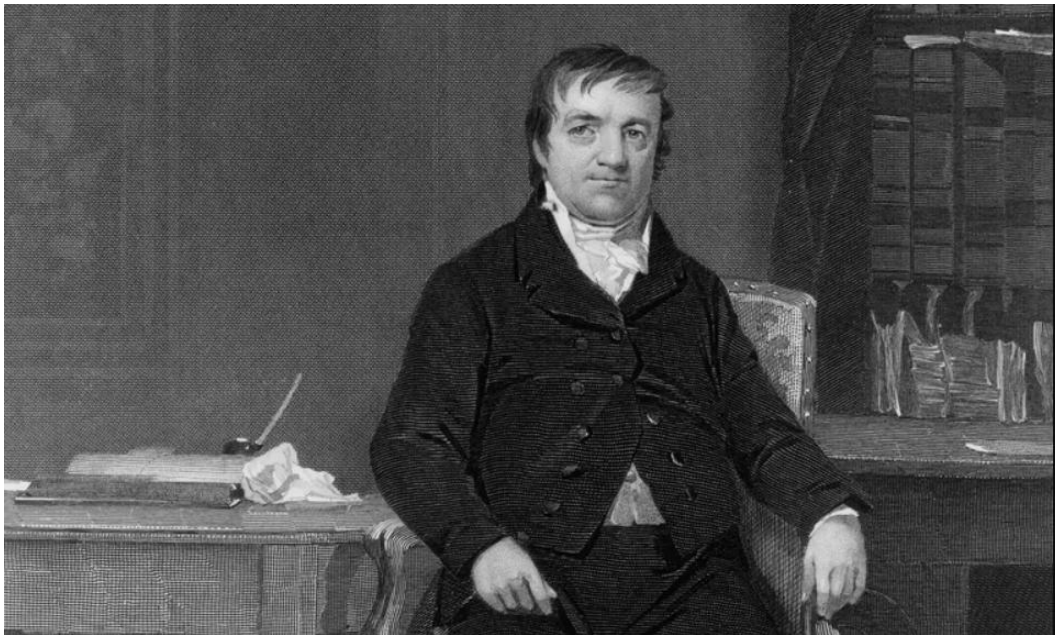


HMS Agamemnon.

On 1 October he was at last given command of his own ship, HMS Curlew, a sloop of 22 guns. The Curlew took part in extensive naval operations in the Sea of Azoff in 1855. These operations are described in further detail in due course.

2. Curtis Miranda Lampson (1806-1885)

Curtis Miranda Lampson, a great great grandfather on my Mother's side, was born on 21 September 1806, the tenth of twelve children. His father lived on a homestead on the outskirts of Newhaven, Vermont. At an early age he decided to seek his fortune in New York and had the good luck to run into John Jacob Astor, the financier, who at that time was on his way to making a fortune in the fur trade. Through Astor Curtis Miranda started in the fur trade and joined the trappers and Indians of the Hudson Bay Company on their hunting trips to their hunting grounds in Canada.

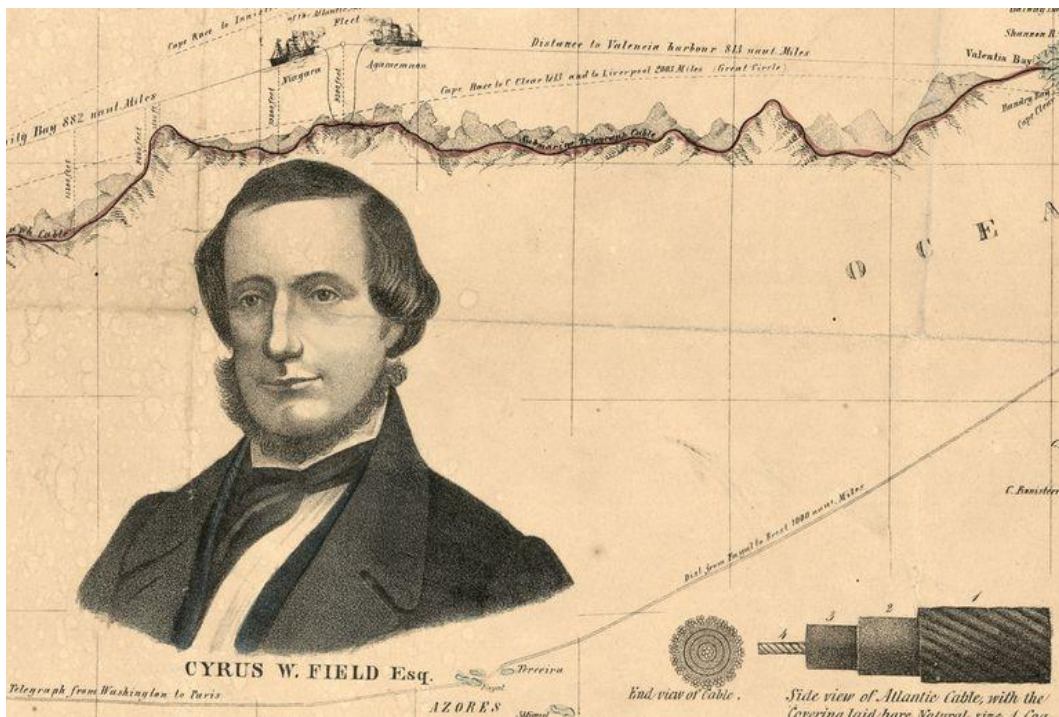


John Jacob Astor was a German–American businessman, merchant, real estate mogul, and investor who made his fortune mainly in a fur trade monopoly, by smuggling opium into China, and by investing in real estate in or around New York City. He is known for being the first multi-millionaire businessman of the United States.

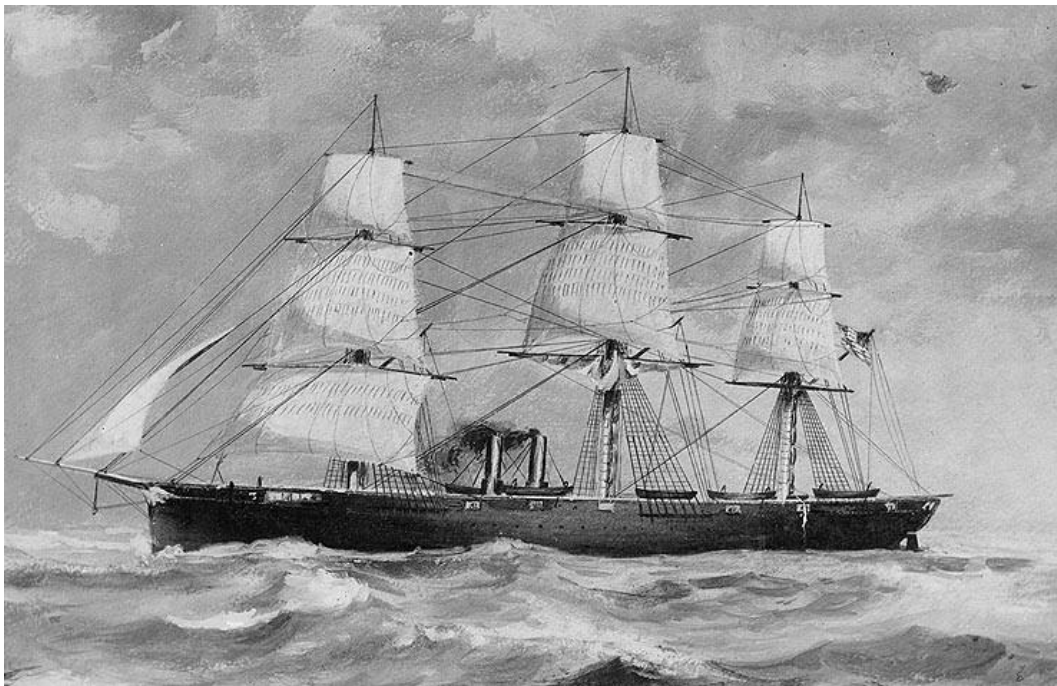
In 1824 as a young man of nineteen years old he was entrusted to be the supercargo of a cargo of peltry on board the Canadian lugger *Betsey* of 290 tons. Having failed to find customers in Montreal and Boston he decided to press on to London. The venture was successful. A second voyage made even better returns, and so started a career in the fur trade which led to him founding his own company, C M Lampson, and being acknowledged as one of the leading peltry dealers in Europe.

On 14 May 1849 he became a naturalised British subject. In 1846 he had met Cyrus W Field who had come to England from America with the purpose of interesting British capital in the establishment of telegraphic communications between England and America by underwater cable. On the formation of the Atlantic Telegraph Company for laying the first Atlantic cable, Curtis became in 1856 one of the directors and soon after

Vice-Chairman. Another director of the company was George Peabody, the well-known American philanthropist and friend of this country.



Cyrus Field, the promoter of the first transatlantic cable.



The USS Niagara.

Telegraphy on land over long distances was well established by 1850. For laying cable at sea the essential ingredient was a steam ship with sufficient capacity to lay cable at a controlled rate in a fairly straight line. For the first Atlantic cable attempt in 1857 there was no one ship then afloat with a large enough capacity to carry 3000 miles of cable. Two ships were therefore used, the 3200 ton HMS Agamemnon built for the Royal Navy in

1852 and the 4600 ton USS Niagara built for the US Navy in 1855. This was the same Agamemnon of which John James Kennedy had been Commander in 1855 during the Crimean War! With some internal structural alterations each was capable of carrying over 1500 nautical miles of cable.

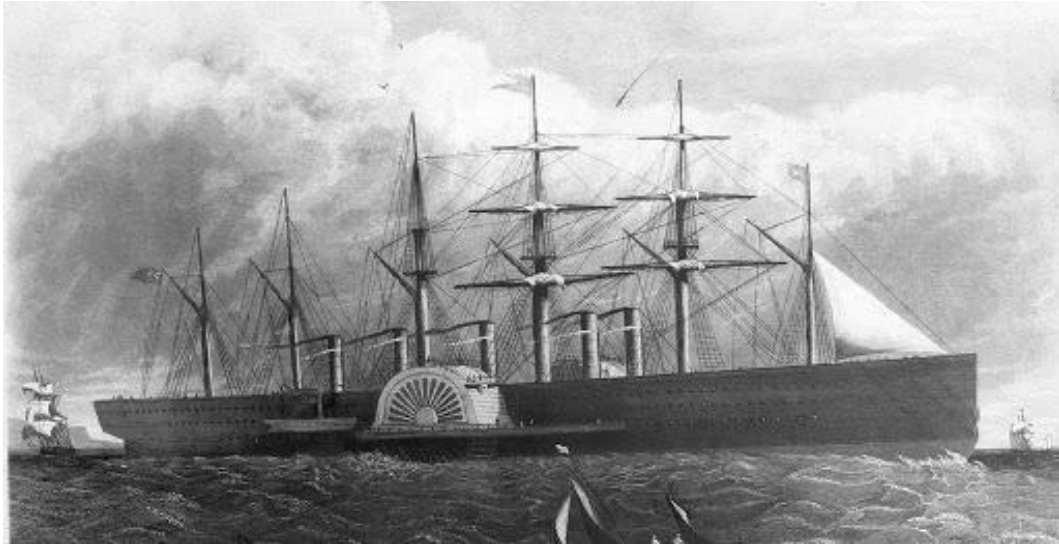
The first attempt in August 1857 failed when the line parted after 334miles. In June 1858 the Agamemnon and Niagara set out again with some 3000 miles of cable between them. Agamemnon nearly foundered right at the start after enduring for a week one of the worst storms ever recorded in the north Atlantic. Despite the cable breaking three times and having to start again each time, they eventually reached mid-Atlantic and spliced the two lengths together on 29 July. On the 13 August the Queen and President of the USA exchanged messages. In America great celebrations took place and Tiffany's in New York purchased the remainder of the cable from the Niagara, cut it into four inch pieces and had no difficulty selling them off at fifty cents a time, each piece accompanied by a certificate of authenticity signed by Cyrus Field.

However, the cable deteriorated and after the 20 October failed to respond at all. The indefatigable Field and Lampton argued that far from being a failure, the experience of 1858 clearly demonstrated that a cable could be laid across the Atlantic and messages sent.



A section of the first transatlantic cable, sold as a souvenir by Tiffanys of New York.

The promoters decided to try again and a further £500,000 was raised. Cable technology had progressed and this time I K Brunnel's magnificent white elephant of a ship, the Great Eastern, which had failed economically as a passenger liner, was used and was able to hold the full length of cable.



The Great Eastern.

In July 1865 the Great Eastern set out from Valentia, southern Ireland, but unfortunately the cable broke after 1186 nautical miles had been paid out. When the cable failed for the third time, the value of the Company's stock collapsed and many sold out. The directors were discouraged. They had lost money, credit, and faith and were for abandoning the hopeless enterprise.

Curtis Lampson stood firm. He called a meeting of the Directors and persuaded them to carry on. Another £300,000 had to be raised and a further attempt was started on 13 July 1866 which was finally successful on 27 July. The previous cable was also retrieved and a new length of cable spliced on to it so that there were then two Atlantic cables.

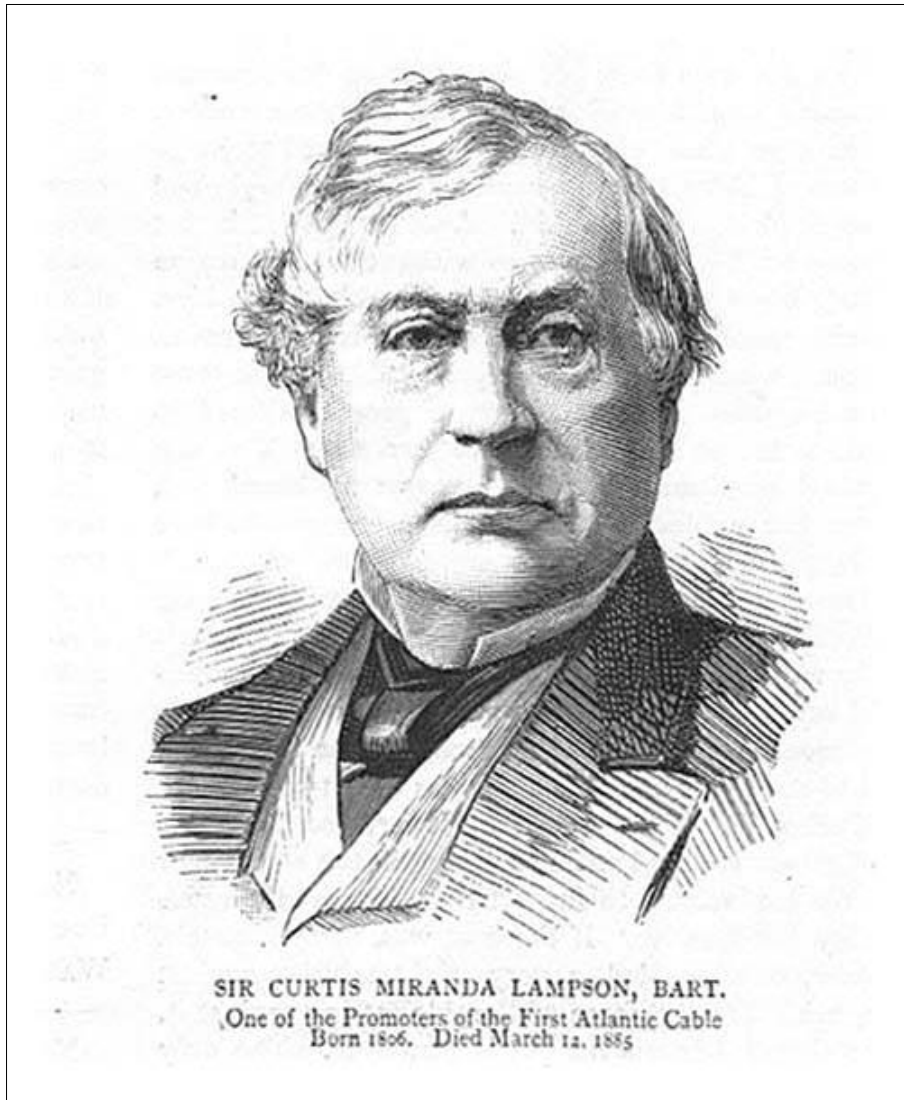
George Peabody (right) wrote of his friend:

'From the incipiency of the Atlantic Telegraph enterprise, Sir Curtis Lampson has been one of its principle capitalists and supporters. When others, on the failing of the undertaking in 1858, hastened to sell their stock at any sacrifice, he held steadily on to his. He called together disappointed shareholders, encouraged the faint-hearted, combatted the despairing, invited the aid of experts and scientific men, advanced large sums of money to sustain the sinking credit of the Company, made his countingroom the rendezvous of the disheartened Directors and encouraged new efforts by still larger subscriptions of money. To no man, not even excepting Mr Field, either in pecuniary or moral point of view, does the success of the Atlantic cable owe as much.'



The great assistance Curtis Miranda rendered to this project was acknowledged in a letter from Lord Derby, the then Prime Minister, to Sir Stafford Northcote, who presided at a banquet given at Liverpool on 1 October 1866 in honour of those who had been active in laying the cable. On 16 November Queen Victoria created him a baronet of the United Kingdom, the citation reading:

‘To whose resolute support of the project, in spite of all discouragements, it was in a great measure owing that it was not at one time abandoned in despair.’



3. Charles Arthur Day (1813-1892)



Charles Arthur Day.

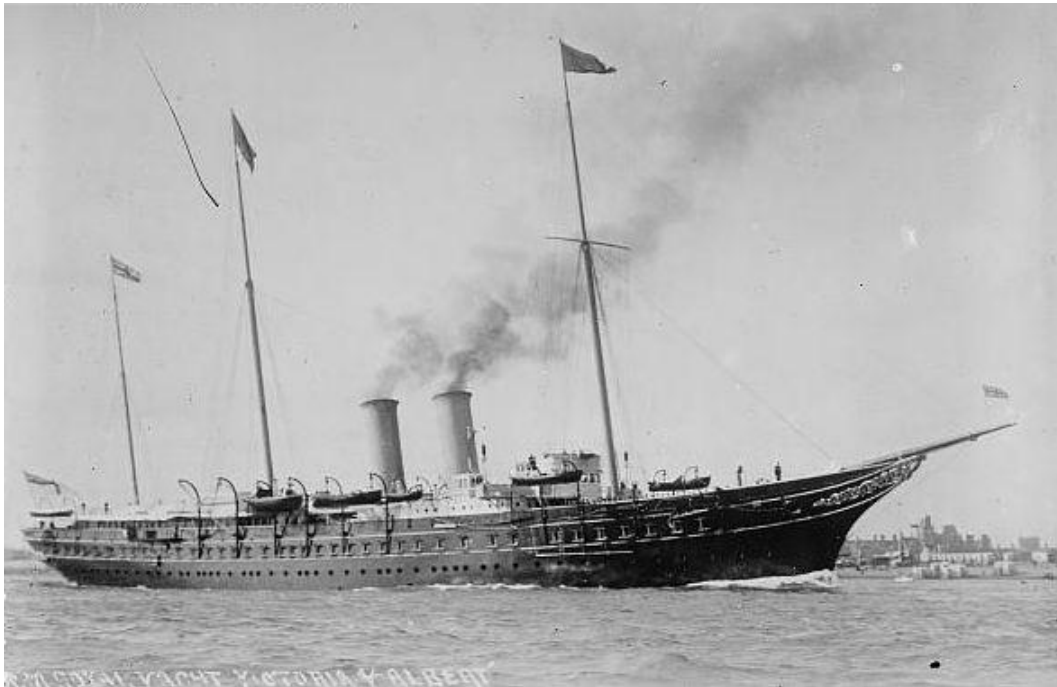
Charles Arthur Day, my father's grandfather, was born on 6 March 1813. His father, Charles Day, an ex-East India Company official who had made his money trading in spices, had founded the Southampton shipbuilding company of Day, Summers and Co of Southampton in 1834. Charles Arthur Day became senior partner and guiding light of the Company in its early days.

Initially the Company built paddle steamers for the Isle of Wight ferry services, building both the iron hulls and the engines. Gradually they branched out into larger passenger and cargo vessels for the P & O Line, Holland America Line and Union Castle Line amongst others. The largest vessel they built was the Hindoostan, 3113 tons in 1869, for the P & O service from Suez to India. Unfortunately this was the limit in size that could be built in the River Itchen where the shipyard was based and when ships started to get larger and larger they turned their hand to luxury steam yachts, tugs and small naval vessels. Eventually they were taken over by Vosper Thornycroft in 1929.

The Company also had a ship repairing side and two of the more memorable jobs may be identified from various company records and local newspapers. One worthy of mention was the construction of the funnels on the Royal Yacht Victoria and Albert when it was discovered that the original funnel made the ship top heavy.

In 1860 the Great Eastern was in Southampton being fitted out for her first transatlantic voyage. The Great Eastern was the ship used by the Atlantic Telegraph Company for the laying of the successful Atlantic cable in 1865! The completion of engineering works was undertaken by Day Summers. This was work necessary for a Board of Trade certificate. The screw and paddle engines were fitted with feed pumps, otherwise the supply to the

boilers relied solely on a donkey pump, a state of affairs which caused a boiler explosion on her maiden voyage from the Thames. There were alterations to the slide valves of the paddle engines - thus adding an extra 500 hp to their output, - and the piston rods were strengthened.



They Royal Yacht Victoria and Albert.

In May 1860 the Great Eastern was opened to the public, for the benefit of the South Hants Infirmary. Two boats - belonging to the South Western Company and Isle of Wight Steamboat Company - took passengers to and from the docks whilst three P & O bands played.

4. George Fiott Day (1819-1876)



George Fiott Day.

George Fiott Day, born on 20 June 1819, was a younger brother of Charles Arthur Day. He joined the Royal Navy as Volunteer 1st Class in 1833 and by 1855 he was a Lieutenant commanding a gunboat in the Sea of Azoff during the Crimean War. By a strange coincidence his senior officer at the time was Commander John James Kennedy! The official report of the action in the Sea of Azoff sent by Admiral Sir Edmund Lyons to the Admiralty and quoted in the London Gazette.

The body of the report contains the following description of one of the actions:

‘On the right and centre the enemy mustered strongest, and at one time observing a column of some 1500 Cossacks moving rapidly off to the left, I directed Commander Kennedy (who by that time had connected his fires with Lieutenant Day) to re-embark all but the marines, and with them to proceed to his right, and I reinforced him with the marines of the Recruit and Weser, under Lieutenant Campion. This answered perfectly; the enemy arrived too late to save anything on the left, whilst our men steadily worked towards the right division, under Lieutenants Strode and Ross, who, in spite of a heavy but badly directed fire from the houses on the heights, steadily held their ground, and effectually destroyed a great accumulation of

materials for boats and ship building, fish stores, cavalry camp gear and granaries.’

‘Despatches, with Enclosures, of which the following are copies, have been received from Admiral Sir Edmund Lyons, Bart., GCB, Commander-in-Chief of her Majesty’s Ships and Vessels in the Mediterranean and Black Sea.

REPORTING DESTRUCTION OF CORN, &c, IN GHEISK-LIMAN

Royal Albert, Kasatch Bay, November 24, 1855

Sir, Their Lordships are aware that when the small gun-boats were no longer required at Kinburn I sent them back to Captain Osborne, to afford him the means of destroying, at the latest period of the season, the harvest of this year, which I understood to be collecting in the neighbourhood of Gheisk-Liman, for the purpose of being transported in the winter months, partly to the enemy’s army in the Crimea over the frozen Gulf of Azoff and partly to his army in the Caucasus by the military road.

2. The enclosed copy of a letter from Captain Osborne will show their lordships that in this, as on many former occasions, he has fully justified the confidence I have placed in him. The skilfulness of the arrangements made by him, and the admirable way in which they were executed by himself, by Commander Kennedy, of the Curlew, and by the officers and men under their orders, completely frustrated the efforts of the large force that was brought against them in the defence of the stores, which the enemy appears to have considered safe from any naval attack, in consequence of the shallowness of the water.

3. The effects of this brilliant enterprize, in the destruction of so much corn and forage at the commencement of winter, cannot fail to be severely felt by the Russian armies both in the Crimea and the Caucasus.

4. Commander Kennedy, in reporting his large share in the proceedings of the day in the command of the Curlew, states to Captain Osborne that at one place alone the rows of stacks were six deep and extended two miles, and it appears that for economy in transport and storage the straw was cut near to the ears of the corn.

5. As ice is now forming on the shores of the Sea of Asoff and the squadron is withdrawn, I feel it be due to captain Osborne to record that under circumstances of great difficulty, occasioned by unusually tempestuous weather, he has most ably continued through the summer, and brought to a successful close in the autumn, operations novel in their nature and extremely detrimental to the enemy, which commenced auspiciously in the spring under the late Captain Lyons of the Miranda; nor is it too much to say, that both commanding officers were supported throughout, by as

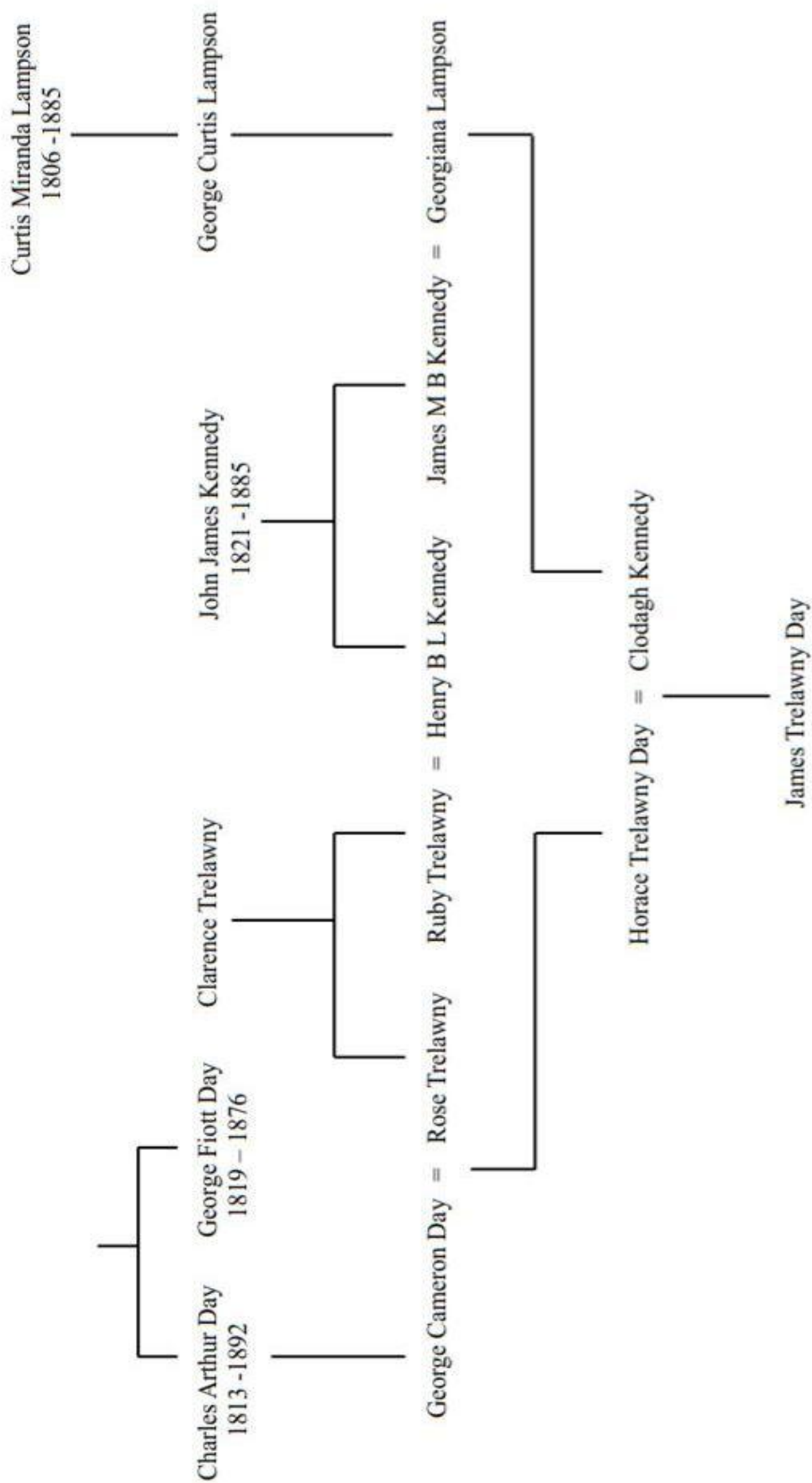
dashing and intelligent a band of young officers, seamen, and marines, as ever shone in the British Navy.

I am &c. (Signed) EDMUND LYON Rear-Admiral and Commander-in-Chief The Secretary of the Admiralty, London.'

It is strange that Lieutenant George Fiott Day, a brother of Charles Arthur Day, my great grandfather on my father's side, should have been so intimately involved with Commander John James Kennedy, a great-grandfather on my mother's side. For his part in this action he was subsequently promoted to Commander and Kennedy was promoted Captain.

George Fiott Day, who earned the nickname 'Daredevil Day', was to be awarded the Victoria Cross for an earlier action in the Sea of Azoff and was in the first list of VC recipients published on 24 February 1857. John James Kennedy eventually attained the rank of Vice Admiral.

5. Family Tree



6. Principal Sources & Notes

Principal Sources

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Notes

1. 'Mrs Duberly's War' edited by Christine Kelly 2007.
 2. New York Times (London Aug 5 1886).
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