

MYSTERY OF HMS CAPTAIN

With an iron hull and innovative heavy turret armament, this ship was to be the pride of the Royal Navy while pointing the way to the future of naval warfare. What happened that would claim the lives of nearly 500 sailors?

BY NAT SWEET

In Britain's famed St. Paul's Cathedral there are numerous tombs and memorials to that nation's naval and military heroes. Several, such as those of Nelson, Wellington, Jellicoe, and Kitchener can hardly be missed by visitors, but others, less celebrated, are easily overlooked.

In an alcove in the dimly lit interior of the cathedral, there is affixed to the wall a simple plaque that bears the heading: *IN MEMORY OF THE OFFICERS, SEAMEN, MARINES, AND BOYS, WHO DIED ON 7 SEPTEMBER 1870 WHEN HMS CAPTAIN FOUNDERED OFF CAPE FINISTERRE.* Beneath this heading is the following inscription:

OFFICIAL ACCOUNT OF THE DISASTER

The Court do find that Her Majesty's Ship Captain was capsized on the morning of 7 September 1870, by pressure of sail, assisted by the heavy of the sea, and that the sail carried at the time of her loss [regarding being had to the force of the wind and the state of the sea] was insufficient to have endangered a ship endowed with a proper

amount of stability. The Court before separating find it their duty to record the conviction they entertain that the Captain was built in deference to public opinion expressed in Parliament and through other channels, and in opposition to the views and opinions of the Controller and his department, and that the evidence all tends to show that they gradually disapproved of her construction.

There, in its somewhat verbose Victorian officialese, is the report of the

Court Martial convened to try the 18 survivors (of a complement of over 500) of the disaster that overtook the pride of Queen Victoria's Navy, over 150 years ago. In a point of fact, it was not so much a trial but an enquiry

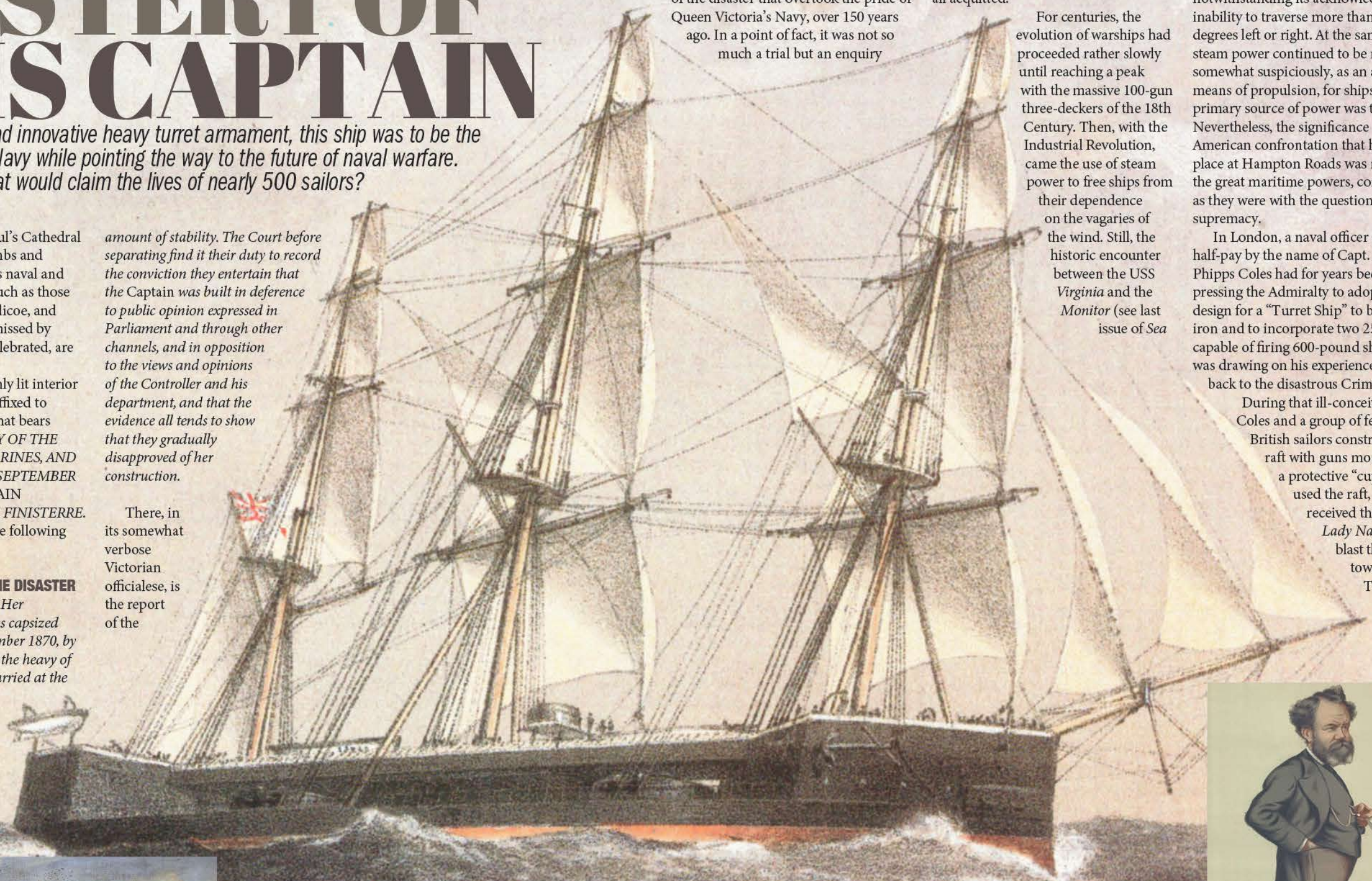
to determine the cause of the loss of HMS *Captain*, and the survivors were all acquitted.

For centuries, the evolution of warships had proceeded rather slowly until reaching a peak with the massive 100-gun three-deckers of the 18th Century. Then, with the Industrial Revolution, came the use of steam power to free ships from their dependence on the vagaries of the wind. Still, the historic encounter between the USS *Virginia* and the *Monitor* (see last issue of *Sea*

Classics), the broadside was considered to be the last word in naval gunnery notwithstanding its acknowledged inability to traverse more than a few degrees left or right. At the same time, steam power continued to be regarded, somewhat suspiciously, as an auxiliary means of propulsion, for ships whose primary source of power was the wind. Nevertheless, the significance of the American confrontation that had taken place at Hampton Roads was not lost on the great maritime powers, concerned as they were with the question of naval supremacy.

In London, a naval officer on half-pay by the name of Capt. Cowper Phipps Coles had for years been pressing the Admiralty to adopt this design for a "Turret Ship" to be built of iron and to incorporate two 25-ton guns capable of firing 600-pound shot. He was drawing on his experiences dating back to the disastrous Crimean War.

During that ill-conceived war, Coles and a group of fellow British sailors constructed a raft with guns mounted in a protective "cupola" and used the raft, which received the name *Lady Nancy*, to blast the Russian town of Taganrog on the



Contemporary oil painting done approximately 1870 of HMS *Captain* with the British Fleet off Gibraltar

Rather idealized painting by William Frederick Mitchell showing HMS *Captain* in a moderate sea. The low freeboard would spell disaster for the vessel.

Caricature of Edward Reed was published in *Vanity Fair* in 1875. HMS *Monitor* was constructed under his direction. However, Reed would raise serious concerns over HMS *Captain*.

