

## Maritime mysteries: Reading

When a yacht was found off the east coast of Australia without its crew, journalists immediately started to compare it with the *Mary Celeste*. But is there justification for comparing the two events?



The case of the *Mary Celeste* may not have become so well-known if Arthur Conan Doyle of Sherlock Holmes fame hadn't used it for one of his stories. In fact many people confuse the fiction of the Conan Doyle story with the facts. It was he who changed her name to *Marie Celeste* and said that there was warm food ready on the table including steaming cups of tea. He also said that the ship was in excellent condition. This was not the case.

The *Mary Celeste* was spotted by the captain of the *Dei Gratia*, a ship that had left New York a week later on a similar route from the States to Italy. Both ships had liquid cargo. The former had 1701 barrels of industrial alcohol on board whereas the latter had 1735 barrels of petroleum. The two captains knew each other. In fact, the two men had dined together before the *Mary Celeste* set sail on 7 November 1872. Captain Morehouse was surprised to see Captain Briggs's ship drifting although she was flying no distress signals. He knew that on board were seven crew members, Captain Briggs, his wife Sarah and their two-year-old daughter Sophia. He tried to make contact but there was never any reply. After two hours of observing the ship he sent a small boat with some of his crew over to investigate.

Although the vessel was found to be in a good seaworthy condition, all was not as it should have been. First of all there was a lot of water between the decks and everything was soaking wet, including the captain's bed. There were things missing, for example the sextant and the marine chronometer. Not only marine equipment but papers were missing too, although the captain's logbook remained. This suggests that the ship was deliberately abandoned, but in a rush - oil skin boots had been left behind. Captain Morehouse's explanation was that they had left quickly because they thought the ship was sinking. Importantly, there were no lifeboats on board either and ropes were found hanging over the side. One thick rope was found torn. Captain Morehouse said it appeared that the boat had been launched but attached to the ship. However, there had been gale force winds and torrential rain the days before they found the ship. If the crew and passengers were in the lifeboat it could easily have broken away. It's much more difficult to stay afloat in a small boat in bad weather. The passengers could have drowned or floated out to sea to die of hunger and thirst.

In addition the galley was in a terrible state. The cooking pots and pans were all over the place and the cooking stove had been knocked over. The cargo was untouched although when it eventually arrived at its destination, nine of the barrels were found to be empty. This could link to the fact that the hatch to the cargo was open. Leaking alcohol may have caused fumes and the captain may have worried there could be an explosion - another plausible reason for leaving the ship.

The possibility of a mutiny has always been considered unlikely, Captain Briggs was a highly respected seaman with an excellent reputation, as was his second-in-command.

In contrast, the Australian 'ghost yacht' *Kaz 11* was as though the men had vanished into thin air leaving everything normal and in working order. The boat, a 12m catamaran, had been bought just a week before by skipper Derek Batton, 56, and Peter and James Tunstead, brothers aged 69 and 63. She left Airlie Beach on 15 April 2007 and was spotted drifting in calm waters three days later by a patrol aircraft. Unable to communicate with the *Kaz 11*, a rescue helicopter winched down a man the following day, he found a table set for a meal but nobody on board. Not only was food ready but there were a couple of laptops on, and the crew's mobile phones, sunglasses, wallets and cameras were there. The boat engine was in neutral and the lights were on. Apart from a torn sail there no problems. The dinghy was still attached and the emergency equipment, including life jackets, seemed untouched.

There was only one clue which may explain what happened: three fenders were tied to the side of the catamaran. These are soft, solid objects like an old tyre which protect the side of the boat and are put out when approaching another boat. These are then brought in when sailing. One of the fenders was tied up higher indicating she may have been tied up to a larger vessel. The running engine idling in neutral indicates that they were willing to be approached.

After authorities stopped searching for the men the families spent thousands of dollars hiring helicopters and boats to scour the sea and the 74 nearby Whitsunday Islands. They reluctantly called off their search after three weeks. There was speculation that the men had jumped out of the boat to push her off a sandbank, but then the wind set the boat free leaving the men stranded. Whatever happened, the disappearance of the crew is one more maritime mystery.