

## Review

# Packed up and ready to go: historical journey from farm field to table top

In the ingenious Roman amphorae, the humble wooden barrel and the glamour of the tea clippers lie the origins of the modern containerised shipping industry, writes Sarah Murray

IN A LEAFY district just outside the centre of Rome is the unassuming hill of Monte Testaccio.

Not large or much to look at, what most passers by fail to realise is that the entire hill is made up of ancient shipping containers — amphorae, the roughly-made pots the size of a small barrel that carried everything from wine to fish sauce around the Roman empire.

The amphora is among the ingenious devices, systems and machines developed by shippers throughout the centuries to convey their goods around the world.

In some ways little has changed. The pots at Monte Testaccio once transported olive oil from southern Spain to Rome, where they were emptied of their contents, broken up and left on what became a giant rubbish dump. But when you start to examine some of the fragments lying just beneath the topsoil some striking parallels with modern container shipping emerge.

A wide variety of markings on the pottery shards make the hill rather like a giant inventory, detailing the export and import of olive oil.

Stamps, scratches and painted inscriptions tell us of the producing estates, the companies that shipped it and the customs officials in Spain and Rome who checked the goods.

The month a particular pot left Spain can be pinned down, as well as the exact date it arrived in Italy. It is not so different, after all, from the information on a container's bill of lading.

And the volumes were impressive. Historians have estimated that the amphorae at Monte Testaccio — accumulated over the course of the first and second centuries — would have transported an estimated 1.6bn gallons of olive oil to Rome.

The amphora was an astonishingly efficient shipping container. With a shape a cross between an egg and a torpedo, it was very strong and easy to pack into a vessel's hold.

The curve of its side fitted snugly against the curve of the ship. Its pointed base allowed the jar to fit neatly in between the shoulders of the amphorae in the row below, keeping it secure in transit.

The base also served as a third grip, supplementing its two handles, for stevedores to grasp during the unloading

process and when decanting the contents.

If ancient containers were surprisingly well designed, so were ships. Today the launch of a post-panamax container-ship generates considerable interest, but in 19th century Britain the public was captivated by the journeys of another type of ship — the racing tea clipper.

Clippers such as *Cutty Sark*, *Fiery Cross*, *Thermopylae* and *Ariel* were the fastest sailing ships the world has known. In a glorious couple of decades between the 1850s and the 1870s these magnificent vessels set off from the east coast of China, their holds packed with chests of the new season's crop of tea, and raced back to England.

These crack sailing ships were daring feats of marine engineering, literally clipping the top of the waves as they sped across the oceans.

But, while above water all was a glamorous flourish of sails and seaborne swagger, below the surface of the ocean were deep holds where neat ranks of wooden chests sat stuffed with cargo.

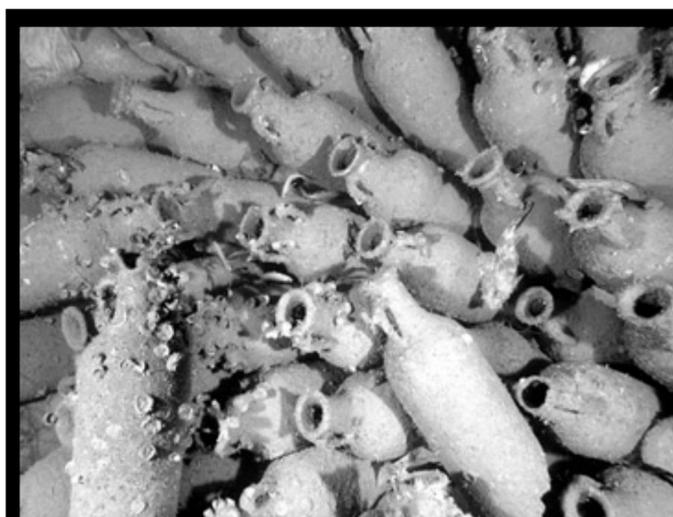
Shipbuilders and engineers honed the designs of these vessels so that their cargo could be moved thousands of miles across the oceans at ever faster speeds.

And those speeds were impressive. Today the behemoth *Emma Maersk* slices through the water at about 26 knots with the assistance of a propeller drive shaft fitted with two electric motors and a horsepower equal to that of 1,156 family cars. But back in the 19th century the clippers managed a remarkable 17 to 18 knots, powered only by the wind.

And the genius of the clippers was not just their bursts of speed in a fair wind. Their real brilliance lay in the ability to continue sailing with only the tiniest breath of wind, ghosting gracefully along the ocean in the calmest of conditions.

A great welcome awaited the clipper crews back home. In London messenger boys raced down to Mincing Lane to announce the imminent arrival of a vessel to tea traders. Crowds gathered by the docks to see the ship arrive.

In Liverpool, where the ships could make their final passage up the Mersey under full sail and in clear view of the public, noise and commotion would greet the sight of these masters of speed. Their masters attained the kind of



The process of evolution: top left, a pile of ingeniously designed amphorae pictured underwater; above, barrels, perhaps the most impressive of the shipping containers to have travelled the high seas over the centuries; left centre, the tea clipper *Golden Fleece*; below, the modern containership. AP

celebrity that these days we accord footballers or actors.

Perhaps the most impressive of the shipping containers to have travelled the high seas over the centuries is the barrel. Its design has proved

so successful that its construction today differs little from that of the Bronze Age craftsmen thought to have invented the device.

The barrel was essential to the building of the British

Empire. Barrels brought sugar to London from the West Indies and sent it out again to be sold in continental Europe. Rice came from South Carolina in barrels, which also carried cod from

New England. In New England molasses arriving from the West Indies was distilled into rum and sent to Africa in barrels where the liquor was traded for slaves.

The British created a com-

mercially interconnected world that stretched from the Caribbean to Asia and the barrel was at the heart of the action. Just as the 20 ft container has become globalisation's pre-eminent transport

tool, in the 18th and 19th centuries, the barrel occupied a similar position.

Constructed without nails or glue, this watertight container is extremely tough. Its bulging shape means that, on its side, less than a square inch of surface area touches the ground, making it easy to roll with one hand, even when it contains up to 100 gallons.

The barrel's sturdy form is based on architectural principles. In barrel-vaulted buildings, buttressing contains the outward thrust of the stones in each of the vault's semi-circular arches.

When used on a barrel, the circle is completed. Hoops contain the outward energy of its components, the staves, and each stave serves the same function as the keystone in an arch — something that becomes clear when looking at a barrel from above.

But, as well as strength and durability, the barrel also possesses creativity, changing the taste of what it holds. For winemakers, oak has become a powerful aid to maturation, generating an astonishing range of tastes and textures.

Everything from the climate in which the forest has grown and the grain of the tree to the way the wood is seasoned, aged and toasted contributes to the complex palette of flavours from which the winemaker chooses when moulding a wine's character.

Over the centuries shipping technologies such as these have changed the world. The amphora was at the heart of an ancient, lucrative global trade, and supply and demand was what kept the Roman Empire together.

The races of the 19th century clippers had a darker side. The opium with which the British paid for their tea led to the deaths of tens of thousands of Chinese and sparked the opium wars, forcing the Chinese to open ports such as Shanghai to foreign trade and to hand over Hong Kong under treaty.

Now the giant ports, not just of Hong Kong but Shenzhen, Shanghai, Singapore and Tanjung Pelapas are these days the starting or transshipment points for the goods we so readily consume in vast quantities.

Seaborne cargo transport has made huge differences to the world's economies and global politics. But it owes a debt of origin to the glamour of the tea clippers, the utility of an amphora or the sensory effects brought about by a simple vessel of hoops and staves.

*Moveable Feasts: the incredible journeys of the things we eat*, by Sarah Murray, is published by Aurum Press, [www.aurumpress.co.uk](http://www.aurumpress.co.uk).

## Lloyd's List Crossword No 402

Note pad

Answers  
Lloyd's List Crossword 401

**ACROSS**  
1 Hardship. 5 Subtle. 8 Skill. 9 Robs. 10 Laughter. 12 Drill. 13 Knot. 14 Body. 16 Insects. 18 Moments. 21 Sing. 22 Unit. 23 Scary. 25 Messages. 28 Area. 29 Eaten. 30 Roared. 31 Formerly.

**DOWN**  
1 Hatred. 2 Dissolve. 3 Hail. 4 Pulling. 5 Situation. 6 Bath. 7 Energy. 11 Thorn. 15 Struggled. 17 Sends. 19 Exchange. 20 Himself. 21 Summer. 24 Yearly. 26 Star. 27 Stir.

27 Scattering seed, Zen had a reflex action (7)  
28 Views of wriggling asps, etc. (7)

**DOWN**  
2 Bother after rent in bad weather (7)  
3 Three assembled in that place (5)  
4 Egg Gaul scrambled with the trappings (7)  
6 Briefly caught following additional passage (7)  
7 Volume of preserved cuttings (9)  
8 Computer system with lights (7)  
9 Made out it's eminent (13)  
15 Interpret letters from starlet - an anachronism? (9)  
17 Essential compound for pointer training (7)  
18 Dramatic art at three, possibly (7)  
20 The extents that swimmers go to? (7)  
21 Fractured rat's leg of the greatest size (7)  
24 Topic giving article to me (5)

## A Red hot opportunity to test your mettle on the high seas

COCKBURN'S Port is the Official Port of Skandia Cowes Week, the most popular event in the British sailing calendar.

The event will host over 1,000 yachts and some 8,500 competitors between August 4-11, 2007. First held in 1826, this famous annual sailing celebration is almost as old as the Cockburn's company itself which was founded 11 years earlier in 1815.

Cockburn's Port and Lloyd's List are offering one lucky reader the chance to sail as a crew member alongside a 14-strong professional crew in Cockburn's boat, *Red*. Skipped and owned by Carphone Warehouse Group chief executive Charles Dunstone, *Red* is a TP52 high performance yacht and one of the fastest that competes during the week.

This is a money-can't-buy opportunity and whilst you don't have to be an experienced sailor, you do need to be reasonably fit, healthy and agile to help sail this racing yacht.

The winner can also invite a friend to watch the racing from the Cockburn's RIB. Transport and one night's accommodation will also be provided.

When the sailing is over there will also be plenty of opportunity to sample the Cockburn's range at the Port Hole Bar; from the refreshing summer drink white port and tonic to the delicious Late Bottled Vintage.

All you need to do is answer the following: In what year was Cockburn's founded? a) 1826 b) 1815 c) 1814 Email your answer to [ll7days@informa.com](mailto:ll7days@informa.com)

9. The name and country of the winner will be published in a future edition of the newspaper.

10. The winner and their friend must be available to race on 4, 5 or 11 August 2007.

Promoter: Beam Global Distribution (UK) Limited, Prewetts Mill, Worthing Road, Horsham, West Sussex, RH12 1ST.

Please drink responsibly

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Braced for adventure: one lucky reader can join the team aboard Red.

OnEdition

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Compiled by Eddie Waltham

**ACROSS**  
1 Elegant style at risk (7)  
5 Sees wood cutter inside with playground items (7)  
10 Ash, possibly, from nitre explosion (4)  
11 Creating mess on the street following guilt initially which is shining out (10)  
12 Portrait maker, perhaps, gets a cream confection (6)  
13 Aesop not so disposed to an item of cutlery (8)  
14 Line in London from Carlisle, perhaps (8)  
16 Implements used in stool construction (5)  
17 It could be a bulb factory .... (5)  
19 .... though this is improbable! (8)  
22 Arm receptacles. Lost hers, unfortunately! (8)  
23 Tea urn designed with character (6)  
25 Ten tramped around the section (10)  
26 It's always held in reverence (4)