

Dr John Adie, Surgeon, R.N.: a biography

by Chris Adie

Part One

The firm of T.M. Adie & Sons was well known in Shetland up until perhaps 30 years ago. As well as running a shop in Voe, the firm manufactured tweed and knitwear for many years.

The firm's founder, Thomas Mountford Adie, was born in Walls in 1815. There's much that could be told of his rise to prominence, but in many ways it is his father, John Adie, who is the more interesting character. John was a surgeon in the Royal Navy around the time of Nelson. His ancestors were from Edinburgh, yet his descendants were all in Shetland. He was the first Adie to be associated with the sea, an association which has continued, in various forms, for seven generations. When I was young in the 1960s the dark hints from my elders about his alleged crimes whetted my appetite to know more. Now I'm retired, I've had time to research his life in depth, trying to see if he deserves rehabilitation.

What follows is a tentative biography, based on a wide variety of mainly primary sources. There are of course many openings for further research which might shed new and different light on John Adie's life, so this account is best regarded as a snapshot, out of focus in places, of an ongoing process of story-making.

Early life

John Adie was born in Greyfriars parish, Edinburgh, on 23 May 1782. He was the only child of Janet Sanders and James Adie 'of Adiefield'. Variously described as a 'grocer' or 'perfumier', or simply a 'merchant', James was based in the Grassmarket in Edinburgh, but his business sometimes took him elsewhere in Scotland. 'Adiefield' was a field on the south side of



John Adie.

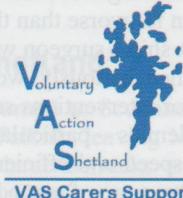
Photo: Christopher Adie

what is now Morrison Street in Edinburgh. It had been in the family since at least the early 18th century, and it's likely that James sold the property to invest in his various business activities.

John's mother died in 1794, when he was only 12, and it must have been about then that his father apprenticed him to a local business – probably 'Messrs Bell, Wardrop and Russell, surgeon apothecaries'.

Every day I'm a carer

I care for my son who has autism. He has good support from local services just now but I worry about what will happen when he leaves school.



As the 1790s drew on, Royal Navy expansion increased the demand for medical personnel. The ship's surgeon and his assistants were crucial on board the overcrowded and disease-ridden warships on which British sea power depended, and, as a result, even raw apothecaries' boys were encouraged to join up. All that was required was a fairly perfunctory examination, and young John was not slow to take advantage of this opportunity. In February 1798 he was awarded a certificate by the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, stating his fitness to serve as a surgeon's mate on naval warships of up to the second rate. John immediately joined HMS *Leopard*, then lying at Leith. He was just 15.

Naval medicine

The period 1793 to 1815 was one of almost constant conflict for Britain. There were three wars with France, wars with various other European countries, and with America. As any fan of Patrick O'Brien will know, the Royal Navy was Britain's main asset in these conflicts, and was at the peak of its strength, dominating the waters around most of the globe.

Skilled seamen were extremely valuable to the Royal Navy, as evidenced by their attempts over many years to press Shetland's fishermen into reluctant service. (In fact, a couple of months before John Adie joined HMS *Leopard*, she had taken on eight Shetland lads as ordinary seamen – presumably press-gang victims.)

Real effort was invested in preserving sailors' health, which was a major factor in the effectiveness of a man-o-war. Ships would be forced to return to port if the sick-list grew too long.

By the 1790s scurvy had largely been conquered, but influenza, typhus and dysentery were rife, due to overcrowding and insanitary conditions. The situation was even more dreadful in enemy navies: a successful attack on an enemy ship, apart from injuries sustained in battle, could lead to the Royal Navy crew contracting disease from prisoners, whose health was often far worse than their captors.

A ship's surgeon would thus be faced not only with seamen seriously wounded in battle and requiring major interventions such as amputation, but also with epidemics – particularly in tropical waters. However, the speed and efficiency of amputations was seen as the measure of a good naval surgeon.

Surgery at the time was distinct from 'physic' – the former was a manual task, and the eighteenth-century surgeon did not have the elevated social status of the physician, who diagnosed illness and prescribed remedies. The Navy, however, required both skills,

and the ship's surgeon was not only expected to be a physician, but an apothecary and health adviser as well.

Naval service to 1803

John Adie's first ship, HMS *Leopard*, was a 50-gun fourth-rate of the Royal Navy, commissioned in 1790. In 1798, she was commanded by Captain Thomas Surridge, and carried a complement of about 350 men and boys. John was appointed to the rank of surgeon's second mate.

The *Leopard* departed from Leith on 17 February 1798, heading south. By April she was in Madeira, but returned to Spithead (in the Solent) in May.

John's father James Adie died in June 1798 when away on business in Ayr. John was probably unable to obtain leave to return to Scotland to deal with his father's affairs, but nevertheless James's moveable property was sold at auction a few months later. Altogether, John inherited £52 15s 3d Sterling.

At the end of June 1798, Rear Admiral John Blankett raised his flag on the *Leopard* and took command of a small squadron which included HMS *Daedalus*, *Fox* and *Orestes*. France had invaded Egypt earlier that year, and Blankett's task was to prevent the French from using the Red Sea.

The voyage south through the Atlantic and round the Cape of Good Hope was relatively uneventful, and by the end of October the squadron was in the northern Mozambique Channel, between the east coast of Africa and the island of Madagascar. There, the *Leopard* captured the French privateer *Apollo*, 12 guns, without resistance. The money which the Admiralty paid for captured enemy ships was a significant incentive for sailors, and was one reason the Royal Navy was so successful. A prize crew was put on board the *Apollo*, and the squadron ventured north, but by December 1798 they were only at Zanzibar.

The climate in these latitudes was very difficult for seamen used to the cold waters around the UK. Disease was rife, and Michael Prichard, surgeon's mate on HMS *Daedalus*, fell ill.

John Adie was transferred to the *Daedalus* on the 18 December 1798 as surgeon's mate, and Prichard died the following day. John was to remain on the *Daedalus* (a 32-gun fifth-rate) for the next two years.

On 15 November 1800, the *Daedalus*'s surgeon died, and John Adie was temporarily promoted to acting surgeon. A few weeks later, the *Daedalus* arrived in the Malacca Straits, to rendezvous with Rainier's flagship HMS *Victorious*. On New Year's Day 1801, Rainier transferred John to the *Victorious* as surgeon's first mate. John was only 18, but lied

about his age, claiming to be 23 – probably in order to increase his chances of permanent promotion to surgeon.

Life on the *Victorious*, a 74-gun third-rate ship of the line, was probably less exciting than on the *Leopard* or *Daedalus*. She proceeded from Penang to Colombo, then Bombay (Mumbai), Nagapattinam and Trincomalee, arriving at Madras (Chennai) in September 1801. There, finally, John got his promotion to surgeon on a new ship, HMS *Chiffonne*.

The *Chiffonne* was a 36-gun frigate, originally French. In August 1801, she had been captured in the Seychelles and taken to Madras, where Rainier appointed Captain Henry Stuart to her command. He took her to Bombay for a refit, where she stayed from January until July 1802. As surgeon, John Adie was not much involved in the refit, so would have had plenty of time to experience the sensual delights of Bombay. The *Chiffonne* arrived back in Madras in September 1802, where she stayed for a couple of weeks before departing on 9 October 1802 for Trincomalee and then London. After nearly five years of seafaring, John was on his way home.

The mysterious Mary Ann

At this point, into our *Boys' Own* story of ships and battles and admirals, glides a mysterious young English-born lady called Mary Ann Westile. Her origins are obscure, but it seems she might have been a Yorkshire lass. She may have been born in Whitby between about 1780 and 1785, but the day and exact year of her birth were unknown, even to her. Her father was Marmaduke Weatherall or Weathrall, her mother was perhaps Mary Ann Wilkison.

We do not know why Mary Ann had the surname Westile, sometimes spelt Westil, Westal or Westle. It is an uncommon name – in fact there seems no trace of it other than Mary Ann and a few of her descendants with that forename. In later life, Mary Ann stated that her father changed his name from Weathrall to Westile on emigrating to India, for reasons unknown to her. I've so far found no mention of Westile or its variants in India Office records.

It is likely that John met Mary Ann in Madras, or possibly Bombay, in 1802. Somehow he arranged for her to board the *Chiffonne* in secret. She does not appear in the Muster Book, meticulously kept by the purser, who was in charge of victuals. Did she impersonate a boy? Did John secrete her in the sick bay? How did she get her food? Where did she sleep? Many years later, John recalled how 'happiness and pleasure and comfort seemed to flow through winds & the surges of the tempestuous ocean', and we know



Mary Ann Westile.

Photo: Christopher Adie

of Mary Ann's presence on board only because in December 1802, as the *Chiffonne* was approaching Cape Town, she and John conceived a child.¹

In early April 1803, HMS *Chiffonne* docked at Woolwich. John lost no time in arranging for marriage banns to be proclaimed, and on 25 April 1803 he and Mary Ann were married, in St Katherine Coleman church, just a few streets away from the docks. Mary Ann was evidently illiterate, signing the register with a cross.

The ship's company were paid off and dismissed, and the newlyweds set up house in Kensington, London. Their first child, Amelia, was born there in September 1803.

First visit to Shetland

Some time in 1803 John returned to Scotland, to visit friends in Edinburgh and Falkirk, leaving Mary Ann in London. There was a large barracks and a community of army families in Kensington, and we can surmise that Mary Ann would have made friends there, and perhaps learned to read and write while her husband was away.

In late 1803 or early 1804, John embarked for Shetland. One of the mysteries of John's life is his

reason for visiting these remote islands. It was winter, and the voyage north from Leith was certainly not without risk. There must have been a compelling motive. Did he have relatives here? There were Adies in Shetland in the 18th century, but there's no evidence of a family connection. The family legend that he was fleeing the legal consequences of marrying Mary Ann without her family's or a guardian's consent is a flight of fancy. A more credible explanation is that the Shetland sailors on the *Leopard* (and perhaps on other vessels) convinced him that Shetland was a place where he might make a living as a doctor.

It certainly seems John tried his hand as a medical man in Lerwick at this time. He is known to have purchased medicines in 1804 from an apothecary's shop run by another surgeon, Duncan Campbell.

One of the servants at the lodging house in Lerwick where John was staying was Charlotte Ramsay, a Yell lass then in her early thirties. John lost no time in seducing her, in the first (?) of his many extra-marital affairs. In November 1804, Charlotte (having returned to Ulsta) bore a son, whom she named John Adie after his father.

John left Shetland not long after his dalliance with Charlotte. After a year's leave, he had been appointed to a new ship.

Naval service 1804-6

In June 1804, John joined HMS *Pegase* at Portsmouth. The *Pegase* was a 74-gun French ship, captured in 1782 by Captain (later Admiral of the Fleet) John Jervis, and from 1799 she was used as a hospital ship.

Despite his promotion in Madras to the rank of surgeon, John was appointed to the *Pegase* as a surgeon's second mate and assistant dispenser. There he studied 'physic' as well as surgery, completing his medical training. After six months he was promoted to surgeon's first mate and was fully qualified to serve as surgeon on ships of the fifth rate.

John was appointed as surgeon to a new ship, HMS *Avenger*, on 7 January 1805. The *Avenger* was an 18-gun sloop, formerly a collier. She sailed in convoy from Portsmouth in January 1805, bound for the Mediterranean, and arrived at Gibraltar in March, returning to the Solent in May 1805 after an uneventful voyage.

The Napoleonic invasion threat was so great, and the need for surgeons so acute, that the Admiralty were forced to reform the naval medical service. While John was away on the *Avenger*, significant changes were authorised 'to induce well-qualified and respectable persons to enter the service' as surgeons. The major

changes included free medicines, a pay rise, eligibility for half-pay when not on active service, and an official uniform – all of which improved the social status of naval surgeons.

John's next ship, HMS *Aurora*, was a 28-gun sixth-rate frigate with a complement of roughly 200 officers and men. John joined her in June 1805, under her youthful Captain (later Admiral) George Elliot, described by Nelson as 'one of the best officers in the Navy'. Elliot took *Aurora* to the Mediterranean, where she was involved in a number of actions against enemy ships and towns – not always successfully.

In August and September 1806 there were heavy storms, immediately followed by enemy engagement, and at some point during this excitement John sustained a wound to his right hand. The wound was serious enough for John to be admitted to the naval hospital of Bighi, Malta on 18 September 1806. He was discharged twelve days later, having 'lost the use of the thumb of the right hand', and was deemed 'not capable of further service'.

John returned to England on 15 November 1806, on half pay. His naval career was over.

Lerwick 1807-10

In 1807, John removed himself, Mary Ann and their toddler Amelia from Kensington to Rothesay, Bute,² and then on to Shetland. Initially they stayed in Lerwick, where in January 1808 their second child, Jannetta Harriet Adie, was born. Mary Ann from this time onwards was almost constantly pregnant, ultimately giving birth to eleven children.

John was expecting to stay in Shetland for several years, and, in May 1808, he took a house in Lerwick on a three-year lease and began his medical practice.

As we've seen, during his first visit to Lerwick, John had obtained medicines from fellow-surgeon and apothecary Duncan Campbell. Now it was John's turn to supply Campbell, possibly from purloined naval stores from the *Aurora*! A list of some of these medicines has survived: they included Laudanum, Cream of Tartar, Spirit of Ammonia, Basilicon, Peruvian Bark, Bitter Purging Salts and Spirit of Turpentine.

Unfortunately Campbell did not pay for the medical supplies. John pursued him through the Sheriff Court, but, although he won the case, because Campbell did not turn up, it's not clear whether he actually was able to collect the debt. This 1808 legal action was the first of many in which John was involved – usually as the debtor.

Mary Ann's third child and their first son, James Mitchell Adie, was born in Lerwick in June 1809. It

seems that John was not able to maintain his growing family on his naval half-pay and income from medical practice, for in 1810 his career took a new turn.

Walls in the 1810s

Thomas Smith was a rope-maker, probably English, who in the late 18th century worked at Woolwich in Kent, where there had been a big naval rope-yard, and later in South Shields, making rope for Greenland whaling ships. His wife was Eleanor Cumming, daughter of Daniel Cumming, a Shetland sailor whose ancestors had been landowners. In the late 1780s, the couple moved to Shetland to take up Eleanor's inheritance of lands there, principally Stabness in Walls. From this time, Smith (as 'heritable proprietor' of his wife's land – the patriarchy being in its heyday) was known as Thomas Smith of Stabness.

By 1810, Smith was in his mid-fifties, and perhaps no longer had the energy or inclination to manage the estate of Stabness, for in that year he leased the entire estate to a younger man – John Adie. The agreement was for a term of 19 years, at an annual rent of £42 sterling. The estate consisted of:

nine merks land in Bardister and nine merks land in Stabness as also the whole of the Island of Linga adjacent to Stabness all lying in the Parish of Walls ... with the manor house and Offices of Stabness and ... other houses with the yards waste grounds mosses ... strands fishings fishing stations seadrift wreck ware kelp and Tang shores profits emoluments & universal righteous pertinents and privileges of every description. belonging to the said lands and Island

The agreement allowed Smith to retain for his own use

the manor house Offices and Cabbage yard thereof together with the Square piece of ground before and behind the said manor house and as much Peat

rigs in the Island of Linga as will produce peats sufficient for said house.

For this, Smith was to pay £4 sterling annually back to John Adie.

The agreement was signed 'at Voe in Walls' – i.e. the house now used as a camping bód. Stabness House (presumably the 'manor house' above mentioned) has been replaced by a modern dwelling, but the 'square piece of ground before and behind' is still evident, enclosed by a stone dyke.

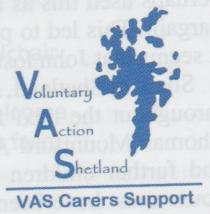
So, where did John and his family live? The answer appears to be that he rented a house at the head of the voe from Thomas Henry of Bayhall. It's unlikely this was the impressive Haa house of Bayhall, now subdivided into flats – more probably it was a smaller house close by. However, after a few years it seems Thomas Smith moved to Lerwick and John was able to move into Stabness House.

Despite being only a 'tacksman' and not the 'heritor', having taken full responsibility for the estate, John was now effectively laird of Stabness. As such, his concern would have been to make it pay – and in the early 19th century that meant mainly fishing. Many areas of Shetland were suffering from over-population, with arable land divided up into very small entitlements managed on the runrig system. This situation should have provided plenty of manpower for fishing 'to the laird' – i.e. using boats and equipment provided by the laird, to whom the catch then belonged. I have found no records of how this went at Stabness during the early part of John's reign, but some years later I find him ordering fishing gear and salt for fish-curing from Hay & Ogilvy in Lerwick and asking what price they would pay for his salted fish.

John had by this time (1811) accumulated considerable debt, dating not only from his time in Shetland, but also from his naval days. In June 1811 his estate was 'sequestrated' – in other words, he was declared bankrupt. His debts amounted to £1,079 18s

Every day I'm a carer

I care for my husband who is frail and has a heart condition. I'm getting older myself and have osteoporosis. I worry what will happen to him if I fall and have to go into hospital.



0d and three farthings – a huge amount by the standards of the time. Creditors included a Mrs Mitchell Baker in Falkirk, Messrs Hutchison & Co in Edinburgh, various merchants in Lerwick, Messrs Archibald and Johnston in Gibraltar, the family of Scott of Melby, Sandness, and John's maternal aunt Ann Sanders. He was lucky to avoid a debtor's prison.

It appears that John was in the habit of trying to appease his creditors by the sycophantic and doubtless ineffectual strategy of naming his children after them. His next child, born in August 1811 at Bayhall, Walls, was named Thomas Hutchison Baker Adie, combining the surnames of his two main creditors. Thomas lived only a few days. John continued this policy with the birth of his third daughter Elizabeth Scott Adie at Stabness in May 1813.

Not content with fathering children with Mary Ann, he seduced (or worse) a young servant, Anderina Robertson, who gave birth to John's son in August 1813. John was summoned to appear before the Presbytery, whose theocratic duty was to uphold moral standards. He excused himself from attending, but sent a grovelling letter admitting paternity and vowing to look after the 'sickly' child. There is no record of what happened to the baby – presumably he died in infancy, as many babies did. Two years later, Anderina married Magnus Georgeson, of whom more shortly.

Meanwhile, John's possessions had been sold off to pay his creditors. They raised a very small amount, and the creditors had to be satisfied with one shilling and ninepence three farthings in the pound – in other words, only 9% of what they were actually owed. In February 1814, John appeared in court in Edinburgh and was discharged of all his debts contracted before June 1811.

John was evidently discontented with his life in Shetland, for in November 1814 he offered to buy a house in Tobago Street, Edinburgh, for £105. How he hoped to pay this sum is unclear, and, although he somehow managed a down payment of £40, he decided the house was too small for his family (or perhaps used this as an excuse), and resiled from the bargain. This led to protracted legal proceedings, and it seems that John lost most of the £40.

Stuck in Shetland, John's family continued to grow throughout the next few years, with his second son Thomas Mountford Adie born at Stabness in 1815, and further children in 1817, 1819 and 1821. The house must have been very crowded – by 1821 there would have been eight children living at home, the oldest (Amelia) then being 18.

John Adie did not get on with some of his tenants. In 1815 he complained under oath of being 'in bodily dread' of William Johnson in Bardister and John

and Magnus Johnson or Georgeson in Stabness. As we know, Magnus Georgeson was the husband of Anderina Robertson – there must have been threats of violence, perhaps connected with John's treatment of Anderina.

Other tenants were also troublesome. The house John rented in Bayhall was sub-let to multiple tenants, including one William Coutts and his family. Coutts not only built up rent arrears, but also proved to be a 'very turbulent neighbour' to other tenants. John strove to evict him, resorting ultimately to court proceedings.

More money troubles

A small estate such as Stabness was never going to provide much profit, and John was struggling to maintain his family. In August 1817 he wrote to the naval authorities complaining that his half-pay was insufficient, and asking to be re-employed. The end of the Napoleonic war in 1815 meant that there were many unemployed naval officers looking for work, and it is not surprising that the Admiralty returned an unequivocal refusal.

In January 1819 John departed Shetland for Leith, for purposes unknown. He wrote to Mary Ann from Fraserburgh, and it is perhaps worth quoting his letter in full:

Saltoun Inn, Fraserburgh, 5pm Friday 22 January
1819

My ever dearest Mary Ann

We by kind fortune got here this forenoon and lucky it was we did so for a very few hours after we came in we were saluted by a very severe passing gale – judging, my darling that you would be exceptionally uneasy on my account from the very unfavourable weather and contrary winds that have prevailed since my departure from Shetland I thought it best to take the first moment to let you know of my getting thus far safe and in tolerable health as perhaps ere we may get to Leith now it is possible the *Coldstream* may have sailed – and had no news been heard of us doubtless we would have been given up for lost, however my love should we get to Leith previous to that vessels leaving it I shall again write you. My spirits are you may be sure not at the highest in a strange place with only a few shillings and no one to advance me a farthing. I look forward my love, however, with hope for better days, when it may graciously please the Lord out of his infinite mercy and goodness to such an unworthy sinner as I am, as to permit me once more in happiness and worldly content to embrace you and my darling children.

I hope you have been able to get the man for

James's boat from Culswick, and I would wish you to secure the whole by arls. The skipper has sufficient arls – he got two pounds sterling J.... and Mitchell each have got sixpence arls. Should any person come to arrest, dare them at their peril to touch an article, as you can instruct that nothing belongs to me, but to Mitchell the children by Mrs Gifford and Mr Gifford, and James by his own cash from the Lottery Ticket four years ago – but I shall write you more fully if the lord spares me to see Leith.

I got Mr Grierson to sign an affidavit in your name, stating you are between thirty and forty, to the best of your knowledge and belief, which I am in hopes will answer in place of the proper register, as I am determined, should I not have a farthing after, to ensure to you and my children every benefit from the surgeon's society possible, for should the lord be pleased out of his will to take me from you, I will have at least the happiness of dying with the fact that I have done all in my power to remunerate your goodness and love to me by leaving you and my children in as comfortable circumstances as my station in life would admit, but I trust t... we will yet meet, and the so.... to secure that our expenses and living must be most penurious, at least until all debts are cleared, and any article that can with any advantage be converted into money, must be done.

I hope that you are well and Jessy, As also my sweet children. Accept of my love in the truest feelings of the heart to you, my children and Jessy, and believe me to be, with never ceasing affection, your fond husband

John Adie

Remember me to my servants and neighbours

Apart from the evidently perilous voyage, the main interest in this letter is his instructions to Mary Ann regarding the fishing. It's clear she was expected to be in charge of business while John was away.

To avoid having his possessions impounded by his creditors, the letter shows that John has started to exploit his young children by assigning them ownership of his boat and fishing gear. 'James' is likely his eldest son (aged nine). 'Mitchell', presumably of a similar age, is unknown. 'Mrs Gifford and Mr Gifford' are almost certainly Arthur Gifford of Busta and his wife (or mother), who seem to have subsidised John's purchase of fishing gear. 'Arls' was a payment which secured someone's services, binding them to their employer.

'Jessy' might be Jessie Gifford, youngest sister of Arthur Gifford. She and her husband John Scott were living at Sand House, where Jessie was expecting her third child. She was of an age with Mary Ann, and

they both had small children, so were perhaps friends despite the distance between Sand and Walls. Such a friendship could conceivably be a factor in Busta's benevolence to John's family.

We can imagine Mary Ann's bemusement as she reads of her husband's desire to pay off his debts while simultaneously looking for an 'advance' to add to them. His protestations of affection sit uncomfortably with his past and future infidelity. However, the concern for his penurious family in the event of his death seems genuine.

Around this time, John Adie's son by Charlotte Ramsey (now aged about 15) came to Stapness as a servant to the family. This young man was later to cause problems for Thomas, well after their father's death - but that is a story for another time.

Notes

1. It is possible that Mary Ann was on one of the other vessels in the homeward-bound convoy, and the child was conceived when they anchored in Table Bay. However, John's words seem to support the assumption that she was on *Chiffonne*.
2. Why Rothesay? All we know is that in 1807, while staying in Rothesay, Mary Ann encountered Flora MacDonald, the niece of the identically-named heroine of Prince Charlie's escape after Culloden. Mary Ann was given a china bowl which had belonged to the original Flora MacDonald. The bowl is still in the family.

Magic is accepted here

Near the beginning

one man who happened to be passing
lifted the wheelchair I had just folded
and put it into the car boot for me
without asking.

We looked at one another
and if magic had shifted a wheelchair
then nobody was sorry about it.
No one had to be grateful or welcome
or unwelcome. No one had lost face.

I never asked to be your carer.

I did not offer, I hope I got that right,
when love had to go back to being careful
and I was back at the beginning.

Gordon Dargie