

The Mystery of the Mary Celeste

by Kieran McGovern

Intermediate

On the afternoon of December 5th 1872 a ship called the Dei Gratia was sailing from the Azores towards the Portuguese coast. Captain Morehouse was standing on the bridge of his ship, looking out to sea.

Looking troubled, he called to his First Lieutenant.

'Look over there,' said Captain Morehouse. 'Do you recognise that ship?'

A look of great surprise came on the First Lieutenant's face. 'It's the Mary Celeste!' he said.

Sister Ship

The Mary Celeste was the sister ship of the Dei Gratia. It had left New York a week before the Dei Gratia.

'What's it doing here?' asked the First Lieutenant. 'And why is it just blowing in the wind like that?'



More men came out onto the deck. They watched the Mary Celeste drifting slowly on the tide.

'This is very strange,' said Captain Morehouse 'I've known Captain Briggs for many years. He wouldn't allow his ship to drift like that ...'

'What can we do, Captain?'

'There's only one thing we can do,' said Captain Morehouse. 'We need to find out what is going on.'

There was no answer

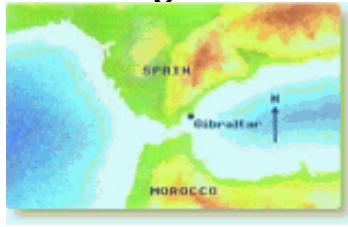
Captain Morehouse sailed out to the Mary Celeste in a small boat. As they got closer, it became obvious that something was wrong. The deck of Celeste was deserted and there were no signs of life.

The men from the Dei Gratia boarded the ship. 'Ahoy there!' they cried. 'Is anyone here?'

But there was no answer. Neither Captain Briggs, nor his wife and daughter nor his seven crew were anywhere on the ship. 'They've all gone,' said the first lieutenant. 'It's like a ghost ship'

[What happened?](#)

Legends



There are many legends about the Mary Celeste. One is that there were half eaten breakfasts and cups of hot tea in the dining room of the ship. Another is that the ship's cat was still on board.

The official enquiry into the Mary Celeste does not support such stories. It suggests that the ship was 'was in a bad state' and not fit for human habitation.

When the boarding party entered the dining room they found that 'the stove was knocked out of its place, and the cooking utensils were {thrown} around. The whole ship was a thoroughly wet mess. The Captain's bed was not fit to sleep in and had to be dried.'

It seems likely that the men abandoned the Mary Celeste in a hurry because their personal possessions were still on the ship. They had left their boots behind, for example.

What do we know?

There is very little we can say for certain about what had happened about the Mary Celeste. All we know is

- it was sailing from New York to Genoa in Italy with a cargo of alcohol.
- On board were 37-year-old Captain Briggs, his wife, Sarah, his two-year-old daughter Sophia.
- There were also seven crew.
- Unanswered Questions

Briggs was an experienced captain and a part owner of the ship. Did he order the passengers and crew to leave the ship? If so, why?

- Did Captain Briggs believe that the Mary Celeste was sinking? If so, he was wrong. When Morehouse boarded the ship it was seaworthy, though certain important things were missing.
- There was no Chronometer or navigation book or ship's register. Where were they?
- Did pirates attack the ship? There were rumours that a bloody sword was found on board and that there were bloodstains on the deck. But again the evidence given to the enquiry does not support the rumours of a sword fight.
- Morehouse and his men did find an old sword on the ship – but it had not been used for years. In fact there was no sign that a robbery had taken place and the ship's cargo of alcohol was still on board.