

# Captain Philip Henry Bridges



## Captain Philip Henry Bridges RN

1785-1848

For many years I have known the name of the Captain of HMS Trincomalee during her voyage in 1818/19 from Trincomalee to Portsea, to be acting Captain Philip Henry Bridges but I realised that I knew very little about him. This led me to do some research on his naval career and his immediate family.

Philip Henry Bridges was born in 1785 being baptized in the parish church of St Nicholas at Wade in Thanet Kent. His parents were Thomas Bridges and Anne Jacobs who had married in that church on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1780. Philip was one of five children having two sisters and two brothers. His older brother, Rev Thomas Edward Bridges DD, was educated at Eton and Corpus Christie College Oxford and became president of that college from 1823 – 1843. His younger brother Edward Jacob Bridges entered the army becoming a major in the Royal Horse Artillery.

Philip, however, joined the navy in 1796 at the tender age of 11 as a boy 1<sup>st</sup> class. He served on a succession of different ships becoming a midshipman and passing his Lieutenant's exams in 1802 aged just 17 but it was to be a year later that he was made a Lieutenant. In June 1803 Bridges was serving on HMS Loire under Captain Frederick Maitland when he was one of a boarding party sent out in three small boats.

*From Naval History of Great Britain  
by William James:*

“On the 27th of June, at night, three boats belonging to the British 38-gun frigate Loire, Captain Frederick Lewis Maitland, cruising off the Isle of Bas, were despatched, under the orders of Lieutenants Francis Temple and James Bowen, assisted among others by Midshipman Philip Henry Bridges, to attack the French 10-gun brig Venteux, Lieutenant Gilles-François Montfort, lying close under the batteries of the island. Owing to the heavy rowing of one of the boats, two only could get up. These, in the most gallant manner, boarded, and after a severe conflict of 10 minutes\* carried, the French brig; whose 10 guns consisted of four long 18-pounders, and six 36-pounder brass carronades. The Venteux was perfectly prepared for the attack, and had her deck covered with men. Of these she lost her second officer and two seamen killed, her commander, with her four remaining officers, and eight seamen, wounded. The British loss amounted to the boatswain (Mr. M'Gwier), four seamen, and one marine wounded, two of the seamen dangerously.

Even without reckoning the force of the batteries, the capture, by two boats' crews, of a brig armed and manned like the Venteux, was a truly gallant exploit; and Lieutenant Temple; the leader of the party, well merited the promotion which he in consequence obtained. Mr. Bridges, also, of whose conduct on the occasion Lieutenant Temple spoke in the highest terms, was made a lieutenant”

(\* Another report of the incident says fighting lasted 1hour 30 minutes)

The following is a quote from a letter sent to the Admiralty Office from Admiral Sir John Colpoys: "Mr Bridges has served his time and passed for Lieutenant nearly a year of whose conduct Mr Temple speaks in the highest terms, together with that of every officer and man under his command"

Midshipman Bridges was awarded a presentation sword as a result of his action that day from the Patriotic Fund along with Lieutenants Temple and Bowen. His sword as a midshipman was to the value of £30 (a Lieutenant's sword would have been £50 and a Captains £100). Interestingly the sword awarded to Lieutenant Bowen is now in the collection of the Royal Armoury.

Soon after this incident Bridges was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant where he served on the Veteran (64 gun Captain Newman) and commanded a boat in the night attack upon the Boulogne flotilla in 1804. Later he was on the Veteran under Rear Admiral James Dacre in the Jamaica station. He was Senior Lieutenant of the Franchise (36 guns Captain Charles Dashwood) serving in her boats at the capture of a Spanish national schooner of superior force off La Guira in 1805 He also served as Senior Lieutenant in the Aigle (36 guns Captain C Wolfe) in the attack on the French fleet in Aix Roads, the Hussar (38 gun Captain J C Crawford) at the capture of Java in 1811 and the Leda (36 guns Captain George Sayer) which in 1813 was sent against the Sultan of Sambras in Borneo, whose piratical attacks threatened the extinction of British trade in the area. Philip Bridges was appointed acting commander of the sloop Zebra in December 1815 and after a total of 11 years 3 months 3 weeks 1 day as a Lieutenant he was made a Commander in 1816 serving on Challenger.

Two years later he was given the task of bringing the newly built frigate HMS Trincomalee to England. With a reduced crew and plenty of room (because the ship was not armed with her full complement of cannon etc) for sick and injured sailors and marines being return to Britain it must have been an odd commission. Added to which it was a brand new ship with its fair share of teething problems for the Captain to cope with.

The voyage, however, was to be memorable for a more personal reason as Captain Bridges probably welcomed his betrothed Harriot Louisa Young on board at the Isle de France (Mauritus). She was the only daughter of Colonel Alexander William Young Commissary-General of the Isle de France. It would appear that both Harriot and her father travelled on the ship to Cape Town where on 6<sup>th</sup> January 1819 Philip Henry Bridges and Harriot Louisa Young were married. I don't know whether Colonel Young returned to the Isle de France immediately after the wedding but he died there in 1820. I can't help thinking that HMS Trincomalee must have held a very special place in the hearts of Captain and Mrs Bridges but it must have been a strange "honeymoon".

On arrival in Portsea the Trincomalee was paid off and exactly what Bridges and his young wife (she was 12 years younger than him) did then I have not discovered. It seems likely that he retired on half pay. Certainly Philip and Harriot were bringing up their family of (at least) one son and four daughters. Their eldest child, William Thomas Bridges was baptised on 9<sup>th</sup> Nov

1820 at St Alphage Church, Greenwich. The 1851 census shows that three of their daughters were born in France (Dunkerque?) between 1822 and 1830 so one assumes they were living there for a while. Philip's father Thomas Bridges died in August 1821 in St Omer, France. By 1827 he was back in active service on board the Prince Regent (120 guns), the flagship of Sir Henry Blackwood commanded by Captain the Hon George Poulett. Bridges, however was at Chatham when he was advanced to the rank of Captain in 1828. Their youngest daughter, Philippa Henrietta Bridges (named after her father?) was baptized at Alverstoke, Hampshire in 1837.

Philip Bridges's will indicates that he later spent some time in Germany as he was residing in Berlin when he wrote his will in June 1847. In 1848 he retired to Bath where he died in the November of that year. Harriot remained in Bath and died there in 1869 aged 72 years.

It appears that at least two of the daughters never married but daughter Harriet Charlotte Bridges married the Rev John Hoskyns-Abrahall in Bath in 1857 and they had at least 6 children. Philip and Harriot's son William Thomas Bridges married Frances Gertrude Carrow and had several children. He was educated at Winchester College and then Corpus Christie College Oxford. He was called to the bar in 1847 and went to Hong Kong in 1851. He had a lucrative legal practice and engaged in money-lending at high interest rates. He acted as attorney-general and colonial secretary when the office-holders were on leave but resigned in 1859 after being implicated in a number of scandals, and left Hong Kong in 1861. On the 1891 census he is listed as a retired barrister and JP for Devon.

The question as to what was Philip Henry Bridges was like as a man is much harder to answer. Brave obviously, seemingly a good sailor and leader of men. He appears to have had a successful marriage and refers to his wife in a very short will written in Berlin a few months before he died as "my beloved and faithful wife". He left everything to her and mentions no one else in his will. I would also suggest that he was a generous kind man as his treatment of Eliza Bunt, who travelled to England on HMS Trincomalee in 1818, showed. She was socially his inferior, the widow of a boatswain yet he seem to have tried to make her voyage as comfortable as possible and mixed with her socially, inviting her to his cabin to take tea and play cards in the evening. He gave her a ring in celebration of his marriage and Eliza called on Captain and Mrs Bridges after they had returned to Portsea.

There are still lots of gaps in Philip Henry Bridges story and more research is needed but I hope this brief account will help to paint a more vivid picture of the first Captain of HMS Trincomalee on her maiden voyage to England from Trincomalee.

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