

A FISHY STORY

By Ian Bruce and John Turner

The island-based website <http://sainthelenaisland.info> run by John receives many unusual requests for information about St Helena, but few were stranger than when he was asked about the central role the island apparently played in the early supply of goldfish to Britain. This was not something John had ever heard before, and neither had anyone else he asked. Did St Helena, as the questioner suggested, operate a previously unrecorded goldfish-breeding industry in the 18th century? Intrigued, we set out to investigate the subject further.

Starting with the Goldfish, it is known that they are not a natural species – they were first bred in China over a thousand years ago from carp found in the lower Yangtze River. But China being the closed society it was, apart from Japan, they do not seem to have spread much at that time outside China itself.

As far as St Helena is concerned, it is documented that goldfish were readily available on the island by the time Napoleon arrived. His well-trodden story describes his enchantment by the Balcombe's goldfish-containing fishpond when he first visited the Briars. In later years at Longwood, Napoleon had two basins installed and stocked with goldfish recorded as having been bought in Jamestown (though sadly, they all died due to improper care).¹ Later, in 1898 William Thorpe donated goldfish for the basin and fountain in the Public Gardens, presumably from his private collection,² where they successfully bred, and their descendants can still be found swimming around this pool today. Today, the enterprising Rose & Crown Store (operating from the building that housed Saul Solomon's original Emporium), reports that it imports goldfish at least four times a year³ and fish tanks containing tropical fish are popular across the island.

Regarding Britain, Samuel Pepys has often been cited as first to record the importation of goldfish into England when he wrote on 28 May 1665: "Thence home to see my Lady Pen, where my wife and I were shown a fine rarity of fishes kept in a glass of water, that will live so forever, and finely marked they are, being foreign".⁴ (We strongly hope the "glass of water" to which he refers was considerably larger than a normal drinking glass!) But it is apparent that, while they may have been known in Britain in the 17th century, goldfish did not become widespread until later.

The idea that St Helena played a central role in the supply of goldfish to England comes from a 1743 book by the highly respected naturalist George Edwards FRS:

His Grace the late Duke of Richmond had a large Chinese earthen Vessel full of these Fish, brought alive to England. I drew some of them for his Grace, who permitted me to make Draughts for myself, with Leave to make them Publick. The first Account of these Fishes being brought to England may be seen in Petiver's Works, published about Anno 1691⁵ [...]. They were not generally known in England till the Year 1728, when a large Number of them were brought over in the *Houghton* Indiaman, Captain Philip Worth, Commander, and presented by him and Manning Lethieullier, Esq, to Sir Matthew Decker: Since which Time they have been propagated in Ponds by several curious Gentlemen, in the Neighbourhood of London. They may be esteemed a Domestick Fish; they vary infinitely in their Colours and Marks, as do all Domestick Animals; they have been propagated and greatly increased in the Island of St Helena, from whence they are now brought by all our India Ships that touch there. They keep them in small Ponds and Basons in China, for the Amusement of the Ladies, and other curious Persons. Those propagated with us are generally of a deader Colour than what are brought from China, or St Helena. In a few Years it is probable, we shall have them in our Rivers.⁶

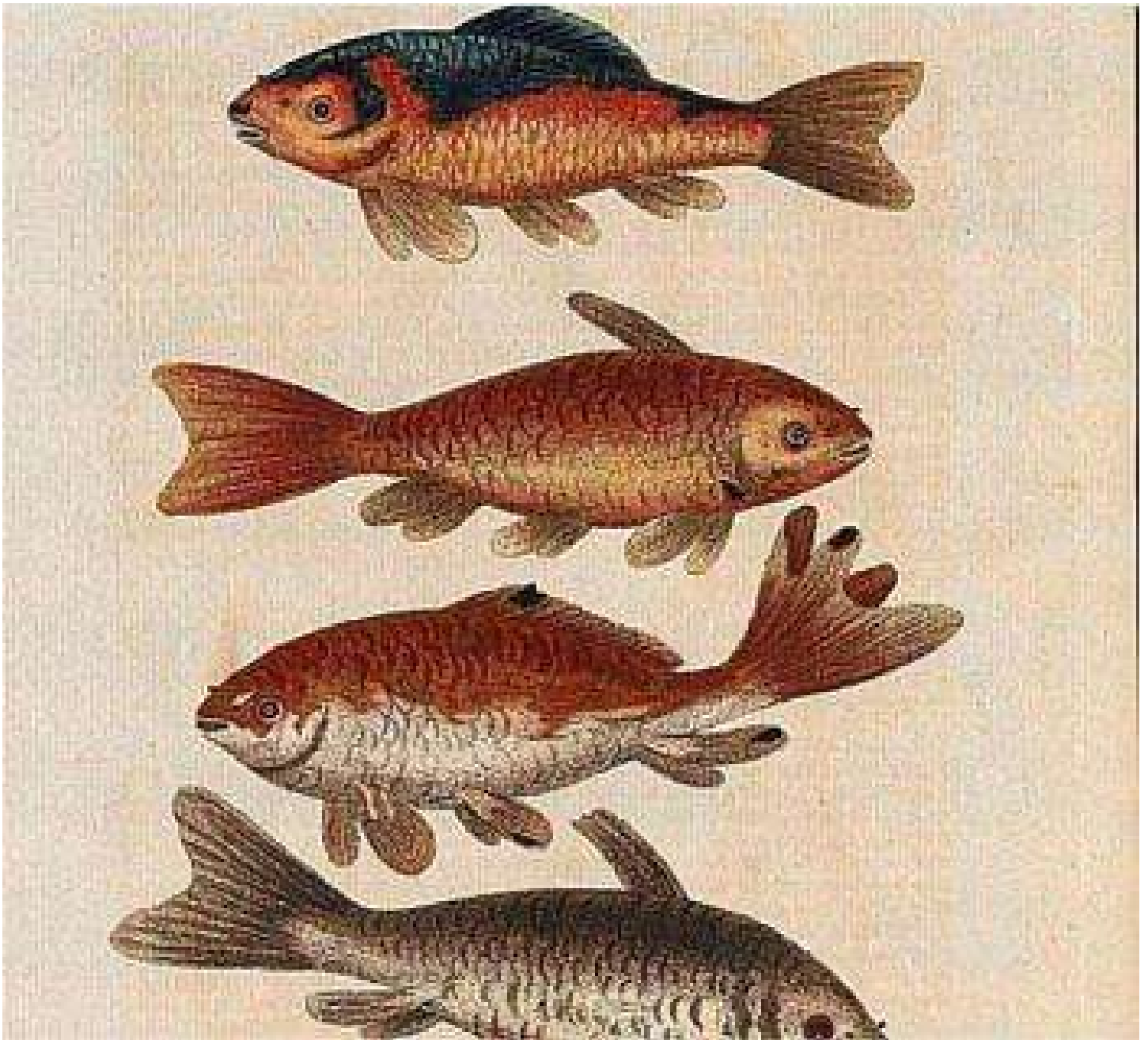


Figure 1: Illustration in George Edwards' Book

Similar remarks appeared in other references in later years, but where a source is given, they are all reliant on George Edwards' statement above.⁷

The history of Britain's introduction of goldfish was described by Prof. Anna Marie Roos from whom it seems certain that the naturalist and apothecarist James Petiver possessed "China gold-tail and silver-tail fish" – from an illustration it is clear these were goldfish.⁸ Operating from a London premises in Aldersgate, he amassed one of the largest natural history collections in Europe making use of a global network of men serving on a range of ships (trade, slave and naval) to collect samples around the world.⁹ Prof. Roos also reported that the 1739 voyage of the *Houghton* brought back "raw and finished silk, cotton cloth, porcelain and *a few goldfish*".¹⁰

The EIC found China an exceptionally difficult market to enter for it proved difficult to exchange goods for anything less than silver bullion. Even so, in addition to the most obvious commodities such as silk and porcelain, EIC ships began to bring a range of unusual items from China, one of which would eventually prove hugely popular throughout every social class in Britain – tea. If another unusual Chinese import were goldfish it can be presumed that they were first brought perhaps within surplus water barrels, though in the days when ships struggled to supply fresh-enough water to meet

the needs of their crews, the reservation of good water for the needs of fish would seem rather scandalous. However, unlike tea, goldfish could easily be propagated elsewhere. On that basis, George Edwards's suggestion that they were brought to St Helena and bred there makes logistical sense. Most EIC ships sailing from China took refreshment (including fresh water) at St Helena during their home voyage back to England. According to Edwards goldfish were offloaded at St Helena, placed in ponds and allowed to propagate.

This gives us two sources for the story, but with some issues:

- both need to have their information tested against other evidence; and
- neither stated definitively whether the import of goldfish via St Helena was an ongoing trade (an industry) or simply a one-off, though Edwards' account does strongly imply the former.

Until Edwards' account was brought to our attention (by the comment John received on his website) we were unaware of any reference to the breeding and export of goldfish from St Helena. Such a trade initially seemed to us unlikely, even with the knowledge that the fish are happy to live in relatively shallow water. Freshwater ponds are few and far between on the island and in the 18th century the island reported five major droughts (1714-15, 1720-24, 1738, 1749 and 1770-71) which hardly seems a sound basis for a freshwater fish breeding industry. Indeed in 1716 everyone was ordered to drink tea rather than collected rainwater because of the latter's "foul nature". Maybe they put them in the Moat (built in 1706)? Despite our doubts, we tried to investigate this with an open mind.

We first examined Edwards' reference to the EIC ship *Houghton*. Several EIC ships sailed under this name, the earliest in the period 1724-1736, which includes the year 1728 mentioned by Edwards, and the second a 495-ton vessel in 1738-1749.¹¹ However, *Houghton's* voyages were thoroughly researched in a paper by A. C. Moule in 1950, and this demonstrated the ship was not at England in 1728:

Moule showed that the *Houghton*, then commanded by Edward Gibson, left England in 1724 and returned in 1726 (the exact dates not known, because the log is lost). Philip Worth, in command of the *Townshend*, left on 29 September 1725 and returned on 2 June 1727; and, having now been transferred to the *Houghton*, he sailed on 24 September 1728 and returned on 26 June 1730, and again on 21 September 1731 to return on 26 May 1733. It is thus practically certain that no fish were brought to England in the *Houghton*, or by Worth in any ship, in 1728; and we must suppose that Edwards and Baster [quoted in reference 6], though they seem likely to have had access to first-hand information, were both mistaken as to which ship was involved. However, we suppose the year is approximately correct.¹²

The voyages of the two earliest *Houghtons* can also be tracked from H. B. Morse's study of Britain and the China trade.¹³ This showed these ships traded in China in the years 1725, 1729, 1735 and 1739. As mentioned above, this last voyage is of interest because Roos suggested it brought back "raw and finished silk, cotton cloth, porcelain and *a few goldfish*".¹⁴ However, that last item does not agree with the cargo listed for that voyage by Morse and Doreen Skala who instead listed "6,307 piculs of tea, 7,295 pieces of woven silk, 20 piculs of raw silk, 513 piculs of cotton cloth, 425 chests of chinaware, and 595 piculs of tutenague (crude zinc).¹⁵ They do not seem very similar, but perhaps Roos confused goldfish with tutenague?

Putting that confusion to one side, we can report that whilst one or more East India Company ships undoubtedly could have brought goldfish back to England from China, we cannot find them listed as cargo on the *Houghton*, either in 1728 or any other year. Neither can we find independent evidence of goldfish being brought to Britain from St Helena.

Perhaps it is not surprising that Morse's comprehensive study failed to mention goldfish brought from China on any EIC ship over the entire 1635-1753 period. That may seem to contradict

Edwards' statement that goldfish "are now brought by all our India Ships that touch [..]" St Helena, but it is difficult to know whether these fish were too insignificant to list as cargo or if they were brought as personal cargo by a ship's officer.

Our next obvious step was to look at the St Helena records but unfortunately, after a very extensive search with the able assistance of the senior archivist Karen Henry, with reference to the breeding and export of goldfish in the period 1720-1740 we found - wait for it - absolutely nothing!

We do not claim that no reference to goldfish exists in the Archives for this period; merely that nothing has so far turned up. We will be more certain on this once the British Library makes available for computer-based searching all the records presently being scanned at the Archives.

For now we can best say the story remains charming but unproven, but it does bring to the fore another important point about researching history, and particularly the history of St Helena.

When the island archives become more easily accessible, maybe George Edwards FRS will be found to be yet another esteemed authority who got it wrong and yet continues to be quoted some 280 years later. Here is yet another example where an error written by an early "authority" has been unquestioningly repeated by later authors who fail to examine the primary sources.

Postscript: Although the search in Jamestown's archives yielded nothing on goldfish, it certainly highlighted the problems suffered by the island with its supply of water during the course of the 18th century:

Floods

1 August 1701: Heavy rain causes a great flood, which washes away several houses.

11 August 1706: Further August flooding causes damage to the fortifications at Ruperts Valley.

31 August 1724: After the drought of 1720-24 the islanders are thankful that this year's August is a wet month, without which the island would have turned into a desert.

9 March 1725: A good rainy season is reported at last. Gumwood plants have sprung from seed in several parts of the island.

22 February 1753: Some very heavy showers of Rain which fell Tuesday last (18th) upon the Hills near Banks' brought such great and impetuous Torrents of water down that valley as did much damage to the lower Platform there.

29 June 1756: Council fails to meet due to a large Torrent of water coming down this valley which ran with such rapidity out of its common course that it was not possible to turn it until the Runs abated and therefore it has done great damage to the Fortifications and Plantations as well as to many of the possessions of the Inhabitants.

25 May 1797: A most uncommon and extraordinary fall of Rain happened in the early part of the morning of 25th last month, which occasioned the largest and most awful Flood ever remembered. Many Farms seriously damaged particularly in Sandy Bay. Several of the Fortifications injured.

Droughts

28 June 1714: The severest drought so far known causes cattle and crop losses. A supply ship from England is expected but well overdue.

18 January 1715: It is reported that in the great dearth lately there dyed above 2,500 cattle.

5 March 1723: The weather is reported as not being kind for the last four years. Wood is reported as very scarce and the islanders still need encouragement to plant trees.

17 January 1738: Water is described as more scarce now than it was at the time of the 'Great Drought'. of 1720-24.

27 July 1749: Failure of rain and cattle dying. th August 1770: It is reported that upwards of 500 cattle have died due to drought.

6 January 1771: The drought reported in August continues, with the totals of dead cattle reaching 700.

Other Water Facts

13 July 1706: Decision taken to build the moat in front of The Castle and Grand Parade.

24 February 1716: The high death rate in the Garrison is thought to be caused by foul water which occurs during the rainy season. It is ordered that tea be drunk instead of plain water as this worked for Dutch soldiers in Batavia [Indonesia] who suffered the same problem.

5 August 1718: Governor Isaac Pyke, having enlarged the Company's Garden, built a high wall and also carried a Run of water through all their yards.

11 June 1734: The water stored in tubs in Chapel Valley is declared to be the breeding ground for swarms of mosquitoes which invade every house.

¹Gilbert Martineau, *Napoleon's St Helena*, trans. Frances Partridge (London: John Murray, 1968), 12; Brian Unwin, *Terrible Exile: The Last Days of Napoleon on St Helena* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2010), 138.

²'1898 Annual Colonial Report: St Helena, No 265' (London: Colonial Office, 1899), 13.

³<https://tinyurl.com/3rd5v4bk>.

⁴Samuel Pepys, *The Diary Of Samuel Pepys* (London: MacMillan & Son, 1905), 315.

⁵The year 1691 is widely recognised as being a misprint and should have been written as 1711.

⁶George Edwards, *A Natural History of Uncommon Birds: And of Some Other Rare and Undescribed Animals, Quadrupedes, Fishes, Reptiles, Insects, &c. [...]*, vol. 3 (London: Printed by author, 1743), 209, <https://tinyurl.com/ycx7dku7>.

⁷Job Baster, 'Observationes Miscellaneas de Animalculis et Plantis Quibusdam Marinis, Eorumque Ovariis et Seminibus Continentia', *Med. Doct. Acad. Caes. Societat. Reg. Lond., Et Holland. Socii Opuscula Subseciva*. 2,2, 1765, 78–93, <https://tinyurl.com/y6v5s47k>; A. C. Moule, 'A Version of the Book of Vermilion Fish', *T'oung Pao* 39, no. 1/3 (1950): 1–82, <https://tinyurl.com/4aafzqxj>; Edward Hyams, *Animals in the Service of Man: 10,000 Years of Domestication* (Dent, 1972), 170, <https://tinyurl.com/5bc5rdha>; Christopher Lever, *The Naturalized Animals of the British Isles* (Hutchinson, 1977), 452; Adair Stuart Mason, *George Edwards: The Bedell and His Birds* (Lavenham, Suffolk: Lavenham Press, 1992), 27–28.

⁸Anna Marie Roos, *Goldfish* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2019).

⁹Charles E. Jarvis and Richard Coulton, 'A Chronology of the Life of James Petiver (ca 1663–1718)', *Notes and Records* 74, no. 2 (2020): 183–87; <https://tinyurl.com/5xe7xwr9>; Sam Kean, 'Historians Expose Early Scientists' Debt to the Slave Trade', *Science*, 4 April 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/as75yvmu>.

¹⁰Roos, *Goldfish*, 69.

¹¹'Ships of the East India Company', n.d., <https://tinyurl.com/3zmbuy27>, <https://tinyurl.com/2p964fjw>.

¹²Moule, 'A Version of the Book of Vermilion Fish', 42.

¹³H. B. Morse, *Britain and the China Trade 1635-1842*, ed. Patrick J. N. Tuck, vol. 1 (Taylor & Francis, 2000), Appendix "Table of English Ships which traded to China for the East India Companies, from 1635 to 1753".

¹⁴Roos, *Goldfish*, 69.

¹⁵Morse, *Britain and the China Trade 1635-1842*, 1:271; Doreen Skala, 'New Case Study: The Scarth Family of London and Ilford', accessed 4 March 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/3eb8nmys>, <https://tinyurl.com/mva9463j>.