

## The Quest for Pelorus

The reel “Pelorus Jack” has become very popular since the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society republished instructions for it in its Book 41. It comes originally from Barry Skelton’s book of “Dolphin Dances”, published in 1993, where it is explained that: *Pelorus Jack was a famous dolphin who piloted ships through Cook Strait for 22 years. Although it was protected by an act of parliament it disappeared after 4 Norwegian whaling ships passed through the Strait.* Book 41 has a similar text, adding the fact that the dolphin was named after Pelorus Sound in Marlborough (S. Island of New Zealand). These brief descriptions hint at the fascinating story of Pelorus Jack, but they tell nothing of the wonderful heritage that lies behind the word “Pelorus” itself. This article follows the thread of a quest to trace it back through its long history.

*The Oxford Companion to Ships and the Sea* gave the first clue. A pelorus, it says, is a navigational device, named after Hannibal’s pilot of two centuries BC. From this beginning the quest was to lead to some unexpected topics – naval history, opium smuggling, patents, Robert Burns, geography and archaeology of Sicily, dragon’s teeth, an ex-convict and a very dodgy Roman writer and the questionable authenticity of the Hannibal’s pilot, Pelorus, *via* many dusty library shelves, numerous websites and ancient books on microfilm, as well as the obvious matters of the pelorus, and Pelorus Jack himself – which is the best place to start.

### *Pelorus Jack*

The dolphin Pelorus Jack inspired several books for children, poems and songs, a thriving souvenir industry, sets of postcards, even a WWII B24 Liberator bomber was named after him. He was at the height of his fame in 1911 when James Cowan wrote his pamphlet, *Pelorus Jack: the White Dolphin of French Pass, New Zealand* (a revised second edition came out in 1930). Cowan reports that a Captain Turner, of Nelson, claimed in the *Nelson Mail* that he was the first to see the dolphin, as early as 1871, and that the intervention of some lady passengers on his cutter, the *Southern Cross*, was the only thing that saved the future Pelorus Jack from being harpooned on that occasion. He stayed with the cutter for 24 hours. Turner saw him at intervals during the next 17 years near Lewis Island, after which he moved to the mouth of Pelorus Sound and began his acclaimed two decade career as a pilot. However, this may not have been the same dolphin throughout, for Turner estimated the one he saw to be 30 feet long, more than twice the size of the Pelorus Jack of the 1888-1912 period.



Pelorus Jack

From *Pelorus Jack: the White Dolphin of French Pass, New Zealand* by J Cowan, 1911 (photo taken by Capt. C. F. Post, of the N.Z. Govt. SS Tutaneikai).

Pelorus Sound is on the north coast of the South Island of New Zealand, east of a narrow and treacherous channel called French Pass, lying between D’Urville Island and the mainland. French Pass is *Te Au-miti*, the swirling current; one of two narrow Straits with swirling currents that figure in this quest. Cowan provided a map of Pelorus Jack’s habitual beat, across the mouth of Pelorus Sound between Clay Point on the west and the Chetwode Islands to the east. The account of another author, Antony Alpers, differs. He interviewed many eyewitnesses and collected all available newspaper reports to compile a marvellous account of Jack’s life in *A Book of Dolphins* (1963) One of his eye-witnesses was Mr George Webber, who places the route west of that shown on Cowan’s map, a six mile stretch across Admiralty Bay between Pass Point (at the northern end of French Pass) and Clay Point. All agree that Pelorus Jack would meet steamers (the faster the better, and steamers in preference to yachts), ride the bow pressure wave and rub against the ships’ hulls, and then part company after about six miles

(or 20 minutes). He never went through French Pass. When Webber and his father took their rowboat out to passing steamers once a week to collect the mail for the district, the dolphin was so friendly that he often had to be held at bay with an oar. Their boat was 14 feet long and Pelorus Jack just a bit shorter. Starting in 1888 (at least, that was when he began to be talked about), he patrolled his beat, piloting ships in both easterly and westerly directions, by day or by night, becoming one of the most famous sights of New Zealand.

He was identified as a Risso's dolphin, *Grampus griseus*, of undetermined sex, but is generally referred to as a male. This is a rare species off New Zealand and a 1998 record says that up to that date only 12 had ever been reported. They lack the prominent "beak" of most dolphins, a feature readily seen in photographs of Pelorus Jack. However he was somewhat unusual for this species – so pale that he may have been partially albino (like Moby Dick, the white whale) and solitary, whereas Risso's dolphins are normally gregarious. Maybe his attraction to ships stemmed in part from having lost, or been cast out by, his school.

After Pelorus Jack became famous, the Reverend D.C. Bates, who published a set of postcards of him in 1906 and was also responsible for his identification, moved to have him protected by law. The existing legislation only provided for protection of fish, not mammals, and only for species, not individuals, so the wording of the Proclamation had to be fudged. It was gazetted on September 29<sup>th</sup>, 1904, not naming Pelorus Jack directly, but prohibiting for five years the taking of the fish or mammal known as Risso's dolphin in Cook Strait and nearby waters. The Proclamation was renewed in 1911, but Pelorus Jack did not reap the benefit. He disappeared sometime between the publication of Cowan's first edition (when he was alive and well) and a visit in search of him by one Lord Bryce in June 1912, described in Cowan's second edition: Bryce was told that he had been last seen the previous April, the very month the Proclamation designed to protect him had been renewed. Alpers, and the *New Zealand Listener* for 13 November 1959, give other versions of his disappearance – one that the lighthouse keeper of French Pass was convinced that a body he had found floating was that of Pelorus Jack, though officials who came to inspect the carcass did not agree, and another that he had fallen victim to a small fleet of Norwegian whalers known to have anchored off the entrance to Pelorus Sound about April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1912, and who would have known nothing about the Proclamation.

Alpers suggests that Pelorus Jack was named by way of a whaling custom, just as in *Moby Dick* there is a whale named New Zealand Jack. As a sort of honorary sailor he would have been entitled to be called "Jack", like so many kinds of seaman and nautical items, as in jack tar, jack lines, jack

stay, cracker jack, lazy jack. Presumably he was given the other part of his name because he did his piloting at or near the mouth of Pelorus Sound. Hence the quest for the origin of "Pelorus" must now turn to how the Sound itself got its name.

### *HMS Pelorus*

The adventures of HMS *Pelorus* would fill a book. She was a British brigantine of 308 tons, built in 1808, definitely not the last navy ship to have that name, and quite likely not the first\*. She was soon in action in the Napoleonic war, blockading Guadaloupe, then after William Wilberforce's Bill was passed in 1831 she had the task of arresting slave trading ships off Africa. In January 1837 she was sent to Western Australia and Van Diemens's Land and was in Sydney in June 1838 (there is a dated picture of her there in the Rex Nan Kivell Collection in the Australian National Library). That August she went to New Zealand to conduct a survey in the vicinity of Marlborough Sound. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> she anchored at Port Underwood to take on supplies and to seek local knowledge from settlers. One helpful informant was Jacky Guard, an ex convict who had been transported in 1814 from Marylebone parish in London because "*he did feloniously and burglariously break and enter .... and carry away one best quilt of the value of five shillings*". He served his time and went to sea and may have been on the first British vessel to enter Wellington harbour. He took part in a rescue operation and was given command of a sealer, and it was this trade that took him to New Zealand as a settler.



HMS Pelorus, 1838

Sepia wash drawing 17.7x31.5 cm, annotated "HMS Pelorus Sidney New South Wales 16 Juin 1838, W.? Reilly?" Rex Nan Kivell Collection NK7060, National Library of Australia; the drawing shows Fort Macquarie (1815) in the background where the Opera House now stands, with Edward Blore's Government House (1835) behind the tree.

\* A detachment of the ship's company from a later HMS *Pelorus* (flagship of the Australian station) formed the "Pelorus Naval Brigade" and took part in the Maori wars in 1860-61. Starting in 1893 the British Navy built eleven "Pelorus Class" cruisers, of which one was yet another HMS *Pelorus*. A recent biography of Scott of the Antarctic indicates that he would probably have served on her had he not gone on his second, fatal, expedition.

On HMS *Pelorus* Captain Harding was ill, so Lt. Chetwode was given command. He engaged Jacky Guard as a pilot to explore a tortuous “river”, named “*Orieri*” by the natives, in which Guard had once sheltered from a storm. They spent ten days in what became Pelorus Sound; a bay within it became Guard Bay and islands near its mouth near where Pelorus Jack would later rendezvous with passing steamers were named after Lt. Chetwode. Jacky Guard’s descendants still live in the area.

HMS *Pelorus* left on 24 September and was back in Sydney on 5th October. A few months later she was at Port Essington on the Coburg Peninsula of Arnhem Land – then a very new settlement – and was capsized and driven aground by a cyclone. Deemed unfit for further naval service when refloated the following year, she was sold to a firm which used her for an opium smuggling run from India to China. At that point she disappears from the records.

### *The pelorus*

The name Pelorus Jack thus comes from Pelorus Sound which in turn comes from HMS *Pelorus*. Where then did this ship get her name? It is time to pick up the subject of the pelorus, the navigational device said by *The Oxford Companion to Ships and the Sea* to have been named after Hannibal’s pilot.



An example of a pelorus. Its graduated disc is mounted on gimbals and can be rotated and clamped so as to “repeat” the compass dial. An outer ring has opposite marks for alignment with the fore and aft axis of the ship. The sighting vanes can also be rotated and clamped on required bearings.

A pelorus is an accessory to a magnetic compass, a graduated ring by which bearings of stars or other objects can be related to compass bearings and to the course of the ship. The navigational connotations of the word have led to its use by numerous companies and corporations that sell all things navigational or nautical, from high-tech satellite systems to compasses to yachts to marinas, and even by financial advisers who use it to convince their clients that they will be piloted through the swirling currents of investment. However HMS *Pelorus* cannot have been named after the pelorus, for the word was applied to the device, at least formally, from 1854 only. This was the date Messrs Friend and Browning filed British Patent 2652 - “*this invention has for its object the construction and use of an instrument or apparatus which we denominate a pelorus ...*”. 1854 is nearly half a century *after* HMS *Pelorus* was built and named, suggesting that the navy *and* Messrs Friend and Browning all knew the word from some earlier usage. Although the pelorus does not appear in earlier dictionaries of nautical terms (including one which we will meet later in another context) the device itself may have been in existence for a very long time, but not necessarily under that name. It is reported that the Vikings used something like it, and it is also reported that Hannibal’s pilot was the original inventor. We must now look to him.

### *Hannibal’s Pelorus – fact or fiction?*

Hannibal’s Pelorus is an elusive figure. He is not in the Britannica, Larousse, Americana, Australian, Chambers, Brock-Haus or Encarta encyclopaedias, nor even in specialised sources such as the Oxford Classical Dictionary or the massive Cambridge Ancient History, nor in numerous scholarly histories of Hannibal and his war with Rome (the 2nd Punic), nor even in Livy, the greatest historian of that war, who started writing his 142 volumes on Roman history in 25BC. Yet the salesmen for the pelorus and the webmasters for the commercial operations that have exploited the word blandly state (though never with references!) that Pelorus was Hannibal’s pilot, and they proceed to add colourful details, e.g. that he was the inventor of the pelorus, that he was a Carthaginian, or that he was a Greek who was sympathetic to the Carthaginian cause, that he was employed in 204BC during Hannibal’s recall from Italy to Carthage, just before the final Roman victory, and that Hannibal threw him overboard in a fit of unjustified suspicion of treachery and then, in remorse, named the nearby north-eastern corner of Sicily “Cape Pelorus”. These tales of Pelorus have obviously persisted down the centuries, so where have they come from and why have most encyclopaedists and historians not paid more heed to him?

Fortunately at least two authorities not only refer to him but give sources for his story. They are Lemprière’s *Classical Dictionary of Proper Names*

in *Ancient Authors*, revised from the 1788 version, and Pauly's colossal 83 volume *Realencyclopädie der Classischen Alterumswissenschaft*.

The first known reference is in Strabo's *Geography*, a much respected treatise written c. 10BC-10AD. His first section covers methods and philosophy of geography, and highlights the need for accurate data by telling two stories about what can go wrong when geographical ignorance reigns. The first is about one Salganeus, who was guiding a Persian fleet and was put to death by the commander, Megabates, because he thought, erroneously, that his fleet was being piloted into an enclosed bay instead of into a river mouth. Upon perceiving his mistake, too late, Megabates in remorse left a monument to his guide at the place. The second story is similar, and all Strabo writes is one line of text, referring to [another monument] *to the memory of Pelorus, who was executed on a like occasion* (translation of H. C. Hamilton, 1854-7). That is all – no identification of this Pelorus, no mention of Hannibal, no time, no location.

Next in sequence comes a Roman named Valerius Maximus, who wrote in the period AD29-32. His books are a "*Collection of the Memorable Acts and Sayings of Orators, Philosophers, Statesmen and other Illustrious Persons*". They compare Romans (largely honourable) with "Forreigners" or "Strangers" (largely despicable) under a series of headings such as *Things Craftily Done, Memorable Old Age, Innocence, Modesty*, etc, etc. Hannibal features in sections in Book 9 that deal with *Luxury and Lust*, and *Rashness*. Being a "Forreigner", and having had the temerity to bring the Romans to the brink of defeat a couple of centuries earlier, he does not come out well.

Hannibal's downfall, according to Valerius, was less to do with the Romans' superior forces and strategy than that he succumbed to *Luxury*, which "...embraced [him] in the arms of her allurements ... long banquets ... plenty of wine, the fragrantcy of ointments and the lascivious softness of venery [which] inveigl'd them to sleep and pleasure...and then was the Punic fierceness broken". And the story of the pilot? A few Chapters later Valerius casts Hannibal as a supreme example of the character defect of *Rashness*, accusing him of killing his pilot in a fit of paranoia:- "*Therefore I wonder the less, that the severe and cruel Hannibal would not admit the guiltless Pilot to make his defence; who returning out of Italy from Petilia, not believing he could reach between Italy and Sicily so soon, killed the Pilot, thinking he had betrayed him. But at length, when he found that what the Pilot had said to be true, pardon'd him too late; when he could pay no respect to his innocence, but that of a sepulchre. And therefore in the midst of a narrow and tempestuous Frith, stands an overlooking Statue, exposed to the eyes of them that sail to and fro, in remembrance of Pelorium and the Punic Rashness*" (From Valerius

Maximus Book 9 Chapter 8, translation of Samuel Speed, 1684)

The third, and last, author is Pomponius Mela, a "Cosmographer" who wrote a book *On the Situation of the World* about 44AD. He devotes a page to Sicily, of which one paragraph is about a headland ...*called Pelorus of Pelorus a ship master, buried there by Hannibal. For when Hannibal fled out of his country, as he was passing that way into Syria, because that to his sight afar off, the shores seemed to join all in one, as if there had been no sea to pass through, thinking himself to be betrayed by Pelorus he killed him.* (translation by Arthur Golding 1585)

It is always a pity to spoil a good yarn, but there are some problems. Encyclopaedists who ignore Pelorus have quite a lot to say about Valerius Maximus. Not much of it is complimentary, e.g. "...from the errors actually detected upon points where we possess more precise information, it is manifest that we must not repose implicit confidence in [his] statements...". For austere encyclopaedists this is strong language indeed! One gets the impression of a man from whom one should not buy a used pelorus. Valerius set his story in the Strait of Messina between Sicily and the "toe" of Italy – his *narrow and tempestuous Frith*. Pauly's *Realencyclopädie* has the comment that anyone who had ever been there would know that he was lying. On the Sicilian side stands Cape Pelorus (variously called Peloris, Peloros, Peloron, Pelorias, Pelorum, Pelorium and Pelorus in ancient writings). It is an extension of the Peloritani Mountains lying to the north of Mount Etna. Despite what Valerius and Pomponius say, we know that Hannibal did not name it, for it was already called Cape Pelorus centuries before his time, and was referred to by writers dating back to Thucydides in about 400BC.

Valerius Maximus and Pomponius Mela attribute their stories to different periods in Hannibal's last years. The former says it happened when Hannibal was recalled to Carthage from Italy (204BC), the latter places it some years later when Hannibal was in deep political trouble after the war had ended and was fleeing from the Romans to Syria (where he committed suicide). Both versions are suspect, for it makes no sense for either voyage to pass through the Strait of Messina and past Cape Pelorus. When Hannibal was recalled across the Mediterranean to Carthage he left from Croton, a port in the province of Petilia in the extreme south of Italy to which he had for some time been contained by the advancing Roman army. His sea route from there would have passed far to the south of the Strait. And historians do not mention either Pelorus or a sepulchre or a statue in connection with that recall, though the size of the fleet and the storms it suffered are recorded in some detail. And if fleeing from Africa to Syria, as in Pomponius' story, why would Hannibal go through the Strait

towards Rome and the very people he was escaping from?

Problematical as they are, these are the original stories of Hannibal and his pilot, a ripping yarn that has echoed through nearly two millennia to give us a word that has been used in navigation and to name ships, and in the name “Pelorus Jack”. The embellishments about inventing the pelorus, Pelorus’ nationality, and Hannibal throwing Pelorus overboard, are simply not there and must have been added over the years by people wishing to make a good story better.

### *Cape Pelorus*

Where does this leave the quest for the origin of “Pelorus”? Not lost, for even if the story of Hannibal’s Pilot has been embellished it remains as the source of our word. Moreover the story is still linked to a place that has been called Pelorus from far back in antiquity. So we have not yet reached a dead end. How did Cape Pelorus in Sicily get its name?

At this point myths and legends begin to outweigh facts. At first sight there are rather too many possibilities. We need to dispose of some red herrings first. Greek mythology has several instances of creatures with names like Pelorus or Pelorias or Peloreus, begat by unconventional methods such as casting severed genitals into the sea, or sowing dragon’s teeth like seeds. One of these monstrosities gave rise to the noun *peloria* (adjective *peloric*), which refers to flowers that are misshapen (monstrous) because of a genetic disorder. This word looks and sounds like our Pelorus, but it has probably come down to us by a quite separate thread.

Happily there is a more plausible source for our Pelorus and for Cape Pelorus. The Greeks left a rich legacy of their occupations of Sicily, dating back to about 740BC. It has been said that they left even more temples to their Gods in Sicily than they did in Greece itself – including one on Cape Pelorus that was dedicated either to Apollo or to Poseidon (brother of Zeus, Neptune to the Romans). Six great columns of Egyptian marble were taken from its ruins to form part of the three naves of Messina cathedral, destroyed by a massive earthquake in 1908. More relevant, there was a legendary nymph (a divinity somewhere between a priestess and a goddess) named Pelorias who was revered there, though Pauly’s *Realencyclopädie* says that this particular Pelorias was based in Rhegium (now Reggio) on the Italian side of the Strait of Messina. In a chapter of his *Geography* devoted to Sicily Strabo refers to a tower called after Pelorus, erected upon Cape Pelorus. He does not relate it to the Pelorus who was executed for a supposed navigational error, but rather to a similar monument on the Rhegium side of the Strait, and, by inference, to the nymph

Pelorias. Through time “The Cape of Pelorias” must have become “Cape Pelorus”. As late as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD another geographer still referred to *Sicily and the land of Pelorias*. Certainly the memory of the nymph Pelorias was sufficiently fresh to the inhabitants of Messina, situated just south of the Cape, that they minted coins bearing her name and her head, decorated with necklace, ear-rings, and corn-stalks woven in her hair. They have been dated to the period 461-288BC. One has Poseidon’s emblem, a trident, on the obverse side.

Our quest is brought neatly full circle by these coins, for there, gambolling in front of Pelorias’ watchful eye, are none other than two dolphins (with beaks, so not Risso’s!).



Head of the nymph Pelorias (PELWRIAS) with two dolphins, on a coin from Messina, dated to 310-288BC

### *Pelorus in Poetry*

That is not quite all, satisfying as it is to have traced the origin of “Pelorus Jack” back through more than two and a half millennia, beginning and ending with dolphins.

Cape Pelorus has long been a place of myth. Zeus chased the monster Typhon to Sicily and buried him under Mount Etna, where he still breathes fire. His right arm extends to the north-east, underneath the Cape. Alongside runs the swirling current of the Strait of Messina, home of Scylla and Charybdis, the six-headed monster and the dreaded whirlpool, both linked to Poseidon. No wonder the Cape has figured so much in legend and poetry, e.g. Homer’s *Odyssey*, Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Wordsworth’s *Epitaphs* – and a poem by a Scotsman called William Falconer which will bring us back to Pelorus Jack himself.

Robert Burns said of William Falconer that “*he was the son of obscurity and misfortune*”. In fact he was the son of an Edinburgh barber, born in 1732, with several siblings, all deaf mutes. He became a sailor and survived a shipwreck in a storm off the coast of Greece, which inspired him at age 30 to compose a 2500-line poem, suitably entitled *The Shipwreck*. It describes how man, through foolish actions, can unleash upon himself implacable forces of nature – specifically, the storm that he himself had experienced. He also published a nautical dictionary, in 1769. Like his poem, it became highly respected, indeed a copy was taken on Captain Cook’s third voyage – it is now in the Australian National Library, with sea-stained pages and the flowing signatures of its original owners. Although it was a truly comprehensive work for its time, it does *not* mention the pelorus, in accord with the notion that the word did not come into use until the Patent of 1854. Alas, Falconer’s poem of storm and death at sea, which had been inspired by his past, was all too portentous for his future. In the year his dictionary appeared he was once more beset by storm and shipwrecked. This time he was drowned, in yet another swirling current, the Mozambique Channel. Burns wrote to his friend Mrs Dunlop about Falconer’s death: “*After weathering that dreadful catastrophe he so feelingly describes in his Poem, and after weathering many hard gales of Fortune, he went to the bottom with the Aurora frigate ... Little does the fond Mother think, as she hangs delighted over the sweet Little Leech at her bosom, where the poor fellow may hereafter wander and what may be his fate?*”.

In *The Shipwreck* Falconer likened the violence of his fateful storm to a volcanic eruption on Cape Pelorus:-

*“So reels Pelorus with convulsive throes,  
When in his veins the burning earthquake glows;  
Hoarse through his entrails roars th’ infernal flame,  
And central thunders rend his groaning frame ...”*

These “reels Pelorus” are not to be confused with the Pelorus reels of Barry Skelton’s dance Pelorus Jack – heaven forbid! Falconer himself was confusing Cape Pelorus with nearby Mount Etna,

and he was echoing suspiciously similar lines in *Paradise Lost*, but no matter. More to the point, early in the poem the crude first mate does the unthinkable and kills a dolphin, although every sailor knows that dolphins are reincarnations of drowned mariners. Coleridge picked up the theme half a century later, except that his ancient mariner shot an albatross. The consequence was the same, doom for all concerned.

And what, apart from Falconer’s reference to Cape Pelorus, has all this to do with our quest? Simply that there is an eerie parallel with another famous part of the legend of Pelorus Jack. It is said that a sailor on board a ship called *The Penguin* shot at the dolphin, to the outrage of the rest of the crew. Pelorus Jack departed, bleeding, but resumed piloting soon afterwards. And it is also said that thereafter he could recognise *The Penguin* and never again piloted her. The story has been re-told in a recent book, *The Wreck of The Penguin*, by Bruce Collins (2000). There is likely to be as much embellishment in this tale as in the story of Hannibal and his pilot, but it is almost certainly true that on one occasion a shot was fired at Pelorus Jack from an unidentified ship, thereby provoking the efforts to protect him by law. Moreover, it is tragically true that on 12<sup>th</sup> February 1909, after successfully negotiating the swirling current, French Pass, on a passage from Nelson to Wellington, *The Penguin* was shipwrecked in a great storm in Cook Strait, with loss of 72 lives. Thus do portents recur and the wheels of history turn.

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Others may be able to correct errors or close gaps in what has emerged so far in this quest for the background to “Pelorus Jack”. Meanwhile, when enjoying Barry Skelton’s excellent dance, Scottish Country Dancers can reflect on the rich heritage that lies behind the name – some 2400 years of known history, with dolphins at the beginning and the end, reaching around the world and extending even further back into the mists of unrecorded legends.

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