

In search of an elusive ancestor Captain Frederick Larsen (later Lawson)

By Lindsay Robertson

The research into the origins and life of Captain Frederick Larsen is certainly not a "success story", nor even a complete story.. it is simply an tale of an long-running, low-key, and perhaps amateurish attempt to track down a fascinating individual. When it was first suggested (26 Oct 2005, by Dr Alan Beattie <editor@shetland-fhs.org.uk>) that I write an article on Larsen I declined, citing lack of significant results. Since then at least some results have come to hand (and so my excuse disappeared) and I still entertain the hope that the article will flush out further information. The information I have found appears on my website http://www.tech-vantage.co.nz/larsen/larsen_f_web.htm. This article is primarily an account of the search.

1 Significance.

Frederick Larsen was born in Denmark in 1803±1 year, and sometime in the mid 1830's arrived in Shetland. He was based in Shetland until his death (in 1859), and is buried at Scalloway. He fathered a total of 9 children, from two marriages, and many of his children also had fair-sized families, where they perpetuated either the "Frederick" or the "Lawson" name among their children: the name survives today in a good number of individuals, including close relatives of mine.

2 Research during my Father's generation.

2.1 Oral history

I grew up in a very close-knit extended family, in the North East Valley area of Dunedin, New Zealand: in the mid 1900's we were certainly aware of a familial link to a "captain Frederick Larsen, from Denmark, near Copenhagen, who had been shipwrecked in Shetland". I was also well aware of relatives, close and distant, who carried "Lawson" or "Frederick" as part of their name. I do not know the source of that original information; however I suspect it came via two basic routes:

- a) From Elizabeth Lawson who married my great-grandfather, William Robertson -- though I do not know exactly what information she passed on.
- b) From the Bolt family: there have been linkages between the Bolt and Robertson families at several points in their respective histories the Bolt

family (originating in Bressay) were and remain quite prominent in NZ, and their family line is well-researched

2.2 Early family trees

During my parents' generation, a member of our extended family (Dr James Murray) researched the family trees on both his (Jamieson) side and the Robertson side of the family. James was tragically killed, and while the trees he drew have been passed on, we have no real knowledge of where he obtained the information from: this is a huge tragedy. James's trees showed Frederick Larsen's descendants, but not his ancestors.

2.3 W J (Bill) Robertson

Towards the end of his life, my Father (W J Robertson, OBE, 1923 - 1988) became increasingly interested in documenting our family's history. I bless him for that (among many other things), since his was the last generation that lived in close proximity to other extended family, and perpetuated the oral history of old family information. Had Dad not documented what was known, I really fear that our links would have been lost. As well as documenting what was known, Dad had corresponded with Margaret Robertson, Sandra Sales (who send census data), and Dr Alan Beattie (who had made major advances by finding records of Larsen's naturalisation documentation in the UK's Public Records Office). Dad also contacted Danish authorities, in an attempt to track down Larsen's origins - but with the only an approximate birth-year and a name as common as Larsen, they were unable to assist.

2.4 Shetland assistance

The book "Hay & Company. Merchants in Shetland". by James R Nicolson. (Pub by Hay & Company (Lerwick) Ltd. 1982) mentions Larsen twice, in Chapter 5: "The Company's Fleet". On page 86 it is noted that "... In 1851 Captain Frederick Larsen, a Dane married to a Shetland lady was serving as master with Robert Gray of Scalloway as mate." On page 92 it is mentioned that "... In 1854, Captain Fred Larsen who had commanded the *George Canning* was put in charge of the *Thomas Graham*. One of his first voyages in his new command was to Pillau in the Baltic with a cargo of herring. It was late when he arrived there and the winter had set in. He brought the *Thomas Graham* in "as far as the ice" where the cargo was unloaded onto sledges. By the time the cargo was out the vessel was entirely frozen in and had to spend the winter there. She returned to Lerwick in April, 1855 and her next voyage was to Leith where she was put into dry-dock to have her bottom recoated..."

Reviewing the relevant dates, and the date of a testimonial given to Larsen by Hay and Ogilvy, it seems very likely that Larsen was initially employed by Hay and Ogilvy, was laid off when that firm failed, and was re-hired by Hay and Co.

Mrs Margaret Robertson generously assisted Dad, and her book "Sons and Daughters of Shetland, 1800 – 1900" confirms the basic facts that my Father knew of Larsen.

As a result of Dr Alan Beattie's visit to the UK's PRO in Kew, we became aware that Larsen's career had been jeopardised by a British regulatory issue: as a Dane, he was unable to continue to command ships in the British merchant service, and so in 1845 he applied for British citizenship and subsequently obtained a the seaman's ticket available to British subjects (He also took the anglicised form of his birth-name, 'Lawson'). Dr Beattie was able to obtain key pieces of correspondence relating to this event.

2.5 Katie Higgins' document

In the last month of his life, my father made contact with Mr Higgins of Christchurch. Mr Higgins and his sister (deceased) had been orphaned, and had been brought up by their grandmother, who was the grand-daughter of George Hay Lawson, son of Frederick Larsen and F Larsen's second wife, Agnes Tulloch! When Katie's health began to fail, her family persuaded her to write down the information that had been passed on by her grandmother – I have a copy of that 12-page, handwritten document, but while it provides fascinating insights into the life and times of F Larsen's descendants, it offers little additional detail on his origins except to suggest that he visited Shetland several times before being shipwrecked on Shetland and settling there.

3 Small advances, and frustrations

My Father died in 1988, and several crates of invaluable research material passed to me. I was interested in this material from the start, but career and a young family took priority for many years, and little was done. Nevertheless, I started to slowly make some progress.

3.1 Of small ships and red herrings..

Nicolson's book notes Larsen sailing on two vessels – the *Thomas Graham* and the *George Canning*. An internet search showed several references to these vessel names – but a more careful investigation showed that the vessels I had identified were about 10 times the displacement quoted for Larsen's commands – and hence certainly not the

same vessels! Presently I have no additional details of the ships that Larsen (Sr) sailed – and I would like to get these!

3.2 The Bolt family.

The Robertson and Bolt families 'connect' at several points – and the Bolt and Larsen families likewise! From my father I had several family trees originating from the Bolt family, each referencing Frederick Larsen, and each bearing above his name the notation “ (Catherine Lawson) “. My father speculated that this referred to Lawson's mother – I doubt that this is correct, firstly because of the prevalence of the patronymic naming system used in Denmark at the time of Larsen's birth – and also because of the use of the anglicised “Lawson” instead of “Larsen”. Nevertheless, the “Catherine Lawson” notation exists on the family trees, and I have no real idea of its significance.

I recently contacted a member of the Bolt family, who quite casually produced a folder with several letters dating from the mid 1890's, referring to both Frederick Larsen, and his son Frederick Lawson (Jr)! The letters contained interesting additional snippets of information (such as recording that Frederick Larsen Jr sailed on the “Beemah of Liverpool”, that he visited Melbourne in 1857, India later, and died tragically in French waters), and also commented favourably on the character of both – this was a relief to me; Rosemary Baxter had commented years earlier that there was some danger when one shook the branches of a (family) tree – there was no knowing what might fall out!!!

3.3 Mailing lists

I left messages seeking information on Larsen, on several Shetland-related e-mailing lists. While these generated the very helpful attitude commonly found, they produced little new information – apart from the humorous discovery that another distant relative of mine was also (un-beknown to me) trying to track down Captain Larsen....

3.4 Danish consular sources

William Hay was, at about the time in question, the honorary Danish Consul in Shetland – and hence responsible for the welfare of Danish citizens in the Shetland region. Since Larsen was employed by Hay, I thought it likely that there would be Danish consular records of assistance to Larsen – I still suspect that these records exist, but I have completely failed to find them. If they could be found they might shed light upon Larsen's mode of arrival in Shetland.

4 *A breakthrough... perhaps*

4.1 Larsen's seaman's ticket

Late in 2006 I had become somewhat frustrated by lack of progress with this topic, and decided that one of the few avenues still open was to apply some further effort to tracking down Larsen's maritime documentation. I visited the local LDS family History Centre, obtained the relevant film, and found the single-line entry giving Larsen's ticket number. With this information I commissioned the UK's PRO to search for the complete seaman's ticket. It proved to be money well-spent, because the PRO were able to tell me that the ticket number I found, actually belonged to Larsen's son.... and they sent me a copy of the full seaman's ticket of Larsen (Sr). This was a breakthrough, since the seaman's ticket contained not only some basic physical descriptors, but also the fact that he had gone to sea from Denmark as a boy of 17, some information regarding his voyages from Shetland, and most importantly a date of birth – 4 Dec 1802.

4.2 Copenhagen church records

With Larsen's birthdate, a search of the IGI showed only one person with (closely though not exactly) matching name and date and birth location – 'Eureka'!!! The IGI record indicated his birth-name was Friderich Christian LARSEN, DoB 02 Dec 1802, Christening 19 Dec 1802, Father Lars Jørgen Andersen and Mother Mette Kirstine HANSDR. Enquiries on the Danish genealogy mailing list soon produced images from the Holmens church book, of his christening record, his 'confirmation' record, his parents names, Father's christening record, the fact that he had a sister (Ane Sophie LARSDATTER), her christening record, and that his father had once been a carpenter and was enrolled in the navy.

Although Denmark's church records are quite good, they were still using the patronymic naming system at that time, and so back-tracking is 'challenging' – there is also a strong indication that Larsen at least once used his Father's middle name, calling himself Frederik Kristian JØRGENSEN (with same birth-date and birth-place)

5 *Where to from here?*

This is clearly not a finished chapter – mysteries remain, and it may be that further research will show that some of the above information is incorrect – I hope not, but it would be wrong to deny the possibility.

The issues I would like to resolve are:

- a) I would like to confirm beyond doubt that Friderich Christian LARSEN, born 02 Dec 1802 in Holmens parish, Kobenhavn, Denmark, is the person I am seeking! If I can establish that the son of Lars Anderson and Mette Kirstine HANSDR went to sea at 17 and was never heard from again, I will be pleased ... but conversely, if a death certificate for Anderson's son materialised, my research would be back to the beginning!
- b) It would be fascinating to know if Larsen's sister has surviving relatives!
- c) I would dearly like to know whether there is any surviving record of Larsen's arrival in Shetland and his initial hiring by Hay and Ogilvy.
- d) The testimonial given to Larsen by Hay and Ogilvy, refers to Larsen sailing from Hamburg, and also references Glasgow – I know absolutely nothing else of this.
- e) The family trees I have from the Bolt family show an alphabetic reference (e.g. "B29") adjacent to each name – at some stage there must have been a document to which these indices refer – but I have never found it.
- f) My family's oral tradition (and the rather dramatised account in Katie Higgins' letter) records that Larsen was "shipwrecked" on Shetland. Dr Alan Beattie has commented to me that "arrived by shipwreck" is likely to be just a euphemism for "unknown mode of arrival" – and one would certainly have to wonder why a seaman shipwrecked in Shetland would not have simply taken the next ship back to Denmark. Yet Larsen's actual mode and date of arrival in Shetland are not known; I would be really interested to know whether any information lurks in the recesses of the Hay and Ogilvy archives.
- g) In her book "Sons and Daughters of Shetland", Margaret Robertson mentions briefly a reference to Larsen in The Shetland Times, 30.3.1889 – I have yet to track this reference down, and to follow any leads it suggests.

I am absolutely sure that a professional genealogist would have run this person to ground in days, if not hours – but for amateurs like me everything seems to take time and have many "hitches". Yet it's a fascinating business, and I hope to be granted the days to make a little more progress, and I'd dearly like to think that this paper will generate some additional information. I also hope to make progress on a subject of even more direct significance to me, the Robertson family of Wadbister, Bressay – that is another story!