



Trade and industry

sweden's 18th century china trade came to an end 200 years ago - but now, as an old ship finally gives up its cargo, a brand new one has set sail **words alan harper**

In October 2005, a ship set sail from Göteborg, bound for China on a diplomatic and trade expedition. The *Götheborg's* task was to bring back a commodity which, to her sponsors at least, is even more valuable than the tea, silk and porcelain that filled the holds of her 18th-century predecessors – goodwill.

As the 58-metre (191ft) square-rigger left Göteborg harbour, she sailed past the spot where the original *Götheborg* sank, 260 years before. A faithful replica of a merchantman belonging to the Swedish East India Company (Svenska Ostindiska Co, or SOIC) the new *Götheborg* arrived in Canton in July 2006 before venturing on to Shanghai, after a voyage via Spain, South Africa and Australia – the latest round in a government-supported charm offensive that aims to put Sweden back in the Chinese spotlight after an absence of over 200 years.

Of the old ship and its cargo only a few

fragments now remain, littering the seabed off the Nya Älvsborg fort. Here, in the approaches to Göteborg harbour, laden with tea, silk, spices and porcelain, it hit Hunnebadan Rock and foundered in 1745. But the wreck of the original *Götheborg* has proved its worth many times over – as an historical archive, as an archaeological treasure trove, and finally as an inspiration.



THE TRADE

China in the 18th Century was at the peak of its imperial majesty, and regarded all other countries as vassal states. Inward missions sent by European heads of state to forge trading alliances were humoured and sent on their way. Mechanical marvels presented to the emperor by these fledgling industrial nations were regarded as childish curiosities. The Middle Kingdom had no need of goods or commodities from elsewhere. If the world had developed a taste for tea, silk and porcelain, so be it; terms of business were strictly cash.

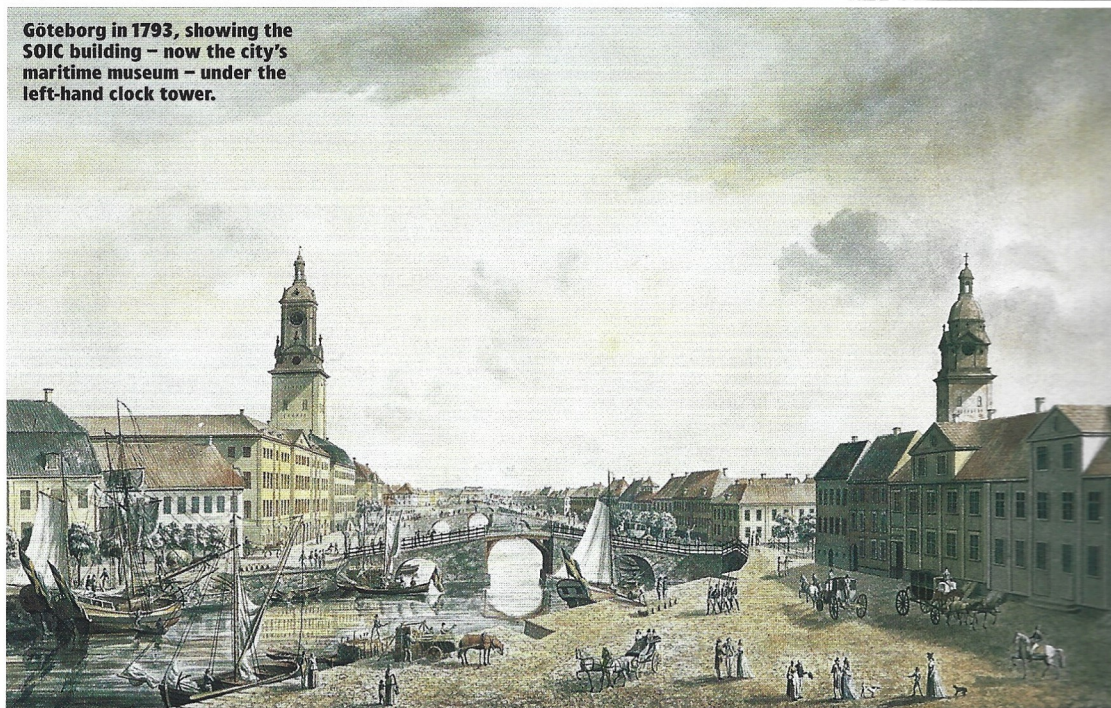
The Swedes came late to the party, but their trading company soon made up for lost time. It was spectacularly successful. The SOIC was founded by a Scot, Colin Campbell, with Henrich König, and received its royal charter in 1731. It mounted its first expedition, with Campbell aboard, the following year. ➔



A thousand tons of authenticity:
the new Göteborg on sea trials.
Opposite top: some of the original
ship's cargo. Opposite bottom: an
SOIC tea chest from the 1760s.

much of the tea was destined, illegally, for the british market – which led the soic to burn its accounts every year to protect foreign investors

Göteborg in 1793, showing the SOIC building – now the city's maritime museum – under the left-hand clock tower.



Scottish entrepreneur and adventurer, and Swedish East India Co founder, Colin Campbell (1686-1757). Below: a teacup and saucer decorated in overglaze enamels.



on tea," explains Kristina Söderpalm of the Göteborg City Museum, which made Sweden's 'grey' imports less profitable. "Also, the Napoleonic wars made trade more difficult. And," she adds, "demand for Chinese porcelain reduced as the European potteries developed." Eight of the company's ships were lost at sea.

THE CARGO

When the *Götheborg* foundered just outside her home port on 12 September 1745, her capacious hold was packed with 366 tons of tea, 133 tons of zinc ingots, replacing the stone ballast of the outward journey; comparatively small quantities of high-value commodities like pepper, mother-of-pearl and silk, and 100 tons of porcelain, amounting perhaps to 500,000 pieces.

Early salvage operations following the sinking recovered cannons, cordage and parts of the cargo that were easily accessible. Two 19th-century dives salvaged wood from the ship which was used to make exclusive items of furniture, and some porcelain. Then in 1906 a Göteborg-based Scots shipping magnate, James Keiller, found the wreck. "He was a knowledgeable collector," explains Göteborg antiques dealer Björn Gremner. "He had bought at auction, and travelled to China."

Keiller brought two divers over from Scotland with the aim bringing up as much of the porcelain as possible, and his two seasons on the wreck were astoundingly successful – more than 4,000 intact pieces were recovered, as well as heaps of broken shards – some of which he used to create an intricate antique mosaic on the floors of the family house. Today, Gremner's Antik West retains exclusive sales rights to the Keiller collection.

But it was the wreck's rediscovery by divers in the 1980s that really put the ➔



The trade in blue and white porcelain was a two-way aesthetic process, mixing shapes and designs from Europe and China.

Göteborg on the map. With the blessing of Göteborg's Maritime Museum, an archaeological salvage operation was launched that lasted until 1993, which mapped the site, surveyed the ship, and recovered another 398 pieces of intact porcelain – as well as nine tons of broken shards, and numerous other artefacts now on show in the museum.

BLUE AND WHITE

China's potters were used to satisfying foreign tastes. Trade with neighbours near and far had gone on for hundreds of years. Distinctive celadon wares from the Longquan kilns have been found from the Philippines to East Africa. Blue-and-white was exported to the Near East from the early 14th century, often featuring Islamic designs and inscriptions. Cobalt used in the underglaze decoration was sourced from Persia, and the colour itself was known in China as *hui-qing*, or 'Mohammedan blue'. Rare pieces that filtered through to western Europe from the Middle East were prized not just for their sophistication and beauty, but for their technological excellence.

Seaborne European trade in blue-and-white began with the Portuguese, first via

their trading posts in Goa and Malacca, and then direct from China through their settlement at Macao. The Dutch were not far behind, and the astonishing prices paid in Amsterdam for porcelain captured from a Portuguese carrack in 1604 – buyers included Henry IV of France and James I of Great Britain – only fanned the flames of Europe's growing enthusiasm for all things Chinese. The trade reached its peak in the late 1600s, when chinoiserie was the ultimate badge of wealth and taste, and some three million pieces of porcelain were being imported every year.

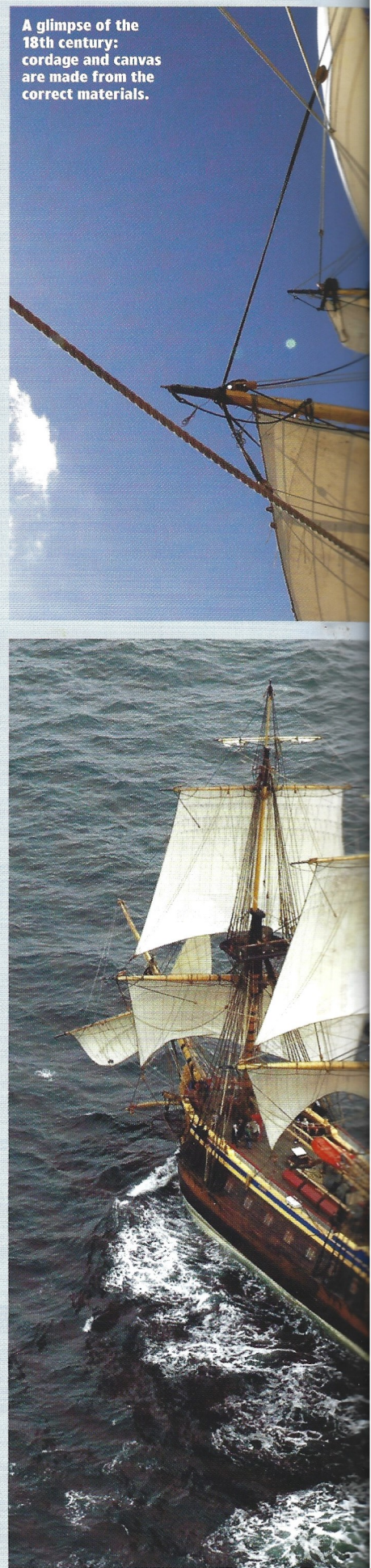
By the time of the *Göteborg*'s fateful voyage, however, times had changed. "In the mid-18th century the main European market was no longer the great country houses, but the new middle classes," says London antiques dealer Robert McPherson. "There was also competition from the European potteries. So you see a lot more standardised ware – it tends to be less ornamental, more functional."

Although the Swedish market was one of the most demanding when it came to ordering special pieces, being particularly keen on armorial wares decorated with elaborate coats of arms, the bulk of the ⇒

blue-and-white had been exported since the 14th century – the colour was known in china as mohammedan blue

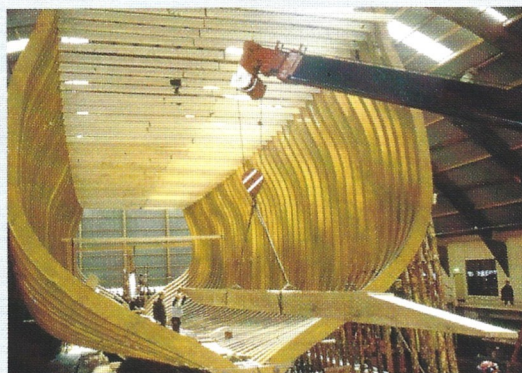


A glimpse of the 18th century: cordage and canvas are made from the correct materials.

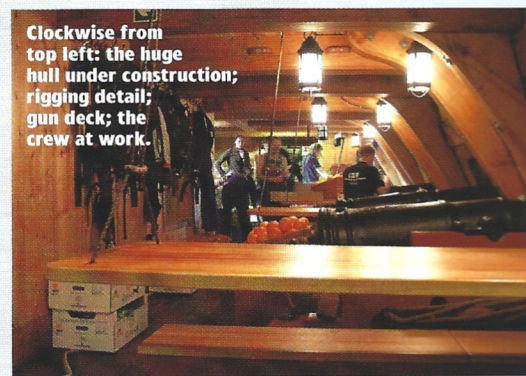




The new Gotheborg on sea trials. She is the largest and one of the most authentic replicas afloat.



Clockwise from top left: the huge hull under construction; rigging detail; gun deck; the crew at work.



The ship

It was shipwright Joakim Severinsson, diving on the wreck of the *Götheborg* in 1986, who first mooted the idea of building a replica. Unlike most pipe-dreams, his has come true.

The romance of the scheme captured the imagination of the public, who responded by digging deep into their pockets. Meanwhile, the government helped by providing generous employment grants. And with the promise of a voyage to China, commercial sponsors queued up to get involved, in the clear hope that the Middle Kingdom had finally developed an appetite for mechanical marvels – such as Swedish ball bearings and trucks, perhaps.

It all came together at a temporary shipyard in Göteborg's docks, where the oak keel of the first Swedish East Indiaman in 200 years was laid in June 1995. No plans of the original ship survive, although a useful model is preserved in the Maritime Museum. Contemporary drawings were consulted, and the wreck itself was studied, to produce the lines of the new ship. "It is a very faithful replica," asserts Christina Lönnqvist. "They studied in our archive, and read a lot of 18th-century shipbuilding books." Det Norske Veritas put their stamp of approval on the designs in November 1995.

Modern methods have been introduced where necessary to satisfy 21st-century regulations, and her internal accommodation – not to mention her electronic navigation equipment and her engine room – would, of course, be unrecognisable to an 18th-century seaman. But she has an absolutely authentic shape and structure, with a

displacement representative of one of the larger East Indiamen, and a draught at the stern of over five metres (17ft). Her frames are laminated pine and weigh 1.5 tons each. She has solid oak beams, 10cm (4in) oak planking, and her hull is held together by more than 50 tons of iron fastenings fashioned at the shipyard's own forge – including 56,000 hand-made nails. Her rigging is hemp, and her sails are stiff canvas. And the figurehead, a Swedish lion carved in pine, is 4.6 metres tall (14ft 9in) and weighs two tons. Few replicas have been as true to the original.

And few have been put so wholeheartedly to work. Some ten years after her keel was laid, the completed ship began sea trials in the Baltic in the summer of 2005. Then, amid scenes of tumultuous excitement, the *Götheborg* set sail on 2 October, bound for the East – and the China trade.

the new gotheborg

Length overall	58.50m (191ft 11in)
Hull length	40.90m (134ft 2in)
Beam	11.00m (36ft 1in)
Max draught	5.25m (17ft 3in)
Max mast height	53.00m (173ft 10in)
Sail area	1,964 m ² (21,141 ft ²)
Ballast	292 tonnes
Displacement laden	1,150 tonnes
Main engines	2 x 405kW (550hp) Volvo Penta
Speed under sail	c. 6 knots
Speed under power	8 knots
Crew	80

The *Götheborg* fires a salute to the city on her arrival in Shanghai in August.



the wreck of the göteborg



An insurance job?

Björn Gremner thinks so. The ship ran on to a well-known rock, close to home, in good conditions, with no loss of life. The pilot was released soon after his trial. The senior company officer on board was called to account for the accident, but then mysteriously disappears from the records.

But for Gremner, the proof is the quality of the porcelain. The antiques dealer and television personality from *Antikrundan* (Sweden's *Antiques Roadshow*) has worked closely with porcelain salvaged from the Keiller dives in 1906-7. He was also instrumental in putting on the recent government-supported 'Treasures from Sweden' exhibition in Beijing, which featured many of the salvaged pieces owned by the Maritime Museum. He is better acquainted than anyone with the *Götheborg* cargo – and he's not impressed.



"They would never have been able to sell this," he says, producing a sample fragment (above right) from his window display on Sodra Vagen. Indeed, the glaze looks cloudy, and the underglaze painting is dull and grey. It has none of the crisp vibrancy of normal blue-and-white. "I would estimate that between five and ten per cent of the cargo is like this," he adds. "That is rather a lot, I think." Alastair Gibson of Sotheby's in London is inclined to agree: "It looks like it's misfired to me."

If the Swedish merchants knowingly bought 'seconds' – or if they discovered on the voyage home that they had been conned in Canton – they had two options. They could brazen it out in the auction room and conceal the bad items among the good – knowing that under SOIC rules, buyers had little comeback after the sale. Or, somehow, they could contrive to lose the whole cargo, and then claim its full value from the insurers...

Intriguing. But we'll never know.
www.antikwest.com

gremner is not impressed with the porcelain's quality. "they would never have been able to sell this," he says

others have a distinctive 'café au lait' glaze on the underside.

But the popularity of armorial porcelain in Sweden endured, with elaborate designs sent out to be copied by Chinese craftsmen. Some orders were more accurately fulfilled than others. There is a celebrated teapot in Göteborg's Stadsmuseum, decorated with the arms of the city, where the heraldic lion rampant in the centre has been painted as a sort of unshaven man-beast in a state of priapic excitement. Whether this potter's joke at the Europeans' expense was perpetrated out of mischief, boredom or simple cultural bafflement, we can only conjecture.

* www.soic.se



A selection of the *Götheborg*'s cargo of porcelain. Above: a potter's joke at the Swedes' expense?

