

On marketing and masquerade: the persistently plucky Captain Pidding

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Studying the history of a commercial enterprise is, in my experience, broken down into two distinct portions: the long tedium of endless streams of numbers that have long since blurred together, and the occasional humorous diversion of the trivial, the unusual, and the bizarre, that are the natural occurrences within any extended and well-documented human activity.

The history of tea is especially ripe with such stories, as it presented an almost perfectly fertile environment for a cunning mercantile imagination, freed from concerns of honesty or fair practice. Having one's British customers and Chinese suppliers exactly half a world away from each other offered ample opportunity to tea merchants at various levels of the industry to exercise their creativity in order to advance their prosperity. Some were more amusingly determined at it than others.

“Captain” John Rhodes Pidding

Pidding's tea odyssey is a brief one, but spectacularly eventful. We can reassemble it primarily through the advertisements for his tea products, and his legal records.

Unfortunately, for his early career we have only his own word, which is more than

slightly dubious. A late advertisement¹ loudly credits Pidding with “Eight Voyages made to China, and 5 years spent in that country”, and in all of his public records (including his legal proceedings) he presents himself as “a captain of the East India Company”.

A modern genealogical database includes correspondence from descendants of the Pidding family which indicates that John Rhodes Pidding lived from 1830-1850.² Even acknowledging that these dates could be inaccurate by a few years in any direction, it seems remarkable at best that Pidding, coming from a large family in Cornhill, would achieve the title of captain of the East-India Company, make eight voyages to China, and live there five years, ***all before the age of 30***. But this is nothing compared to Pidding’s further stories.

Pidding claims that in the year 1822, at the age of 19(!), he was a captain of an EIC ship and living in Canton (Guangzhou), the center of all Chinese-British trade. The Canton trading system was dominated on the Chinese side by the *hong*, the association of tea merchants that, by imperial edict, were the only Chinese allowed to trade with foreigners. The most powerful of the *hong* was [Howqua](#) (Wu Bingjian), and Pidding went so far as to claim that he and Howqua became close personal friends, and that he spent a great deal of time at Howqua’s home enjoying a tea blend the legendary merchant (at one time the wealthiest individual *in the world*) made specially for his family’s private use... and sharing with his 19-year-old friend from Cornhill.³



Wu Bingjian all like “yeah as if”.

“Howqua’s Mixture”

Pidding’s story goes on that in 1829, he either deciphered the blending formula for Howqua’s mixture without assistance³, or was given the secret by the 60-year-old Howqua himself.¹ From there, he claims to have purchased, imported, and packaged loads and loads of this super-fine mixed tea in 1831-32 for the London market, entirely by himself, as the sole proprietor of “Howqua’s Mixture”.

We must pause to give Captain Pidding some credit for creativity — his innovative packaging was designed to look like a Chinese tea chest as used by exporters, even being sold in a standard Chinese weight (1 catty) and having reasonably Chinese-looking artwork and decoration.

Now we get to the part of the story which is supported by court documents. In April or May 1832, “Captain Pidding” first appears in public, renting a vendor’s stand at the Pantechnicon, a bazaar on Belgrave Square, London (since destroyed by fire, 1874). There he called his stand “The Chinese Hong” and hired a Chinese man, Sam Sing, to

dress in traditional-looking costume and assist him in selling his special teas, “Howqua’s Mixture” and “Howqua’s Small Leaf Gunpowder”. For unknown reasons — though he later claims his teas were wildly successful — Pidding very soon moves to a smaller bazaar at Baker Street. However determined and successful he claims to have been, he was nonetheless bankrupted in September of 1834, and does not resume business operations until 1835.³

This is where things get interesting. Though Pidding has left the Pantechicon, his stand hasn’t exactly closed. Another tea vendor, William Brocksopp, took over the operation and kept the name, even hiring the same Sam Sing to assist, selling “Howqua’s Mixture” tea in catty chests, just as before. This, in fact, is how we know anything about Pidding’s story — because when he discovers this, he promptly took Brocksopp to court to sue and protect his trademark.

On May 8, 1837, Pidding successfully got an injunction forcing Brocksopp to cease selling “Howqua’s Mixture” at the Pantechicon⁴, however, the case was heard on June 17, 19, and 21 of the same year, and Pidding’s case quickly fell apart as an overwhelming amount of evidence was thrown against his testimony.

Pidding v. How, 1837

Captain Pidding’s “Howqua’s Mixture” was claimed to be a special blend of “forty to fifty of the finest black teas of the province of Kyiang nan”.¹ His advertisements openly stated or clearly insinuated that the teas were purchased and packaged in Canton, and at special arrangement by “Captain Pidding”, friend of Howqua and the East-India Company alike, made available to the public at prices well below what one should expect for such delicacies. Throughout his initial testimony to secure the injunction against Brocksopp, Pidding had insisted upon his story of the mixture being a special blend of Howqua’s for the great mogul’s personal use. An advertisement of the time stated that the ‘secret ingredient’ that elevated “Howqua’s Mixture” above all others was the inclusion of

Longjing (Dragon Well) tea³ — a powerful claim indeed, as this green tea was well known to be so highly prized by the nobility in China that *none* was ever exported to Britain!

The affidavits for the defense, however, destroyed most of these assertions to the satisfaction (and possibly outrage) of the court. His ‘blend of fine black teas’ was analyzed to be a blend of substandard black teas, heavily covered with scented orange pekoe — in other words, instead of “the Emperor’s green tea”, Longjing, Pidding’s ‘secret ingredient’ was cheap perfumed black tea of the lowest grade. Evidence was provided by merchants who *had* actually lived in Canton, and known the famous Howqua, who decisively testified³ that:

- the esteemed Howqua would *never* blend black teas for himself or his family, as black tea was considered unworthy of consumption in China at this time;
- that scented orange pekoe was considered the lowest possible grade of tea by the Chinese;
- that Kyiang nan in fact *only* produced green tea, and never black;
- and that Mr. Pidding’s tea was neither purchased nor packaged in China, but was in fact bought at the London auctions and packed in facilities in England.

The court, therefore, politely refused “Captain” Pidding’s case against Brocksopp, the Vice-Chancellor opining,

*it ought to be the rule pursued by courts of justice, **not to go out of their way to favor those whose case is not founded on truth.** The plaintiff has thought proper to mix up that which might be true, with so much misrepresentation, that unless he establishes his title at law, this Court ought not to interfere.*³

Interestingly enough, this was a bit of a landmark decision, the first time an English court had stated that it would not enforce trademark claims that were simply invented

stories not based in some kind of reality — this decision was cited as legal precedent for many years afterwards as a basic touchstone of British trademark law.

(Pidding could *perhaps* content himself later, as the grocer Brocksopp was ultimately bankrupted in September 1842.⁵ On the other hand, he could just as easily have despaired, as one record indicates the cheap orange pekoe at the base of “Howqua’s Mixture” was flavored with overpowering bergamot⁴: this unusual adulteration, if not the cheap tea underneath, would in the hands of the Twining family become the world-renowned [Earl Grey](#) tea, one of the most successful tea blends in history.)

Sigmond & The Royal Medico-Botanical Society

Our hero Captain Pidding was not particularly daunted by his failures, and seems to have continued his operations in London for several years longer; advertisements for his “Howqua’s mixture” appear in London newspapers, now with the amusing warning: “Beware of the numerous counterfeit imitations, all having a title purposely ending in QUA.”⁶

In reality, Howqua’s name had long been fair game for any tea vendor, and there had already been several products named “Howqua’s mixtures” introduced to the market in or around 1836, further undermining Pidding’s claims against Brocksopp exclusively. Howqua’s name continues to appear in tea product names to this day as a sign of special quality.

Somewhere along the way, Captain Pidding becomes associated with George Gabriel Sigmond, an author of sorts and member of the “Royal Medico-Botanical Society”. The two seem to pair up, boosting each other’s credibility by each touting the other’s

experience and expertise in their own writings and advertisements. A Pidding tea advertisement of 1838⁶ celebrates “Howqua’s Mixture Tea, which Dr. Sigmond has pronounced to be *a standard tea in this country*“, while Sigmond’s writing⁷ mentions Pidding as a person of great influence in the tea world — despite the fact that I have never found any other source ever mentioning Pidding, except when they are quoting Sigmond!

Now, the Royal Medico-Botanical Society is still somewhat of a mystery to me. The [Scholarly Societies Project page on the subject](#) indicates it was a very short-lived association, the brainchild of a “flamboyant medical entrepreneur”. The society was likely the novelty of wealthy men, and it is within reasonable speculation to wonder if Capt. Pidding and Dr. Sigmond, either separately or together, weren’t above soliciting the interests, and investments, of the society’s members, especially in a venture as exciting, patriotic, and lucrative as tea.

Capt. Pidding mysteriously — and shockingly — returns to relevance on January 10, 1839. It was on this date that the East-India Company held the most anticipated and historically significant auction of many years: the very first auction of the new teas from the British colonies of Assam, India.

Somehow, despite having been bankrupted only a few years prior, Capt. Pidding took over the auction and bought the first lot of tea offered... and the second... and the third... and in fact bought **all** of the lots offered by the EIC that day (2,560 lbs.). Not only did he buy all of this new tea, but he paid a price “far beyond the most sanguine expectation that had been entertained”, as reported by Sigmond himself!⁷

Obviously I strongly suspect Sigmond of being a co-conspirator in this very odd occurrence. There is a 1973 work by D.H. Forrest, *Tea for the British: The Social and Economic History of a Famous Trade*, that seems to have explored the same suspicions, intimating something of a ‘Pidding/Sigmond axis’ that conspired to hoard the Assam tea, instantly publish Sigmond’s rave reviews thereof, possibly to influence public opinion and

artificially inflate sale prices...? Unfortunately I cannot get my hands on a copy of this book; if anyone has one to loan me, I'd be much obliged.

I believe the most plausible explanation is a conspiracy between Pidding and Sigmond to prejudice the expectations of the public and inflate the price of their new tea; I would further suspect Pidding of adulterating the Assam tea by blending it with something cheaper to extend his supply and profit. But this is, at this point, merely speculation: while I have not yet found evidence of any scandal unfolding from Pidding's strange 'cornering the market' on Assam tea, I also have not yet found evidence of either man benefiting greatly from the affair. Ukers casually writes, "The gesture proved a splendid advertisement for British grown tea, even if the quality left much to be desired." In a happy coincidence, the very next lots of Assam auctioned were noted for their "considerable improvement".⁸

The Medico-Botanical Society entirely disappears a few years later, and Sigmond wanders off to become a biographer-for-hire living off of wealthy egotistical old men.

Ridicule & Exile

Pidding and "Howqua's Mixture" have, by now, become a punchline in the esteem of London's elite — the Captain is satirized in *Punch* (August 18, 1841), and the phrase "Howqua's Mixture" is used as a comic insult meaning "a fraud" in Planché's *The King of Peacocks* (1848). There's also this terrible joke from the New York weekly, *Brother Jonathan*:

Howqua is of three different sorts; although they are not generally particularized by the tea-dealers or brokers, viz., **Somehow-Qua**, which includes Hyson, Souchong, Bohea, etc., as well as the tea advertised by Captain Pidding, **Anyhow-Qua**, composed of sloe, ash, willow, secondhand tea-leaves, or any other vegetable rubbish, and,

Nohow-Qua, which falls to the lot of those who cannot get any tea at all.⁹

Point is, it seems that the Captain's act was played out in London — though he's still famous, or infamous, enough to be known by name in a New York weekly. Pidding then seems to focus his operations to the northwest, particularly in the area of Carlisle and Wigton. It is here he retains the 'exclusive distributors' for his "Howqua's mixture" while maintaining an address at 22 College Hill, London, and he continues to advertise his teas through the early 1840s.

The Howqua name certainly grows entirely out of his control, though, as his own 1844 advertisement admits there are "upwards of 500" products called Howqua's Mixture now on the market. Again, though, we cannot help but admire the Captain's indomitable spirit — he boldly states that 499 imitations is *proof* of the quality of the 'real' product.¹

A passing comment by Barnes notes that Capt. Pidding attempted to start his own newspaper for Oriental traders, *Captain Pidding's Chinese Olio and Tea Talk*; this project, perhaps mercifully for whoever may have been funding it, lasted less than year, ending in 1845.¹⁰

Pidding surfaces but one more time, in the tiny little town of Dartmouth. The town's Sandquay Dock had deteriorated from being abandoned for seven years, and a by-election guaranteed a government position to whichever wealthy man could buy and rebuild the Sandquay into a profitable ship-building dock. In 1845, "Captain John Rhodes Pidding of Pidding's Teas fame" swept into town and leased "Higher Sandquay, the dock and all the buildings plus the ropewalk and Sandquay Mills", though with what funds we are unaware. Pidding soon realized, apparently, he had no chance of winning any election (for whatever reason), and quickly abandoned Dartmouth. Amusingly, we are told that "to get even with the local electorate, Pidding removed the dock gates and made from them frames for portraits of his ancestors."¹¹

From that point forward I have no knowledge of Pidding's fate. His fleeing Dartmouth is described as including his "family" but as of yet no direct descendants have published anything on the internet for me to discover about their fascinating and slippery predecessor.

Epilogue

Some shreds of interesting but inconclusive information comes from a genealogical database, in the 2008 correspondence of descendants of the Pidding family.^{2,12} We learn that J.R.'s older brother, George Raymond Pidding, in fact married a French woman who was the widow of an employee of the East-India Company.

Further, we learn that the same brother was convicted of forging stamps and sent to Australia, and that their father, James, was "a surgeon who sold potions for a while before running a lottery house at Cornhill."

We don't know when Pidding's brother married the French widow of an EIC man, but we can hypothesize that this may have provided some inspiration for Pidding's later assumed identity as an experienced China merchant (if the story is a lie) or provided the necessary connections allowing J.R. to launch a truly remarkable career (if the story is true *hahahahaha*). Alas, brother George was only three years older, so... yeah, never mind.

As he is the son of a "maker of potions", I'm also willing to suggest Mr. Pidding might well have grown learning something about making falsified products with the desired aromas and flavors to fool one's customers. In other words, skills that could be useful to a fabricator of fanciful fictitious tea.

At an absolute minimum, we may be assured that "Captain" Pidding had *chutzpah* to spare, no matter which portions of his biography may be fact or fiction.

Notes

1. (Advertisement) "As Supplied to the Royal Table." *Carlisle Patriot*. October 25, 1844.
<http://www.cultrans.com/1876-vane-vs-vane-times-112/307-newspapers1/cumberland-newspapers/carlisle-patriot/october-25-1844/2996-captain-piddings-tea>
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3. *Pidding v. How*, 8 Simons 477 (1837).
4. "Miscellaneous." *Blackwood's Lady's Magazine and Gazette of the Fashionable World*, 77-78. August 1837.
5. *The Jurist*, no. 298, 351. September 24, 1842.
6. (Advertisement.) *The Athenaeum* (London). December 14, 1838.
7. Sigmond, G.G. *Tea; Its Effects, Medicinal and Moral*, 86. London, 1839.
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9. "Howqua." *Brother Jonathan* (New York), 358. March 26, 1842.
10. Barnes, Linda L. *Needles, Herbs, Gods, and Ghosts*, 217. Cambridge, MA, 2005.
11. Smart, Ivor H. "The Shipyards of Dartmouth Sandquay Dockyard." In *The Dartmouth Harbour Papers*, 14. 1995.
12. Manning, Greg. "James Pidding (1770-1827)." S. Gregory, <http://stuart.scss.dyndns.info/FamilyTree/individual.php?pid=I13460>.

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