

The Great Tea Race of 1866

A clarification on the final outcome of the greatest of all the 19th century Tea Races

The results and times of the first five clippers, arriving in the Downs, are recorded as follows:

Place	Ship	Time and Date	Days out from Foochow	In Command
1 st	TAEPING	08:00hrs 6 Sept	99	Capt. MacKinnon
2 nd	ARIEL	08:10hrs 6 Sept	99	Capt. Keay
3 rd	SERICA	12:00hrs 6 Sept	99	Capt. Innes
4 th	FIERY CROSS	Night of 7 Sept	101	Capt. Robinson
5 th	TAITSING	Forenoon of 9 Sept	101	Capt. Nutsford

Although the foregoing is a historical matter of record and is well recorded in the journals of commerce and other similar august contemporary chronicles by respected authorities, there has always been a question-mark in certain circles and sources over the true winner of the 1866 tea-race and this note is proposed to provide a clarification and explanation why ARIEL was mistakenly considered the winner.

The issue only appertains to the 1st and 2nd placing, i.e. the TAEPING and the ARIEL. There are many references to the ARIEL having come first and thereby having won the 1866 Tea Race. It is necessary to analyse the last day of the race after these two fast clippers had beat up the Channel neck and neck at not less than 14 knots with Royal Stunsails and all Flying Kites set to capture all that the strong WSW wind could offer.

At this point there was nothing between these two magnificent ships –

08:00 hrs : abeam the Lizard Light
12:00 hrs : abeam Start Point
18:00 hrs : off Portland
19:30 hrs : nearing St Catherine's
24:00 hrs : abeam Beachy Head

At 03:00 hrs when approaching Dungeness, ARIEL reduced sail and signalled for a pilot. At 04:00 hrs and now abreast of the light ARIEL hove to, still signalling with rockets and flares for a pilot.

Meantime, TAEPING was close astern of the ARIEL, by 05:00 hrs was also signalling the shore, but showed no signs of heaving-to, like ARIEL. Captain Keay of the ARIEL, fearing that the TAEPING was going to run ahead of him, took a decision to cut across the TAEPING, determined to prevent TAEPING from either getting ahead of him or getting to the pilot first. The authority of the fast tea clippers, Basil Lubbock, described this tactic of Keay's as a 'daring manoeuvre', whereas by good seamanship codes and ethics it could also, in the author's view, be described as reckless and irresponsible.

Nevertheless it worked – Captain MacKinnon was left with no choice but to stand away, slacken stays and come about, to avoid a serious collision. Captain Keay knew his man very well and undoubtedly took this into consideration when assessing the risks associated with his bold manoeuvre.

By 05:30 hrs the pilot boats were bearing down towards the two clippers and this was when Captain Keay pulled his next stunt, positioning his ARIEL between the approaching pilot boats and TAEPING in order that the ARIEL would embark her pilot first.

By 06:00 hrs. both ships, now under their respective pilots, stood away for the South Foreland. By setting more sail than ARIEL, TAEPING managed to close the gap on his rival, but ARIEL was still in a lead position by about a mile when both vessels took in their sails in preparation for continuing up the River under their respective steam tugs.

In this regard, TAEPING secured the best tug and arrived at Gravesend almost one hour ahead of her great rival. In due course ARIEL also arrived there and the vessels awaited the tide to continue their passage.

The ARIEL arrived outside the East India Dock gates where she was to discharge her cargo. TAEPING had further to go, her discharge point being the London Docks, and it was therefore later before she arrived. However, drawing less water than ARIEL, she was able to go through the lock and, thus, docked some 20 minutes before the ARIEL, landing the first of that season's tea in the Port of London, this being the criterion for winning the Tea Race as agreed beforehand with all the Owners and Masters.

Technically, ARIEL arrived at her dock before TAEPING, and it is for that reason that it is sometimes held that ARIEL was the winner of the 1866 Race. This claim, of course, is wholly invalid insofar as the winner of the race was to be the first to land her tea ashore – and that was Captain MacKinnon and his beautiful and highly successful TAEPING.

It was not a popular outcome in many quarters, as the favourite, ARIEL, with her larger spread of canvas and the very experienced and successful Captain Keay, was heavily backed by the majority, the Tea Races of the 19th century being akin to the Grand Nationals of a century later!

Thus came to an end the most debated, thrilling and astonishing of all the Tea Races, the first three clippers having left the Min River on the same tide, then 14,000 miles and 99 days later all three arriving in the Port of London on the same tide, with hardly anything separating them. All three Clippers were Clyde-built by Roger Steele & Sons of Greenock and all three Masters were Scots.

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