

What Really Happened to Fletcher Christian?

Written by Andy Owen



Fletcher Christian

Captain Peter Heywood RN, pulled up the collar of his greatcoat, as he walked down Fore Street in the Plymouth dock area.

The sleet started and it felt like it was cutting his face to pieces.

It was the winter of 1808.

Heywood hated the cold. He always had.

Right from a boy.

His thoughts turned to the South Seas. The sun. The sand. An idyllic lifestyle on two beautiful islands, with stunning women and sex as plentiful as the coconuts on the palms.

This wasn't a dream. Heywood had *lived* it.

And *loved* it.

How much he would give, to be back there right now...

You see, Peter Heywood was a Midshipman aboard the discovery ship, The Bounty. Yes, *THAT* Bounty. Captain Bligh, Fletcher Christian and the mutiny.

He was part of it. He was a mutineer.

He chose Christian instead of Bligh. And he nearly hanged for it.

As he crossed the muddy street in Plymouth that day, with Tahiti and Pitcairn Island still on his mind, an extraordinary thing happened.

In front of him was a man whose slightly unusual gait drew Heywood's attention. He used to know someone who walked like that.

The man was wrapped up well with an overcoat and a cap pulled down over his face - and he was walking quite quickly. Heywood increased his pace to catch up. He had to see his face...

His rapid steps made the man turn round. He looked at Heywood and then started to run. Yes, it was *him*. He was sure.

Fletcher Christian! How could this be?

Christian was killed by the islanders on Pitcairn, years before. Everyone knew that. How could he be in Plymouth, now?

Heywood started run after him.

His mind was in a whirl. That fleeting look had convinced him.

It *WAS* Christian. He was also sure that Christian had recognised him.

He continued to run after him and considered shouting out his name, but thought better of it. They were meeting crowds of people now and weaving in and out and it became difficult for Heywood to keep sight of the man.

And then, suddenly, he was gone.

Heywood looked everywhere and spent a few minutes checking the side streets, but there was no sign of him. He moved into a shop doorway, as the sleet came down harder. His mind was on fire.

He had just seen a dead man.

A man, who had affected his life like no other.

Fletcher Christian...

The man responsible for The Mutiny On The Bounty.

That evening, Heywood thought of little else. He simply couldn't believe that Christian was in England, yet he was convinced he had seen him that very morning.

And the resemblance, the agitation and the reaction of the man he was walking behind, were circumstances too strong not to make a deep impression on his mind.

What should he do? Start investigating, make some enquiries and spend some time in the area to see if he could spot him again?

The more he thought about this, the more he felt it would not benefit him at all. On the contrary, it could be dangerous.

So he decided to let it go. But he would never forget it for the rest of his life.

This story started 21 years earlier, in 1787...



The discovery ship *The Bounty*, with a crew of 43, sailed from Spithead on the Solent, to the South Seas, in December 1787, to collect breadfruit trees for the West Indies.

The voyage was undertaken at the request of Caribbean plantation owners, who were seeking a subsistence food for their slaves

The breadfruit plants were thought to be a potentially cheap and an easy to cultivate food source for slaves in British colonies.

Very soon into this rather arduous journey, Bligh became aware that the officers and crew on board were not of the highest quality.

On numerous occasions, he had to lay down the law in his own harsh way - and, as a result, he alienated the crew - and The Bounty was not a happy ship.



It has been said that Bligh was a tyrant and totally unsuited to leadership.

He could be vicious and lacking in understanding.

Some say that was not the case - and history has been unfair to him.

But, the fact that there were three mutinies against him in his career, does suggest he had a real problem.

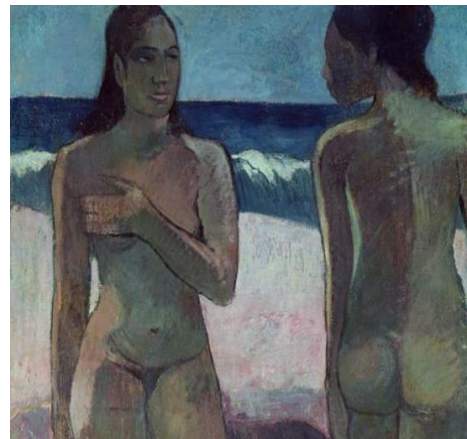
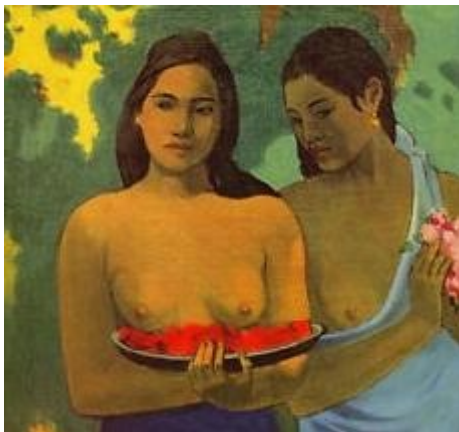
The voyage to Tahiti was a difficult one.

They originally took the western route which would have seen them rounding South America and Cape Horn. But, after a month of trying, Bounty was finally defeated by the notoriously stormy weather and opposite winds - and was forced to take the longer way to the east, around the Cape Of Good Hope.

The ship finally arrived in Tahiti on October 26th, 1788.

That delay in getting to Tahiti proved to be a real bonus for the crew. The ship had to wait five months for the breadfruit plants to mature sufficiently to be potted in soil and ready for transportation.

Every one of them indulged themselves completely in the idyllic lifestyle and the hedonistic delights that the island had to offer.



After 5 months of what must have been heaven for the *Bounty* crew, they shipped anchor - and on April 4th, 1789, fully loaded with breadfruit trees, the *Bounty* set sail for the West Indies.

After a few days sailing out of Tahiti, the atmosphere on the ship changed.

A lot of the crew didn't actually want to leave after the lifestyle they had been enjoying for the last 5 months.

Bligh reverted to type and became oppressive and controlling - and consistently threw insults at anyone in his way.

He also gave the crew inadequate provisions, serving them pumpkin instead of bread - and threatening to flog those who complained.

He had fallen out with his first mate and long-time friend Fletcher Christian, tormenting him to the point that Christian planned a suicidal escape from the *Bounty* by raft.

A determined group of nine men tried to convince Christian to take over the ship.

As Bligh's behaviour became even more intolerable, more crew joined the call to do something.

Tensions mounted. And finally, they broke...

On the morning of April 28th - two weeks out of Tahiti - Fletcher Christian, representing 25 petty officers and seamen, took control of the ship.

There was very little fighting and no bloodshed. The remaining eighteen crewmen were offered a choice to join the mutineers or stay with Bligh.

They chose the latter.

The mutineers provided them with a 23-foot launch.



They were allowed four cutlasses, food and water for just over a week, a quadrant and a compass, but no charts, or marine chronometer.

One of the crew brought his pocket watch, which was used to regulate time.

The launch was so heavily loaded that the gunwales were only a few inches above the water. In fact, it couldn't take all the loyal crew members who wanted to go with Bligh, so four were detained on the ship for their useful skills.

They were later released in Tahiti.

(Incredibly - and a testimony to his sailing skills and single-mindedness, Bligh and his crew sailed for 47 days and travelled more than 3,600 miles in a small boat without the aid of a compass or map.

On June 17th, he reached a Dutch colony in Timor and nearly one year later, in March 1790, was back in England to a hero's welcome.

But, despite the notoriety of the mutiny, the title "Bounty Bastard" dogged him for the rest of his life).

After casting Bligh away, Christian and his followers then sailed to Tubuai in the Austral Islands, now part of French Polynesia.

They were not received well by the islanders, so Christian decided to discuss the options with the rest of his men.

Because of the time they had enjoyed on Tahiti, 16 crewmen predictably requested to go back.

They sailed the Bounty back to the island.



Although it was a paradise, Christian knew he couldn't stay there.

The Navy was going to come after them. And the first place they would look was Tahiti.

After a few months, he shared his concerns with the men. He told them he wanted to leave. But eight decided they would stay.

So, a few weeks later, Christian and the eight others, together with some Tahitian men and women (including Mauatua, who became Christian's wife), said their goodbyes and sailed away.

A long time later, George Hamilton - a surgeon on HMS *Pandora* - after that ship failed to discover Christian and his party - wrote in his Journal:

'Although that man Christian has, in a rash unguarded moment, been tempted to swerve from his duty to his king and country, as he is in other respects of an amiable character and respectable abilities, should he elude the hand of justice, it may be hoped that he will employ his talents in humanising the rude savages; so that, at some future period, a British Iliou may blaze forth in the south with all the characteristic virtues of the English nation, and complete the prophecy by propagating the Christian knowledge amongst the infidels.'

As Christian has taken fourteen beautiful women with him from Otaheite, (Tahiti) there is little doubt of his intention of colonising some undiscovered island.'

In January 1790, after a journey of over 1,500 miles, Christian and his group approached Pitcairn Island.



Pitcairn is one of the most remote islands in the world. It has been described as lying 'in the middle of nowhere.'

It is over 4,000 miles from Panama, 4,000 miles from Chile - and 3,300 miles from New Zealand.

And 7,800 miles and eight and a half months after the mutiny.

The weather was atrocious and it was not until three days later that Christian, with Brown, Williams, McCoy, and three Tahitians managed to land in a boat on the west coast of the island.

They spent two days exploring the island and returned to the ship with the good news that the island was well suited for a permanent settlement.

It was also uninhabited.

They ferried ashore pigs, goats, chickens, and several varieties of plants that they had brought from Tahiti.

They also stripped *Bounty* of everything movable - and saved and hauled ashore two damaged, but repairable small boats.

Then, they burned and scuttled *The Bounty*.

They had reached their safe haven. And, it was to be ten months before *HMS Pandora* sailed from England to hunt them down - and just six weeks before Bligh got back to England.



Not much is known about how life went for the group on Pitcairn. One imagines it was similar to Tahiti in a lot of respects.

But, one story suggests otherwise.

In fact, it is the story that history has accepted as being the truth. It is, that after many years, the group had major disagreements - and great friction had developed between them.

One night, the mutineers were all rounded up by the Tahitians and killed, Christian included. For some strange reason, one man was spared.

His *Bounty* name was Alexander Smith. But his real name was John Adams.

Why he gave a false name to sign on is very strange.

But, there were a lot of strange things surrounding this man.

When Captain Mayhew Folger of the American ship *Topaz* visited Pitcairn in 1808, he was told that he and his crew were the first visitors to the island, since the arrival of the *Bounty* mutineers and the Tahitian men and women they brought with them.

When he went ashore, Folger was greeted by a man who he assumed was the community leader. He introduced himself as Alexander Smith.

He claimed he was the sole living survivor of the original mutineers.

He then told the story that the mutineers had been murdered by the Tahitians of their party about four years after their coming to the island.

Later, he told different versions of the story to future visitors.

It is extremely doubtful whether any of these stories were true, mainly because of what had happened on the island since the Bounty mutineers set up home there.

After four years, the relationships between the crew and their female Tahitian partners had developed and children had been born.

Families had been created.

For the Tahitians to kill the Bounty crew would not have made sense.

And why would they do that? Whether they could have managed it anyway, is very doubtful. Plus, why was Adams spared?

It is now widely accepted that Adams's stories are dubious at best.

His statement to Folger about his ship being the first to visit the island, is also in serious doubt. It is likely that many ships visited over the years.

His tales seem rather odd and manufactured - almost as if to hide something.

But what?

Incidentally, Christian's grave has never been found on Pitcairn. Given his importance to this group and his leadership that was instrumental in building the settlement, this is also very odd. Perhaps there is an obvious reason?

Fletcher Christian didn't die on Pitcairn Island at all.

He found his way back to England.

But how? Because of the remoteness of the island, it is unlikely that many ships stopped there. But some will have done, almost certainly.

The Jenny, a ship trading otter skins, is thought to have paid a visit. And there would have been others, too.

And, of course, Christian had money. Bligh had been given funds for his trip and Christian would have taken control of it, once Bligh had been removed.

This would certainly have bought him his passage back home, without doubt.

Towards the end of 1796, a book suddenly appeared in bookshops in England, with the lengthy title of *'Letters from Mr. Fletcher Christian, containing a narrative of the transactions on board His Majesty's Ship Bounty, Before and After the Mutiny, with his subsequent voyages and travels in South America'*.

Extracts from the book were published everywhere.

A copy was sent to Bligh by his publisher.

After reading it, Bligh wrote to Sir Joseph Banks:

"Mr Nicol has been so good as to send me down a pamphlet called Christian's Letters - is it possible that wretch can be at Cadiz and that he has had intercourse with his Brother, that sixpenny Professor, who has more Law about him than honour?"

"My Dear Sir, I can only say that I heartily despise the praise of any of the family of Christian, and I hope and trust yet that the Mutineer will meet with his desserts."

Among the journals that published extracts from the Letters was one called The Weekly Entertainer.

The piece was seen by William Wordsworth, the poet.



The following issue of this journal contained a letter from him that has created a lot of conjecture, both at the time and many times since.

'Sir,

There having appeared in your Entertainer (vide the 255th page of the present volume) an extract from a work purporting to be the production of Fletcher Christian, who headed the mutiny on board the Bounty.

I think it proper to inform you, that I have the best authority for saying that this publication is spurious.

Your regard for the truth will induce you to apprise your readers of this circumstance.

I am, Sir, Your humble servant,

William Wordsworth

Fletcher Christian and William Wordsworth had been schoolmates at Cockermouth Grammar School, meeting first in 1776 - and they enjoyed a very strong friendship.



The words the poet used, " *I have the best authority for saying that this publication is spurious*", can only be a reference to a conversation that he must have had with Christian in the previous few weeks.

In addition to this, the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge also made references to suggest he had met Christian in his later years.

Both poets cleverly added to the mystery by careful use of words, shrouding it all nicely, instead of writing in detail as they normally would.

The feeling grew in certain circles, that Fletcher Christian had indeed made it back to England.

But this seemed to be confirmed soon after, when Sir John Barrow started to write his narrative on the *Bounty*.

It wasn't published, however, until 1831.

But, in it he suggests, that Fletcher Christian had most certainly returned to England, and that he (Barrow) knew the truth of it.

He also commented that he felt it was 'certain and undeniable' that Peter Heywood, actually saw Fletcher Christian in the streets of Plymouth in 1808.

In addition, Sir John Laughton in his biography of Fletcher Christian in the Dictionary of National Biography, gave certain credence to the fact of Christian's return.

What's interesting about all of these statements, is that none of these reputable men are giving opinions. They are simply writing of things they know to be true.

So, where did Christian hide?

Almost certainly in the Lake District. He went home...



In those days, the Lake District had become a haven for fugitives from justice in the nineteenth century.

There was lots of space, no law enforcement to speak of – and people kept themselves to themselves. It was the perfect place to disappear.

Christian grew up in Cockermouth. He knew the area very well.

And he also knew he would be sheltered by his family and friends.

His return adds strength to the theory that he was still in love with his sweetheart and first cousin, Isabella Curwen. In fact, he named his Tahitian wife after her.

The two knew each other well - Windermere is not far from Cockermouth.

But the romance was not to be, as his family suffered financial problems and were only saved by another cousin, John, who subsequently married Isabella.

Christian was heartbroken.

Six months after Isabella's marriage, he joined the Navy.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

After the Pandora brought back the mutineers from Tahiti, they all testified to the terrible treatment they had received under the command of Bligh. His reputation took a hit in the wake of the revelations.

Four of the men were acquitted of the crime of mutiny, three were convicted, but they either received a royal pardon or were otherwise excused.

The remaining three were found guilty and hung for their crimes.

Fletcher Christian was sentenced to death in his absence.

Heywood was found guilty and sentenced to death, but soon afterwards pardoned, because of the supposed influence of Heywood's uncle Commodore Thomas Pasley (soon to become Admiral Sir Thomas Pasley).

It's been over 330 years since the mutiny took place, but the name of Fletcher Christian still looms large over all of us.

And, although he led a mutiny - he was clearly a very impressive man.

He was a leader - strong, committed and determined.

That strength and determination brought him back to England - and he lived out the rest of his life here.

I am sure of it.

Fletcher Christian - even after all this time - still leads us a merry dance.

He is one of life's iconic characters - and probably always will be.