

# Frederick William Beechey's Narrative of the Voyage of the *Blossom* to the Pacific and the Arctic

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(Received October 28, 2023; Revised manuscript accepted January 15, 2024)

## Abstract

Frederick William Beechey's expedition in 1825-1828 was not so much to discover and explore the North Pacific region and Bering Strait but to render assistance to Captain Parry and Captain Franklin. John Franklin was on his second land expedition and was supposed to go westwards from the Mackenzie river to Kotzebue Sound in Alaska. Unfortunately, Beechey had to leave Kotzebue Sound in two consecutive years without having found any trace of Franklin's expedition and sailed back to England having been away for three and a half years but having explored hitherto less known North Pacific and Arctic regions.

**Key words:** Frederick William Beechey, *Blossom*, North Pacific, Bering Strait, Alaska

## 1. Introduction

In 1825 Frederick William Beechey, commander of the sloop *Blossom*, was instructed by the Admiralty to explore uncharted areas of the Pacific, to pass through Bering Strait, and to attempt to make contact there with either an overland expedition from the Mackenzie River, Northwest Territories, led by John Franklin or a naval expedition from Prince Regent Inlet under William Edward Parry. During the summer of 1826 an advance party from the *Blossom* reached as far east as Point Barrow (Alaska) but did not meet either expedition. It was later discovered that the *Blossom*'s party had missed Franklin, who had come within about 150 mi of Point Barrow, by only nine days.

After wintering in the Pacific, F.W. Beechey once more headed north to the Bering Strait in the summer of 1827 but again failed to rendezvous with either Franklin or Parry. He then returned to the Pacific, explored and charted parts of it, and sailed home, reaching Britain in September 1828. The *Narrative of a voyage to the Pacific and Beering's Strait*, was published by authority of the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty in 1831 (Burant, 1985).

Interesting in this context is also the publication of the *Journal of Lieutenant George Peard of H.M.S. Blossom* (George, 1974; Gough, 2011).

## 2. Frederick William Beechey

### 2.1 His personal life

Frederick William Beechey was born on 17 February 1796 as the son of Sir William Beechey (1753-1839), R.A., R.N., F.R.S. and his second wife, Anne Phyllis Jessop (1764-1833), both of them painters. F.W.

Beechey was a naval officer, an artist, an Arctic explorer, a hydrographer and an author. In December 1828, he married Charlotte, youngest daughter of Lieutenant-Colonel John Stapleton, of Thorp Lee, and they had five daughters. F.W. Beechey was elected President of the Royal Geographical Society, an office which he held from 28 May 1855 until his death. Rear-Admiral Beechey died at his residence, Westbourne crescent, Hyde-Park, on 29 November 1856 (Anonymous, 1857; Murchison, 1857).



Fig. 1 Portrait of Frederick William Beechey painted circa 1822 by his brother George Duncan Beechey.

### 2.2 His naval career

Frederick William Beechey entered the Royal Navy in July 1806, at the age of 10 years, under the direct patronage of Lord St. Vincent, and in 1807 he was rated midshipman. He took part in the attack on New Orleans, and was promoted to lieutenant for a boat operation in

1815. After the Napoleon wars, the British Navy renewed its attempts to discover the northwest passage to the Pacific. In 1818 he was appointed second in command to the brig *Trent* commanded by Lieutenant (afterwards Sir John) Franklin, and had an interesting share in the Arctic expedition of that year. In the next year, 1819, he served again in the Arctic, on board the *Hecla*, under Lieutenant William Edward Parry (Parry, 1828). On 25 Jan. 1822 he had been promoted to the rank of commander, and on 12<sup>th</sup> of January 1825 he was appointed to command the *Blossom*, which was engaged for the next four years in the Pacific, and in endeavoring to co-operate, by Bering's Strait, with the polar expeditions from the eastward. Beechey had been, whilst still in the Pacific in 1827, advanced to the rank of captain. In 1854 Beechey was promoted to rear-admiral. (O'Byrne, 1849; Laughton, 1885; Anonymous, 1857; Burant, 1985)

### 2.3 His Majesty's Ship *Blossom*

H.M.S. *Blossom* was an 18-gun Cormorant-class sloop-of-war which was launched on 10 December 1806 at Robert Guillaume's yard at Northam. She was at Deptford and Woolwich between July 1824 and August 1825 being converted to serve as exploration ship in 'icy seas'. In 1825 Commander Frederick William Beechey commissioned her for exploration of the Pacific Northwest. After the polar expedition, she was at Woolwich being fitted as a survey ship and was recommissioned for the Jamaica station. *Blossom* was hulked as a lazaret at Sheerness in 1833, and was broken up at Chatham in 1848.

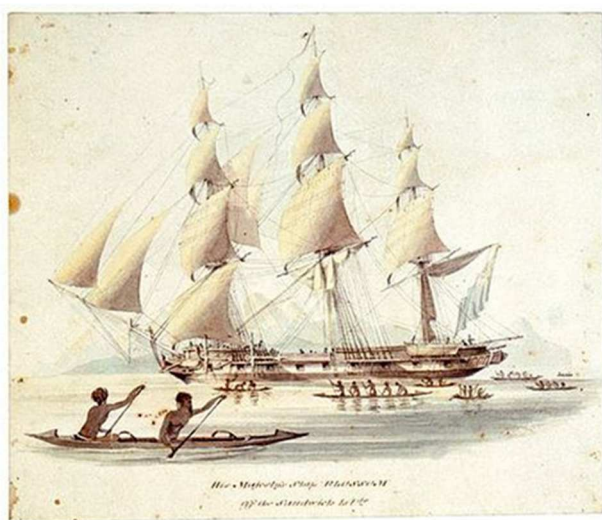


Fig. 2 His Majesty's Ship *Blossom* off the Sandwich Islands.

## 3. Frederick William Beechey's Voyage

### 3.1 The instructions of the Voyage

Frederick William Beechey, Commander of the *Blossom*, received on 11<sup>th</sup> May 1825 at Spithead the

instructions from the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty that 'under his command H.M.S. *Blossom* should be at Beering's Strait in the autumn of 1826, and, contingently, in that of 1827, for the purpose of affording assistance as may be required, either by Captain Parry or Captain Franklin, should one or both these officers make their appearance in that neighborhood.' Captain Parry should try to discover the north-west passage by way of the Prince Regent's Inlet. At the same time, Captain Franklin should descent the Mackenzie River and coasting the northern shore and arrive at open sea in Bering Strait where F.W. Beechey should await the arrival of both expeditions and, if necessary, provide assistance returning them to Europe. The *Blossom* was strengthened and adapted for that service. 'A boat was supplied, to be used as a tender ... and rigged as a schooner, decked and fitted in the most complete manner.' As the *Blossom* was going to traverse 'a portion of the globe, hitherto little explored' it should survey and explore such parts of the Pacific useful for navigation.



Fig. 3 Track of the *Blossom* in 1825-1828 (frontispiece of Beechey, *Narrative ...*, 1831).

The expedition should stop at Rio de Janeiro to complete provisions and water, sail around Cape Horn to Easter Island, steering for Society Islands [named by Captain James Cook in 1769], proceed to Pitcairn's Island [the island of the Bounty mutiny], on the southeastern extremity of the Society Islands and proceeding north-westerly to Otaheite [Tahiti, the largest island of the Windward Islands of the Society Islands]. Having completed the survey, direct your course to the Navigator's Islands [Samoa Islands], position the Suwarrow's Islands [an island in the northern group of the Cook Islands in the south Pacific Ocean], and 'deliver the dispatches and packages addressed by the Foreign Office for his Majesty's consul at that island, and to procure refreshments and water.' The *Blossom* should not arrive later than 10<sup>th</sup> of July 1826 at the appointed rendezvous and remain there until the end of



October 1826 or as late as the season will admit. In the case that having heard nothing of either of Captains Franklin or Parry, proceed to a place for completing provisions and water and be again in Bering's Strait by the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 1827, staying there as long as possible to not be forced overwintering there on account of the ice, and finally proceed to Spithead, England.

### 3.2 Aspects of the first part of the Voyage

In the beginning of June 1825, the *Blossom* left Oneehow [Niihau, named Oneeheow by Cook, 1778-1779], the westernmost of the Sandwich Islands [Hawaiian Islands], after having taken 'on board as many yams as the natives could collect before sun-set, and then sharpened course to Kamchatka.' 'On the 26<sup>th</sup> June 1825, after having traversed nearly seven hundred miles in thick fog, the horizon was cleared for a few hours' and the temperature fell 31° F lower than it had been thirteen days before. On the next day, they saw the high mountains of Kamchatka and anchored off the town of Petropavlovsk with a magnificent view on the snow-capped volcano emitting smoke in interval. Beechey found dispatches that the sailing expedition of Captain Parry had returned to England and 'desiring to cancel that part of instructions which related to him'.



Fig. 4 View of Petropavlovski, Kamchatka (Hyde, Baldwin & Gage, 1874, p. 250).

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 1825, Bering Island [the largest of the Commander Islands located about 175 km east of Kamchatka peninsula, 58° 0' N, 166° 16' W], the place where Vitus Bering shipwrecked and found his grave with 28 of his crew in 1741, appeared through the fog. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of July 1825, the *Blossom* stood close into a small bay of St. Lawrence Island [Alaska, U.S.A.] and the crew bartered with the natives [Yupik, Alaskan natives]. The two Diomedes Islands, the Russian Big Diomedede or Ratmarov Island and the U.S. Little Diomedede or Krusenstern Island, were seen and near Schismareff Inlet near the American shore, the natives came off in large skin-covered boats, named *baidars*, and there was good bargaining. 'It was at Schismareff Inlet that they first saw the lip ornaments which are common to all inhabitants of the coast thence as far as Point

Barrow. ... We entered Kotzenue Sound in the morning of the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July ... At four o'clock in the morning of the 25<sup>th</sup> we reached our appointed rendezvous at Chamisso Island ... and there were no traces of Captain Franklin having arrived.'



Fig. 5 Track of the first part of the voyage of the *Blossom* to Bering Strait in 1825.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of July 1825, the *Blossom* attended by the barge, in command of Elson, weighed from Chamisso Island and steered out of the Kotzebue Sound to proceed surveying the coast to the north looking for traces of Franklin's land expedition. There were visits to the *Blossom* and to the barge by the natives, who were friendly. At specific places, a bottle was deposited with indications to find it. On the 13<sup>th</sup> August, 1825, they were at latitude 71° 07' N, longitude 163° 40' W, on the land a post was put up for the land expedition, and a bottle buried near. The boat had proceeded to the latitude 71° 23' 31" N and to 156° 21' 30" W and had to return because the whole body of ice was moving to the land. This farthest tongue of land which they reached was named Point Barrow by Beechey and is only 146 miles from the extreme of Franklin's progress westward from the Mackenzie River. Finally, the *Blossom* left Kotzebue Sound and sailed to San Francisco for overwintering arriving on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1825, in San Francisco harbor.



Fig. 6 Baidars of Hotham Inlet with native Alaskans (Beechey, *Narrative ...*, 1831, p. 250).

### 3.3 Aspects of the second part of the Voyage

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of January, 1827, the *Blossom* put to sea to the Sandwich Islands which were arrived after a passage of 20 days. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of March, they left for Macao, China, to get medicines. They passed on the 15<sup>th</sup> March Wake's Island, on the 25<sup>th</sup> March Assumption, on the 7<sup>th</sup> of April Bashee Islands [a group of Philippine islands between Luzon and Formosa] and arrived on the 10<sup>th</sup> of April at the Tupa/Taipa anchorage in Macao. It was decided to change the water in Napakang [Napa River] on Great Loo Choo [Great Lew-Chew, Ryūkyū Islands]. At Naha, the *Blossom* was inspected by an officer, then followed by several well-dressed persons who made inquiries on the ship and the reason of the visit. One of the party, the so-named linguist An-Ya 'recollected the visit of the *Alceste* and the *Lyra*, which he correctly said was 144 moons ago [15 Sep. – 9 Nov. 1816]. ... An-Ya said that Loo Choo had been visited by a violent typhoon in April, which unroofed the houses and did much other mischief.' 'On the 25<sup>th</sup> of May 1826 we took our departure from Loo Choo'. They took possession of an uninhabited island named it Peel Island of the Arzobispo group [Bonin-sima, Japan], and its harbor Port Lloyd [27° 05' 35" N, 217° 45' 54" W].



Fig. 7 Track of the second part of the voyage of the *Blossom* to Bering Strait in 1827 and return to England in 1827-1828.

'On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June we made the snowy mountains of Kamchatka. ... The season was more backward than in the preceding year; and though it was beginning of July, the snow lay deep upon some parts of the shore.' 'On the 1<sup>st</sup> of August, we apprised our approach of St. Lawrence Island. ... About midnight the temperature of the water fell to 31°, and soon after that of the air was reduced from 42° to 34°.' On the 5<sup>th</sup> of August, the *Blossom* came to an anchor off Camisso Island. 'The line of packed ice, in the meridian of Icy Cape [70° 19' 47" N, 161° 52' 27" W], was twenty-four miles to the southward of its position the preceding year.' The barge under command of Lieutenant Belcher was shipwrecked and three members of the crew drowned. In the beginning of

October, sharp frosts and heavy snowfall came, and no intelligence of Captain Franklin's expedition had been received, Beechey decided to quit the anchorage in Kotzebue Sound and to sail south, mooring in the Bay of Monterey on the 29<sup>th</sup> of October 1827.

### 4. Nautical, geographical, magnetical and meteorological Observations

The Annex of the 1831-version of the *Narrative of a voyage to the Pacific and Beering's Strait* contains nautical, geographical, magnetical and meteorological observations. In the places where the *Blossom* remained a long time, precise geographical positions have been determined and compared to known results (Table I). At the same places, the elevation of specific items was ascertained by barometric or by trigonometric techniques (Table II). The meteorological tables contain a table of the daily 3-hourly barometer observations but the daily mean mercury temperature values are only means for every five degrees of latitude on each side of the equator and in the extra-tropical latitudes to every five or six days (Table IV). Table VI presents the meteorological observations of temperature of air and surface of the sea, humidity of the atmosphere, wind, weather and clouds. However, the geographical coordinates are only given at 5° latitudes and 1° longitudes. Table IX provides the specific gravity of sea water (in grains) and temperature. Tables XI and XII contain magnetical observations.

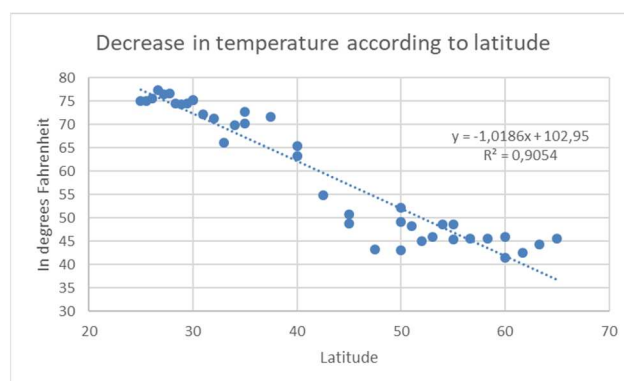


Fig. 8 Decrease of the temperature according to the latitude.

Figure 8 show the decrease of the daily temperature between the latitude 25 to 65 providing a, approximate decrease of 1° F per 1° latitudes. However, the decrease is different in the lower and in the higher altitudes. In the lower latitudes it remains approximately 1° F per unit latitude where it lowers to approximately 0.6° F per latitude in the higher latitudes.

### 5. Conclusion

In the years 1825-1828, the English sloop *Blossom* made a three years long voyage through the Pacific and

Bering Strait. The instructions from the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty provided assistance to Captain Parry on his voyage searching the North-West passage from Prince Regent's Inlet and/or Captain John Franklin land expeditions descending the Mackenzie River might one of these expeditions reach the area where Beechey was waiting for them. In the summer of 1825, Captain Franklin went downriver and reached its mouth. In the following summer, Franklin found the ocean frozen and worked his way west for several hundred miles and gave up on 16 of August 1826 at Return Reef, a single island NE of Gwydyr Bay, at about 150 mi (240 km) east of Point Barrow, and began to retrace his way towards the Mackenzie River.

The Narrative of the Voyage isn't a logbook and misses much of the nautical, scientific, meteorological and geographical information usually contained in the Captain's record. In this case, the geographical coordinates are generally given in the approximations of 1 to 5 degrees' latitude and 1-degree longitude which do not allow geographical, meteorological and geophysical research.

On the other hand, the Narrative contains interesting information on the native Alaskans which was welcomed in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century by the reading public and provided several successful reprints and translations of the Narrative.

### Acknowledgements

The authors sincerely acknowledge the constructive remarks and suggestions made by two anonymous reviewers. The authors are also grateful to prof. emer. Dr. Shuhei Takahashi for his precious help in the production of this paper.

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### Summary in Japanese

和文要約

### F. W. ビーチェイによる 太平洋と北極へのブロッサム号の航海

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北極北西航路が未発見であった頃、1825年から1828年にかけてのF. W. ビーチェイの太平洋側から北極海へ向かう航海は、グリーンランド側から船で北西航路発見に向かうパリー隊とカナダ内陸から北極海へ向かうフランクリン隊を支援することが目的だった。また北太平洋地域とベーリング海峡を越えた北極地域を探検する目的もあった。フランクリンは二度目のカナダ内陸地域探検であり、マッケンジー川を下ってアラスカのコツェビュー湾まで西に向かうことになっていた。残念ながら、ビーチェイはフランクリン隊と会えないまま、2年連続でコツェビュー湾を離れなければならなかった。しかし、それまであまり知られていなかったアラスカ北極地域と北太平洋地域を調査することができた。

(編集部注)：その後、1845年にフランクリン隊総勢129名は2隻の船で北西航路に向かったが全員死亡した。フランクリン隊が最初に越冬したビーチェイ島は、このF. W. ビーチェイ船長の名に由来する。

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