

THE MOST IMPORTANT SHIP IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

*And all night long they sailed away;
And when the sun went down,
They whistled and warbled a moony song
To the echoing sound of a coppery gong,
In the shade of the mountains brown.*

EDWARD LEAR, *The Jumblies*

Early in the morning of 24 June 1497 – Midsummer Day and, coincidentally, the feast of St John the Baptist – John Cabot stepped ashore on North American soil. Cabot became the first European of his age to land on the continent of North America and claim it for the English monarch, Henry VII. In doing so, he laid the foundation stone of English exploration and colonization. It is ironic that it should be an Italian who bears ultimate responsibility for North America becoming part of the English-speaking world, but, as a result of Cabot's endeavours, the *Matthew* can claim to be the most important ship in the English language.

Exactly where Cabot made his landing on that fateful morning in late June is uncertain – like so much else in his eventful life. It is most likely that the actual spot was near the northern tip of Newfoundland or across the straits in southern Labrador. Farther south in Newfoundland near Cape Bonavista is favoured by some, while others believe it may have been still farther south – in Nova Scotia or perhaps even Maine. But, however much else is uncertain about John Cabot and his life, that he made a landing in North America in June 1497 is undisputed fact.

'John Cabot' reads a medieval navigation instrument called an astrolabe, which allowed mariners to calculate their position north or south of the equator. The role of Cabot in the television series was played by the actor Guy Ransom.

Everyone knows that Christopher Columbus sailed across the Atlantic five years earlier in 1492 and that he can claim to have discovered the 'New World'. Yet, when Cabot made his historic landing in Newfoundland, Columbus and his crew were still exploring the Caribbean islands and no Spaniard landed on the North American continent proper until 1513. After four voyages across the Atlantic Columbus died in ignorance of the great land mass that lay just over the horizon to the north of his Caribbean islands, and until the end of his life he remained convinced that the land he had discovered was Marco Polo's Cathay.

John Cabot's Atlantic crossing of 1497 ranks as one of the greatest voyages of discovery of all time. But unlike Columbus who took the relatively gentle southerly trade-wind route to the West Indies with three ships, Cabot sailed across the North Atlantic against the prevailing winds and ocean currents with just one small three-masted caravel. Although shorter, this northern route was much harder on both ship and crew: in addition to unfavourable winds and currents, air and sea temperatures were cold even in June and, on approaching the North American continent, Cabot and his crew would have had to cope with dense fog over the Grand Banks and with the icebergs that drift south from Greenland's glaciers. Cabot's exploits cannot detract from the achievements of Columbus, who made his four remarkable trans-Atlantic voyages between 1492 and 1504. But Cabot's accomplishments are no less remarkable; had he returned from his last voyage in 1498 there is little doubt that he would have won himself a place in history equal to that of Columbus himself.

But it was not to be. On that final voyage Cabot and his fleet of ships disappeared. As a result, this great mariner has not received the credit he deserved. Columbus's son Fernando did much to secure his father's place in history by writing his biography. The one person who could have done this for Cabot was his son Sebastian. But one of Sebastian's great skills was self-promotion, and his father's biography was never written. Ironically, it is probably Sebastian who is better known, despite the fact that his father was undoubtedly the more accomplished mariner.

John Cabot's successful second voyage in 1497 is a major achievement in the history of man's exploration of his planet and a milestone along the road that led to the colonization of the world by Europeans. The journey is a fascinating story of skill, daring and good luck – one that combines the latest in contemporary understanding of the greater world beyond Europe with spying, political intrigue and the intense superpower rivalry of the day. Fortunately, sufficient information also survives about Cabot's final but unsuccessful voyage of 1498 to allow us to reconstruct what *might* have happened to the expedition, and this too is an almost unbelievable tale of exploration, survival and possibly even of murder.



March 1996, and the new *Matthew* slipped quietly out of Bristol harbour and down the River Avon on the morning tide. In contrast to the fanfares and Victorian pageantry of the launch the previous September, the beginning of her sea trials was a quiet affair, but still the schoolchildren of Bristol turned out on the banks of the River Avon in their hundreds to see 'their' ship leave the city.

The weeks spent finishing the ship had been fraught, with the shipwrights working long into the night to get the vessel ready for sea. The *Matthew* had passed her safety inspections and all the navigation equipment was working, but much remained to be done and several shipwrights were still hard at work during that first sail, attired to the teeth with chisels and saws, desperately trying to make up lost time.

The ship was bound for Falmouth, and then on to London for a major promotional event. It seems that little had changed in five hundred years, for the owners of the new *Matthew* needed sponsorship just as much as John Cabot did for his voyages. Despite the delays and the tensions in building – which are typical for any project such as this – what had been achieved was remarkable. In two years an historic reconstruction had been built of a ship for which no plans or even a contemporary picture have survived. Yet now a real ship slipped down the muddy waters of the River Avon, bringing alive the historic past of one of England's great medieval maritime cities.



Ironically, John Cabot would not have left that March morning – despite the fortuitous, bitterly cold east wind that took the modern replica swiftly down the Bristol Channel. The ship would not have worried him, for he would have marvelled at the fine finish that can be achieved with modern carbon-steel tools and would have envied the bronze bolts that hold the ship together and will never rust at sea.

What would have worried Cabot was the appearance of the comet *Hyakutake*. In March 1996 *Hyakutake* passed closer to earth than any other comet for decades and it could be seen clearly high in the night sky. Today, such a vision has everyone looking out in excited expectation, but few medieval sailors would have ventured to sea with such a threatening omen in the heavens. The maritime explorers of the late fifteenth century were setting off on voyages to unknown parts in the knowledge that some, perhaps many, would not return. Cabot was a skilled and well-travelled mariner and one of the leading cartographers of his day. But most of his crew were simple men, unable to read or write. They lived in a world whose forests were inhabited by hobgoblins and werewolves and where the waters of the uncharted oceans poured over its unknown limits in a roaring cascade. Comets were unwelcome apparitions at any time, and *Hyakutake's* presence in the night sky would have been one uncertainty too many for Cabot's crew.