

Joseph Wiggins (1832–1905)

Joseph Wiggins occupies an unusual niche in arctic history. While undoubtedly an explorer, he devoted most of his career in the North not specifically to exploration but to the development of commercial relations between Great Britain and Russia by the exploitation of the sea route to the Ob' and Yenisey Rivers and thence into the centre of Siberia. He was active in the period during which the technological development of ships enabled the route to be practicable for cargo vessels, but before the Russian Revolution closed the route to trade from the West.

BEGINNINGS

Wiggins was born in Norwich into a family of coach drivers. When Wiggins was six, the advent of the railway age necessitated a change in the family occupation and his father became landlord of an inn in Bury St. Edmunds. Determined on a career at sea, Wiggins left school at fourteen and became apprenticed to his uncle Joseph Potts of Sunderland, a ship owner. Wiggins's ascent in the profession was rapid: at the age of 27 he was appointed master of the *Victoria*, at 4000 tons then the second largest steamer in the world, after Brunel's *Great Eastern*. Wiggins married in 1861 and in 1868 took the shore appointment of Board of Trade Examiner in Navigation and Seamanship for the port of Sunderland.

Wiggins had long been interested, however, in the possibilities of the sea route to northern Russia. In particular, he considered that the route had immense potential for undercutting the high cost of overland travel for goods to and from Siberia; hence, handsome profits could be made from exploiting it. While early venturers certainly had progressed into the Kara Sea, east of Novaya Zemlya, no modern expeditions had reached the Ob' and Yenisey Rivers through that sea, and scientific opinion held that ice cover made the route unnavigable (Häkli, 1992). In the early 1870s, however, empirical evidence from Norwegian fishermen was indicating that this was not necessarily the case, which helped to stimulate Wiggins's interest.

BY TRIAL AND ERROR: THE EARLY VOYAGES

Wiggins attempted to obtain arctic experience by seeking a place on any expedition proceeding northwards, but failed. In 1874, he decided to organize his own expedition. He was not, of course, the only party with these interests, and had corresponded with like-minded individuals such as August Petermann, the prominent geographer of Gotha. Petermann had been urging a northern sea route to Russia, as had M.K. Sidorov, a Russian merchant and mine owner who had himself sponsored two unsuccessful attempts.

The Diana Expedition, 1874

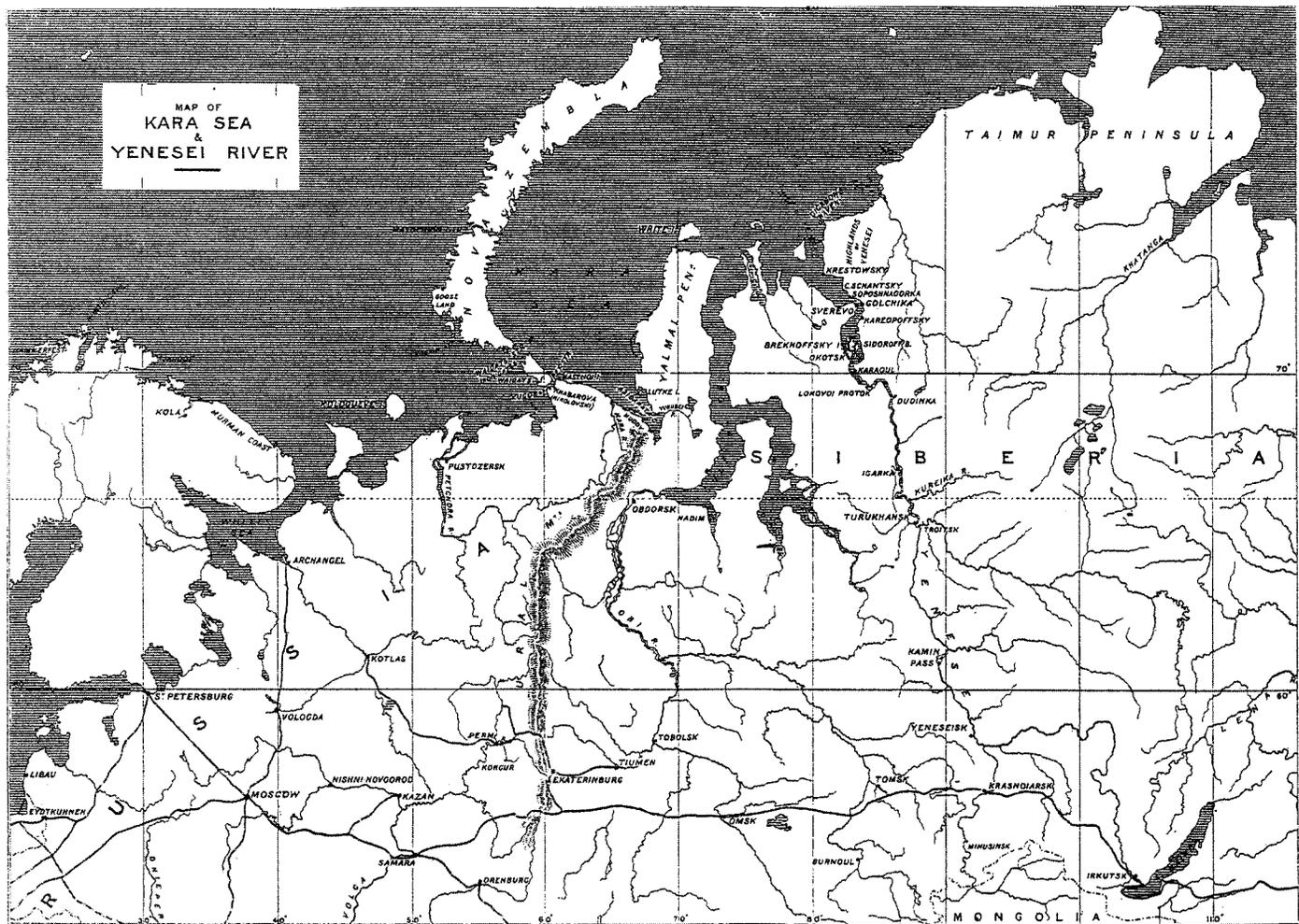
Wiggins funded the expedition from his own savings. He chartered the small steamer *Diana*, 103 tons register, for the purpose and employed his own crew. Just before departure, Henry Morton



Joseph Wiggins

Stanley, then at the height of his fame after the meeting with David Livingstone, approached Wiggins with a view to accompanying the expedition. However, Stanley's employer, James Gordon Bennett of *The New York Herald*, did not approve of the idea. It is fascinating to speculate on what Stanley would have made of the Arctic had he gone with Wiggins and whether it would have caused a permanent reorientation of his efforts in that direction. At all events, if he had been with Wiggins, he could not have departed on his 1874 expedition, which probably contributed more to the geographical knowledge of Central Africa than any other.

The *Diana* departed from Dundee on 3 June and, after calling in at Tromsø and Hammerfest, sighted ice on 28 June. The next day, the *Diana* entered the Kara Sea and experienced much difficulty with the pack, being nipped on a number of occasions. On 10 July, the *Diana* reached the Yamal Peninsula and spent three weeks attempting to proceed northwards. Wiggins realized that he had started too early and that the *Diana*, which had a prominent keel, was not an ideal vessel for navigation in icy and shallow waters. Nevertheless, she rounded Belyy (White) Island on 5 August, thereby achieving one of Wiggins's aims: reaching the gulf of the Ob'.



Northern Russia: Showing the travels of Wiggins.

Realizing that nothing more could be achieved, Wiggins retreated, intending to return in 1875 with a more appropriate ship. The *Diana* arrived at Dundee on 25 September. The expedition had proved that the Kara Sea was not permanently blocked with ice and was available for passage.

The return of the expedition attracted a good deal of attention, and Wiggins was congratulated by Petermann. The character of the expedition was clearly appreciated. In the words of *The Athanaeum*, "The return of another expedition from the north Polar regions has been chronicled in the past week; and although it had more of a commercial object than its predecessors, it was, nevertheless, as much a Polar Expedition as those that sailed under Buchan, Parry and others. . ." (Johnson, 1907:51).

Moreover, Wiggins's success encouraged others in their plans to use the route, most notably E. Nordenskiöld, with whom he corresponded and who in 1875 reached the mouth of the Yenisei in the *Pröven*.

Turned Back by Storms: The Whim Expedition, 1875

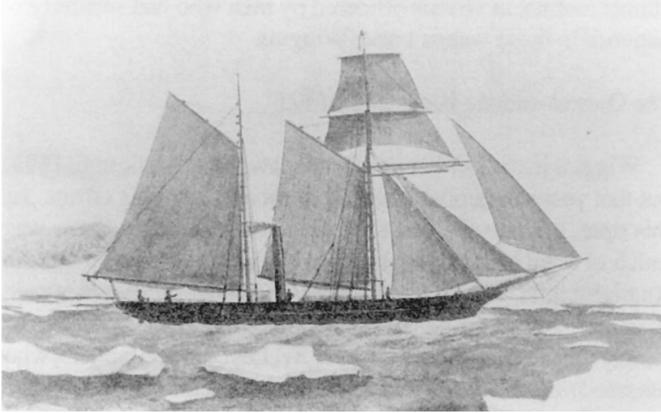
Wiggins's problem in 1875 lay in the shortage of resources. He had consumed his own savings on the 1874 expedition, and so he had to secure outside support. However, he obtained only the bare

minimum. Hence, the expedition took place in a diminutive vessel: Wiggins purchased a fishing sloop of 27 tons and took her to Sunderland to be fitted. On overhearing a remark that it was a mere whim of Captain Wiggins, he determined that she should be given that name. The *Whim* sailed on 28 June 1875. The aim of the expedition was to enter Baydaratskaya Gulf to survey the isthmus between there and the Ob' River. This was an old trade route and the attractive possibility existed of cutting a canal through it, thus enabling the circumnavigation of Yamal to be avoided.

At Vardø, Wiggins had a stroke of luck. He met Admiral Glasunov, Inspector of Customs at Arkhangel'sk, who arranged for Wiggins to visit that port to encourage the interest of the Russian authorities in the Kara Sea route. Wiggins secured valuable introductions in Arkhangel'sk, and then rejoined the *Whim* to proceed eastwards. The season was very stormy and progress was slow. In the vicinity of Kolguyev Island, Wiggins realized that little would be possible that year and decided to return. It took nearly 11 weeks to reach Sunderland.

The Thames Expeditions, 1876–1878

Never one to waste time, Wiggins started corresponding with Sidorov and the suggestion arose of a concession from the Rus-



The *Thames* entering the Kara Sea

sian government to permit a company to trade to the Ob' and Yenisey Rivers. This presented a problem, since many of the influential Siberian merchants did not want competition from a much cheaper sea route. Wiggins pointed out that the commercial world at large would not regard the route as a practical proposition until a cargo had actually been transported through it. To present the proposal in the corridors of power, he arranged to visit St. Petersburg. Despite promises, nothing came of his visit. Prospects appeared bleak until Charles Gardiner, "an enthusiastic yachtsman, and one who rightly esteemed the Captain's pluck" (Johnson, 1907:83), decided to invest in the project. Wiggins bought the *Thames*, a screw steamer of 120 tons, with the aim of undertaking the work previously planned for the *Whim* expedition and also of surveying the Gulf of the Ob' and entering the Yenisey. Moreover, he was to return to England with a cargo of graphite which the *Thames* would take on board at the mouth of the Yenisey River.

The *Thames* left Vardø on 26 July 1876 and sighted Novaya Zemlya on 31 July. She was delayed by ice off the Yamal Peninsula, but Wiggins took the opportunity of surveying Baydaratskaya Gulf. On 3 September, she reached Belyy Island but was unable to enter the Ob' because of adverse winds. Wiggins accordingly headed for the Yenisey, and the *Thames* entered that river, the first ocean vessel to do so. He reached Kureyka, almost on the Arctic Circle, on 18 October. This was, of course, much too late to contemplate a return to England in the same year, and so Wiggins secured the ship for wintering.

Throughout his career, Wiggins seems to have had bad luck in meeting persons who had set out to meet him. One instance of this occurred on the *Thames* voyage. A Captain Shvanenberg was to transport the graphite down the Yenisey in a schooner, but the two ships missed each other in the islands of the estuary. Shvanenberg deposited his cargo at a suitable spot, and then proceeded upriver searching for Wiggins. The two made contact and Wiggins decided to go with Shvanenberg to Yeniseysk and St. Petersburg to publicize the opportunities offered by the route. After an 800-mile sledge journey, Wiggins reached Yeniseysk and was impressed with its size and appearance. He was welcomed in the town by the local people and by those who appreciated what he had achieved. Previously, the mouth of the river had been considered too shallow for an ocean-going vessel to enter. In early 1877 Wiggins arrived in St. Petersburg where he delivered several addresses to

learned and commercial societies. He seems to have been well received, even though this was hardly a good time to attract investment in view of the tension developing in the Balkans, which resulted in the Russo-Turkish war of 1877–78. By this time, Wiggins's personal resources were exhausted, and he traveled back to England at the expense of Gardiner.

Wiggins spent the winter at home and left for Russia again on 1 March 1878, accompanied by the well-known naturalist H. Seebohm, who wished to pursue ornithological work in eastern Siberia. Traveling by way of St. Petersburg and by Moscow, Wiggins reached the *Thames* towards the end of April. The vessel was frozen to the bed of the river and suffered damage during breakup. Eventually she was freed and started on her voyage downstream on 30 June. However, and most unfortunately from Wiggins's point of view, she ran aground on 3 July. After a prolonged struggle to refloat her, Wiggins concluded that she must be abandoned. This was, of course, disastrous with regard to the public relations aspect of the voyage. The crew refused to risk the journey home in a small schooner that Seebohm had purchased and so Wiggins returned to Yeniseysk with them. Here he had the problem of settling the affairs of the *Thames*, which included selling her at a knockdown price, largely for the value of her boilers. After this chastening experience, Wiggins returned to England by the overland route.

First Successful Cargo Transport: The Warkworth, 1878

Whatever other characteristics Wiggins had, tenacity was certainly one of them and he does not appear to have considered abandoning his aims in view of the failure of the *Thames* voyage. He immediately set about raising fresh interest, using his powers of persuasion, which seem to have been considerable, to attract potential investors in his scheme. He succeeded with a British merchant based in St. Petersburg, Oswald J. Cattley, who provided Wiggins with the resources to charter the 650-ton steamer *Warkworth* to carry a mixed cargo to the bottom of the Ob' Gulf. This was a completely incident-free voyage and, for once, the arrangements for Wiggins to be met on arrival at his destination worked. The *Warkworth's* cargo was swiftly unloaded, a large cargo of wheat was taken on board and the *Warkworth* arrived home in just over two months. This was the first Siberian produce to be transported to England via the Kara Sea route and vindicated all Wiggins's optimism in the previous years.

However, the nature of the *Warkworth* voyage induced others, less well prepared and experienced, to try the route. In 1879 a veritable fleet of five merchant men departed from England for the Ob'. The ships had deep draughts, clearly unsuitable for a shallow river mouth and they set out too soon. Five thousand tons of Siberian produce were purchased to be sent downriver to meet them, but the rendezvous never took place since the steamers were unable to reach the shore. In the words of Wiggins, "both in England and in Siberia, the project of opening up a new trade route became utterly discredited" (Johnson, 1907:197). One result of this discredit was that for the immediate future Wiggins was unable to secure backing for further voyages. He was forced to earn his living by commanding merchant vessels elsewhere in the world.

NEW FINANCE AND A NEW PLAN: THE SYNDICATES

By 1887, interest in the route was reemerging and a syndicate was formed to mount another attempt at running cargo to Siberia. The interest of Sir Robert Morier, the British ambassador in St. Petersburg, was important; although obviously not a member of the syndicate, he was able to make representations to the Russian government to have cargoes admitted free of import duty.

The plan was different from that adopted previously. It was appreciated that the transshipment of cargo at the mouths of the rivers was fundamentally inefficient and consumed valuable time. Therefore, the syndicate decided to purchase a reasonably small vessel of shallow draught that could carry a useful cargo, to be sent directly from England to Yeniseysk, more than 2000 miles up the Yenisey River.

The Phoenix, the Labrador, and the Seagull, 1887-1889

The syndicate bought the *Phoenix*, 273 tons register, and Wiggins was appointed commander. One of Wiggins's brothers, Robert, was appointed chief officer. The *Phoenix* left South Shields on 5 August 1887 carrying a cargo of salt. After a completely uneventful voyage, she arrived at the mouth of the Yenisey and started to ascend the river. The river had never been surveyed, and there were no buoys marking shallows or other danger points. The *Phoenix* arrived at Yeniseysk on 9 October to a tumultuous welcome. After being fêted by the local dignitaries, Wiggins departed for St. Petersburg via Krasnoyarsk and Tomsk, leaving his brother in charge of the ship. He returned to England in February 1888, with the intention of securing a larger vessel with which to carry cargo to the mouth of the Yenisey to be unloaded and transported upstream in the *Phoenix*.

While in England, Wiggins set about commissioning the *Labrador*, a large steamer which had served the Hudson's Bay Company on the Greenland coast. Loaded with general engineering equipment, the *Labrador* left the Tyne on 16 June 1888. At Vardø, however, Wiggins received a telegram which announced that the *Phoenix* had been stranded on the Yenisey and could not meet the *Labrador* at the mouth of the river. Undaunted, Wiggins waited for the *Seagull*, another small vessel secured by the consortium, to join him. The intention was to transport the *Labrador*'s cargo upriver in relays. However, during a series of gales, the two ships separated and both turned back. Ironically, back at Vardø, Wiggins discovered that the *Phoenix* had been freed and had waited for him at the mouth of the river. This financial disaster caused the liquidation of the syndicate, but a new one was formed which took over its assets, notably the *Phoenix* lying at Yeniseysk.

The new syndicate tried again, in the following year, 1889, and Wiggins returned to the mouth of the Yenisey again in the *Labrador*. Once again, the arrangements were inefficient and the river vessels waited for the *Labrador* at a place some 200 miles upstream. Wiggins unloaded part of his cargo into store and returned home, delaying his departure to the latest date consonant with safety.

Wiggins again had the problem of earning his living and so took routine commands in the southern hemisphere in 1890 and 1891. While he was away, another syndicate ran an uneventful voyage to the Yenisey, the passage to which was now seemingly

almost routine, in vessels officered by men who had secured experience in those waters under Wiggins.

The Orestes and the Blencathra, 1893

Wiggins had no further involvement with the Arctic until 1893, but that year saw probably the most successful of his efforts. At this time, towards the end of the nineteenth century, there was much of what would now be called "upmarket tourism" in the Russian Arctic. Wealthy individuals voyaged in the area to pursue scientific studies, or for sport, notably fishing and shooting, or simply for pleasure. One such was F.W. Leybourne-Popham, who intended to make just such a voyage in his yacht *Blencathra* (formerly Allen Young's *Pandora*). However, he decided to combine business with pleasure and to exploit the opportunities offered by the route by forming a new syndicate. Wiggins was appointed to secure a suitable ship to accompany the *Blencathra*, which was to have on board an unusual party, in that two of its members were women, or rather ladies, as they were from the higher strata of society. These women seem to have been among the first of their sex to have ventured into the arctic seeking amusement. One of them, Miss Helen Peel, granddaughter of Sir Robert Peel, the famous statesman, wrote a book about her experiences entitled "Polar Gleams" (Peel, 1894). Another participant was F.G. Jackson, who undertook the voyage to secure experience useful for his projected expedition of 1894 (Jackson, 1895).

Just before the plans were finalized, however, Wiggins received an urgent request from the Russian government to convey a cargo of rails for the Trans-Siberian Railway up the Yenisey to Krasnoyarsk. Accepting the task, Wiggins chartered a 2500-ton steamer, the *Orestes*, to carry the rails. To develop transport within Siberia, the Russian government had commissioned the construction of river vessels in England to transport the rails inland and these, crewed by Russians, were to be convoyed to the Yenisey by the *Orestes*. Six vessels in all met at Vardø and left that port on 22/23 August 1893. After a swift passage, the fleet reached Gol'chikha at the mouth of the Yenisey on 3 September. This completed the first voyage by Russian vessels across the Kara Sea to the Yenisey River. The voyage represented the fruition of Wiggins's efforts. The *Orestes* and the *Blencathra* returned to England via Arkhangel'sk and Wiggins, traveling with the Russian ships, reached Yeniseysk on 23 October. After much festivity, he traveled to St. Petersburg. By order of the Tsar he was presented with a magnificent solid silver punchbowl, salver, ladle and 25 mugs, of which, one suspects, he made little use, since he was a lifelong teetotaler. Back in England, his achievements were recognised by the Royal Geographical Society with the award of the Murchison Grant in May 1894.

The Loss of the Stjernen, 1894

The success of the 1893 voyage buoyed up hopes for the future. The Russian government had commissioned the construction of two further river vessels at Newcastle, and Wiggins was asked to convoy these vessels to the Yenisey in the following year. Leybourne-Popham wished to secure a vessel to undertake this task as well as to carry a suitable cargo. Accordingly, the *Stjernen*,

a 700-ton screw steamer, was purchased. The ships left the Tyne on 8 August 1894 and safely reached their destination 500 miles up the Yenisey on 13 September. The *Stjernen* discharged her cargo and left for home two days later. She crossed the Kara Sea safely but then encountered dense fog with strong northerly winds. These, together with unknown ocean currents, seem to have driven her well out of her projected course. On 22 September, with no bottom by the lead, the ship was proceeding dead slow in fog on a southerly course when she went aground on a hitherto unknown reef. The crew made desperate efforts to get her off, but it became clear that her bottom was fatally holed. All that could be done was to land the crew with as many stores as possible. By 24 September when the fog had lifted, Wiggins realized that the ship had stranded just to the east of Yugorskiy Strait. The nearest settlement known to the shipwrecked mariners was Khabarovo, some 45 miles away, and Leybourne-Popham himself undertook the task of walking there to secure help. This he did, and eventually the whole party reached Khabarovo, after which they set out for Arkhangel'sk in a party of 87 sledges and 2000 reindeer, reaching that city on 15 December. No blame was attached to Wiggins for the loss of the ship. It was accepted that a due proportion of losses was inevitable bearing in mind the difficult conditions of the route, most notably the fact that it was virtually uncharted. When it was appreciated that the *Stjernen* was overdue, the Russian government sent out two search expeditions and decided that the route should be properly surveyed.

The Leybourne-Popham Syndicate's Dual Ship Approach, 1895

In 1895, Leybourne-Popham, despite his heavy losses in 1894, (the *Stjernen* not having been insured), decided on a dual approach. Two ships were to make the voyage. One of them was to proceed upriver to Yeniseysk with Wiggins on board, while the other was to deposit her cargo at Gol'chikha. The larger of the two, the *Lorna Doone*, was specially equipped for navigating in ice, while the smaller *Burnoul*, was of a light draught. Both ships were appropriate for their tasks, and optimism for the prospects of the voyage was high. The potential of the route was now so obvious that traders who wished to export goods to Siberia inundated Leybourne-Popham with requests for space on board, some of which had to be declined.

The ships left the Tyne on 24 August, somewhat late in the year, and encountered much early ice in the Kara Sea. The cargo of the *Lorna Doone* was swiftly deposited, and a cargo of flour and graphite was taken on board. The ship left Gol'chikha on 22 September under the charge of a Captain Cameron. As she approached the Yugoskiy Strait, her path was blocked by seemingly impenetrable ice. It appeared possible that she would have to overwinter in the Kara Sea, a very risky undertaking, especially as the crew had insufficient winter equipment. To secure the necessities, Leybourne-Popham went ashore. However, while he was away, the ice suddenly opened and the ship escaped, making a swift passage back to England. Leybourne-Popham was marooned, but soon secured sledges and reindeer and set off to Arkhangel'sk and hence home.

While this was happening, Wiggins in the *Burnoul* had reached Yeniseysk, where he did all he could to promote both the arctic

route and business relations between the local merchants and British manufacturers. He arrived home in England in March 1896.

Ups and Downs: The Last Years of the Syndicate, 1896-1899

Buoyed up by previous successes, Wiggins adopted an even more ambitious plan for 1896. No fewer than six vessels carrying valuable cargoes were to make the voyage, and two of them were to be delivered to Russian owners on the Yenisey. The *Lorna Doone* was the key to the whole operation. As the only ice-strengthened ship, she would be used to cut a passage through the ice if necessary. Unfortunately, the exercise was mismanaged and an overall failure. Traveling in the *Glenmore*, a paddle steamer obviously unsuited to ice conditions, Wiggins arrived at Vardø, where the fleet was to assemble on 25 August. Wiggins discovered that the *Lorna Doone* and two of the ships, under instructions from the syndicate, had already left for the Kara Sea. Wiggins received further instructions at Vardø to follow the *Lorna Doone* but this he declined to do, as he did not have an ice-strengthened ship with him. His attempt to secure one locally failed. Despite badgering by telegraph from the syndicate, Wiggins refused to proceed further and laid two of the ships up for delivery in the next year.

This mismanagement on the part of the syndicate, which seems not to have acted with one mind, caused an immediate diminution of the popular regard in which Wiggins was held, both in England and in Russia. However, his friends rallied round and his long-term reputation was not to suffer. He was by this time 64 and decided to retire from his connections with the Leybourne-Popham syndicate. That syndicate continued its efforts and made successful voyages in 1897 and 1898. In 1899 four ships were sent, but when one of them sank at Khabarovo, the remainder returned to England and the losses caused the syndicate to cease operations.

A QUIET ENDING

Once again, Wiggins had to seek work. He was not a wealthy man and seems not to have taken the opportunities offered to him in his Siberian voyages to enrich himself. He had no difficulty, however, in securing commands and was still active at sea until 1903. In that year, he was approached by the Russian government to participate in a surveying expedition to the Kara Sea, but this project was abandoned at the start of the Russo-Japanese war in 1904. During the hostilities the entire freight-carrying capacity of the Trans-Siberian Railway was used to transport munitions and troops to the front. This caused severe famine in parts of Siberia. The Russian government decided to alleviate the problem by transporting provisions via the Kara Sea route, which had been neglected. Early in 1905 Wiggins was offered a large remuneration to organize the transport operation. He went to St. Petersburg and then quickly visited several European ports to secure suitable ships. He arrived home in Harrogate on 28 May, seriously ill. Conducting business from his sickbed, Wiggins made elaborate plans for the operation and for joining it. However, he weakened rapidly and died on 13 September 1905.

At the time of Wiggins's death, the prospects for the successful exploitation of the route he pioneered had never been better.

Stronger and larger ships were available, valuable concessions had been secured from the Russian government with regard to customs duties, and a number of new companies were being formed to take advantage of the opportunities offered. However, the route never seems to have realized its potential for trade with the West before the outbreak of war in 1914.

Wiggins's name is all but forgotten today. It is hoped that this brief sketch will demonstrate his pioneering role in commercial navigation in areas which had hitherto been the reserve of exploration or fishing. Moreover, Wiggins seems to have been an attractive personality. While a staunch propagandist of his cause, he did not seek to enrich himself and, indeed, he recognized that he was no businessman. Had he been one, and had he taken as prominent a part in managing the various enterprises with which he was associated as he did in navigating the ships, then they might have been more successful. Wiggins considered that by promoting commerce, he would also promote friendly relations between nations. To a modest extent he acted as an apologist for the Russians in England. He seems to have believed, for example, that the practice of exiling people to Siberia was, in some aspects, beneficial since it brought energetic people there. At the time of his death, he was highly regarded by the Russian authorities and was well-respected in England, where he had a wide circle of acquaintance

and had become well known in society. His efforts, however, were proportionally much more important at the Russian end of his activity, and he was more honoured there than in his native land.

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