TRIBUTE TO LIEUTENANT THOMAS WAGHORN, THE ARCHITECT LINKING THE WEST TO THE EAST ACROSS THE SUEZ ISTHMUS

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This article traces Thomas Fletcher Waghorn's role in proving the practicality of the overland route between Britain and India. It situates his work within earlier attempts to use Egypt as a communications corridor, the rise of steam navigation, the interests of the East India Company and P&O, and the later railway and canal developments that transformed the route he helped establish.

Introduction

"I write to inform you, and other businessmen having relations with India, that I am leaving England on the 5th and Falmouth on the 8th of February, by the Postal Steamer for Malta. On arriving there, I shall leave Alexandria, thence by land to Suez, thence down the Red Sea and hope to arrive at Bombay seventy days after leaving England. On this occasion, I shall take charge of any letters given me at five shillings each. I shall be happy to accept all letters which your company or your friends wish to send by this rapid route. I shall return to England in November, and in all probability, I shall travel this route each year in February so that once a year, you can count on rapid communication with India, on condition, however, that a postal steamer service is not established."

A circular dated 8 January 1835, issued by Thomas Waghorn, the champion of speedy and efficient mail service between England and its Far Eastern Territories, states this. Prior to Waghorn, the usual route for mail, travellers, and goods from India to England was via the Cape of Good Hope. Waghorn established a new route through the Red Sea, Egypt, the Mediterranean, and Europe, shortening the journey by over 5,000 miles (8,046 km) and reducing travel time by months.

Ferdinand Marie Vicomte de Lesseps
(Nov. 19, 1805–Dec. 7, 1894)

Baron de Lesseps, the builder of the Suez Canal, nearly twenty years after Waghorn's death, spoke about him during a speech at a Paris celebration marking the completion of his canal.

"He it was who first conceived the idea; it was his indomitable courage and great perseverance, which led him on to prove its practicability ... but he was in advance of his age, and the very plans that were scoffed at when first mooted were those which, in my position as engineer of the works, have enabled me to carry them through."

This was the influence of a pragmatic man whose obsession was to prove that the route to India via Egypt and the Red Sea was a practical and highly desired alternative to going round the Cape of Good Hope. He dedicated most of his life to fulfilling this urgent and practical need. One can gauge the man from a letter he sent to His Majesty's Ministers and the Honourable East India Company, in 1830.

"Of myself I trust I may be excused when I say that the highest object of my ambition has been an extensive usefulness; and my line of life - my turn of mind - my disposition long ago impelled me to give all my leisure, and all my opportunities of observation, to the introduction of steam-vessels, and permanently establishing them as the means of communication between India and England, including all the colonies on the route. The vast importance of three months' earlier information to His Majesty's Government and to the Honourable Company, whether relative to a war or a peace; to abundant or to short crops; to the sickness or convalescence of a colony or district, and often-times even of an individual; the advantages to the merchant, by enabling him to regulate his supplies and orders according to circumstances and demands; the anxieties of the thousands of my countrymen in India for accounts, and further accounts, of their parents, children, and friends at home; the corresponding anxieties of those relatives and friends in this country; in a word, the speediest possible transit of letters to the tens of thousands who at all times in solicitude await them, was a service to my mind, of the greatest general importance and it shall not be my fault if I do not, and for ever, establish it."

Waghorn faced numerous obstacles from jealous government officials and businessmen who feared that the connection between India and England via Egypt would threaten their profits. This was because the route around the Cape of Good Hope was well established and considered relatively safe; sailing still appeared more reliable than steamers due to the lack of coaling stations, especially on the Suez side of the route; and the desert passage was often dangerous and inhospitable. However, we will see that Waghorn's success was due as much to his personal qualities as to technological progress, trade growth, and regional history and politics: his naval experience provided him with knowledge of steamships, navigation, and geography; he recognised the potential of early steamships and understood it was only a matter of time before they transformed communication between England and its Empire in the East; British trade with the Far East was expanding, requiring faster methods of communication; and Egypt had become a strategic region for European powers, particularly England.

History of the Communication by the Isthmus of Suez

Egypt's strategic geographical position, lying between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean via the Red Sea, has always made it a coveted territory for nations seeking trade and communication routes to the Far East. When Alexander the Great defeated Persia in 332

B.C.E., Egypt became part of his empire, and the following year, Alexandria was founded. Under Persian rule, Alexandria became the centre of commerce and learning in the Mediterranean. After Cleopatra's death in 30 B.C.E, Egypt remained a Roman province for the next seven centuries. It was only after the death of Prophet Mohammed in 632 C.E. that the Romans were finally driven out by the Arabs ten years later. Cairo was founded in 969, and later, members of the Egyptian military class, the Mamelukes, ruled from 1250 to 1517, continuing to flourish until the French invasion of 1798.

The Venetians aimed to maintain their monopoly on Far Eastern trade by establishing a protectorate over Egypt. However, their commerce was severely impacted by the discovery of America in 1492 and was eventually abandoned with the opening of the sea route around the Cape of Good Hope in 1497. Simultaneously, Egypt's economy declined markedly, as before the diversion of this trade, the Mamelukes received a quarter of the value of the merchandise passing through Egypt. This economic decline continued for the next three centuries, and without Venice's protection, Egypt ultimately became a Turkish Pashalik with the fall of Cairo on 22 January 1517.

Near the end of the seventeenth century, English sailing ships travelled from India to the Arabian Sea and traded at the Red Sea port of Mocha for Arabian coffee. This initial development suggested the possibility of establishing a route across Egypt to connect England and Asia.

In 1698, Henry Tistew, who had served as the English Consul at Tripoli, travelled through Egypt, along the Red Sea, and on to Surat in an effort to establish a trade route. However, he was unsuccessful due to the Ottoman ban on Christian ships sailing in the Red Sea north of Jeddah, near the Holy Cities of Medina and Mecca. Nonetheless, the English controlled the Cape route to India, which proved effective for dispatch communications and the movement of personnel and goods. Early in the 17th century, this route was almost entirely closed to all but the East India Company, and as long as the Ottoman rulers prevented Christians from entering the northern Red Sea, England remained largely unconcerned about the French presence in the eastern Mediterranean.

In 1766, Ali Bey al-Kabir, a Georgian from Abkhazia, expelled the Ottoman rulers and declared himself Sultan. Around the same time, the Ottomans fought wars against European nations. France and England renewed their interest in Egypt as a gateway to the riches of the East, amid the Turkish decline and the rise of new rulers in Egypt. England aimed to negotiate with the Beys and secure a route through Egypt and the Red Sea. In June 1768, James Bruce, the former English Consul at Algiers, arrived in Alexandria en route to Asia via Egypt. He toured Egypt, evaluated its potential as an English commercial route to India, and consulted with Ali Bey. The Sultan, hopeful of reviving trade income, sent a letter to the Governor of Bengal outlining the advantages of establishing a trade route through Egypt. Governor Warren Hastings of Bengal responded positively with a letter and gifts, expressing appreciation for Ali Bey's offer to trade and promising to send a ship to Egypt the following year. In 1774, two ships left Calcutta for Egypt but tragically met disaster at sea. Nevertheless, Hastings remained resolute, and in 1775, he dispatched agents to Cairo to negotiate a trade agreement.

These arrangements faced criticism in England because they threatened to weaken the East India Company's monopoly by removing control over trade. Additionally, the commerce was

viewed as risky due to opposition from Ottoman officials in Turkey. In India, however, the situation was quite different, as Indian ships appeared at Suez shortly after the agreement was signed.
George Baldwin, an English merchant and adventurer in the Levant since 1760, recognised Egypt's vast resource potential and the advantages of establishing a communication route across the country. During a visit to England, he secured approval for his plan from the Levant Company, which held the regional monopoly. Hearing this, the Directors of the East India Company authorised Baldwin to act as their agent in Egypt and compensated him with a small salary plus bonuses for each packet of correspondence successfully expedited through Egypt. Baldwin began his duties in the summer of 1775. He spent the following two years perfecting and organising the arrival of ships from both sides of the Egyptian Isthmus. His main concern was that the monsoons limited the sailing window to about two months each year, during which ships could arrive and depart from Suez and exchange dispatches with those at Alexandria. It was discovered that ships could travel from Alexandria to England in 25 days, and during the "open season," a ship from India could wait at Suez for replies from England before returning safely. This system proved so effective that by 1777 the East India Company relied on it for its urgent dispatches. A report from around this time describes how the postal service exploited this arrangement:

"Packets and dispatches, brought on nearly every vessel, were promptly transported from Suez to Cairo and thence to Alexandria by special messengers. They reached Europe in some of the many vessels annually attracted to Alexandria, and reached England by a route leading from Triest to the Channel ports. ... During each of the three or four years following the Treaty of 1775, sailing vessels frequently arrived at Alexandria from England and at Suez from India at the same time."

Despite its success, the route was closed due to political and commercial jealousy. First, the Turks opposed the route because they wanted the wealth it generated for themselves and because it strengthened the position of the Beys in Egypt. Additionally, the East India Company disliked the route because they feared that goods from the Indo-Egyptian trade might be transported to European markets by the Levant Company, thus seriously competing with their monopoly of goods via the Cape of Good Hope. Consequently, on 4 July 1777, the Court of Directors of the East India Company issued an order prohibiting navigation of the Red Sea north of Jeddah. Despite this, Indian ships continued carrying dispatches and trade goods to Suez for a further three years.

While the British lost interest in Egypt, the French saw an opportunity to expand theirs. France clearly recognised the advantages of Egypt for communication and trade with India, as well as the chance to develop this trade route to undermine British trade in Indian goods across Europe. The Egyptians were eager to form an agreement with the French to protect their income from trade passing through their territory. Consequently, on 7 February 1785, the Chevalier de Truguet signed a very favourable treaty with the current Bey ruler at Cairo on behalf of France.

Many Britons recall the convenience of communicating with Indians in half or a third of the time it now took via the Cape route, and they longed to restore this situation. After leaving Egypt for England in 1781, George Baldwin dedicated himself to re-establishing the use of the Egyptian route. He emphasised the dangers to England's interests east of Suez if France were to gain control of Egypt. To some extent, his efforts bore fruit, for in 1786 the British

were willing to risk compromising their earlier policy towards Turkish interests in Egypt by re-establishing a consular office in Cairo with Baldwin as Consul. His task was: "... *to endeavour to obtain from the Government of Egypt by proper and discreet means, a secure and regular passage through their country for His Majesty's subjects and dispatches - going and coming between England and the East Indies by the Red Sea*." Due to political instability in Egypt and a lack of cooperation from some key British officials, Baldwin was unable to conclude a treaty until May 1794. However, after 1786, the British government began to lose interest in Egypt because of the unreliability of this communication route, caused by ongoing political instability and the absence of lucrative trading opportunities there. As a result, on 8 February, the Foreign Office ended Baldwin's appointment as British Consul. Just nine days earlier, the French Consulate at Cairo, which had been closed since 1777, was reopened, and by 1797, the French had devised plans to send an expedition via Egypt to India and to strike a blow at England.

The French Republic declared war on Great Britain on 1 February 1793 and started planning an invasion. However, by 1797, it was clear that an invasion across the Channel was unlikely. The French still aimed to deal a significant blow to Great Britain and revived their earlier plan to invade Egypt, believing that Egypt provided "*...the means of ousting the English from India by sending a body of 15,000 troops from Cairo via Suez*." On 12 April 1798, the French Directors and Napoleon agreed to put the plan into action immediately. From then on, events unfolded rapidly, and on 19 May 1798, a large French fleet sailed from Toulon with 35,000 men. Malta fell on 12 June, while Alexandria was captured on 2 July 1798. The French quickly defeated the Mamelukes cavalry at the Battle of the Pyramids on 12 July 1798, and took Cairo the following day.

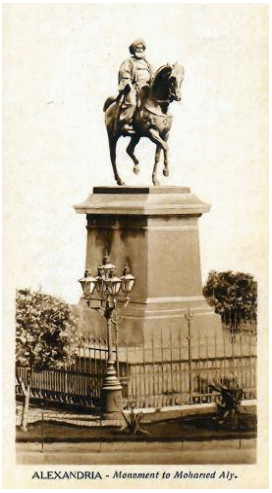
The French aimed to construct a sea-level canal linking the two seas, granting them exclusive access to the shorter route to India and control over the Red Sea. However, Napoleon's engineers miscalculated the sea-level difference between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, claiming the latter was 15 metres higher. This led to a significant delay of nearly sixty years, by which time the actual difference was found to be much smaller, averaging only 15 to 25 centimetres higher in the Red Sea due to seasonal variations.

On 1 August 1798, the British fleet spotted the French fleet in the harbour at Abukir, near Alexandria, and destroyed it in what became known as the Battle of the Nile. This cut off the French's escape route. The Turks, supported by the British, landed near Alexandria but were defeated by Napoleon at the Battle of Abukir on 25 July 1799. Due to increasing chaos in France and the army's numerous defeats across Europe, Napoleon left Egypt for France on 24 August 1799.

After the Turkish defeat at Abukir, the British landed 18,000 men on 8 March 1801, and they ultimately defeated the French army at Alexandria thirteen days later. As part of the surrender terms, the remaining French troops were repatriated. The Treaty of Amiens (27 March 1802) was signed between England and France, and the British withdrew their troops in 1803, leaving Samuel Briggs as the British Proconsul.

Through political intrigue, Mohammed Ali succeeded in 1805 in driving out the Turkish governor of Egypt and having the Sultan appoint him as governor. Mohammed Ali was a soldier of fortune who had been a tobacco merchant in the Greek seaport of Kavalla before going to Egypt in 1799 in the service of the Turks. His power was finally consolidated when,

in 1811, he annihilated the Mamelukes in a massacre at a banquet to which he had invited them at the citadel of Cairo. He was receptive to Western ideas and adopted many of them in his efforts to develop his country.



ALEXANDRIA - Monument to Mohamed Ali

First School of Medicine in Egypt Inaugurated in 1827 by Mohammed Ali

After defeating the French in Egypt, the English had little interest in the country, as it was not yet an important route to India and the Far East. However, the power of the Muslim nations was waning as European Imperialism expanded, creating a need for highways for commercial and military purposes to access the riches of the Far East.

Beginning of the Age of Steam Navigation

Before steam propulsion, navigation in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea relied on the monsoon wind patterns. The southwest monsoon blows over the Indian Ocean from the east coast of Africa to the coasts of India from May to October, peaking between June and August. From October to May, the weaker northeast monsoon dominates. Ships travelling to or from Bombay had to plan their voyages around the monsoon. Sailing vessels would depart from England or other European ports to benefit from the southwest monsoon, while those sailing from Bombay to Europe would utilise the northeast monsoon. Over time, steam-powered ships eliminated the reliance on seasonal monsoon patterns for maritime communication between India and England.

By 1815, steamboats were already being used on English canals, and by 1820, some predicted their inevitable application for ocean travel. However, the technology was still in its infancy. The first marine steam engines were fragile, required frequent stops for cleaning, and burned coal so inefficiently that early steamships could only operate close to their fuel supplies. An additional drawback was that their paddle boxes were vulnerable to being washed away by strong waves. For these reasons, the early steamships primarily operated in inland or coastal waters with a series of ports, such as the English Channel, the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf.

The early steamships were very expensive to build and operate: they were fully rigged sailing ships fitted with engines and steam-powered equipment. They required a complete

sailing crew along with steam personnel. While sailing ships relied on wind for free propulsion, steamers consumed large amounts of coal in inefficient engines.

The Honourable East India Company and the Far East Trade

On 31 December 1600, the Governor and Company of Merchants of London trading in the East Indies, later known as the East India Company, was granted a charter by Queen Elizabeth I. This granted them a monopoly on trade east of the Straits of Magellan (Cape Horn) and the Cape of Good Hope. By 1612, the Company had received permission from Mughal Emperor Jahangir to establish a trading post at Surat in India. Subsequent posts were established at Madras (1639), Bombay (1651), and Calcutta (1696). In 1699, the East India Company began trading with China. From the outset of its operations in the Far East, it was clear that its success depended on maintaining communication between these posts and the Home Office in London.

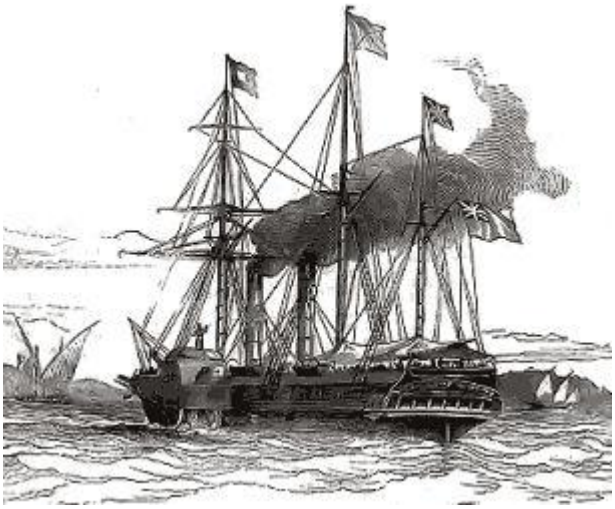
From 1600 to 1813, trade in India was solely controlled by the East India Company. However, the Charter Act of 1813 marked a turning point for trade in India. This Act extended the Company's charter for 20 years but abolished its monopoly on trade with the country, including control of the mail, except for the service from Bombay, which remained under their control until 1854. Once India was opened to British private traders, thousands flocked there.

Twenty years later, the Charter Act of 1833 extended the East India Company's charter for another 20 years, and this time it lost its monopoly on trade with China, allowing leading merchants to fill the gap. After this period, the Company was mainly reduced to a political and administrative body representing Britain. On the first of September 1858, the East India Company ceased to exist. Its duties and treaty obligations were transferred to the British government. Finally, on 1 April 1867, the Straits Settlements became a crown colony, thereby ending the British East India Company's rule.

Rise of the Peninsular and Oriental (P&O) Steam Navigation Company

This renowned shipping company, which still operates today, was founded in 1815. That year, Brodie McGhie Willcox established himself as a shipbroker and commission agent in London, initially hiring Arthur Anderson as a clerk and later, in 1822, as a partner. In the absence of a well-established and regulated mail service by sea, the Ship Letter Office was founded in the late 1700s. However, following significant criticism, the responsibility for the package service was transferred to the Admiralty in 1837. In September of that year, Willcox and Anderson's company, then known as the Peninsular Steam Navigation Company, became the first private shipping line to be granted an official maritime steam mail contract. They operated a weekly mail packet service from England to Gibraltar on behalf of the Admiralty. The segments from Malta to Alexandria remained under Admiralty jurisdiction. Once P&O demonstrated they could deliver the mail more quickly and cheaply than the Admiralty, contracting out to private companies became standard practice.

The P&O had to work hard to secure its mail contracts. They had to negotiate with the established interests and methods of government, the Admiralty, and the Honourable East India Company, which controlled affairs east of Suez. However, they had the support of influential merchants in Britain and India who desired a faster mail service than that provided by the East India Company.



The Admiralty ships were not suitable for the packet service, and the overland route through France was underdeveloped; therefore, in 1840, Willcox and Anderson's greatly expanded P&O secured the Admiralty contract for a monthly packet service from England to Alexandria. An agent from the Admiralty was on board each ship, overseeing the mail. The contract stated that P&O would provide service east of Suez, but it was not until September 1843 that the service from Suez to Ceylon, Madras, and Calcutta began. The delay was due to the need for P&O to establish a fleet and support facilities on both sides of the Isthmus of Suez, which was along the most direct route. In 1845, the service to Penang, Singapore, and China commenced, and by 1848, it was extended to Hong Kong. Due to the East India Company's persistent adherence to the remnants of its monopoly, the service from Bombay remained under their control until 1854, when P&O finally took over.

The P&O prospered, and its fleet expanded from six paddle-wheel steamers in 1835 to fifty-five in 1860, some over 2000 tons and more than half screw-driven. Due to increasing cargo and passenger traffic across Egypt, by 1850, the P&O had constructed warehouses, stores, wharves, workshops, and freshwater plants, as well as coal depots at Alexandria and Suez.

Thomas Waghorn's Naval Career

The stage was now set for the arrival of Thomas Fletcher Waghorn. He was born in Chatham, Kent, on 20 June 1800. At the age of twelve, Master Thomas joined the Navy on 10 November 1812 and was made a midshipman. Young Waghorn must have been an exceptional individual from the outset because sixteen days before his seventeenth birthday, he passed the navigation examinations for Lieutenant, making him the youngest midshipman ever to do so. However, this examination qualified him only for the rank of Lieutenant; due to his youth, he was not promoted immediately.

His naval career appeared to be over when, at the end of 1817, due to the reduction of the British Navy following the Napoleonic Wars, he was paid off and returned to England. He was soon offered a position as the third officer on a merchant vessel, and he sailed for Calcutta.

Two years later, in 1819, he was appointed to the Bengal Marine Pilot Service on the Hooghly River. He served there until 1824, when the First Burmese War broke out. Waghorn volunteered for active service with the East India Company and was assigned to a Bengal Marine division of gunboats in coordination with the army and flotilla as Captain of the

cutter Matchless. He saw action on five occasions and was wounded in the right thigh. Like many others, he contracted a fever. After the war ended in February 1826, Waghorn returned to Calcutta and his post with the Pilot Service.

Origins of Waghorn's Concept for Shortening Transit Times of Mails to India

Two events shaped Waghorn's views on faster communication between India and England. The first happened during his participation in the First Burmese War. He was impressed by the small steamship Diana. This 32-horsepower, 89-ton river and coastal passenger steamer was the first of its kind in Indian waters. Launched in 1823 at Kidderpore, on the waterfront district of Calcutta, she was acquired by the Bengal Government for use on the Arakan coast, mainly to tow men-of-war into position for attacks and to transport passengers up the Irrawaddy. The practical Waghorn noted the significant advantage the expedition gained from the steamer.

The second event occurred when he met Captain James Johnston of the steamer Enterprise at the end of the first steam voyage from England to Calcutta via the Cape. Waghorn was the pilot who brought the Enterprise up the Hooghly to Calcutta upon her arrival in India.

Paddle Steamer Diana

Paddle Steamer Enterprise
[National Maritime Museum, London]

Captain Johnston had travelled from Calcutta to England by sailing ship, passing through the Red Sea and then overland through Egypt. He was an advocate of steam navigation and personally preferred the Red Sea route over the Cape of Good Hope route.

In 1825, the Calcutta Steam Committee offered a prize of 20,000 rupees to the first steam vessel that could complete the 11,000-mile voyage from England to Calcutta and back in 70 days or less on each leg. Captain Johnston's vessel measured 67.7 metres in length, displaced 479 tons, and was fitted with two 60-horsepower steam engines and collapsible paddles to take advantage of favourable sailing conditions.

The Enterprise left Falmouth on 16 August 1826 with 17 passengers, dispatches, and mail, arriving in Calcutta on 7 December after a 113-day voyage. She used her engine for 62 days,

sailed for 40 days, and spent 11 days at coaling stations. She consumed over 10 tons of coal daily to maintain 6 knots. Since sailing ships usually completed the journey in about 90 days, the Enterprise's experiment was considered unsuccessful. Nevertheless, Captain Johnson was awarded half the prize in recognition of his efforts to improve steam navigation between England and India and to demonstrate that steamers could undertake long ocean crossings.

Waghorn Promotes Steam Communication

Still recovering from the fever he contracted during the Burmese campaign, Waghorn began planning for his furlough to England. Before departing, he shared his idea for "*A steam communication between our Eastern possessions and the mother-country, England*" with the Marine Board at Calcutta. The Board supported his plans and promptly sent them to the Bengal Government, which issued him letters of recommendation to the Honourable Court of Directors of the East India Company, stating that he was suitable to establish steam navigation with India. Throughout his journey home and upon his arrival in England, he actively championed his plan. Unfortunately, the P&O and all but Mr Loch, the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the East India Company, opposed steam navigation on the open ocean.

Two years later, Waghorn's efforts paid off when, in October 1829, Lord Ellenborough, president of the Court of Directors, and Mr Loch commissioned him to deliver dispatches to Sir John Malcolm, the Governor of Bengal, via Egypt and the Red Sea. The mission's main purpose was to report on navigation in the Red Sea, with the aim of establishing an overland route for the mail service. With only four days' notice and just 20 pounds of luggage, Waghorn set out from Gracechurch Street, City of London, on 28 October 1829. He travelled through Trieste and reached Alexandria in 26 days. He crossed the Egyptian desert to Suez, where he was meant to meet the Enterprise. However, it did not appear due to mechanical problems. Waghorn was undeterred; he boarded an open native boat and continued down the Red Sea to Jeddah, covering 620 miles (998 km) in six and a half days. He finally completed the journey aboard a man-of-war and arrived in Calcutta on 20 March 1830, covering about 7,700 miles (12,392 km) in four months and twenty-one days. His actual travel time was 84 days. The journey took longer than expected because he fell ill in Jeddah for a month. In his view, with ideal conditions and steamer connections, the trip could be completed in an average of 55 days. This experience led him to shift his plans from the Cape route to one through Egypt.

While in India, he held meetings in Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta to promote his ideas for establishing steam communication between England and the Far East, and he was well received. With the thanks of the Governor of Bengal, he returned to England. At a meeting with Mr Loch's successor, Waghorn was told that the East India Company needed no steam communication with the East at all. Waghorn states that the new Chairman of the Board of Directors told him:

> "*.....that the Governor-General and people of India had nothing to do with India House; and if I did not go back and join their pilot service, to which I belonged, I should receive such a communication from that House as would be by no means agreeable to me*!"

Waghorn's reaction was, by now, predictable:

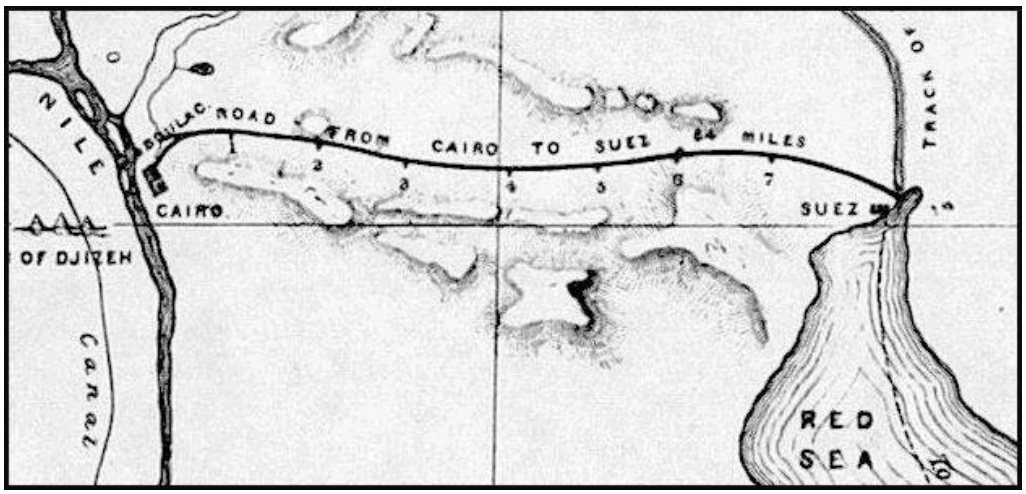
"On the instant I penned my resignation, and placing it in his hands, then gave utterance to the sentiment which actuated me from that moment till the moment I realised my aspiration - that I would establish the Overland Route, in spite of the India House."

Waghorn's Overland Route

Initially, the British Government and the East India Company were content to leave the overland route through Egypt to private enterprise because, at least for the time being, neither wanted to risk becoming involved in political issues with the Pasha of Egypt or the Ottoman Sultan.

One reason the East India Company did not support Waghorn's idea was the difficulty of obtaining affordable coal supplies east of the Mediterranean. It had cost the company £20 per ton to deliver coal to Suez, and the journey could take up to 15 months. Waghorn adhered to his philosophy of proving by doing and set out to show that transporting coal to Suez could be economical. With the assistance of Pasha Mohammed Ali, 1,000 tons of coal were delivered to Suez. Waghorn managed this by shipping English coal first to Alexandria, then via local vessels along the 48-mile Mahmoudia canal connecting Alexandria and the Nile; subsequently, the coal was shipped to Cairo and carried by caravan to Suez. The total cost at Suez was £4, 3s, 4d per ton. Once this obstacle was overcome, in 1835, Waghorn began efforts to establish his express mail service via the overland route. By 1837, he had been appointed Deputy Agent of the East India Company in Egypt to oversee the mail operations.

The challenge he faced was transforming what had been an experimental service into a reliable system. Steamer service to Cairo was well established. Service in the Red Sea was provided by steamers of the Bombay Marine until 1840 and by the P&O thereafter. It was left to Waghorn to organise the transit across the desert.



Location of the Rest Stations Between Cairo & Suez.

Waghorn lived among the Arabs for three years and demonstrated the benefits of his scheme to them. He wrote that "*Once in the enjoyment of the Pasha's friendship, I was enabled to establish mail to India and to keep the service in my hands for four years. On one occasion,*

I succeeded in getting letters from Bombay to England in 46 days..." He set up a regular caravan service and built eight stopping stations along the 85 miles (137 km) from Cairo to Suez for changes of horse teams and the provision of meals for passengers.

TRAVELLING IN THE DESERT

STATION IN THE DESERT

His friendly contact with the Pasha and his administrative services ensured the journey was both safe and reliable. Over time, three hotels were established to serve the passenger route. Mohammed Ali opened an agency in Suez, Waghorn set up one in Cairo and another in Alexandria to manage the mail. By the time Waghorn left Egypt in 1841, he had organised a service using English carriages, vans, and horses to transport travellers, and had deployed small English steamers on the Nile and the Mahmoudia Canal, which connected Alexandria to the river.

Mail Across Egypt

Under the Convention of 30 March 1836 between England and France for transporting the East Indies mail, the aim was to prevent fumigation and delays. The mail was to be sealed in airtight iron boxes. The letters were placed into boxes measuring 2 by 2 by 1.5 feet (0.61 by 0.61 by 0.46 m), then sealed with lead. These boxes were bound and stamped with a crown and "General Post-Office, India Mail." A shipment could contain 30 or more such boxes.

Waghorn had agents in major English cities and in India. The procedure for using his service was as follows: addressed letters were taken to one of his agents, and the sender paid the required fees. The agents applied the handstamp, "Care of Mr Waghorn etc.," and the letter was left with them to be forwarded by the fastest route. John Sidbottom's, "The Overland Mail," published in 1948, remains the outstanding reference on Waghorn's service. Sidbottom illustrates over ten types of handstamps that Waghorn and his agents used to mark letters between 1836 and 1841.

As the steam service to and from Egypt improved and faster routes through Europe were developed, so too did the speed of the mail between England and India.

Agents of the Bombay Steam Co., Hill and Raven, established an express service to compete with Waghorn. They also built hotels in Cairo and Suez and operated several rest houses along the desert route for their passengers. Due to financial problems, the two rivals merged in 1841, creating J.R. Hill and Co.

In 1837, the mail system was taken over by the English Government to Waghorn's great loss. In 1843, Arthur Anderson described how the mail crossed the desert:

Indian mail is taken charge of on their debarkation at Alexandria, and until their arrival there from India, by agents of the East India Company. The steam vessels on the Nile and Alexandria are not availed of for the transit of the mail, which is conveyed overland between Alexandria and Cairo on the backs of donkeys, each donkey carrying two boxes of letters. Between Cairo and Suez, across the desert, dromedaries are employed. The average of one monthly mail somewhat exceeds one hundred boxes each way, being upwards of two hundred crossing Egypt to and from India, and containing about one hundred thousand covers."

Since the mail service across the Egyptian desert from Alexandria to Suez did not require rest stops, it would be loaded onto the vessel hours before the arrival of the passengers and their baggage. A delay of almost 24 hours was quite common.

ARRIVAL OF THE INDIAN AND AUSTRALIAN MAILS AT ALEXANDRIA

Once P&O established steamship links on both sides of the Isthmus, they aimed to control the overland route because passengers were unhappy with the service offered by Hill & Co. As passenger traffic increased rapidly, P&O was concerned that its reputation and income might decline. With the Pasha's help, P&O created the Egyptian Transit Company, and on 26 May 1843, this new firm purchased Hill and Co. The handstamp "EGYPTIAN TRANSIT COMPANY SUEZ" appears on mail covers from 1843 to 1847. These covers were managed by the British Post Office, which would have left London, crossed the English Channel, and carried overland across Europe using a combination of fast stagecoaches, early rail networks, and river steamers. The route was deliberately planned to avoid France and typically passed through Belgium, Germany (Prussia), and Austria, down to their Adriatic coast at Trieste (which, in 1918, was handed over to Italy after the First World War), where the mail was handed over to the Austrian postal authorities. It was then loaded onto their monthly steamship service to Alexandria, operated by Österreichischer Lloyd. This was another route pioneered by Waghorn (more details below).

The P&O had made many improvements to their transit system on the Mahmoudia Canal and the Nile. They introduced improved six-passenger carriages on the desert route. The rest-houses were upgraded, and the one at the midpoint was enlarged, with clean bedrooms, beds, and a dining room for cooks and servants. By 1846, the P&O was carrying mail over the 250 miles (402 km) from Alexandria to Suez in 64 hours, steamer to steamer, while the passengers took an additional 12 hours, owing to a rest stop in Cairo. The Egyptian Transit Company was taken over by the Pasha's government in 1846.

Waghorn After Egypt

In 1838, Waghorn and George Wheatley established a shipping and forwarding agency in London named Waghorn & Co., which later became G. W. Wheatley & Co. They acted as forwarding agents for the Overland Route to India and China, under the name Global Express. The story of Waghorn after 1841 increasingly centres on Europe rather than Egypt, as he dedicated his time to promoting his business in London, though he continued to visit Egypt regularly.

After resigning from the Bengal Marine Pilot Service, Waghorn believed that holding the rank of Lieutenant would aid him in his pursuits in India. Between 1832 and 1842, he repeatedly sought this rank. Ultimately, on 23 March 1842, he was granted the honorary rank of Lieutenant by Lord Haddington, Head of the Admiralty, in recognition of his efforts in establishing the overland route.

Waghorn continued experimenting with finding better routes across Europe for the mail in 1845. He tested routes via Genoa, the Papal States, and the port of Ancona. In 1846, he lobbied for the Trieste route, and in 1847 he saved 13 days by travelling via Trieste rather than Marseilles.

His 1846 experiments with the Trieste route resulted in personal debt from which he could not recover, despite liquidating his entire estate. He lost all hope of recouping his losses when the P&O packet company took control of the entire overland carrying business.

Ruined in health and financially, he applied for a pension from the East India Company and the British Government. He was granted one quarter of his Lieutenant's pay, and from the minutes of the East India Company Court of Directors for 12 April 1848, records:

> ***"Adverting to the merits and services of Lieutenant Thomas Waghorn of the Royal Navy in the Establishment of Steam Communication with India, and to the great benefits which have been derived therefrom, Lieutenant Waghorn be granted as a further mark of the sense entertained by the East India Company of those services, an annuity of One hundred pounds (£100)."***

Waghorn requested and was granted an advance payment of his pension. In 1849, he collapsed while trying to improve the route via Trieste and felt compelled to request a grant. Later, his pension was increased to £200 a year. He asked to receive this in advance, and when allowed, his creditors seized the sum. Lieutenant Thomas Fletcher Waghorn received only the first quarterly payment from his pension; he died in London at Golden Square, Pentonville, on 7 January 1850, aged 50. His remains were laid to rest in the church of All Saints at Snodland, near Rochester in Kent.

Waghorn married later in life. He and his wife, Harriett, never had children. Initially, his widow received a pension of only £75 a year. Despite complaints published in the press, the Government was unwilling to increase it above £90 a year. She died in poverty on 19 January 1856.

Egyptian Railway

1884-1954 Commemorative Stamp

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1852-1933 Locomotive Commemorative Stamp

In 1832, Waghorn had convinced the Pasha of the advantages of a rail service connecting Suez to Cairo, across the mostly flat desert. Two years later, the Pasha commissioned Galloway Bey to survey the desert route and estimate the cost of constructing the railway. The death of Galloway and the conflicting political interests of the European powers delayed its development. Nevertheless, in 1851, the Pasha finally commenced construction of the section from Alexandria to the Nile and completed it two years later. The segment linking Cairo and Alexandria was finished in 1855, and the extension from Cairo across the desert to Suez was completed in 1858. In February 1858, the British Post Office sent Anthony Trollope to negotiate an agreement with Egypt for transporting mail by rail. The treaty was signed in June of 1858 and stipulated that the journey would take no more than 24 hours from ship to ship. A Post Office messenger was to accompany the mail, and the Post Office was to pay £12,000 annually for the service.

The Suez Canal

Breaking ground at Port Said on 25 April 1859
Engraving from L'Illustration

Work officially commenced on the construction of the Suez Canal on 29 August 1859, and it opened a decade later on 17 November 1869. However, not everyone was pleased with its construction. The British did not welcome the idea of a canal under French control because

they feared French interference in their commercial and maritime affairs. The P&O had good reason to oppose its construction, for on the day it would open, their capital investment in Egypt, developed for the overland route, would be lost, and their monopoly on eastern mail and passenger services would be abolished. Their eastern stations, dockyards, and shops would become redundant. They had a large establishment at Suez with condensers supplying fresh water, an ice-making plant, stores, repair shops, a coal station, lighters, and tenders. At Alexandria, they owned offices, warehouses, docks, coal stocks, coal hulks, and many service vessels. Near Cairo and Zagazig, the company ran farms producing chickens and eggs, vegetables, fruit, and sheep to supply their steamers at Suez and Alexandria. All of this would become obsolete once ships built to take advantage of the canal and sail nonstop between England and India, and beyond, became available.

The Post Office, seeing an opportunity to pressure the financially troubled P&O into accepting a reduction in its subsidy, insisted that it strictly observe the terms of the contract, despite the opening of the canal. It required them to continue carrying the mail overland! Consequently, an absurd situation arose where, at Alexandria, a ship carrying mail transferred it to the waiting train, then the vessel steamed through the canal to Suez and waited for the train to arrive, when the mail would be reloaded onto the same ship. This irrational situation persisted until 1874, when a revised contract permitted the mail to transit the canal; however, P&O had to sacrifice £20,000 of its subsidy.

Suez Canal

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Suez Canal from a NASA image

Waghorn's Place in History

Despite begrudging official recognition for his heroic work, countless millions of his countrymen, and others, understood that he had realised his aspiration to "... *establish the Overland Route, in spite of the India House.*" His overland route had a life of nearly 30 years before being supplanted by a rail link in 1858 and the Suez Canal in 1869. His tireless efforts had made it plain that a link between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea was a necessity in the age of steam, and thereafter.

On 20 November 1859, Ferdinand de Lesseps unveiled a bronze bust of Waghorn overlooking the mouth of the Suez Canal at the port of Tewfik. On its base, he inscribed these words of admiration:

"In homage to the memory of a generous though unfortunate man, who alone, without any help, by a long series of labours and heroic efforts, practically demonstrated and determined the adoption of the postal route through Egypt, and the communication between the East and the West of the world; and this was the originator and pioneer of the great Egyptian maritime commerce completed by the canal of the two seas."

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A version of this article appeared in the book *The Mediterranean Mails* which can be download as a pdf **HERE.**

Anyone with further information to add to this article will be welcomed: You may kindly email me with your input, images or similar information relevant to help make this website a more useful reference.

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