

## A 19TH CENTURY WOODEN BASKET



**Fig. 4 Treen basket from Pitcairn Island**

This oval basket is in a dense reddish coloured wood, measuring 9 inches x 8.75 inches, has a shaped edge and turned uprights attached to the shaped handle. At first sight this appears to be an attractive but relatively simple piece of 19th century treen. Simple that is, until one reads the punched inscription - 'Pitcairn Island - John Christian'

Pitcairn Island was a remote uninhabited island in the South Pacific. In 1790, Fletcher Christian, eight of his fellow mutineers from HMS. Bounty and a number of Tahitians settled there. Despite many months of searching by the British, the location of the final refuge of the mutineers was not found until 1808, when an American ship visited the island. In fact, only one of the original mutineers, John Adams, was alive, the remainder having died through inter-fighting and with the Tahitians. Under Adams, the island had become more ordered and the children educated, including Fletcher Christian's three children by his Tahitian wife Isabella (Maimiti or Mi-mitti). The first recorded John Christian was Fletcher Christian's great-grandson and was

born on Pitcairn in 1843 and he would appear to be the likely maker of the basket.

Early accounts of life on Pitcairn record that the islanders were skilled woodworkers. They made many small objects such as cups, boxes and other objects to sell to passing ships (an inlaid box with drawers was sent to Queen Victoria for her birthday). Whether this basket was one such object is open to conjecture. As it is stamped with John Christian's name, would it have been for his own use? Of the many species of trees indigenous to Pitcairn and its neighbouring islands, the actual outer body of the piece is turned in 'red miro', (the local name), which was extensively used for cabinet making and turning. 'Red miro' is *Miro-Thespesia populnea* (Malvaceae). At first, it was common on Pitcairn but as it became scarce, the islanders sailed their dugout canoes to Henderson Island, 80 miles away, for supplies of the timber. This uninhabited island is, even now, a source for the wood. Although miro is still grown on Pitcairn, the timber is of an inferior quality to that on Henderson Island. Miro is also widely used in Polynesian herbal medicine.

Thus, a simple piece of 19th century treen puts one in direct touch with the most notorious mutiny in British naval history; subject of several films, dozens of books and much disinformation. The basket is now in the Wade Collection.

### Bibliography:

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