

David Hamilton: The Author of Mixed Moss

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James Turner, more commonly known as Uncle Jim or Captain Flint appears within the *Swallows and Amazons* series as a slightly mysterious figure. We know that he is a large fat man with a bald head but apart from odd pieces of information let slip by Nancy or Peggy, we do not know much about him at all. I find him a very interesting character.

Peggy, in *Swallows and Amazons*, introduces us to him before he actually appears in the book himself. 'He's been all over the world. Mother says he was the black sheep of the family when he was young so he was sent to South America. But he didn't stay there. He went everywhere. Last year he came back home and saw he'd gathered enough moss and meant to settle down. But he always liked being at sea so he bought the houseboat'. From a description of the houseboat's interior we see that James Turner was a most travelled man. A boomerang, a bamboo flute from Shanghai, bright coloured leather cushions from Omduram, and a necklace of sharks teeth. Other items, such as a model elephant from Colombo in Ceylon, an item broken during the burglary, show his life was spent in the Far East. But doing what? Apparently he liked being at sea, so maybe he was an officer on board a ship sailing around the world.

But what do we make of his knowledge of mining? This is revealed in the description of his room at Beckfoot, Nancy and Peggy's home, which is given in *Winter Holiday*. It is a room full of scientific apparatus, glass fronted cupboards full of chemicals and high bookshelves which contained books on geography, chemistry and mining. This seems to indicate that he was some sort of an engineer or mining consultant. In *Peter Duck* it is said that he once crossed the Andes mountains travelling night and day hoping for treasure, and in *Pigeon Post*, where the Swallows, Amazons and D's are prospecting for gold on High Topps, James Turner is spending $\frac{3}{4}$ of the book slowly and presumably sadly returning home from Pernambuco in South America after an unsuccessful attempt at prospecting there. He tells us so in his telegram to his sister.

Other things we do know about him. He smokes a pipe, Navy Cut tobacco being his favourite. He gets restless, paces up and down and fidgety when things are on his mind.

But what else ... he spent a while at Oxford University, and a night in police custody after a bout of high spirits one boat race night. Maybe this is the reason that he became the black sheep of the family and was sent to South America. Or maybe he really did have a pirate past.