



Dutch East India's PRINS WILLEM

PRINS WILLEM (East Indiaman)
(EL PRICIPE CUILLERMO - Spanish translation)
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1651 - Dutch East India Company's (de VOC), Amsterdam; Middleburg, Zeeland; 2,000 tons; 181' x 45' x 18'; crew 150.

The **PRINS WILLEM** was one of the world's finest merchantmen and the biggest vessel in the Dutch East India Company's (de VOC) fleet - their flagship and their great pride. With her keel laid down in 1649, she was launched on 1 January 1650, and fitted out in time to begin her maiden voyage to Batavia on 5 May 1651.

She was designed with only two full decks, but her generous depth of hold permitted the addition later of a 'cow-deck' or orlop, laid down above the cargo hold to afford accommodation for the extra fighting men required in times of war.

In accordance with what was then the custom, her three, square-rigged masts were placed in precise order. The main deck was measured off into 11 equal parts, and the foremast was stepped well forward at a distance of one part from the stem. The main mast was set near or at centre and the mizzen just one part from the stern. It was a very successful mode.

Quite aside from her practical conception, **PRINS WILLEM** was a work of great beauty. Her ornamentation by way of decorative carvings was a marvel in which to delight. The massive, two-ton figurehead of a pouncing lion was only one of scores of hardwood sculptures which elaborated her stern, rails and beak, enhancing her from bowsprit to rudder. This was so, despite the fact that the thrifty Dutch burghers did not normally concern themselves with such frivolity. Indeed, so much was paid in wages to the **PRINS WILLEM** wood-carvers that those who came later to paint

the ship were restricted to a total budget of only 160 florins.

The artists and painters overcame this parsimony by means of a clever device. Unable to afford final gilding, they first painted the figures an ochrous yellow then added a covering of resin mixed with sulphur. In sunshine, or reflecting the light from her two enormous lanterns, the result was an appearance of costly gold, and the high stern especially must have looked beautiful.

Its embellishments included the shields of de VOC and of Middleburg, a painted carving 'Prins Willem II', flanked by lions and saluted by trumpeting angels, warriors, water nymphs and dolphins. Much of the carving was fretted, or open, to allow the wind to blow through.

PRINS WILLEM was manned in times of peace by a crew of about 150, and like almost all Indiamen, both

English and Dutch, she was quite well armed.

She had provision in her capacity as a merchant ship for the mounting of 32 guns; 24 black iron pieces each weighing two and a half tons and firing a shot of up to 24 pounds. A further six guns firing shots of between 18 and 29 pounds and a pair of light bronze mignon or small anti-personnel cannon were probably mounted topsides.

Most surprising is the fact that although de VOC was a commercial conglomerate run by 17 'directors' from seven largely autonomous provinces, its rules of conduct were clear and unequivocal and resulted in marvelous efficiency.

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