Giant worms and rum: records reveal 19th century life at sea

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From a young girl who vomited a giant worm to lightning strikes and walrus attacks, the treacherous nature of life at sea in the 19th century was laid bare Thursday in newly released British archives.

More than 1,000 Royal Navy medical officer journals were made public for the first time by the National Archives, revealing a world where drunken debauchery was a common theme of ship life, but rum was also used as a medical cure-all.

One of the most startling accounts reveals the case of 12-year-old Ellen McCarthy, a passenger on an 1825 journey from Ireland to Canada who complained of pain in her belly, constipation, a quick pulse and a great thirst.

She subsequently vomited up an 87-inch (2.2-metre) worm, and later had another "motion", producing two shorter worms.

The collection of surgeons' logs, which date from 1793 to 1880, reveal elsewhere how three men were killed when the ship 'Arab', on its way to the West Indies in 1799-80, was hit by lightning at sea.

Another ship, this one bound on a voyage of discovery to the Arctic in 1824, was attacked by several walruses, which had to be beaten off with bayonets.

The account of the 'Arab' also describes a man stung by a scorpion or

centipede and another bitten by a tarantula. In both cases the surgeon turned to rum, which he claimed was effective if applied early.

Rum was not only used for medicinal purposes, however. Littered throughout the logs are accounts of heavy drinking, which one surgeon in the Royal Navy remarked "kills more men than the sword".

Tobacco smoke was also used as an experimental treatment on a man who fell overboard from the 'Princess Royal', which serviced the Channel in 1801-02, and appeared to be dead by the time he was pulled aboard.

After smoke was pumped into his lungs for almost an hour, a pulse was detected and he recovered. The treatment was hailed a success, although in the next journal, he was hospitalised suffering from pneumonia.

The dangers of sea life did not only affect those on board, however.

The medical journal of surgeon Godfrey Goodman of the 'Dido' in 1875 expressed concern that his ship had spread a measles epidemic to Fiji, which eventually killed one third of the population.

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