

The Quest for Simon (2004)

(page checked February 2026)

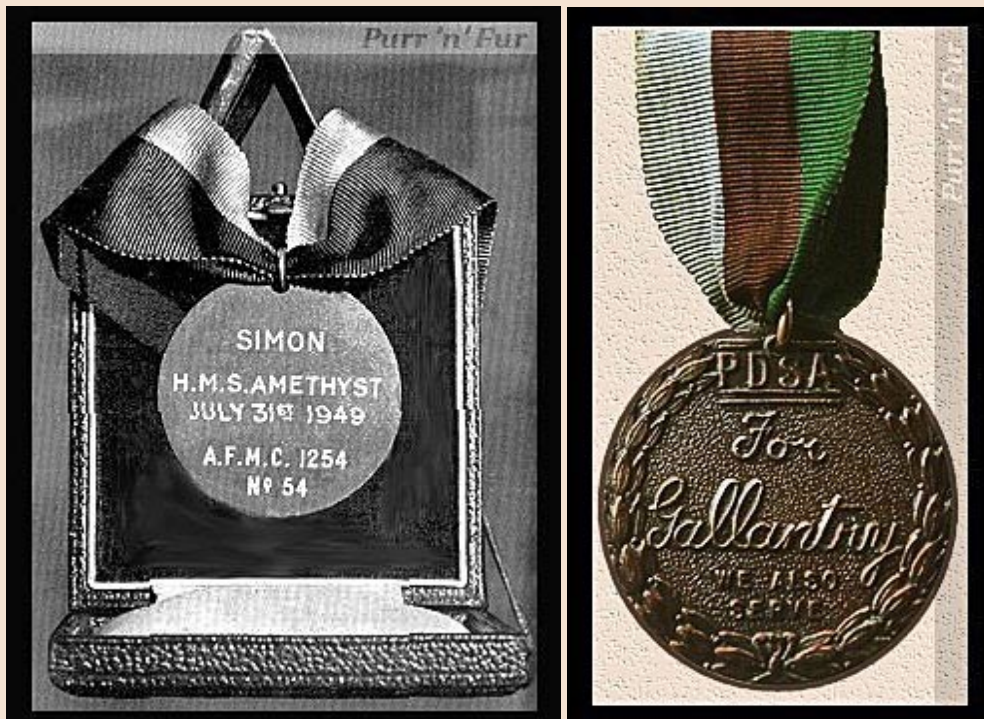
This article is about my research into the story of Simon, of HMS *Amethyst*, who was awarded the Dickin Medal for gallantry under enemy fire. While it contains further information, photos and associated links, you need to [read Simon's main story](#) for the account of the Yangtze Incident itself and how Simon came to receive his medal.

I can't remember when I first heard of **Simon**, the ship's cat of HMS *Amethyst* — but I knew little other than that he had been awarded the Dickin Medal for gallantry (often referred to as the 'Animals' VC'), and that he was buried in the PDSA animal cemetery in Ilford, Essex.

The Dickin Medal

I began to extend my knowledge in 2002 following an article in my local newspaper about a dog from the area that had also gained the medal. Subsequently I was able to contact a gentleman who had known the dog in question, and who in fact had been the person in charge of receiving war dogs back into Britain after WW2 and reintegrating them into civilian life. However, although interesting, this didn't advance my knowledge about Simon, so I turned next to the internet.

Entering 'Dickin Medal' on the search engines gave plenty of information about it and about the [PDSA](#), the organisation that awarded it and that had itself been founded by [Maria Dickin](#) (*archived copy*) — hence the medal's title. I learned that the medal had been introduced in 1943, and found out to which animals and birds it had been presented; also that the 1949 award to Simon was the last until a further, posthumous award had been made in 2000 to a wartime dog from 1942. I still wasn't clear if that marked the end of the story, so to speak, or whether it remained possible for an animal to win the medal; so I wrote to the PDSA — which coincidentally, I found, has its headquarters in Shropshire, at Telford, quite near where I live.



What became of Simon's medal?

Amethyst was decommissioned in 1954 and mothballed at Lishally, Londonderry, in Northern Ireland, as part of the Royal Naval Reserve fleet (my thanks to Ken McCormack of Derry for this information), and Simon's medal is likely to have been held on the ship until then. It would have been treated as a naval trophy — of which each ship had several — but when a ship is decommissioned its trophies go to HMS *Nelson*, a shore-based establishment in Portsmouth on England's south coast, where they are kept. A reduction in the size of the Navy led to fewer

trophies being retained, and so Simon's medal was eventually auctioned and bought by a Canadian private collector, who kept it until 1993. At that time it came up for auction again, and was expected to fetch £3,000 to £5,000; however, the Eaton Film Company of London bought it for over £23,000 (some 32,000 US dollars at the time). Apparently they wished to use it in a video film about animals in war.

I contacted them to ask if they still held the medal and whether perhaps I would be able to see/photograph it. They declined my request, but sent me a photo (of not particularly good quality, considering they're a film company!) of a flyer about the video they had made, and confirmed that Simon's medal remained in their bank vault.

The medal was released in 1999, when it was loaned for a memorial exhibition in Plymouth to mark the 50th anniversary of the *Amethyst* incident; and then it was loaned to London's [Imperial War Museum](#) in 2006/07 for the 'Animals in War' exhibition. In 2009/10 HMS *Collingwood*, a shore-based naval establishment in Fareham on the south coast of England, mounted a private exhibition to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Yangtze Incident, and once again the medal was released by Eaton. This time it was loaned to the Royal Navy, originally for a year, the duration of the exhibition, but it remains the property of Eaton Films. The PDSA has an [article about the exhibition](#) (Oct. 2009 – *archived copy*) and the Yangtze Incident. In January 2025 an enquiry to Earon Films ascertained that the medal was in fact still on loan to the Navy.

Ship's cats

Searching for 'ship's cats' on the internet produced a quantity of interesting material. In particular it gave details of a book entitled *Ship's Cats in War and Peace*, published by Nauticalia of London in 2001. I ordered a copy right away, and when it arrived was pleased to find a full account of Simon's story. There are many other tales and accounts in the book: a good read for cat lovers. I was able to contact the author, Val Lewis, who referred me to the [Imperial War Museum](#) archives in London as a source of material about Simon and she also kindly supplied the address of a very valuable contact, an officer who had been on *Amethyst* at the time, and who had helped her with information and photographs of Simon.



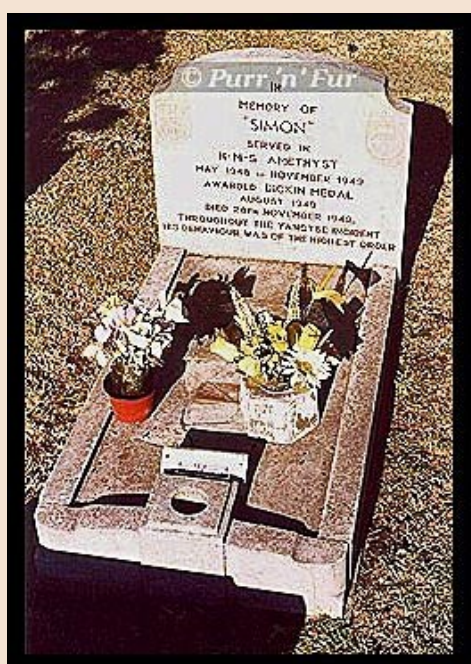
Information from the PDSA

In the meantime, the PDSA in Telford had been very helpful. In particular, I had still wanted to know the current status of the Dickin Medal, and also whether the cemetery in Ilford was accessible to me as an ordinary member of the public, so that I could visit to see and photograph Simon's grave and memorial for myself. While the medal had been introduced originally as a wartime award for animals in the armed services, further awards have been made more recently, notably in connection with the Twin Towers attacks of 11 September 2001. This was considered to be a suitable occasion to amend the rules a little; I presumed, therefore, that the medal could now be presented again to any animals whose conduct in time of war or terrorist attack merited it (see the [main Simon](#)

[story](#) for more details of awards made). I was sent an attractive and informative booklet about the medal, its history and the animals that have won it, including details of the New York 9/11 awards. I learned also that the PDSA cemetery in Ilford is always open and accessible to the public, and was able to establish its exact location using internet maps. It's very close to the east-London end of the M11 motorway, and so is easy to find and reach, being situated behind the PDSA Animal Hospital on the outskirts of Ilford (see [location map](#)). I determined to visit it.

The Animal Cemetery at Ilford

One glorious 'Indian summer' Saturday in October 2002, with sunshine all the way there and all the way back, I drove the couple of hundred or so miles from the Welsh border to east London and found the cemetery. On a Saturday the hospital was closed and I had the place to myself. It was a remarkable spot: amidst all the nearby motorways, power lines, traffic and hustle and bustle of a Saturday afternoon in suburban London, it was an oasis of tranquillity. So peaceful; I just didn't notice the traffic or other extraneous noise, and with a variety of trees and shrubs in their autumn colours it was unforgettable and really quite a special place. I was so pleased to have made the trip, and took many photographs.



I located Simon's grave and his quite splendid memorial with its inscription: *Throughout the Amethyst incident, his behaviour was of the highest order.* There were many other memorials to beloved pets, mostly cats and dogs, with some very poignant inscriptions expressing great devotion to long-departed companions. Most looked to be half a century old or more; at this time many of the graves' surface features had had to be removed as they were more or less derelict, and in places the uneven ground was becoming a hazard to visitors. No matter: the grass was cut, the place was very tidy and it gave the impression of being well-cared for. Just a very few graves showed signs of recent attention — including Simon's (*above*), which had some plastic flowers in a container — but then the great majority of the owners of pets buried here must themselves also have passed on. It's perhaps unlikely that succeeding generations of the families would bother with the graves of pets they probably didn't even know.

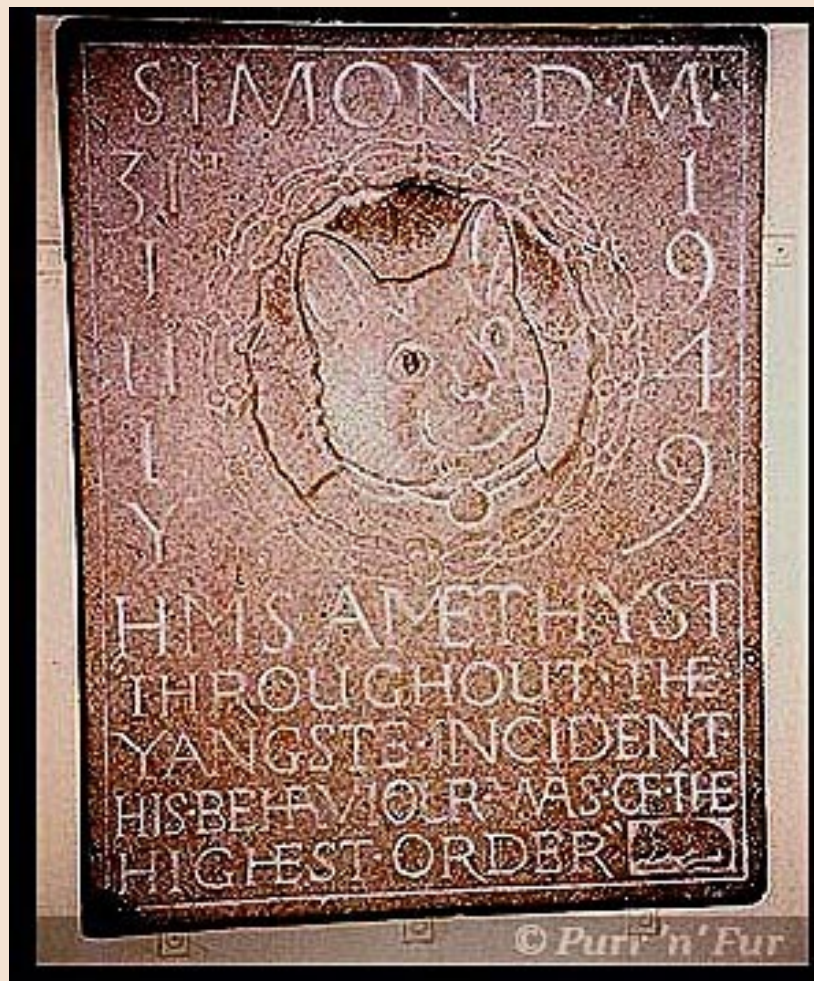
Lack of funding

While sitting in the shade of one of the several fine trees and contemplating this lovely spot for a time, I wondered whether it could be made available again for use. There is space and there would be many people who would gladly pay, and pay well, for a spot and a memorial here to their pets. I made this suggestion in a letter to the Animal Hospital, and received a reply from the PDSA's Property Services Department, responsible for the cemetery's upkeep. Apparently modern regulations that would have to be complied with made it impossible at the time, as a considerable sum of money would have been needed to upgrade the plot, and the PDSA — funded entirely by voluntary donations — didn't have the funds to spend on it. Therefore the news in late 2006 of funding becoming available to refurbish the whole place was very welcome.

[See the paragraph [Ilford Revisited](#) near the end of this account —Ed.]

Memorial in Plymouth

One interesting outcome of my correspondence with the PDSA was that I was told there was another memorial to Simon at the PDSA hospital in Plymouth. This was the first I had heard of the existence of the plaque there, and I thought it would be good to have a photograph of it. Plymouth is a long way from Wrexham, but I resolved to visit when I could.



I later learned that this plaque was sculpted by Elizabeth Muntz, and had been unveiled on 13 April 1950 by Lt Geoffrey Weston, who had been severely wounded in the attack on *Amethyst*, but had acted as captain until Kerans arrived. The president of Plymouth PDSA, speaking at the unveiling ceremony, had said he couldn't help feeling that 'the poor cat, having lost his ship, his friends and his liberty, felt there was not much worth living for and died partly of a broken heart'.

Lt Cdr Hett

The next step was to get in touch with Lt Cdr Hett, the retired naval officer whose details Val Lewis had kindly given me. I wrote explaining what I was doing and how I had acquired his address, and asked whether he would help my research. He replied that he would be pleased to do so, but I would need to visit him to be able to see his various scrapbooks and mementoes.

A visit was arranged in early February 2003, and I was able to meet him to view and read his material one afternoon, then return the following morning and take some of it for copying. Hett could hardly have been more helpful: he had arranged several scrapbooks with material from 1949 to date, and had marked where anything relating to Simon was located in the books, so it could be found easily. He also lined up several published books relating to the incident; more about those shortly. I read and noted photographs and articles I thought would be of interest, and took a look at the books. Stewart also possessed a couple of videos, including what I thought was the quite strange one for which Eaton Films had purchased Simon's medal. In addition there was a short newsreel clip taken at *Amethyst*'s homecoming in 1949, on which Simon could actually be seen alive. A treasure: I would have loved a copy, but didn't wish to take further advantage of Stewart Hett's kindness.

'Cat Officer'

The following morning we went to photocopy a quantity of material I would have been unlikely to find anywhere else, certainly not in so readily accessible a form, and I am greatly indebted to Lt Cdr Hett. Following my visit, he kindly answered a few other questions that came to mind when I was writing an article for *The Cat* magazine, who had expressed an interest in featuring Simon's story. I further discovered that it was actually he who had been appointed 'cat officer', when Simon became famous and someone was needed to deal with all the mail and gifts that arrived — but he was very modest about this and said that the captain had done most of the work.

Other *Amethyst* Memorials

Hett also told me of two other *Amethyst*-related locations: a further one near Plymouth and one in Staffordshire. It was interesting that he reported that the majority of enquiries he had dealt with over the years concerning *Amethyst* had been about Simon!

Books

Upon my return home I wanted to see whether any of the books Stewart had shown me could be found second-hand using the internet. There was a small, contemporary paperback by Vera Cooper devoted exclusively to Simon's story; and *Two Perfectly Marvellous Cats* by Rosamond Young, detailing both his story and that of [Faith, the wartime cat](#) of St Augustine's Church in London. Faith had also been awarded a PDSA medal, although not the Dickin since she was a 'civilian' cat. And I wanted an account of the whole *Amethyst* story; so on Stewart Hett's recommendation I sought *Escape of the Amethyst* by E. Lucas Phillips. I was able to obtain perfectly good second-hand copies of all these, as well as *They also Serve*, a more general account of animals' exploits in wartime.

TIME Magazine

Another thread in Simon's story I came across was that upon his death his fame at the time was such that he merited an obituary paragraph in *TIME* magazine. I wondered how I might obtain a copy, then more than half a century old, but at the time the internet wasn't much help. A professional contact led me to enquire at the Scottish National Library, where a copy might be held. Sure enough it was, and for payment of a modest fee they sent a photocopy. As time moved on the obituary could be read in full online; later still, it was moved behind a subscription paywall but the text (no pictures) can still be seen at the [internet archive](#). A [further article](#) in 2018, very comprehensive, honoured Simon and his medal.

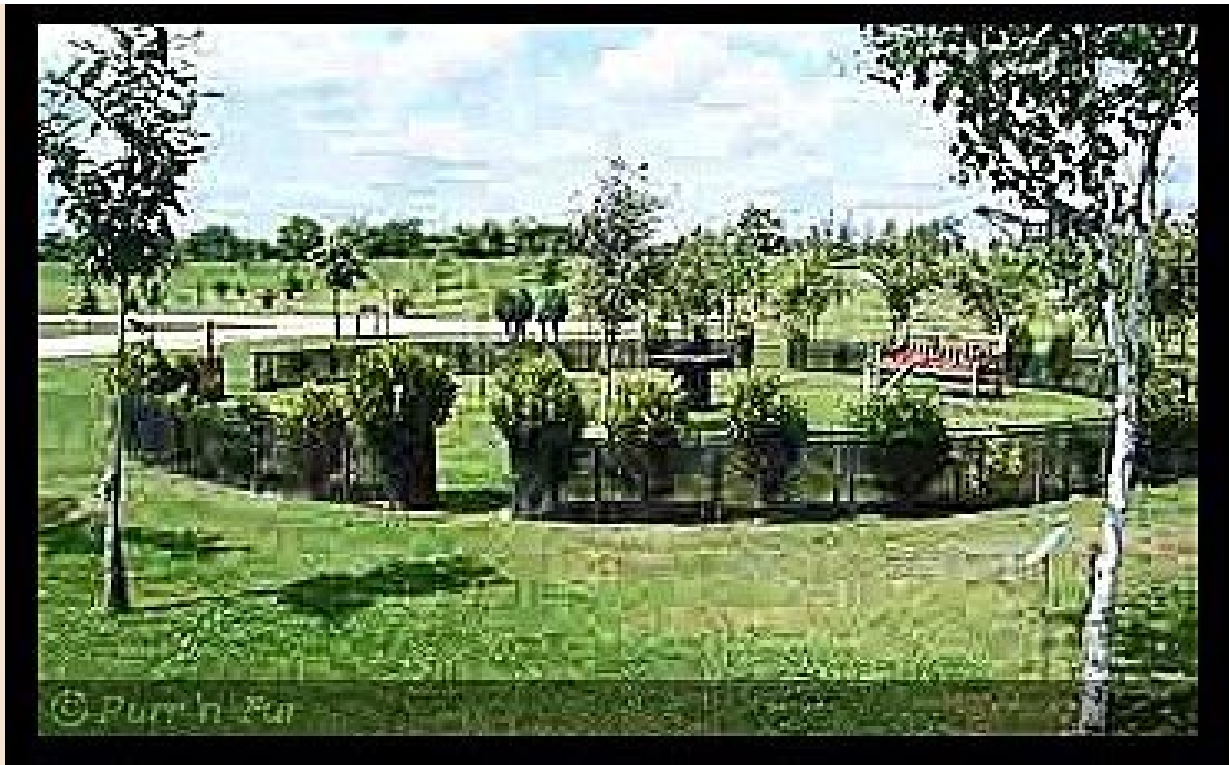
More places to visit

The remaining leads to follow were those given to me by Lt Cdr Hett. The PDSA hospital plaque in Plymouth I now knew of, but apparently there was also a further memorial to *Amethyst*, and a separate small one to Simon, at the China Fleet Club in Saltash. Hett had a picture of it; but I wanted to take my own, so my future visit would need to include both Plymouth and Saltash.

The National Memorial Arboretum

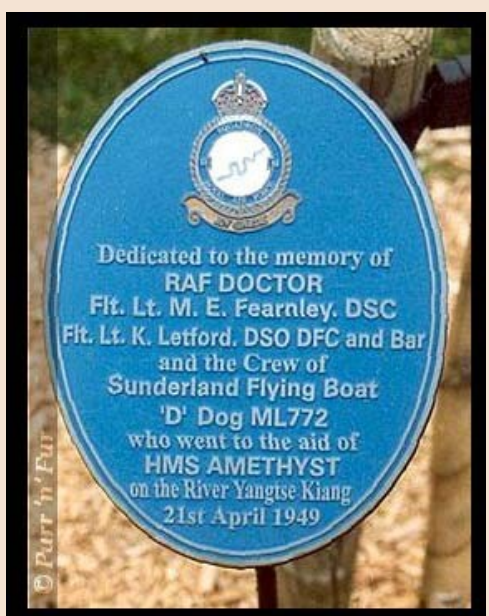
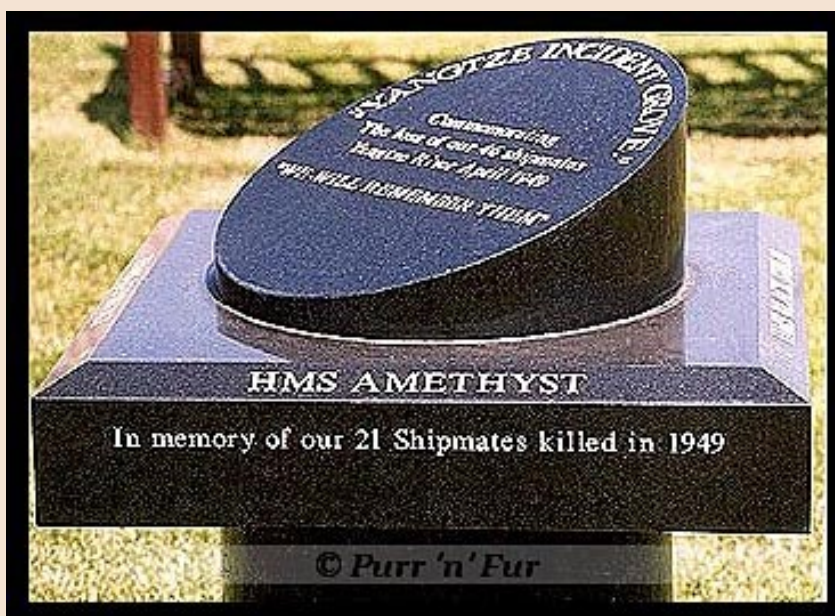
The second spot mentioned was the [National Memorial Arboretum](#) at Alrewas, in Staffordshire, where there's a memorial to the four ships involved in the incident and their dead, although nothing specific to Simon. This was a place I had never heard about, but it isn't too far from where I live. It's a millennium project, and a national memorial to those who died in any of Britain's wars. The individual memorials are sponsored by each different regiment, service or other wartime organisation that wishes to do so. I visited on a bitterly cold day in March 2003; but it was interesting and I was able to take some photographs, including the memorial for *Amethyst* which is part of the imaginative Yangtze Incident Grove. I noted that it would be a most impressive place in some years' time when all the saplings had grown (*lower photo*).



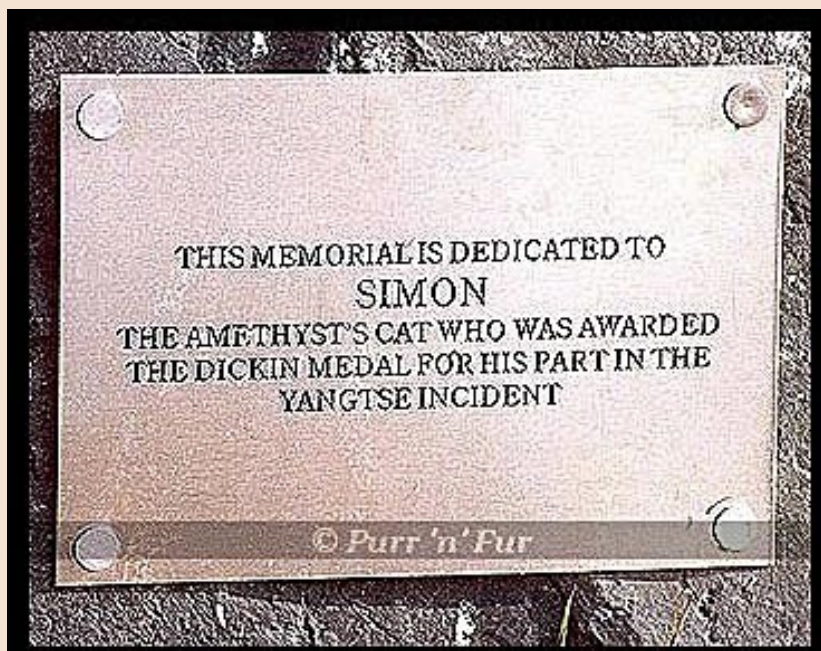


I revisited the Arboretum in the summer of 2005, on a much sunnier and warmer day than for my first visit a couple of years earlier, and it was good to see that the Arboretum had grown, both in popularity and literally in terms of the saplings' growth. The Yangtze Grove had been enhanced by the addition of a black marble plinth at its centre (*below left*); each side of the rectangular section of it bearing the name of one of the four ships involved in the action and rescue. There's also a plaque with full details of the incident (not pictured). My latest visit to the Arboretum, in June 2009, showed a quite different scene from that bleak March day in 2003. This (*above*) is how the memorial had developed in the intervening six years; as well as the growing greenery there is now a low encircling fence around the site, which I think enhances its appearance.

There's much to see here at Alrewas (not far from Lichfield) and a good number of organisations are now represented. Full details — with a map of the site and suggested routes around it, and its history — can be found at the website (take the link above, then click on 'The NMA' tab).



Some months later I was able to make the trip to Plymouth, which struck me as a pleasant city; I had never visited before. I called at the PDSA hospital, where the plaque to Simon is situated just inside the entrance, and was kindly allowed to take photographs. I had earlier contacted the China Fleet Club and was expected there, so made my way across the impressive Tamar Bridge to Cornwall. The manager of the club at the time, Dave O'Sullivan — himself an ex-naval man — was most kind, especially as I was essentially a casual visitor. Over a coffee he gave me a brief history of the China Fleet Club and why it is where it is: a fascinating story in itself (see the 'About us' link at the foot of their page [here](#) — it seems now to be a 'country club'). I was then given a comprehensive guided tour and was able to photograph the memorials I had come to see. It was a glorious sunny morning, which is by no means always the case in the Plymouth area!



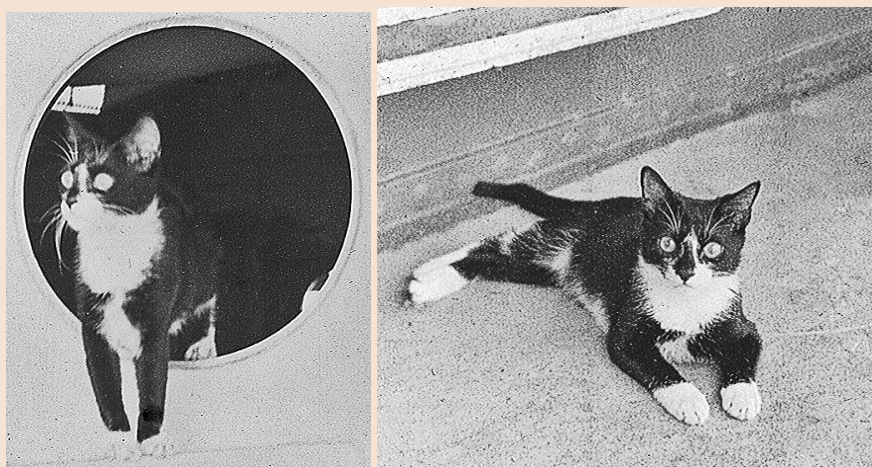
Not long after this trip, British Pathe News made all their archive newsreels available on the internet, and so I could download the 1949 one which reported *Amethyst's* homecoming to Plymouth. Simon was briefly shown — so at last I had a fleeting glimpse of him alive! See 'Amethyst Home in Triumph' at this link :

Unexpected contact

My quest for information about Simon took two further unexpected turns during 2005, when two people having direct connections to him contacted me as a result of seeing the [account of his story](#) on this website.

The first was Anna Grant, elder daughter of Ian Griffiths, *Amethyst's* captain when Simon first joined the ship. She most kindly lent her father's photo albums containing pictures from his naval career, including some of the vessels he served on or commanded; his wedding and his young family; and — of particular interest to us! — half a dozen photos of Simon when he first became a crew member as a youngster. A couple are shown here; the others are on a separate [page dedicated to Lt Cdr Griffiths](#).

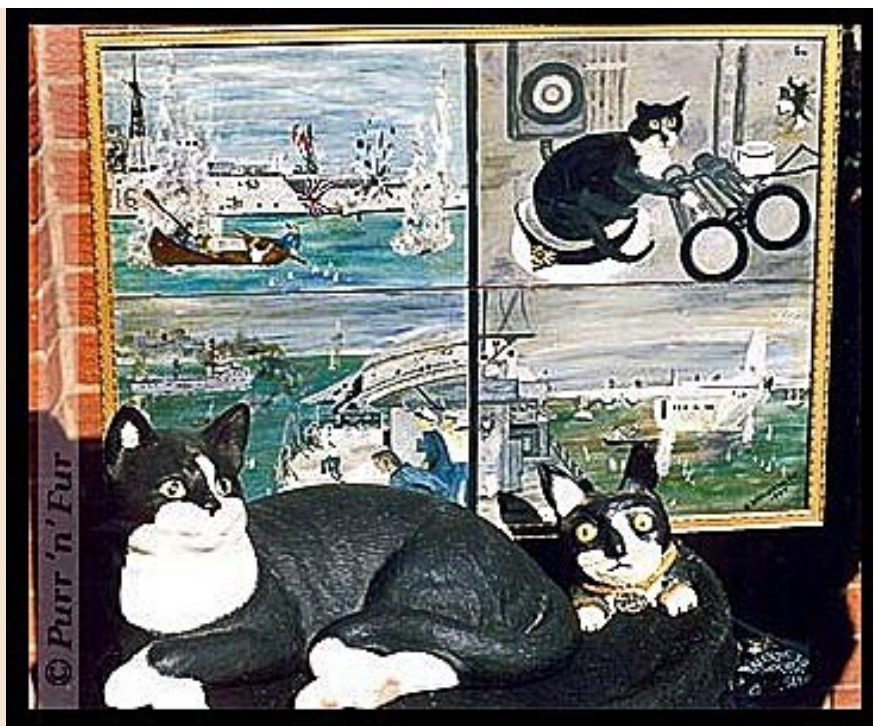
During the summer it was a great pleasure to meet Anna and her husband, and we were able to make the meeting a rendezvous with Lt Cdr Stewart Hett at the same time. I am most grateful to Anna and Stuart Grant for their kindness and help, and we remain in touch.



Simon's rescuer

A few months later I received a message that turned out to be from George Hickinbottom, a young seaman on *Amethyst* in 1948, who said he was actually responsible for taking Simon on board in the first place. This revelation caused us to revise our account of how the cat had come aboard. George had a couple of models of Simon (the smaller one he made himself); had done paintings of *Amethyst* and of the cat; and had written a fascinating book about all seven of the ships that have borne the name of *Amethyst* between 1793 and 1957, when the last one was scrapped (*The Seven Glorious Amethysts*, 1994, privately published).

I was fortunate to be able to visit George, and am much indebted to him for agreeing to meet me, as a complete stranger, and for sharing with me some of his memories of Simon and HMS *Amethyst*. We're delighted to be able to show pictures of some of his memorabilia.



Imperial War Museum

In summer 2006 I visited the Imperial War Museum in London, not just to catch the *Animals in War* exhibition — for which I was able to assist the Simon tableau in a small way — but to examine two very large scrapbooks in their archives. They include all manner of newspaper articles, photos and other material of the time concerning *Amethyst*, collected by her captain Lt Cdr John Kerans and others. They are fascinating: there's quite a bit about Simon and I found out some details I hadn't known before.

Ilford revisited — and good news

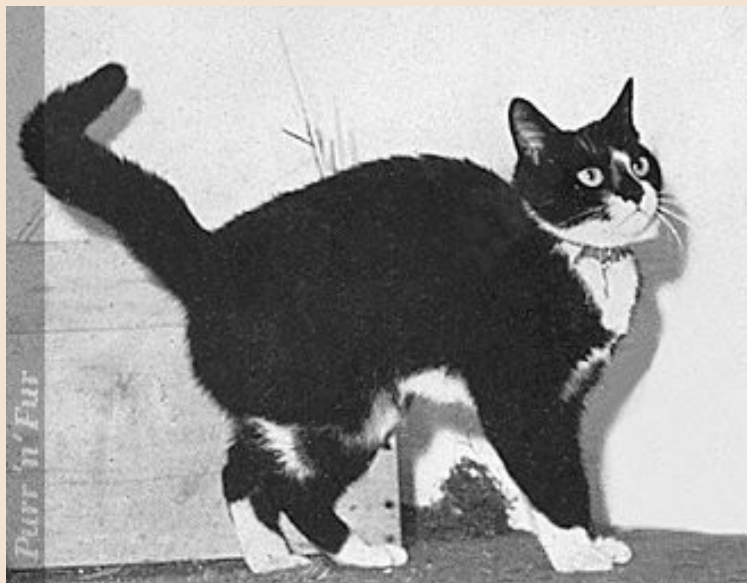
In autumn 2006 I made a second journey to the PDSA's Ilford cemetery, looking for the grave of one of the Home Office cats called [Peter](#), said to be buried there. I found several headstones inscribed 'Peter', but none seemed to be the one I was seeking. I felt the general condition of the cemetery had deteriorated considerably since my previous visit four years earlier, although Simon's grave remained in good shape. Therefore I was thrilled to learn, in November 2006, that the PDSA had been successful in obtaining a grant of £50,000 (about 70,000 US dollars at the time) from one of the UK lotteries for the purpose of refurbishing and improving the site. The work was carried out during 2007 and on 13 December the cemetery, now much enhanced, was formally reopened. I was fortunate in being invited to attend the opening, and a full report and photographs can be seen [at this page](#).

HMS Belfast

At one point there was a small display about *Amethyst* and Simon on board the ship, now moored permanently in London as a museum open to the public. It wasn't directly involved in the Yangtze Incident, but was in the South China Sea Squadron at the time. I didn't get to visit this display, which I imagine is no longer there, but it's mentioned, with a couple of photos, at the end of this [archived article](#), which is mainly devoted to a comprehensive account of the drama on the Yangtze.

Conclusion

And so my research into the story of the life and times of Simon the cat was more or less complete, although one thing I haven't been able to establish is what might have happened to his Blue Cross medal (*see reference in Simon's main story at the link below*). I doubt whether I shall ever find that out; Blue Cross themselves were unable to help. But it has been a fascinating quest, leading in some quite unexpected directions, and it seems that this diminutive feline, who had only a short life more than 70 years ago, is not forgotten. I was struck by the helpfulness of all the people with whom I came into contact, and express my warm thanks to them all. For a fuller list of acknowledgements, see the following link for Simon's story.



The main page for
[Simon of HMS Amethyst](#)
includes more photos, information and links,
and also gives access to two further companion pages that may be of interest.

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