

Butter Pot: the first landfall

by Mobilewords Limited

Butter Pot is a hill located “behind Fermeuse”, say Fermeusemen, or “behind Renewes”, say Renewsmen. It is about almost equidistant from the heads of both harbours, between 4 and 5 statute miles. At 931 feet above sea level, it eclipses American Man at Bay Bulls by 35 feet. It is visible from about 30 nautical miles to sea; with refraction and an elevated vantage point (up the mast) taken into account, it might be possible to see Butter Pot at 35 nmi.

Butter Pot was a tactical point of spring-time trans-Atlantic crossings at the 47th parallel; get across as quickly as you can, pray for clear weather so you can see Butter Pot; once seen, adjust course for desired port. Butter Pot is about 2000 nautical miles due west of the Bay of Biscay in France. By Yonge’s time, Butter Pot was a preferred landmark for more than a century.

Seventeenth century navigation was quite adept at determining latitude; so, for example, leaving the Azores, ships would sail northwest until they hit the 47th parallel, then turn westward to follow it to Newfoundland. Problem was in spring, from the False Bank (Flemish Cap) to the Newfoundland coast, there was ice to be navigated around, stormy northeast wind which drove ships well south of the 47th parallel, and fog, which precluded checking latitude. They fell back to the lead line and good luck.

Sounds pretty simple; but there were complexities; for example, once you can see Butter Pot (if you ever see Butter Pot through the spring fogs) you need a second reference to determine how far you are north or south of Butter Pot; smaller hills along the central Avalon plateau would have come into play as the ship neared the coast. In particular, Red Hill at 720 feet and the Green Knob (Green Hill) at 625 feet (about 25 nmi of visibility each) and American Man (about 30 nmi) would have been used.

Table 1: seventeen hills above 500 feet asl visible from the ocean and their extreme visible range

(where d in nautical miles = $1.22\sqrt{h} * 0.869$).

Hill	Height (ft)	Visibility (nmi)
Butter Pot	931	31.8
American Man	896	31.7
Captain Orlebars Cairn	791	29.8
Williams Hill	722	28.5
Red Hill	720	28.4
Jonclay Hill	695	27.9
Big Lookout	648	26.9
The Green Knob	625	26.5
Long Ridge	600	25.9
Peters River Hill	600	25.9
Long Hill	571	25.3
Bread and Cheese Hill	561	25.1
Cahills Rock	550	24.9

Long Hill	550	24.9
The Neck	550	24.9
Brigus Ridge	500	23.8
White Hill	500	23.8

Figure 1: visibility range from sea for American Man (red); Butter Pot (yellow) and Red Hill (green).

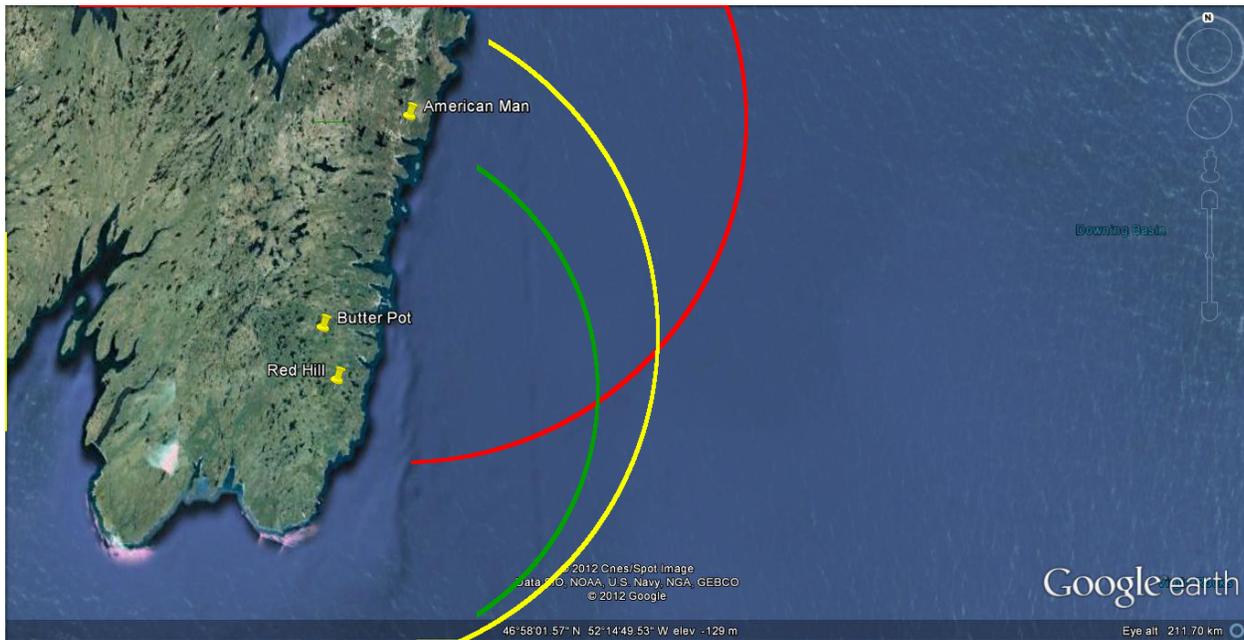


Figure 2: American Man, Butter Pot and Red Hill from Canada Topographic maps 1K14 and 1N07; 1:50,000 scale; each blue square is 1 kilometre on a side; heights in metres.



A perfect example

James Yonge signed on the *Reformation* for his first voyage to Newfoundland in 1663 and set out from Plymouth on 24 February, three days before his 16th birthday. He reported setbacks which delayed them for 8 days (05 March); they made *the False Bank of New Found Land* [the Flemish Cap] 22 days later (27 March) in extreme cold and surrounded by icebergs.

Fog bound, they blew around for a week before finding strong signs of land; a large flightless bird that carried its young on its back (Yonge's *penguin*; our auk) and seals (Yonge called them *amphibious dogs*). On 3rd April they spotted land at about 8 leagues (24 miles) but without other landmarks to go by they were still uncertain of where they were.

The land they saw was two *hommitts* (probably Butter Pot and Red Hill) which, before the near shore was seen, looked like islands, *and these they call the Butter Pots*. Nearer the shore, Cape Race, a *low point* appeared as another island to the south. Yonge reports they came near to *Cape Ballard* which he described as four leagues from Cape Race and four leagues from *Renoose*. They recognized *Glam Cove*, a haven for Renew's boats when they were *put to leeward*. The *Reformation* entered Renew's Harbour the next morning and set about establishing their fishing enterprise.

The latitude of Renew's Head is 46 54.0; Cape Ballard is 46 47.1; Cape Race is 46 40.7; Modern maps show about 15 kilometres (8.5 nautical miles; 10 statute miles) of latitude between Renew's Head and Cape Ballard and between Cape Ballard and Cape Race, not far off Yonge's estimate of 4 leagues (12 miles). Clam Cove is 4 miles south of Cape Ballard.

Yonge again visited Newfoundland ports from Renew's to Torbay in 1664, 1669 and 1670. These three other voyages were bound for St. John's and they made landfall at Cape Spear or Sugar Loaf. Mariners had good control over their latitude but were stumped on longitude, relying on sounding lead and a known landfall; Flemish Cap (False Bank) was 120 leagues (360 miles) east and a week out. Yonge reported hailing other vessels and trading navigation information. His ships were *Reformation* Master William Cock 1663; *Robert Bonadventure* Master Wm. Mitchell (a Quaker) 1664; and *Marigiold* Master Christopher Martin, 1669 and 1670.

Of passing interest are Yonge's take on auk and seals. He was 16 and could not have had any detailed knowledge of, or appreciation for, either species. It was only 50 years before (1610) that Whitbourne reported a mermaid in St. John's harbour. Given the economic importance of the auk, hunted to extinction two centuries later, and the continuing exploitation of seals, was it only Yonge's youthful naiveté? Or, was 17th century English society simply not yet attuned to the potential uses of these species?

Other creatures encountered offshore Newfoundland included *noddies* (terns), *strange coloured gulls*, *boneta* (bonita tuna), *dolphins*, *flying fish*, *squids*, a *shark*, and *whales*.

Mobilewords Limited is a publisher of Newfoundland ephemera. *What We Call Things*; a coastal toponomy of the Irish Loop, now in press, will be released in October 2012; some material in this article is from that book and also from *The Journal of James Yonge 1647-1721*, F.N.L. Poynter, Editor. Longmans Green, London, 1963. Pages 53-60, 66-68, 112-120, and 124-136 detail his passages to and his time spent in Newfoundland, including detailed descriptions of fishing enterprises, business and trade information, medical observations and treatments. Yonge was credited with a number of surgical and therapeutic innovations including "skin flap" limb amputations and methods to prevent gangrene.