

## MARITIME ARCHIVES AND LIBRARY

## **INFORMATION SHEET 48**

## **PRIVATEERING**

Privateering can be defined as a form of private enterprise whereby vessels could attack and seize the goods and vessels of foreign subjects, which were at war with Britain, and claim the rights to the property under the law of the sea and within the legal regulations of the Admiralty. Shipowners applied to the Admiralty for letters of marque or privateer commissions that licensed them to send out private vessels of war. In order to maximise their chances of encountering enemy ships, the vessels were issued with instructions to cruise rather than follow a specific course. There are a number of documents relating to privateering in the archives collections, especially in the Earle archives (D/EARLE).

The ships used were either adapted from merchant men or specially built with this purpose in mind. The articles for the fitting out of the Privateer *Enterprize* in the Earle archives give the details of what was required, for the cost of £4,083.13s.8d. Labour recruitment was difficult in times of war, when most commerce raiding took place, and Francis Ingram, the agent and owner of  $2/16^{th}$  share in the *Enterprize*, was forced to recruit men from Chester and Whitehaven. A large crew was also essential to fight for the prize and to navigate her to a homeport; they generally received no wages but were given a predetermined share of the proceeds.

There were two main groups of privateers, the Channel privateers who operated during the war with France, on coastal and larger merchant men, and the deep water privateers which hunted for the large, valuable cargoes of colonial produce returning to Europe from the Caribbean, South America and the East Indies. These deep-water predators often cruised in company with other vessels and always received strict instructions as to their cruising stations. In the letter of instructions written by Francis Ingram to Captain James Hasslam, 16 September 1779, the Enterprize was to depart Liverpool for a cruise of six months, by the North Channel if the wind be favourable: '.... it being the path less liable to meet with the Enemys Cruisers and having a chance to meet with American vessels, bound to Sweden ....' He was to obtain a longitude of 20 degrees West and cross the latitudes to the Azores. If, after three weeks, they had met with no success, he was to proceed to the North West of Cove (Cobh, Ireland). Should they be fortunate enough to take a prize or prizes on those stations to the value of ten thousand pounds, he was to: '.... see them safe into some good ports in Ireland'. If the prize was less than this amount, he was: 'to despatch them with a trusty officer taking care not to put too many of the Enemy in purporting [sic.] to your own men on board .... with caution not to trust many of his own people aloft at a time on any account whatever, as many prizes have been retaken by the prisoners for wont of such precaution'.

Captain Hasslam was: 'strictly ordered not to meddle with any neutral vessel unless he was certain that she had taken her loading in North America ....' and not to pay attention to the 'giddy solicitations' of his crew, but to adhere to the printed instructions from the Admiralty. He was given instructions to secure every paper relating to a prize and to forward it to Francis Ingram.

Upon examining the prisoners to obtain information relating to the destination of other vessels, anything of national importance was to be communicated to the first King's ship encountered. The prisoners were not to be plundered of their clothes and bedding but 'be used with all tenderness and humanity consistent with your own safety'. The success of the cruise was greatly dependant on the fact that the crew: '.... be made to do their duty with good temper - as harmony, a good look out and a steady attention to the main points are all absolute ....' The instructions end with the routine and extremely necessary proviso that in case of the death of Captain Hasslam, his first Lieutenant was to take command, and with wishes for a successful cruise.

Privateering was an extremely popular and profitable maritime 'profession', especially in Liverpool. Captains Fortunatus Wright, William Hutchinson and William Boats, who started life as a poor foundling, were both locally and nationally famous.

Perhaps the most sensational privateering incident involving local men and ships, was the capture of the French East Indian *Carnatic*, on the proceeds of which the Carnatic Hall was built. This provided a temporary home for the Liverpool Museum's collections from 1945 till the restoration of the building after its virtual destruction in 1941.

## **Booklist**

DAMER-POWELL, J.W. Bristol Privateers & Ships of War. 1930.

FISHER, S. Ed. Studies in British Privateering, Trading Enterprise & Seamen's Welfare, 1775-1900. Exeter, 1989.

STARKEY, D.J, *British Privateering Enterprise in the Eighteenth Century* (appendices contain extensive notes on sources in the National Archives, Kew and elsewhere). Exeter, 1990.

STATHAM, E.P. Privateers & Privateering. London, 1910.

WILLIAMS, G. *Liverpool Privateers & Slave Traders*, London to Liverpool, 1897. Reprinted New York, U.S.A., 1966.