

MARITIME ARCHIVES AND LIBRARY

INFORMATION SHEET 67

WOMEN IN MARITIME RECORDS

Introduction

Women can prove very difficult to trace in history, and this is particularly the case in port history. Many of the jobs carried out by women were casual or hidden away, often regarded as unimportant and have therefore gone largely unrecorded in the historical evidence we have left today. However, various forms of records have survived, illustrating the role women played in port life. This information sheet provides details of sources available in the Maritime Archives & Library relating to women and their contribution to port economics.

There is early evidence to show that women were employed in such fields as lighthouse keeping, sail and flag making, fitting out and cleaning ships on their return from sea. Later, women would adopt the more traditional caring roles as stewardesses and matrons employed by the large shipping companies.

Women on the Docks

There is little evidence of the women who were employed in casual jobs on the docks themselves. Evidence has been found, however, of women being employed by the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board in the 19th Century as Lighthouse Keepers. This was usually in the case of wives and daughters taking over as keepers following the death of a husband or father. In 1835 it was recorded that two sisters, Anne and Catherine Urmson, could take over from their late father as keepers of Bidston Lighthouse as they were deemed "competent" by the dock committee. They were to receive the same pay as their late father, to be split between them. (MDHB/MP/1/5)

The Mersey Docks and Harbour Board were also concerned with maintaining security on the docks, in particular the growing problem of thieving from ships and warehouses. In 1814 evidence for the need for a special dock police force cited the problems of gangs of 40-50 women who regularly thieved from the coffee ships. (MDHB/DT/10)

.... the regular system of plunder now carried on upon the dock quays, which I am compelled to be a daily witness of a gang consisting principally of women in number from forty to fifty are in constant attendance upon all the coffee ships, - whether lading or unlading. Some of these women I have known for fourteen or fifteen years and during that time, thieving on the quays has been their sole occupation, which they have carried on unmolested and apparently without fear of apprehension.

After the establishment of the Dock Police Force, women were regularly arrested for crimes ranging from being drunk and disorderly to stealing from ships, and were sent before the Police magistrate to be sentenced, fined or released on bail.

Some of the earliest evidence of women working in the docks can be found in the collection of merchant papers belonging to William Davenport, a leading merchant engaged in the slave trade in the 18th Century.

The collection includes many receipts for work carried out on ships, such as fitting them out and cleaning them on their return from sea. This includes a receipt for money paid to Sarah Walker for her cleaning of the ivory tusks brought back to Liverpool on the Davenport ship, *Badger*, from Africa, 1777. Other receipts show monies paid to women such as Margaret Cherry for taking up the anchor, to Alice Wynstanley for gorse (used in chalking the ships timbers) and to Elizabeth Urmston for border and wallpaper used to decorate the cabin of the *Badger*. (D/DAV/10/12)

Records

Receipt detailing payment to Sarah Walker for the cleaning of elephant's teeth (ivory), c.October 1777.

D/DAV/10/12

Receipt detailing payment to Margaret Cherry for taking up the anchor, 7 October 1777.

D/DAV/10/17

Receipt detailing payment to Alice Wynstanley for gorse, 24 October 1777.

D/DAV/10/29

Receipt detailing payment to Elizabeth Urmston for paper and border for a cabin on the *Badger*, 9 February 1778.

D/DAV/10/36

Letter to Chairman, George Case Esq., from J. Richmond, H.M. Customs, describing the organised theft of coffee on the docks by gangs of women. Given in evidence as part of a proposal to form a Dock Police Force, 20 July 1814.

MDHB/DT/10

Proceedings to magistrates at the Liverpool Dock Police Office, 1835:

- § Anne Hampson, sentenced to a month's imprisonment for stealing iron at Princes Dock, 2 July 1835.
- § Susan McOdden appeared before the magistrate on suspicion of stealing a bag of periwinkles from Clarence Dock, 31 July 1835.

MDHB/Misc. Volumes

Resolution to appoint Anne and Catherine Urmson as keepers of Bidston Lighthouse. Proceedings of the Dock Committee, 3 November 1835.

MDHB/MP/1/5

Indenture of Apprenticeship of Mary Millinger to Stuart Matthews, as flagmaker for three years. Includes certificates of satisfactory service and discharge, 1901-1904.

DX/116

Voyage narrative of George Hiscock, *The Barque Inverness-shire*, c.1910. Description of a late evening scene on the dockside involving a group of seafarers and their women companions returning to the ship.

DX/1705

Registration Card of Cooper's Wife, for the Liverpool Coppers' Friendly Trade & Burial Society, 1920.

DX/779

War Time Women Dockers

As with many professions during war time, women were called on to take on jobs previously done by men, and this was the case in the Liverpool Docks during the First and Second World Wars.

In early March 1916 due to the shortage of male dockers, around 30-50 women were taken on at Huskisson Dock, working as porters moving the unloaded cotton into the Leyland Line warehouses on trucks. These women were employed for around three weeks until opposition from the male dockers and their union forced the company to cease their employment.

Around the same time women were also taken on by Harrison Line at Toxteth Dock to unload their ships but again, the men refused to work with them and backed by the union, the employers ceased to employ females as dockers. By 20 March 1916, the *Liverpool Courier* reported that there were no longer any women employed as dockers. (Source: *Women's Work on the Waterfront*)

Although women never worked as dockers again at Liverpool Docks, they were employed during the Second World War as sweepers, again to replace the men who had been called up to active service. These women worked in Alexandra, Gladstone and Seaforth Docks, sweeping up the sheds after they had been emptied of their cargo of tea. This labour intensive job did come with the added bonus of being able to salvage tea from the floors to supplement tea rations. (Source: *Women's Work on the Waterfront, p. 22*)

Women as Seafarers

Women were employed on ships from around the 1860s when shipping companies began to see the benefit of employing women as stewardesses to care for their female passengers and children. As time passed, women seafarers began to be employed in all the traditional female caring roles such as matrons, stewardesses, laundresses, hairdressers and shop assistants. As shore based staff, women were employed by shipping companies as office clerks, typists, cleaners and also in the shipping companies' own canteens.

Shipping company archives can be a major source of information on the careers of late 19th and 20th Century merchant seafarers, as they often contain staff records such as apprentice and officer registers, wage books, as well as operational and fleet records such as logs and photographs.

The Maritime Archives & Library hold many examples of seafarers career papers, mainly belonging to masters and seamen, although a small number do relate to women seafarers.

Records

Discharge Certificate of Elizabeth Cavan, stewardess on Cunard Line vessel, *Samaria*, 1875.

SAS/24A/2/1

Collection of letters and diaries written by Anne Smith, whilst serving as a stewardess with Cunard Line, 1920-1930.

DX/1560

Discharge Book and photograph of Kate Lilian Thomas, bookstall attendant for the Canadian Pacific Line, 1920-1922.

DX/2271

Diary of Rose Stott, stewardess on Cunard vessel, Samaria, round the world cruise, 1923.

DX/1166

Blue Funnel Wage Register, No. 44, showing an entry for Victoria Drummond as tenth engineer on the *Anchises*, earning a salary of £12 a month, 1922.

OA/986

Obituary for Victoria Drummond, MBE, first British woman to hold a Board of Trade Certificate as a marine engineer, Lloyd's Log, 1980.

OA/1094

Career papers of Hannah Leslie who served as a laundress for Cunard Line, 1933-1947.

DX/384

Career papers of Mary Scott, bath attendant with Cunard Line, 1946-1967.

DX/1231

Women as Passengers and Emigrants

In the 19th Century and early 20th Century women chose to share the dangers and hardships of life at sea by accompanying their captain husbands on voyages, and quite often took their children along. These women retained their traditional feminine roles on board by acting as homemaker. They too suffered the storms, sickness and boredom which came with life at sea, many of them writing diaries of their experiences. These diaries provide us with an excellent insight into daily life at sea aboard a merchant ship and the Maritime Archives & Library holds examples of such narratives.

Records

Voyage account of Annie Stephens, wife of Captain John Stephens, on board SS *Anselma de Larrinaga* on a return voyage from Eastham to Buenos Aires, April-September 1909.

DX/1128

Narrative of Eliza Bradley, wife of Captain James Bradley, master of Liverpool ship *Sally*, wrecked on the Barbary Coast, 1818.

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Transcript of ship's log written by Eliza King, captain's wife on board *Fearnought* with small son, Liverpool - Bombay - Rangoon, 1882-1883.

SAS/35C/1/6

Letter of thanks and letter of proposal of health to Captain Black and his wife from passengers aboard *Antiope*, 22 January 1879.

SAS/23A/1/11

At one time Liverpool was the most important port of departure for emigrants from Europe and it has been estimated that between 1830 and 1930 over nine million emigrants sailed from Liverpool bound for a new life in the United States, Canada and Australia. The Maritime Archives & Library holds documents and narratives recording the experiences of those emigrating to a new land and a new life, a number of which are written by female emigrants.

At the opposite end of the passenger experience are those who travelled in style on voyages across the Atlantic and cruised the oceans on holiday. The Maritime Archives & Library has collected many original documents and letters written home by passengers, including the letters of Gladys Cherry, who experienced one of the most famous shipping incidents to have ever taken place, the sinking of the *Titanic*. (DX/1522)

.... The lowering of the boat 70 feet into the darkness seemed too awful, when we reached the water I felt we had done a foolish thing to leave that big safe boat, but when we had rowed a few yards, we saw that great ship with her bow right down in the water

Records

Passenger's Contract Ticket, Tapscott's American Emigration Office, Liverpool. Ticket for Elizabeth Lukes, Liverpool to Philadelphia, 17 March 1855.

SAS/3/1/1/2/16

Pamphlet entitled Female Emigration - Mr. Vere Foster. Report of the amount raised and the manner in which it has been expended, 12 April 1856.

SAS/3/1/1/1/4

Voyage diary of Sarah Stephens, emigrant from Montgomeryshire, North Wales. Account of her voyage on the *Cardigan Castle* from London to New Zealand, 30 September 1876 - 23 January 1877.

DX/1071/R

Transcribed extracts from the diary of Sophie M. D. Luce, on a voyage from London to New York, 1857.

DX/324

Transcript extract from the diary of emigrant, Adelaide Parker Ebdon, on a voyage from Liverpool to U.S.A., 1891.

SAS/3/1/8

Letters of the Hon. Gladys Cherry, written on board the rescue ship *Carpathia*, following the sinking of *Titanic*, 16 April 1912.

DX/1522

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