

MARITIME ARCHIVES & LIBRARY

INFORMATION SHEET 7

CUSTOMS BILLS OF ENTRY SOURCE GUIDE FOR RESEARCHERS

Scope of the Collection

The Maritime Archives & Library at Merseyside Maritime Museum holds the national collection of Customs Bills of Entry. There are many gaps prior to the mid-19th century, but thereafter survival has been good. The earliest and latest available volumes are: Liverpool (1820-1939), London (1779-1939), Bristol (1832-1917), Hull (1831-1939), Dublin (1850-1923), the Tyne (1875-1927) and the Clyde (1841-1939). A full listing of surviving volumes is available in the Searchroom.

Scope for Research

The Bills are divided into a number of sections, and there are variations in the format from port to port. In general, however, incoming voyages are listed in more detail than outgoing ones. Incoming overseas and coastal traffic information includes the registry of the vessel, its last port of call, number of crew, tonnage, agent, dock used and whether it was a sailing ship or a steamer. The cargo is broken down by port of origin (important in multi-stop voyages), quantity, measure, commodity and the merchant to whom each item was consigned.

The Bills usually list exports in summary form, with the totals of each commodity sent to various overseas destinations. They also record vessels loading at the various docks of the port, along with the names of the agents responsible for them. The Bills sometimes contain useful summary tables for trade in particular commodities on a weekly, monthly or annual basis. Liverpool and London also have a 'B' series of Bills, which record the customs revenue on particular goods, and the names of the merchants who paid the duties.

The key strength of the Bills is their unique linkage of traders to ships and commodities: no other source offers this level of detail in tracing the involvement of merchants and agents to particular voyages and cargoes.

Disadvantages

Evidence for the involvement of individual merchants tends to diminish after the mid-19th century in many trades because increasing quantities of material are simply consigned 'to order', with no merchant named. In addition, lists of export commodities have no mention of the merchants involved.

Finding a particular vessel in the Bills is only feasible if an approximate date of arrival or departure is known: there is no indexing. For more quantitative projects, even a small sample from the Bills, is very time consuming to transcribe and interpret. Researchers should make sure the information they seek cannot be found in more accessible form elsewhere: for example, the total quantity of a particular commodity handled can be found in the Annual Return of Trade and Navigation (Parliamentary Papers) much more quickly than counting each record from the Bills.

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Written by the Centre for Port & Maritime History, a joint initiative of the University of Liverpool and National Museums Liverpool, GWR Building, Merseyside Maritime Museum, Liverpool.