

MARITIME ARCHIVES AND LIBRARY

INFORMATION SHEET 51

LIVERPOOL STEAMSHIP OWNERS ASSOCIATION

Scope of the Collection

Liverpool Steamship Owners Association was established in 1858 to lobby the newly formed Mersey Docks and Harbour Board. Its membership was drawn from the leading liner companies and its history is very much the history of the deep-sea liner trade. It became an influential body in national as well as local affairs to the extent that it was often consulted by Parliamentary Committees on the shipping industry. In 1988 the Association merged with the Liverpool Shipowners Association, founded in 1810, the equivalent association for sail and tramp ships. The Association is now known as the Liverpool Steam Ship Owners and Agents Association.

The archive of the Association is held by the Maritime Archives & Library at Merseyside Maritime Museum and consists of Minute Books (1858-1964), Annual Reports (1859-1981) and Miscellaneous Reports (1890-1965). The Minute Books are the most important record. Not only do they perform the standard function of providing an extensive and well-indexed legal record of the meetings of the Association, but they also contain much additional material enclosed in the volumes. This includes correspondence sent to the Association, reports and memoranda (confidential, official and unofficial), the Annual Reports of the Association and Parliamentary legislation (and associated documents) relating to mercantile marine matters. Correspondents include the Board of Trade, Lloyd's of London, chambers of commerce, overseas steamship owners' associations, and harbour and port authorities around the world. Information can be found relating to the imports into Liverpool, for example, cotton and grain, commodity prices, bills of lading, etc., and also on port employment, safety at sea and other marine insurance matters, to name but a few of the subjects covered.

Scope for Research

The Minute Books, Annual Reports and Miscellaneous Reports show how wide-ranging the interests of the Association were. For example, at its outset the members were concerned with preventing competition from the railway companies operating steamship services, and thirty years later in 1887, they were critical of the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board's arrangements for master portorage. The Association was also active politically and during 1906 they lobbied the Liberal Government on its merchant shipping bill. In 1925 the taxation of post-war profits was a major concern, and in 1960 the Association complained to the British Government about the 'nationalistic policies of foreign governments through the adoption of flag discrimination, subsidies and other artifices designed to maintain national merchant fleets regardless of economic considerations' (Annual Report, 1960, D/SS/2/7).

The membership from its very beginning represented a "Who's Who" of the great names of both the Liverpool and national shipping scene involved primarily from their need to represent their business interests with the formation of the MDHB. Leading on from the more general business of the Association much can be gleaned of the members' own company's activities and interests, and of their powers both as an influential body and individually in national as well as local affairs and politics.

The records of the Association provide unrivalled scope for students wishing to study shipping in the age of the rise to world dominance of the steamship with all the associated national economic, political, industrial and social implications. The importance of the Port of Liverpool in world shipping and trade does not need to be highlighted here, and the records of the Liverpool Steamship Owners Association are therefore not only important for the study of the mercantile marine on a local and national level, but also for recording the activities of a powerful organisation in world trade.

Disadvantages

As with all forms of meeting minutes, those of the Steamship Owners are only the official record of what took place in a meeting, recorded in rather concise terms. Whilst the Minute Books of the Association are unusual for the amount of correspondence and additional material which they contain, the minutes cannot give the student the complete picture of the business which went on outside the meetings, when the decisions of the Association would very often be made before the meeting had even begun. The power of certain members, both commercially and privately, their wealth and influence, their private interests, together with underlying issues, motives, tensions, and alliances of members, can only be guessed at, and perhaps, from personal and/or business records, discovered elsewhere.