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MARITIME ARCHIVES & LIBRARY

INFORMATION SHEET 43

TRACING SEAFARING ANCESTORS IN THE MERCHANT NAVY

Seafaring ancestors can be some of the most difficult people to trace since they were often away at sea for long periods, and were often absent from their homes when population censuses were taken. However, many forms of records, dating mainly from the mid-19th century onwards, are available to the family historian, although in many cases they can take perseverance to track down. This information sheet provides details of sources available in the UK and elsewhere for tracing members of the Merchant Navy who served on British registered ships.

RECORDS OF MERCHANT NAVY SERVICE

From 1835 onwards, Central Government started to take an interest in merchant seamen from a desire to improve their conditions and to help man the Navy in time of war. As a consequence many more records have become available that allow the researcher to trace details of individual seamen. The main sources of information are the records compiled by the Registrar General of Shipping & Seamen, the majority of which are now held at the National Archives (PRO), unless otherwise stated.

Crew Lists and Agreements

Since 1747 it has been a legal requirement for the masters of vessels to compile a list of the crew engaged for a voyage. Crew lists, originally called "muster rolls" or "lists", were kept to ensure that a levy could be collected from all seamen's wages for a relief fund, and record the names, ratings, dates of entry and final discharge for all men serving on board a ship. The 1835 Merchant Shipping Act and its successors were intended to create central registers of all seamen who might be called on to support the Royal Navy in time of war. Since 1835 this information has been recorded on standard forms known as Articles of Agreement and Crew List. These documents were forwarded to the Registrar General of Shipping & Seamen. This central registration stopped in 1857 and only began again in 1914 with the start of the First World War (see section below).

Crew Agreements, detailed contracts between a seaman and his employer, carried on beyond 1857, and provide greater information about the crew, apprentices, ships and voyages. For ships engaged in the home trade (coasters and fishing vessels, operating in UK coastal waters, or from the UK to North European and Baltic ports) records of agreements were submitted twice a year and usually include a list of all sailings and arrivals for the half-year. Agreements for vessels in the foreign trade were submitted at the end of each voyage and do not include this information, just a general voyage description with dates.

The location of the crew lists and agreements is far from straightforward, and is divided between several locations.

1747 - 1860

All surviving muster rolls and crew agreements for British-registered merchant ships up to and including 1860, are held by the National Archives (BT 98). Muster rolls exist for 1747-1851, but prior to 1800, only those for Dartmouth, Liverpool, Plymouth, Shields and Scarborough have survived. The earliest crew list for Liverpool is dated 1772 with crew agreements available from 1835. There is no name index of either vessels or persons at

present. Up to 1854, records are arranged by port and registry number; subsequently by ship's official number.

1860 - 1938

After 1860, the volume of these documents was so great that the National Archives felt unable to justify preserving them all, and in 1970 the crew agreements were divided between a number of repositories:

- The National Archives holds a series of crew lists of "celebrated vessels" from 1861 (BT 100). The Maritime Archives & Library has a copy of the list of vessels.
- The National Archives has also retained a random 10% sample of crew lists, 1860-1938, 1951-1977 (BT 99). A similar sample for fishing vessels under 80 tons is preserved for 1884-1919 (BT 144).
- The Maritime History Archive at the Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada, holds approximately 70% of crew lists from 1863-1938 and 80% for 1951-1976. It holds none for the years 1939-1950 (see section below). The Archive will provide copies of documents and undertake research for a fee.
- The National Maritime Museum, London, holds the remaining 90% of the crew lists for the years, 1861, 1862, 1865, 1875, 1885, 1895, 1905, 1915, 1925, 1935, 1955, 1965 and 1975. Anyone wishing to consult them should give at least two weeks advance notice, stating the name and official number of the vessel, and year voyage ended.
- Various Record Offices throughout Britain hold a selection of crew lists of vessels registered in ports in their area. The Maritime Archives & Library has a few such lists for this period and a list of those held by the Liverpool Record Office (in the Central Library, William Brown Street, Liverpool) which has a larger number from this period. The CLIP project has recently completed a database of all crew lists, 1863-1913, held in local repositories, a copy of which will be available at the Record Offices.

1939 - 1950

All crew agreements are held by the National Archives.

1951 - 1977

A 10% specimen group of crew agreements is in the National Archives; the remaining 90% for years ending in '5' have been deposited with the National Maritime Museum (1955, 1965, 1975 and 1985). They are filed in official number order (see below*) not ship order. All remaining papers have been transferred to the Maritime History Archive in Canada.

***How to find the Official Ship's Number**

This can be found by consulting the Mercantile Navy List or, after 1872/3, Lloyd's Register of Shipping. For muster rolls and agreements before 1854, the ship's port and registry number can be found through the indexes to ship registrations, 1786-1854, in the National Archives.

1978 onwards

The National Archives and National Maritime Museum each hold a 10% sample of crew agreements for this period. The remainder, up to 1989, have been destroyed. All crew agreements from 1990 are held by the Registry of Shipping and Seamen in Cardiff. Further deposits to the National Archives and other archives, may be made at intervals.

Ships Official Logs

British Merchant ships were first required to keep an official log under the Merchant Shipping Act of 1850 and logs start to appear among official records from 1852. Many were later discarded, with only those recording a birth or death, or an unusual incident like a mutiny or epidemic being retained. The survival rate is only about 20%, except during the First and Second World Wars, for which all logs containing any entries were preserved.

Surviving logs are always to be found with the appropriate crew agreement, wherever they are kept except between 1905-1912 and 1914-1918. For those years most are kept separately, at the National Archives (BT 165), together with all log books containing information on births and deaths at sea, for the years 1902-1938. The indexes to the Maritime History Archive's holdings of crew agreements indicate whether or not a log is available with the crew agreement. Copies of deck logs or journals survive only in rare instances and are not among official records, but are usually found amongst shipping company archives, if at all.

Summary:

- None before 1850.
- Spasmodic survival with crew lists 1850-1879.
- Only for vessels under 80 tons for 1880-1901.
- Separate series 1905-1912, 1914-1918 (BT 165).
- 1920 to date (as 2 above).

The Maritime Archives & Library includes a few examples of official logs, some within shipping company collections, and a useful publication available in the Library is, *Log of Logs*, a three-volume catalogue of logs, journals, shipboard diaries, letters and all forms of voyage narratives, 1788 to 1998, for Australia and New Zealand, and surrounding oceans, by Ian Nicholson (Roebuck Society Publications). The National Maritime Museum also holds some examples.

Merchant Navy Seamen's Service Records

Registers of Service, 1835-1857

The registration of seamen was introduced under the Merchant Shipping Act, 1835, to allow the Government to identify individual seamen to be used as reserve sailors for the Royal Navy. To meet this need the Registrar General of Shipping and Seamen compiled indexed registers of seamen from the crew lists, who were issued with a seaman's or master's ticket. The early records from 1835 are in five series of registers, which were created from information in the ships' agreement and crew lists; all are held at the National Archives (see National Archives leaflet, *Domestic Records Information 89*).

- First Register of Merchant Seamen's Service: Series I, 1835-1836 (BT 120), 5 volumes arranged alphabetically, and Series II, 1835-1844 (BT 112), 78 volumes also name index (BT 119).
- The Merchant Shipping Act, 1844, required that every British seaman should have a register ticket. Second Register of Merchant Seamen's Service: Registers of Seamen's Tickets, 1845-1854 (BT 113), with name index for seamen (BT 114) and for masters (BT 115).
- Third Register of Merchant Seamen's Service, Series III, 1853-1856 (BT 116), in alphabetical order by name. These were discontinued in 1857 when the Board of Trade considered that the crew lists were sufficient information. So from 1858-1913 no registers were kept.

However, information on ordinary seamen (those not in possession of a Certificate of Competency and Service) can still be found from the Crew Lists & Agreements. For information on Merchant Marine Officers and other sailors awarded competency or service certificates, see section below.

In 1910 an Advisory Committee on Merchant Shipping proposed to the Board of Trade that a Central Index Register of Seamen be created, this Fourth Register of Merchant Seamen's Service, 1913-1940, is available at the National Archives on microfiche. It comes in three forms:

- The Register of Seamen, Central Index, Numerical Series, 1921-1941 (CR2), arranged by discharge number, and containing a brief record of ships on which seamen served and dates of signing on (BT 348).
- The Register of Seamen, Central Index, Alphabetical Series, 1921-1941 (CR1), arranged by surname only, containing dates and place of birth, discharge number, rating and sometimes a photograph (BT 349).
- The indexes for 1913-1920 were destroyed in 1969, but there does survive the Special Index, Alphabetical Series, 1918-1921 (CR10), which includes similar information to the Alphabetical Index (CR1) and photographs (BT 350).

The indexes cover all categories of seafarers not just ordinary seamen, including details of mates, engineers, trimmers, cooks, stewards, etc., but not masters.

The original records are held at Southampton Archives who operate a distance enquiry service (fee applicable).

Merchant Seamen's Pouches, 1913-1940

These pouches contain all documents submitted by seamen to the Registry of Shipping throughout their career, often including photographs, together with copies of documents issued to them, and are to be found at the National Archives, Central Register of Seamen's Records (Pouches) (BT 372).

The Fifth Register of Merchant Seamen's Service, 1941-1972, are also held at the National Archives (BT 382).

Sea Service Records, 1973-1993 - No records are available from the Registry of Shipping and Seamen, as after 1973, the Registrar General was not required by legislation to keep records.

Sea Service Records, 1994-2003 - The Registry of Shipping and Seamen is able to provide information taken from ships' official log books and crew agreements, which can be recorded onto a Certificate of Sea Service (for a charge).

Apprenticeship Records

From 1823 masters of ships greater than 80 tons were required to carry a quota of indentured apprentices. The indentures had to be filed with the Registrar General of Shipping and Seamen. The records now held at the National Archives are Apprenticeship Indexes to Indentures, 1824-1953 (BT 150), but the actual Apprenticeship Indentures, 1845-1962 (BT 151) have only been kept in batches of every 5th year, as have the Apprenticeship Indentures Fishing Boats, 1895-1935 (BT 152). Some Apprenticeship Indentures may have survived in private hands, for example, in shipping company archives.

Records of Masters and Officers

From 1845 men intending to become masters or mates of foreign-going British merchant ships, had to take voluntary examinations of competency. This system was made compulsory by the Marine Act of 1850 and the Merchant Shipping Act of 1854 extended it to masters and mates of home trade or coastal vessels.

Certificates of Service were issued to those who were exempted due to long service, but those without sufficient service, or wishing to rise in rank, were granted Certificates of Competency on passing formal examinations. The National Archives does not keep the original certificates, but only the series of registers, 1845-1921 (BT 122-126), with name indexes which give the date and place of birth and certificate number (BT 127). The series is divided into Home, Foreign, Colonial and Coastal Trade, also Steamships, and are arranged in certificate number order, and provide: name, place and date of birth, register ticket number (if any), rank examined for, or served in, and date and place of issue of certificate.

From 1918 there is a Consolidated Register (BT 318) including engineers. A self-indexing register including engineers and fishing boat officers, from 1910-1930, is also available (BT 352).

Original certificates issued before 1900 are kept at the National Maritime Museum. They are ordered by certificate number, and you must know this number before you can locate an individual's certificate. If the person concerned held a Master's Certificate and was at sea between 1869-1945, you may be able to obtain their certificate number from Lloyd's Captain's Registers, kept at the Guildhall Library, London. A microfilm of the years 1869-1887 is available in the Maritime Archives & Library. For certificates for captains, 1846-1852, you will need to use the Lloyd's Register Supplement to find the necessary certificate number, and this is only available at the Guildhall Library.

In addition to certificate number, Lloyd's Captains' Registers also provide the following details: year and place of birth, date and place of issue of the certificate, special qualifications, dates of engagement and discharge, name and official number of each ship, general destination of each voyage, casualties on voyage and special awards to officers. Indexes of the Captains Registers of Lloyd's of London (up to 1911) are now available to consult online on the Manuscripts Section website at www.history.ac.uk/gl/capintro.htm.

Records of Engineers

Examinations of competency were extended to engineers in 1862. Registers of certificates are held at the National Archives: Certificates of Competency, 1861-1907 (BT 139), Certificates of Competency, Colonial, 1870-1921 (BT 140) and Certificates of Service, 1862-1921 (BT 141) with alphabetical name indexes, 1861-1921 (BT 141).

Records of Cooks

The Merchant Shipping Act of 1906 required the registration of cooks, which began in 1908. Registers of Cooks Certificates of Competence and Service, 1915-1918, are held at the National Maritime Museum.

Fishing Boats

The Merchant Shipping (Fishing Boats) Act of 1883, extended examinations to skippers and mates of fishing boats. The registers of certificates are held at the National Archives: Certificates of Competency: Skippers and Mates of Fishing Boats, 1880-1921 (BT 129) and Certificates of Service, 1880-1921 (BT 130) with surname indexes (BT 138).

Pensions

There is no single collection of records relating directly to the award for pensions for seamen, but information can be found in documents created by the Board of Trade, the War Office, Paymaster General's Office and the Ministry of Pensions.

Medals

Records of the following medals to Merchant Seamen are held at the National Archives:

- Sea Transport Medal (ADM 171/52).
- Albert Medal (BT 97, BT 261, MT 9 code 6, ZJ 1).
- Sea Gallantry Medal (BT 261, MT 9 code 6, ZJ1, ZHC 1).
- First World War: awards of the British War Medal, Victory Medal and 14-15 Star to men of the Merchant Marine Reserve only (ADM 171/130-133).
- The Mercantile Marine War Medal records are held at the Registrar General of Shipping and Seamen, Cardiff.
- Records of campaign medals awarded to Merchant Seamen during the Second World War, are not yet available. Records of Naval Gallantry Medals awarded to Merchant Navy Officers, can be found in ADM 1 code 85. The Lloyd's Medal for Gallantry at Sea was instituted in 1940, to be awarded by Lloyd's upon officers and men of the Merchant Navy and Fishing Fleet. Details of medal entitlement can be obtained from the Department of Transport, Marine Division, Room 1/6, Sunley House, 90 High Holborn, London, WC1V 6L.

Census Records

From 1851 seamen in British territorial waters were enumerated. From 1861 Merchant Seamen on board ship, whether on the high seas or in foreign ports, are enumerated. For 1861 and 1881 there is an index. The master of the vessel was the enumerator. Available at the National Archives and Local Record Offices.

Royal Naval Reserve (RNR) and Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNVR)

These were Merchant Seamen who served in the Royal Naval Reserve (RNR) as ratings, mainly during the First World War, and service record cards are available on microfiche at the National Archives (BT 377).

The Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNVR) was a force of officers and ratings undertaking naval service in their spare time, but not professionally employed at sea. In 1958 the RNR and RNVR amalgamated, and further details of naval records held amongst Admiralty records at the National Archives can be found in the Public Record Office Handbook No. 22: *Naval Records for Genealogists*.

Merchant Seamen Prisoner of War Records

Information is available at the National Archives (BT 373), arranged by name of ship from which the seamen were captured. These records contain the name of men captured, place of captivity, etc., 1939-1952.

An index of c. 3, 000 names taken from "List of Merchant Seamen and Fishermen detained as Prisoners of War in Germany, Austria-Hungary and Turkey, Board of Trade Printed List 31st May 1918" printed by the Board of Trade. This is an index of an original document reference MT9/1238 held at **The National Archives**. Searchable by surname or name of ship. <http://wanborough.ukuhost.co.uk/POW/POW.htm>

Deaths at Sea of Crew and Passengers

Deaths at sea are not usually found amongst the normal records of civil registration at the General Register Office. The details are recorded in Marine Register Books starting 1 July 1837. From 1854 when the deposit of the official log books with the Registrar General became compulsory, registers were compiled from entries in the logs. Registers of births, marriages and deaths at sea of crew and passengers can be found at the National Archives,

1851-1964. From 1874 masters were required to report deaths at sea to the RGSS which was forwarded to the Registrars General of England, Scotland or Ireland where it can now be found. Records of births and deaths at sea from 1965 to the present are held at the Registry of Shipping and Seamen (search fee applies). They all include name, occupation, age/date of birth, address, date and place of death, cause and name, official number and port of registry of ship.

Records at the National Archives comprise:

- Registers and Indexes of Births, Deaths and Marriages at Sea, 1891-1964 (BT 344) includes death registers for those who dies on the *Titanic* and *Lusitania*. Microfiche copies are available at Liverpool Record Office, see address list.
- Registers of Births, Marriages and Deaths of Passengers at Sea, 1851-1890 (BT 158) - From 1854 information was taken from ships official log books, of births, marriages and deaths, 1854-1883, births and deaths only from 1883-1887, and deaths only from 1888 onwards.
- Masters also had to report births and deaths of all UK subjects and foreign subjects to the Registrar General of Shipping and Seamen. These records are held at the National Archives (BT 159 and 160).
- From 1851 onwards masters of all UK ships had to surrender to the Board of Trade the wages and effects of any seamen who died during a voyage, and records are held at the National Archives as Registers of Wages and Effects of Deceased Seamen, 1852-1881 (BT 153) with name and ship indexes (BT 154). Also available are Monthly Lists of Deaths of Seamen, 1886-1889 (BT 156) and Registers of Seamen's Death Classified by Cause, 1882-1888 (BT 157).
- Masters also had to submit a Return of Death, with details from the ship's log book giving an account of the events surrounding the seamen's death, 1914-1919 (none for 1920-1938) and 1939-1964, which are held at the National Maritime Museum. From 1965 to the present day, these are held at the Registry of Shipping. Inquiries into Deaths at Sea had to be made under the Merchant Shipping Acts, and the reports can be found at the National Archives (BT 341), 1939-1946, organised in year order and by ship's name.

Casualties and Death Lists (C&D)

When the log of a vessel was lost with the ship, a copy of the crew list was submitted to the Registrar General instead. For the years 1920-1938, these are held at the National Maritime Museum, and include fishing vessels (List D), organised by official number. For the years 1939-1950, the C&D lists are included in log books and agreements held at the Registry of Shipping. Daily Casualty Registers, War of 1939-1945, are held at the National Archives (BT 347).

Graves of Seamen / Memorials

There are many memorials and war cemeteries around the world in which seamen are buried. Information is available from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, 2 Marlow Road, Maidenhead, Berkshire, SL6 7DX. A searchable database is available on the Commission's internet site: www.cwgc.org. The National Maritime Museum has a collection of index cards for burial locations, 1939-1950. Those who were buried at sea, or have no known grave, are commemorated at the Tower Hill Memorial, London. The Memorial Registers for both World Wars are available on microfilm in the Maritime Archives & Library.

Rolls of Honour, 1914-1918, 1939-1945

These are available at the National Archives (BT 339) and cover Merchant Navy, Fishing Fleets, Ships List and Seamen's List.

Records Held at the Maritime Archives & Library, Merseyside Maritime Museum

Pilotage Service

Records go back to 1766 and the Pilots Character Books commence in 1788.

Port Records

Mersey Docks & Harbour Board records include staff records from 1846, which include some seamen employed on the Board's vessels.

Shipping Company Records

Where they survive, these are a major source of information on the career of late 19th and 20th century Merchant seamen, 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 holds many collections of records of major shipping companies operating from Liverpool. These include Ocean Transport & Trading which incorporated Blue Funnel, Elder Dempster, Bibby Line, T. & J. Brocklebank and Pacific Steam Navigation Company (see *Guide*, Vol. 1). Career papers of individual seafarers including Commodores Grattridge and Thelwell of Cunard, Captain Lord of the *Californian* and many others of all ranks are also available (see *Guide*, Vol. 2).

Educational Training Establishments

Records of two of the training ships, which were moored on the Mersey in the latter half of the 19th century, the HMS *Conway*, which became a national institution for the training of future officers of the Merchant Navy, and the TS *Indefatigable*, founded to give sea training to poor boys. Both of these collections contain records of the cadets who trained on them (see *Guide*, Vol. 2) and Information Sheet 9, Training Ships and Educational Establishments.

Photographs

Photographs of Merchant Navy vessels on which your ancestor may have served can be found amongst shipping company archives and also in photographic collections, such as the McRoberts collection.

Bibliography

SMITH, K. & WATTS, C.T. & M.J. *Records of Merchant Shipping and Seamen*. PRO Readers Guide No. 20, 1998. An excellent basic guide.

READ, G. & STAMMERS, M.K. *Guide to the Records of the Merseyside Maritime Museum*, Vol. 1. Newfoundland, Canada: Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1995. Includes records of Mersey Docks and Harbour Board, shipping companies.

LITTLER, Dawn. *Guide to the Records of the Merseyside Maritime Museum*, Vol. 2. Newfoundland, Canada: University of Newfoundland, 1999. Includes details of seafarers career and charitable records.

Maritime Archives & Library Information Sheet 39, First World War Seafaring Ancestors.

Useful Addresses

<p>1. Guildhall Library Aldermanbury London EC2P 2EJ Tel: 020 7332 1868/1870 Fax: 020 7600 3384 Email: printedbooks.guildhall@corpoflondon.gov.uk</p>	<p>6. The National Archives (PRO) Ruskin Avenue Kew, Richmond Surrey TW9 4DU Tel: 020 8392 5200 Fax: 020 8878 8905 Email: enquiry@nationalarchives.gov.uk Website: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk</p>
<p>2. Imperial War Museum Department of Documents Lambeth Road London SE1 6HZ Tel: 020 7416 5220/1/2/3 Fax: 020 7416 5374 Email: docs@iwm.org.uk Website: www.iwm.org.uk</p>	<p>7. Registry of Shipping and Seamen MCA, Anchor Court Ocean Way Cardiff CF24 5JW Tel: 02920 448800 Fax: 02920 448802 Email: registryofshipping&seamen@mcga.gov.uk Website: http://www.mcga.gov.uk/</p>
<p>3. Liverpool Record Office and Local Studies Service Central Library William Brown Street Liverpool L3 8EW Tel: 0151 233 5817 Fax: 0151 233 5824 Email: archives@liverpool.gov.uk Website: www.liverpool.gov.uk</p>	<p>8. Curator of Manuscripts Royal Naval Museum HM Naval Base Portsmouth Hampshire PO1 3NH Tel: 023 9272 7577 Fax: 023 9272 7575 Email: matthew.sheldon@royalnavalmuseum.org Website: www.royalnavalmuseum.org</p>
<p>4. The Archivist Maritime History Archive Memorial University of Newfoundland St. John's Newfoundland Canada A1C 5S7 Tel: 709 737 8428/9 Fax: 709 737 3123 Email: mha@mun.ca Website: www.mun.ca/mha</p>	<p>9. University of Liverpool Special Collections and Archives Sydney Jones Library PO Box 123 Liverpool L69 3DA Tel: 0151 794 2696 Fax: 0151 794 2681 Website: http://sca.lib.liv.ac.uk/collections/index.html</p>
<p>5. National Maritime Museum Romney Road Greenwich London SE10 9NF Tel: <i>General Enquiries</i> - 020 8858 4422 <i>Plans and Photographic Enquiries</i> - 020 8312 8600 Email: plansandphotos@nmm.ac.uk Website: www.nmm.ac.uk</p>	<p>10. Southampton City Archives Southampton City Council South Block Civic Centre Southampton SO14 7LY Tel: 023 80873 2251 Email: city.archives@southampton.gov.uk Website: http://www.southampton.gov.uk/libraries/information/archives</p>