

MARITIME ARCHIVES AND LIBRARY

INFORMATION SHEET 50

LIVERPOOL SHIP REGISTERS

Scope of the Collection

Liverpool's shipping was subject to a series of Acts of Parliament requiring that details of vessels be registered from the mid-18th century onwards. Although formats changed over time, the Maritime Archives & Library, Merseyside Maritime Museum, holds a near-complete run of material from 1739 to 1942. The volumes are known as Wool Act Registers (1739-1792), Plantation Registers (1743-1784) and, simply, Register Books (1786-1942). The evidence was recorded more systematically from 1786 onward, following the well-known Registry Act of that year. From 1855, there is an accompanying set of Transaction Books, which record changes in ownership of vessels over time. There is a gap in the Plantation Register series between 1773 and 1779. There are also references in the registers to a Transaction Book called the "small book", which has not been identified.

As well as the main set of records, there are other smaller collections, including a register of vessels visiting the port but not registered there (1788-1818), a register of fishing vessels (1921-1925), and registers for Runcorn (1862-1937).

Scope for Research

The ship registers record details of vessels and their ownership. Tonnage, dimensions, place and date of construction, rig, number of decks and masts, and other information, is recorded in different levels of completeness at different times. Engine room dimensions and horsepower of engines are recorded for steamships. Records of the owners of vessels can be very comprehensive, with occupation and places of residence recorded.

The registers cast light on a range of aspects of Liverpool's Merchant Fleet, including the evolution of maritime technology (in particular, the transition from sail to steam); the occupational and social profile of the town's shipowners; and patterns of investment in shipping. When used in conjunction with other sources, they also provide important evidence for the changing fortunes of shipbuilders on the Mersey and elsewhere

Disadvantages

Using the registers can be time consuming. There is an index, arranged alphabetically and chronologically, which enables vessels with unusual names to be identified rapidly. However, anyone seeking a particular vessel called *Anne*, *Margaret* or the like, may have to look at a large number of records before finding the correct one.

The records relating to ownership can, in some cases, be very complex. Some vessels had a large number of owners, and shares changed hands frequently. Identifying owners at a particular time can sometimes involve tracing vessels through subsequent re-registrations and in the accompanying Transaction Books. Vessels owned by joint stock companies simply have the company name, not those of individual shareholders.

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.