Merchant Seamen Research - General

Introduction

Researching your seafaring ancestors is no easy task. Records changed over time, and those that still exist have been filed under a range of catalogue numbers, though at least the bulk of them are held in one repository: The National Archives at Kew.

The registration of seamen was introduced under the Merchant Shipping Act, 1835, to allow the Government to identify individual seamen able to serve as reserve sailors for the Royal Navy. To meet this need, the Registrar General of Shipping and Seamen initially compiled indexed registers of seamen from the crew lists (see Crew Agreements, Lists and Official Logs Research Guide) and then issued each individual with a 'seaman's' or 'master's' ticket.

From that initial system of extracting personal information from crew agreements and lists, the seamen's registration system evolved well into the twentieth century, eventually making it a requirement that each merchant seafarer be issued with a unique number which would be retained during his/her time of service. This evolving process of registration produced the Five Registers of Merchant Seaman's Service which can be broken down into specific dates as follows:

Pre-1835

Unfortunately, there was no systematic registration of seamen prior to 1835. There are however some muster rolls dating from 1747 to 1857 in The National Archives' sequence BT 98. These are incomplete and are based on the port of registry and the date of sailing. You will also need to know the name of the ship in order to carry out your search.

1835 - 1844: First Register of Merchant Seamen

The Registrar General of Shipping and Seamen initially compiled indexed registers of seamen using ships' crew lists. The seamen were then issued with a seaman's or master's ticket, each with their own unique number. This index became known as the First Register of Merchant Seamen.

1835-1836

First Register of Merchant Seamen Service: Series I, 1835-1836 arranged in five volumes alphabetically in BT 120.
1835-1844

First Register of Merchant Seamen Service: Series II, 1835-1844 in BT 112 with an alphabetical name index in BT 119. It is advised to consult BT 119 first to find the Seaman's Register number, and then use that number to locate the appropriate seaman in BT 112, which is listed in numerical order.
1845 - 1854: Second Register of Merchant Seamen

The Merchant Shipping Act, 1844, required that every British seaman should have a register ticket if they were leaving the United Kingdom. The First Register was closed and in its place, each ticket was entered into ledgers BT 113 which in turn are indexed in the Alphabetical Register of Seamen's Tickets BT 114, which gives the surname and forenames, place of birth, and register ticket number. Using the alphabetical index BT 114, you can locate the seaman’s Register number, and using that number, further details may be found out about the individual from the registers themselves in BT 113:

[Image of a register ticket page with details]

BT 113 Series. © National Archives

1854 - 1856: Third Register of Merchant Seamen

A Third Register of Merchant Seamen's Service was begun in 1854 and continued until 1856. This register is located in BT 116 in alphabetical order by name.

[Image of a register page with details]

BT 116 Series. © National Archives
1857 – 1912

Following the closure of the Third Seamen's Register in 1857, no central register of seamen was kept for 56 years and therefore no records such as those preceding exist. The Board of Trade felt that Crew Agreements and Lists provided an adequate means of recording information about the seamen without the need to create a separate register. Researchers will therefore have to rely on the agreements and other types of sundry records, where they exist for this period, in order to carry out their research. Please refer to Research Guide: Crew Agreements, Lists and Official Logs for more information.

1913 - 1941: Fourth Register of Merchant Seamen

In 1910 the Government's Advisory Committee on Merchant Shipping recommended the creation of a new Central Register of Seamen and so the Fourth Register was started in October 1913 and continued until 1941.

1913-1917

That said, the cards for the period 1913-1920 were destroyed in 1969 for unknown reasons. For these specific years, you should consult the Crew Agreements and Lists during that period. To do this, you will need the name and the Official Number (ON) of the ship(s) on which the seaman served. Once you have the ship name(s) you can obtain the ON(s) by either consulting copies of the Mercantile Navy List or Lloyd’s Register of Shipping. The National Archives has a partial set of both, while the National Maritime Museum holds a complete set of Lloyd’s Register.

1918-1921

Although the majority of the cards from 1913 to 1920 were destroyed, a selection of them, dating from 1918 to 1921, can be traced using CR10 cards. Originals of these cards are located at Southampton City Archive, however The National Archives holds copies of the registry cards on microfiche in BT 350. This series is arranged alphabetically by surname. On the front of each card, information provided includes: Discharge ‘A’ number, Certificate of company number, name of seaman, year and place of birth, rank or rating, name (sometimes) and Official Number of ship and date of engagement of service.

CR10 Card - Front. © National Archives
The reverse of the CR10 card has a photograph of the seamen with numbers and names listed. Those are the names and/or Official Numbers of the ships on which the seaman served. The number on the actual photograph is the Seaman’s Ticket number as seen on the front of the card.

1921-1941

To locate seamen during this period, it is best to consult the CR1 cards held at The National Archives in series BT 349 which is on microfiche and catalogued alphabetically by surname. Each card typically gives the following information: Surname, Christian name, birth year and place of birth, Discharge ‘A’ number, rating, RV2 number, certificate grade and number (if owned), PR number, health insurance number, unemployment insurance number, height, colour of eyes and hair, complexion and distinguishing marks.

1941 - 1972: Fifth Register of Merchant Seamen

In 1941 the Essential Work (Merchant Navy) Order created a Merchant Navy Reserve Pool. To ensure that seamen would always be available for service, the Government paid them to remain in the Reserve Pool when they were ashore. Thus continuous paid employment instead of casual employment was available to all seamen, and comprehensive and effective registration became possible.

All those who had served at sea during the previous five years, and those who were intending to serve during WWII, were required to register. A new Central Register of Seamen (known as the Fifth Register of Seamen), was established. CR 1 and CR 2 cards of seamen who were still serving in 1941 were removed from the old Fourth Register (see previous section), placed in ‘pouches’ BT 372 (see section on Seamen’s Pouches) or re-sorted into BT 364 and their details carried forward to the new register in BT 382 located at The National Archives. The Fifth Register of Seamen was maintained until 1972, although occasionally records after this date can be found.

The series BT 382 holds CRS10 Docket books which form the Register. These dockets create a sea service record for each registered seaman. They are arranged alphabetically within eight parts:
Part 1: Covering mainly Europeans and British Dependent Territories Seamen, originally for the period 1941 to 1946, but later service records can be found covering seamen who started their sea service after WWII

Part 2: Covering mainly Europeans and British Dependent Territories Seamen, originally for the period 1946 to 1972, although some seamen's records covering the WWII period can be found

Part 3: Asiatic seamen, mostly from the Indian sub-continent, from 1942 to 1965

Part 4: Asiatic seamen, mostly from the Indian sub-continent, from 1966 to 1972

Part 5: Indian, Chinese and foreign national seamen, unnumbered series (as service was only of brief duration a discharge book number was not allocated), mainly from 1941 to 1972, although the records of Chinese seaman cover the period 1945 to 1972. Anglicised spelling of patronyms and forenames is used

Part 6: Prisoners of war and internees; Europeans, Lascars (Indians), Adenese, Goanese and Chinese, from 1940 to 1945

Part 7: Records of those men who served on merchant vessels requisitioned for War services

Part 8: Records of deaths of Merchant Seamen recorded for pension purposes for the Ministry of Pensions, from 1944 to 1951

The front page of the CRS10 Docket book provides the following information:

- Name
- Date and place of birth
- Discharge 'A' number
- Rank or rating, with relevant certificate details
- Details of any other qualifications
- Date CRS10 first page was created
- British Seamen's Identity Card Notations. The entries refer to correspondence and issuing of cards, certificates, applications etc. The originals in general do not survive except where they have been filed in the Seaman's Pouch (see below)
- Merchant Navy Establishment [licensed] Agencies (MNEA) Contracts

While the continuation page of the CRS10 Docket book shows:

- A list of ships and their official numbers with date and place of engagement
- rank or rating
- F or H (for Foreign or Home trade voyage)
- date and place of discharge from the ship
- character grade
- National Insurance contribution code
- Registry clerk's initials and date of the entry
- When ashore the sheet may bear the entry MNRP (Merchant Navy Reserve Pool) with date and place
1973 - 1999

No records are available from the Registry of Shipping and Seamen, as after 1973, the Registrar General was no longer required by legislation to keep records of individual seafarers.

1999 - Present

The Registry of Shipping and Seamen is able to provide information taken from ships’ Official Log Books and Crew Agreements, which (for a charge) can be recorded on to a Certificate of Sea Service.
Once you have located the Discharge number, you can then search for the seaman’s CR2 card in BT 348 which is organised numerically by that number (omitting any prefix letter before it). These CR2 cards should show a list of the ships on which the seaman served, customarily by its Official Number. However, the clerks do not seem to have entered every change of ship and you may find that the record is incomplete and that some additional ship details may be recorded on the CR1 and CR10 cards.

Combined Index 1918-1941

Organised by the seaman’s Discharge ‘A’ number this index was compiled using extracted cards from the other three indexes. The reasons for doing this are unknown. They are located in series BT 364 as the Register of Seamen, Combined Index (CR1, CR2 and CR10 cards) 1918-1941. For details of what you will find on each type of card please see the descriptions above. The majority of these cards refer to seamen who went on to serve after 1941 and thus their Discharge ‘A’ number may be found from the ‘docket book’ in the Central Register of Seamen BT 382.

Seamen’s Pouches 1913 - 1972

For some individual seamen a collection of his/her papers were filed together in what is known as a seaman’s ‘pouch’. They are now held at The National Archives in series BT 372. The contents vary from single registry cards to ID Cards, photographs, letters, applications forms and other ephemera. The records ostensibly cover the period 1913 to 1972, though few have contents dating further back than the 1930s.

Some special categories of pouches are to be found in BT 390 (those who served on Royal Naval Auxiliary vessels) and BT 391 (those who served in the liberation of Europe); these should be consulted, where relevant, in addition to
Some material that might have been expected to be in pouches can be found in BT 364 and BT 391 and can be searched for by surname using The National Archives Catalogue.

Bibliography

Smith, Kelvin; Watts, Christopher T. and Michael J., *Records of Merchant Shipping and Seamen* (Richmond, 2001)


## Useful Contact Information

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