



Tracing Merchant Navy Ancestry

The purpose of this information sheet is to provide guidance on tracing Merchant Navy personnel. More detailed information can be found in our publication ***Tracing Your Family History: Merchant Navy*** – this can be purchased from the Imperial War Museum online, through mail order or the shop. The Museum does not hold any personal service records or official documentation, but can help the enquirer as long as some basic facts are known. The Department of Printed Books welcomes visitors by appointment and is able to provide useful reading material and advice for finding out more about those who served. Other reference departments in the Museum – Art, Documents, Exhibits and Firearms, Film and Photograph Archives, and the Sound Archive – may also be able to assist.

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Where to Find Merchant Navy Records

Personnel records available to the public are now held by **The National Archives, Ruskin Avenue, Kew, Richmond, Surrey TW9 4DU (Tel: 020 8876 3444; Website: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)**. The National Archives (TNA) was formerly known as the Public Record Office. For anyone intending to do their own research TNA has produced invaluable guides to their holdings; of particular importance are ***Tracing Your Ancestors in The National Archives***, 7th revised edition edited by Amanda Bevan (Richmond, Surrey: TNA, 2006) and ***Records of Merchant Shipping and Seamen*** by Kelvin Smith, Christopher T and Michael J Watts (Richmond, Surrey; PRO, 1998). Other useful titles are ***My Ancestor was a Merchant Seaman*** also by Christopher T and Michael J Watts (London: Society of Genealogists Enterprises, 2004) and ***A Guide to the Naval Records in The National Archives of the UK*** by Randolph Cock and NAM Rodger (London: Institute of Historical Research, 2006).

In general, seamen's records for the period 1913-1972 are to be found at TNA. Although the Merchant Navy was a civilian service, during the periods of 'hostilities' some mariners served in uniform with the Royal Naval Reserve, Royal Naval Reserve Trawler Section, Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve and Royal Fleet Auxiliaries. All First World War records for these formations have now been transferred to TNA. Records of Royal Naval Reserve ratings in service between 1914-1958 are available at TNA. Generally speaking, Second World War officers' records and post 1950 records are held by **Data Protection Cell, Director Naval Career Management, Disclosure Cell, Room 109, Victory Building, HM Naval Base, Portsmouth, Hampshire PO1 3LS** (see the *Tracing Royal Navy Ancestry* leaflet). Genealogical enquiries to the above should be made in writing by next of kin, and a search fee of £30 is likely to be levied.

Another important archive open to the public is the **Guildhall Library, Lloyd's Marine Collection, Aldermanbury, London EC2P 2EJ (Tel: 020 7332 1868;**

Website: www.cityoflondon.gov.uk) which holds the Captains' Registers for the period up to 1948, voyage record cards 1927-1975 and runs of the **Lloyd's Registers, Lloyd's Lists** and **Mercantile Navy Lists**. The Guildhall Library does not hold crew lists. Some are at TNA, while a few are held by the National Maritime Museum. However the majority are held by the **Maritime History Archive, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, Newfoundland, A1C 5S7 Canada (Website: www.mun.ca/mha)**. A microfiche index to their holdings has been retained by TNA.

The only published sources available to the researcher are the **Lloyd's Registers** and **Mercantile Navy Lists**. Unfortunately, the Imperial War Museum Department of Printed Books (DPB) holds only a small selection of these for the period 1914-1920 and 1939-1946.

Casualty Records

Casualty records are available for consultation at TNA and the Guildhall Library. In addition, the **Commonwealth War Graves Commission, 2 Marlow Road, Maidenhead, Berkshire SL6 7DX (Tel: 01628 507200; Website: www.cwgc.org)** holds details of the burial place or commemoration site for those who died in service during the period 1914-1921 and 1939-1947. However, not all Merchant Seamen who died during the world wars are recorded by the Commission (there was complex criteria for inclusion which chiefly revolved around the concept of 'increased war risk'). A search fee may be levied but their website provides free access to the **Debt of Honour** database. Details of Merchant Navy personnel who were buried at sea are contained in memorial registers produced by the Commission. The DPB holds a set of these, together with other published sources including some rolls of honour. Notable examples are the volumes of the **Cross of Sacrifice** by SD and DB Jarvis covering the First World War and the **Book of Remembrance: the Merchant Navy World War Two** researched by Ian Stockbridge (N.p.: NUMAST, [2003]).

Medal Records

Records of campaign and gallantry awards and available citations for the world wars are lodged with TNA. Records relating to Second World War campaign medals can now be viewed online at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/seamens-medals.asp For Second World War medal claims, you should contact the **Registry of Shipping and Seamen, MCA Cardiff, Anchor Court, Keen Road, Cardiff CF24 5JW (Tel: 029 2044 8800; Website: www.mcga.gov.uk)**. The Guildhall Library and TNA both hold full sets of the **London Gazette**, another good source of reference for awards and citations, together with their indexes. The **London Gazette** is also available online at www.gazettes-online.co.uk For possible information on the recommendation that led to an award, write to the **Naval Secretary (Honours and Awards), Room G10 (MPG2), Fleet Headquarters, West Battery, Whale Island, Portsmouth, Hampshire PO2 8BY**.

The DPB holds published sources only, the most useful of which are **Seedie's Rolls of Honour and Awards** compiled by BC Dickson (Tisbury, Wiltshire: Ripley Registers, 1989-1997).

Other Sources

Service and ex-service publications often carry a column for contacting and tracing information on ex-service personnel. The DPB can advise on these, although an excellent starting point is the **Merchant Navy Association, National Office, 9**

Saxon Way, Caistor, Market Rasen LN7 6SG (Tel: 01472 851130; Website: www.mna.org.uk).

Although official documentation such as operational and convoy records, and some ships' logs are now with TNA, many of the records relating to shipping companies are still lodged with other archives and record offices around the country. Records of shipping companies are useful to the researcher as they may contain information on the company's employees as well as details of the fleet and ships' sailings. The DPB holds a good collection of shipping company and individual ships' histories but in the main these refer to the larger companies and more famous vessels.

The collections held by the following archives will also prove to be invaluable:

National Maritime Museum, Romney Road, Greenwich, London SE10 9NF (Tel: 020 8312 6516; Website: www.nmm.ac.uk)

Merseyside Maritime Museum, Archives and Library, Albert Dock, Liverpool L3 4AQ (Tel: 0151 478 4499; Website: www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/maritime)

Southampton Archives, Southampton City Council, South Block, Civic Centre, Southampton SO14 7LY (Tel: 023 8083 2251; Website: www.southampton.gov.uk)

Glasgow Archives and Special Collections, Mitchell Library, North Street, Glasgow G3 7DN (Tel: 0141 287 2910; Website: www.glasgow.gov.uk)

Glasgow University Archives and Business Record Centre, 13 Thurso Street, Glasgow G11 6PE (Tel: 0141 330 5515; Website: www.archives.gla.ac.uk)

The DPB also has publications relating to maritime operations and convoys. Reading lists on naval and maritime operations and on Atlantic, Arctic and Mediterranean Convoys are available on request or can be accessed on our website.

Once archives have been approached and answers received, researchers are welcome to forward their findings to the DPB for advice on published and unpublished works and the addresses of other relevant museums, archives and old comrades' associations. The DPB Reading Room is open to the public, by prior appointment, from Monday to Saturday between 10.00am and 5.00pm. Please note that the Imperial War Museum only covers the period of history from the First World War onwards.