This guide explains how to use the facilities of the Caird Library at the National Maritime Museum (NMM) to research the crews and vessels of the Mercantile Marine in 1914-1918. It also provides details of the principal relevant records held at The National Archives (TNA) and elsewhere.

Partly in recognition of the national service performed by civilians at sea during wartime, standard uniform and insignia for officers of the Mercantile Marine were introduced in 1919. The first formal use of the title Merchant Navy came with the appointment of the Prince of Wales as Master of the Merchant Navy and Fishing Fleets in 1928.

Information on visiting the Caird Library, links to the Archive and Library catalogues, guidance on how to register and order items for viewing or copying, etc., can be found here on the Royal Museums Greenwich website: rmg.co.uk/researchers/library

In the Caird Library reading room there is free access to most of the records that can be searched and viewed online via the TNA, Ancestry and Findmypast websites.

Officers of the Wilson Line vessel Borodino with Junior Army and Navy Stores Ltd supervisors, Greenland Dock, London, 1919. The Borodino had been in Admiralty service as a floating shop and recreational facility for the crews of warships at Scapa Flow (NMM negative G11019).
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1. Researching individuals

1.1 Registers of seamen

Without some reliable facts to use as a starting point, it is usually difficult to trace the career of a merchant seafarer during the First World War. Civilians employed at sea didn’t get an official service record and in the period 1857-1913 the Board of Trade didn’t maintain a central register of seamen.

The Central Indexed Register of Merchant Seamen (Fourth Register of Seamen) entries for 1913-1917 have not survived, but the original registry cards for 1918-1941 are held by Southampton Archives. They can be accessed online using the Findmypast website. Microfilm copies of the same records are at Kew, see the descriptions for the Board of Trade series BT 348, BT 349 and BT 350 in the Discovery catalogue on the TNA website. There is also a combined index numbered BT 364 on microfiche at TNA.

1.2 Log books, agreements and crew lists (see also Research Guide C1)

Log books, agreements and crew lists from British-registered merchant vessels in 1914-1918 do survive. These documents are usually arranged by year of termination of voyage and then by vessel Official No. In most cases the names of individual crew members have not been indexed, so some vessel details will be required as a starting point for research.

Part of a crew agreement for the cargo liner Commodore Official No 123981. As recorded here, the vessel was sunk in 1915 while on government service as a transport (NMM collection RSS/CL).

The 1915 Crew List Indexing Project is due for completion in 2014. This has produced an online index of all the names appearing on the surviving crew lists from voyages that terminated in 1915,
from the original records held at the NMM (90%) and TNA (10%). Searches of the transcribed
documents are already possible using the Discovery catalogue on the TNA website. This is best
done by entering the name of the seafarer as keywords and restricting the search to the BT 400 and
BT'99 series.

For the other wartime years 1914 and 1916-1918, the surviving records are mostly held by the TNA
and the Maritime History Archive (MHA) in Newfoundland: mun.ca/mha

All the surviving log books from 1914-1918 (where they exist as separate documents) are in the BT
165 series at TNA. These log books were retained by the Board of Trade because they have details
of casualties.

Lists of lascar seamen (Asiatic agreements) usually don’t feature in Board of Trade collections held
by archives in the UK. The crews of ships commissioned by the Admiralty as armed merchant
cruisers, troopships, patrol and escort vessels, etc. are also not represented in these records. However, the civilian crews of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary and Mercantile Fleet Auxiliary are often included.

1.3 Masters, mates and engineers (see also Research Guide C2 and Research Guide H3)

Deck and engineer officers who passed their examinations before and during the First World War
are represented in the NMM collection of Board of Trade certificates. The associated application
forms provide useful details of their apprenticeship and employment prior to qualification. The
records of masters and mates held by the NMM have been digitized and can be accessed online on a
subscription basis. See the UK and Ireland, Masters and Mates Certificates, 1850-1927 resource on
the Ancestry website.

Part of an application made by Thomas William Fisher certificate number 040038, showing that he
was first mate on the Borodino in 1914-1916 (NMM collection RSS/MC).
The records of engineers 1862-1930 (NMM collection RSS/EC) have not been digitized or indexed. There are certificate registers for the period 1902-1944 (6 volumes) in the NMM collection, but these are arranged numerically and don’t have indexes. To determine the certificate number for a particular individual, the following indexes held at TNA should be consulted:

• Indexes to Registers of Certificates of Competency and Service, Engineers 1862-1921 (reference BT 141)
• Indexes to Certificates of Competency, Masters, Mates, Engineers and Fishing Officers, Home and Foreign Trade 1910-1969 (reference BT 352)

If the relevant certificate numbers are known, original documents relating to mates, masters and engineers can be requested for viewing or scanning using a standard form on the NMM website: rmg.co.uk/researchers/library/masters-certificates-request-form

Career details for mates and masters active in the foreign trade in the period 1869-1947 can be found in the Lloyd’s Captain Registers. Microfilm copies of the registers are on open access in the Caird Library reading room. Each volume is arranged alphabetically by name of individual and provides details of vessels and dates of engagements. The originals are held by the London Metropolitan Archives (LMA) at Clerkenwell: cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/visiting-the-city/archives-and-city-history/london-metropolitan-archives

1.4 Fishing skippers and second hands

The NMM has a collection of Board of Trade certificates and application forms for second hands and skippers covering the certificate number range 1 to 21000. There are also samples of the documents filed in other certificate number sequences. However, none of these records have been catalogued or indexed by name of individual. Registers for certificates of competency and service for fishing officers in the period 1883-1921 are held at Kew, see the references BT 129 and BT 130 in the TNA catalogue. The index to names appearing in these registers is numbered BT 138.

1.5 Other crew records

Some personnel records relating to deck officers, engineers, stewards, shore staff and other capacities can sometimes be found within shipping company archives (see below).

The NMM holds Board of Trade registers of cooks’ certificates covering the period 1915-1958 (7 volumes). However, the entries are arranged numerically by certificate number and have not been indexed. As far as we know, there are no surviving office copies of certificates issued to cooks.

1.6 Cadets and apprentices

Some individuals in the Mercantile Marine started their careers as boys or officer cadets on board training vessels. The following NMM collections relate to young seafarers:

• Marine Society records of boys (mainly from the London area) trained in seamanship on HMS Warspite include admissions registers (MSY/L and MSY/M series) and registers of apprentices sent to merchant vessels (MSY/Q series).
• Printed reports from HMS Worcester (the Thames Nautical Training College) include a roll of honour listing officer cadets who died during the First World War (WOR/A/6). Cadet records for HMS Worcester from 1862-1967 are still held by The Marine Society, see the website: marine-society.org
• Records of officer cadets on the sailing vessels Port Jackson and Medway belonging to Devitt & Moore’s Ocean Training Ships Ltd, see the Devitt & Moore collection (DEM).
Career details for Herbert Edward Dale in a Devitt and Moore register of midshipmen, covering entrants in the period 1907-1917 (NMM collection DEM/19).

Some records of officer cadets on HMS Conway and other Merchant Navy training establishments in the Liverpool area are held by the Marine Archives and Library at Merseyside Maritime Museum: liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/maritime/archive

Some records of apprentices in the Merchant Navy are held at TNA. The BT 150 series is an index of apprentices compiled by the Registry of Shipping and Seamen in 1824-1953. This relates to the samples of indentures preserved in BT 151 and BT 152, the latter series relating to fishing vessels.

Apprentices on British-registered vessels are usually included in the official crew list (see above). Details of when and where the individual was indentured are recorded.

1.7 Royal Naval Reserve and Mercantile Marine Reserve

Many merchant seamen and fishermen were in the Royal Naval Reserve (RNR) during wartime. For example, they served on trawlers employed in anti-submarine and minesweeping duties, drifters engaged in boom defence, or on the armed merchant cruisers used to enforce the British naval blockade. Information on how to locate service records for these individuals is provided in our research guide on the Royal Navy in the First World War. The relevant records are mostly in the Admiralty collection at TNA. Some career details for RNR officers can be found in the Navy Lists on open access in the Caird Library.

During 1916-1920 the Mercantile Marine Reserve (MMR) was used to engage officers and seamen on board vessels employed on government service. The crews of vessels commissioned as auxiliaries by the Admiralty were signed on under a T.124 agreement, whereby they agreed to serve in any commissioned vessel, but retained aspects of their civilian pay and benefits.

1.8 Royal Fleet Auxiliary and Mercantile Fleet Auxiliary

The crews of Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA) vessels were signed on by a mercantile agreement and these sometimes survive among the Board of Trade records of British-registered merchant vessels (see above). The same applies to the crews of Mercantile Fleet Auxiliary (MFA) vessels.
The Fleet Air Arm Museum at Yeovilton holds some crew books for RFA and MFA vessels circa 1915-1920. These contain alphabetical indexes of vessels, crew lists, rates of pay and next-of-kin details. A guide to service records held at Yeovilton can be found on the Archive & Research Centre page on the FAAM website: fleetairarm.com/naval-aviation-research

1.9 Prisoners of war

Printed lists of crew members held as civilian prisoners of war were issued by the Board of Trade. The NMM has copies of two reports from 1915 and 1918 entitled *List of Merchant Seamen and Fishermen detained as Prisoners of War in Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey*. See the Board of Trade volume *Miscellaneous Papers: Various* (item ID number A6148) in the Library Catalogue.

At TNA relevant records can be found in the Foreign Office series FO 383 containing general correspondence of the Prisoners of War and Aliens Department, the Marine Department series MT 9 (code 106), also the Colonial Office series CO 323 and CO 693. This material includes papers relating to the civilian internment camp at Rhuleben racecourse in Berlin and the execution of Charles Algernon Fryatt, master of the cross-Channel steamer *Brussels*.

1.10 Medals and other awards

Index cards recording the issue of the British War Medal and Mercantile Marine War Medal to individuals in the Mercantile Marine can be found in BT 351/1/2 and BT 351/1/2 at TNA. A list of the recipients of the Silver War Badge (awarded to those who were no longer fit for sea service due to wounds or illness) is in MT 9/1404. Individuals who served in the Royal Naval Reserve or Mercantile Marine Reserve should feature in the Royal Navy Medal Rolls (ADM 171 series) at TNA. All these records can be accessed online using the Discovery catalogue on the TNA website.

Notices of honours and promotions, citations for gallantry awards, etc. were often published in *The London Gazette*. A search for notices relating to a particular individual is possible using the advanced search facilities on *The London Gazette* website: thegazette.co.uk

Details of Lloyd’s medals for lifesaving and meritorious service can be found in the publication *Lloyd’s Medals 1876–1989: A History of Medals Awarded by the Corporation of Lloyds* by Jim Gawler, Hart Publishing Co, Toronto, 1989. Manuscript records relating to these awards are in the Lloyd’s collection at London Metropolitan Archives and in corporation minutes retained by Lloyd’s. An information leaflet on records of bravery awards can be found on the LMA website. Awards made to masters are sometimes recorded in the Lloyd’s Captain Registers also held at LMA.

Some further relevant sources of information are listed in Research Guide U2: Maritime Medals: Sources of information.

1.11 Hospitals, deaths and commemoration

During the First World War the Seamen’s Hospital Society ran hospitals at Greenwich and Albert Dock in London. They admitted both military and civilian casualties, including the victims of attacks on merchant shipping. The Dreadnought Seamen’s Hospital collection at the NMM includes registers from the wartime period numbered DSH/30 and DSH/31 in the Archive Catalogue (see DSH/130 and DSH/131 for the indexes).

Details of the deaths of over 15,500 merchant seafarers due to enemy action in the First World War can be found on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) website: cwgc.org
The CWGC data includes some 12,000 individuals with no known graves, but whose names are engraved on bronze panels at the Tower Hill Memorial in London. A printed register of the Tower Hill Memorial compiled in 1928 is on open access in the Caird Library.


The CWGC database does not cover all deaths on British-registered vessels, so it may be necessary to consult official log books (see above) and other documents submitted to the Registry of Shipping and Seamen. The NMM holds the following records of deaths extracted from log books of British-registered vessels:

- **Monthly Returns of Deaths of Seamen** (GR160 forms) 1916-1989 numbered with the prefix RSS/A. These provide brief details of the cause of death and the relevant vessel. They mainly record deaths resulting from marine causes or accidents in ports, but deaths resulting from enemy attacks on fishing boats and other small vessels are sometimes included.

- **Returns of Births and Deaths** (B&D1 forms) 1914-1919 numbered with the prefix RSS/B. These records are arranged by month and then alphabetically by the vessel name. They provide more detailed information on the circumstances and sometimes include reports from medical staff, police, etc. There are also B&D1 forms recording births and deaths among passengers on merchant vessels 1914-1919 numbered with the prefix RSS/C.

![B&D1 form](image)

B&D1 form recording the death of William Paul Cunningham, second mate of the *Lomas*, during the incident in which this vessel was pursued and shelled by a German submarine off the Scilly Isles in 1915 (NMM collection RSS/B/19).

Registers of births, marriages and deaths of seamen and passengers (including foreign nationals) maintained by the Registry of Shipping and Seamen are in the BT 334 series at TNA. For the period 1910-1918 there are also registers recording births and deaths reported to one of the national Registrars General. The TNA research guide on births, deaths and marriages at sea provides guidance on the relevant records at Kew and links to resources on the Findmypast website: nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/looking-for-person/bmdatseaorabroad.htm
2. Researching vessels

2.1 Key sources

The Caird Library holds key sources to help with research on British merchant vessels during wartime. See these guides for information on using Lloyd’s Register of Shipping, The Mercantile Navy List, and other resources:

- Research Guide C5 (Sources for ship histories)
- Research Guide C6 (The Mercantile Navy List)
- Research Guide C8 (Wrecks, losses and casualties)
- Research Guide H4 (Indexes to Lloyd’s List)
- Research Guides H5 (Lloyd’s Register of Shipping)
- Research Guide H6 (Lloyd’s Survey Reports)

2.2 Shipbuilding


Many merchant ships in this period are represented in the Lloyd’s Survey Reports on loan from Lloyd’s Register (National Maritime Museum collection LLY). Where documents survive, they usually include the first entry survey of the vessel, often with the constructional plans sent to Lloyd’s Register for approval at the time of building. For more details, see Research Guide H6.

First entry Lloyd’s Survey Report for the Wirral, torpedoed and sunk off Norway in 1917 (NMM collection LLY box W/725).
The Historic Photographs and Ship Plan collections at the National Maritime Museum include many original items relating to vessels built during the First World War. For more information, see the relevant pages on the NMM website: rmg.co.uk/researchers/collections/by-type

Please note that it is not possible to provide access to the Historic Photographs and Ship Plans collections in the Caird Library. Applications to view items in these collections should be made in writing and sent by e-mail to plansandphotos@rmg.co.uk.

2.3 Merchant vessels used by the Government

British merchant vessels commissioned as warships or auxiliaries during the First World War are included in books listing ships of the Royal Navy and Royal Fleet Auxiliary, see Research Guide B7.

Ships employed on Government service as transports or auxiliaries etc., but not commissioned into the Royal Navy, are covered by these books in the Caird Library collection:

- *Service List: List of Vessels Engaged for Naval, Military and Commercial Purposes 1914-1920*, compiled by the Shipping Intelligence Section of the Ministry of Shipping, published by HMSO, London, 1921. This provides details of owners, tonnage, speed, dates and other particulars of service, etc. A list of vessels employed on special service (Q ships) is given as an appendix.

2.4 Shipping movements and cargoes

Admiralty records of commissioned ships and naval operations involving merchant ships are at TNA. See the research guide on Royal Navy operations in the First World War on the TNA website. The log book entries of some merchant vessels used by the Admiralty, for example the armed merchant cruisers forming the 9th and 10th Cruiser Squadrons, have been transcribed for the Old Weather Project and can be viewed on the naval-history.net website.

During 1914-1916 the movements of merchant vessels were recorded as normal in *Lloyd's List*. However, once publication of this information in wartime was seen as unwise, the movements and casualties section of *Lloyd's List* was printed separately for restricted circulation. See the issues of *Overseas Shipping Intelligence*, 1917-1918.

Some details of vessel movements can be determined from Board of Trade agreements, log books and crew lists (see above).

Brief information about the cargo carried by vessels sunk by war causes is included in *Lloyd's War Losses: the First World War* (see below). Additional details may be found among reports in *Overseas Shipping Intelligence* if salvage work was carried out at the time, or if wreckage was washed ashore.

Cargo manifests from the First World War period usually only survive within Custom House records. Merseyside Maritime Museum at Liverpool holds the central set of Customs Bills of Entry from the HM Customs & Excise Library in London. Local authority archives in port locations such as Bristol, Glasgow and Newcastle, also hold some bills of entry. For further details, see the relevant information sheets on the Merseyside Maritime Museum website.
2.5 Vessels sunk by enemy action or marine causes

The Caird Library has many useful publications on shipping casualties during the First World War, for example the following:

- *Government War Risks Insurance Scheme: List of Vessels Lost, Damaged, or Missing*, published by the Board of Trade Marine Department, in two parts, covering August 1914-May 1920.
- *Lloyd's Reports of Prize Cases Heard Before or Decided by The Right Honourable Sir Samuel Evans...during the European War Which Began in August 1914*, edited by John Bridge Aspinall and Edward Louis De Harte, Lloyd's, London, 1915-1921 (7 volumes).
- *Merchant Shipping (Losses)* issued by HMSO in August 1919. This House of Commons paper was later combined with *Navy Losses* and reprinted as *British Vessels Lost at Sea 1914–1918*, Patrick Stephens Ltd, 1977. It was never revised, so has some errors and omissions.
- *Statistical Review of the War against Merchant Shipping*, Director of Statistics, Admiralty, 23 December 1918.

The following records are held at TNA:

- A complete list of British merchant and fishing vessels sunk or damaged by enemy action 1914-1920 can be found in the Ministry of Shipping series MT 25/83-85.
- The Admiralty: Historical Section: Records used for Official History series ADM 137 forming material used for the official history of the First World War also contains information about shipping losses and measures taken to protect merchant vessels. The relevant file references can be found by searching the TNA catalogue, or by using the Admiralty: Digests and Indexes series ADM 12, looking under the name of the ship, or the names of key individuals.
- Lists of merchant vessels attacked by enemy submarines, with reports of actions and sinkings can be found in Admiralty: Station records: Plymouth Correspondence ADM 131/113-118.
- Vessels and cargoes lost through war causes came under the Government War Risks Insurance Scheme. Ledgers recording claims for values of ship cargoes 1914-1929 are in the Board of Trade series BT 365. These records are arranged chronologically by date of settlement, but each volume has an index of names of vessels and claimants.
- The proceedings of formal investigations into shipping casualties held before a Wreck Commissioner and reports of preliminary inquiries can be found in the Board of Trade Marine Department Shipping Casualty Investigation Papers 1910-1988, series BT 369. These records include vessels lost through war causes, including the passenger liner *Lusitania*.

Casualties to shipping due to marine causes (foundering, stranding, collision, fire, etc.) do not appear in the published lists of war losses. They are, however, included in *Overseas Shipping Intelligence* 1917-1918 published by Lloyd's (see above).

A large number of vessels lost without trace, and fate unknown, were declared 'missing'. A Joint Arbitration Committee considered the evidence and assessed, for insurance purposes, whether a loss was likely to be due to war or marine causes. Lists of missing vessels are given in *Lloyd's War Losses* (see above). Additional information can often be found in the *Lloyd's Missing Vessels Books* from the Lloyd's Marine Collection now held at the London Metropolitan Archives.

Digitized and transcribed versions of some Board of Trade enquiries into lost and missing merchant vessels in 1914-1918 (including the *Lusitania*) can be viewed on the PortCities Southampton website: plimsoll.org/WrecksAndAccidents/wreckreports
3. Shipping company records

3.1 Records at the NMM

The Caird Library has a large collection of books on the histories and fleets of British shipping companies. A few of these focus on events during the First World War, for example:

- *A Merchant Fleet at War* (Cunard Line) by Archibald Herd, Cassel, 1920.

With regard to archive material, Research Guide F1 lists the shipping companies whose records, or part-records, are held by the NMM. These can sometimes include personnel records for seagoing staff and details of employees who served with the armed forces during wartime. Examples of collections in the Archive Catalogue which might help to trace the careers of individuals during the First World War are those from the General Steam Navigation Co Ltd (GSN), New Zealand Shipping Co (NZS) and the Peninsular & Oriental Steam Navigation Co (P&O).

![Details of the employment of a stewardess in 1914-1921 among the staff records of the Peninsular & Oriental Steam Navigation Co (NMM collection P&O/77/21).](image)

3.2 Records held elsewhere

The National Register of Archives (NRA) maintained by TNA is a useful tool for locating the surviving records of shipping companies and other corporate bodies. See the keyword search facility on the NRA website: nationalarchives.gov.uk/nra

Another major collection of shipping company records is held in Liverpool, see the relevant information sheets on the Marine Archives and Library pages of the Merseyside Maritime Museum.
4. Bibliography

The following books in the Caird Library collection cover the history of the Mercantile Marine during the First World War:

- *Mercantile Marine in Home Water: State of Report Card, April 1918* published by the Intelligence Department of the Admiralty. This includes silhouettes of British merchant vessels (and those of other European nations) seized by Germany.
- *Merchantmen-at-Arms: The British Merchants’ Service in the War* by David W. Bone (with reproductions of drawings by his brother, the official war artist Muirhead Bone), Chatto & Windus, London, 1919.
- *The System of Convoys for Merchant Shipping in 1917 and 1918* (bound with *Atlantic Trade Convoy Committee’s Report, 6 June 1917*), published by the Admiralty and Ministry of Shipping.
- *War Instructions for British Merchant Ships (C.B. No. 415)* published by the Trade Division, Naval Staff, Admiralty, July 1917.

The following books provide useful guidance for research on individuals in the Mercantile Marine and relevant records held at TNA:


Archive & Library
National Maritime Museum
27 August 2014