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THE MERCHANT SEAMEN OF BRISTOL 1747-1789



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The Merchant Seamen of Bristol 1747-1789 is the thirty-eighth pamphlet in the local history series published by the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association.

Although a great deal has been written about seamen in the Royal Navy, merchant seamen have received comparatively little attention, and this pamphlet breaks new ground by examining conditions in the merchant ships of eighteenth century Bristol. Thanks are due to the Society of Merchant Venturers of the City of Bristol for permission to examine the very valuable collection of Ships' Muster Rolls in the Society's archives.

Miss Mary Williams helped in selecting the illustrations and Mr Sion McGrail drew attention to the illustration by Pocock of eighteenth century merchant seamen playing cards. Mr R. Kelsey was very helpful in preparing the photographs.

This is the second reprint of this booklet since its first publication in 1976.

The publication of a pamphlet by the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association does not necessarily imply the Branch's approval of the opinions expressed in it.

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THE MERCHANT SEAMEN OF BRISTOL, 1747-1789

by JONATHAN PRESS

During most of the eighteenth century, Bristol's trade was second only to that of London in volume, and her interest in the West African and West Indian trades was not surpassed by Liverpool until the last decades of the century, but although the merchants of Bristol have been studied in considerable detail, research on the way of life and working conditions of her seafaring population is almost totally lacking. In this pamphlet, an attempt is made to remedy this deficiency. Most of the available records were brought into being by an Act of 1747 "For the Relief and Support of Mariners and Disabled Seamen, and the Widows and Children of such as shall be killed, slain or drowned in the Merchants Service".¹ This Act created a Seamen's Hospital Fund, to which all seamen contributed sixpence per month during their periods of employment, and in order to keep an accurate check upon payments, captains had to present a Muster Roll to the Controller of Customs at the conclusion of each voyage.² These Muster Rolls provide information about the duration and destination of each voyage, the name, last ship and usual place of abode of every man who signed on, together with details of all the discharges, desertions and deaths which occurred during the voyage. Copies of the Ship's Muster Rolls of Bristol ships are preserved in the archives of the Society of Merchant Venturers, which was appointed Trustee of the Fund in Bristol. The Society's records also include a volume entitled *The Seamen's Hospital Orders, etc.*, which gives details of 204 petitions for relief which were received between 1747 and 1769.

Some idea of the size of Bristol's seafaring community in this period can be obtained from the Muster Rolls. In 1787, for example, 2,838 men signed on for 203 voyages, and of these 2,470 gave Bristol as their usual place of abode. If we accept that the population of Bristol rose from approximately 25,000 in 1720 to 60-70,000 by the end of the century, it would seem that seamen comprised rather less than 5% of the total, a surprisingly small proportion in view of the importance of foreign trade in Bristol's economy.

However, a number of the seamen joining Bristol ships were domiciled elsewhere—about 13% of the total labour force in 1787.

1. 20 Geo. II c.38.

2. For the Seamen's Hospital Fund, see Patrick McGrath, *The Merchant Venturers of Bristol*, (Bristol, 1975).

In that year, 23 men from the villages around Bristol signed ship's articles. Most of them were domiciled in those villages which were themselves closely linked with the sea—Pill, for example, was the home of the Bristol Channel pilots. Other men came from further afield, London providing 33 men in 1787, and Liverpool 13. Some ships contained a considerable proportion of men from these ports, especially if they were employed in coasting voyages, where the general practice was to retain the captain and perhaps the mate for the whole voyage, hiring different crews for the outward and return trips.¹ Bristol's proximity to the Welsh and Irish ports and her flourishing trade with Ireland meant that her work force contained a higher proportion of immigrants from these areas than did those of other English ports. In 1787, 55 Irish and 49 Welsh seamen signed the articles of Bristol ships, but the number of immigrants sailing out of Bristol was probably greater than these figures suggest, for many of them came to regard Bristol as their home town. In the Muster Roll for the *Pollard* Evan Evans and David Thomas, both probably of Welsh birth, gave Bristol as their usual place of abode.²

Most English ports were in fact represented in Bristol's seagoing labour force, while a very few men came from overseas, primarily from Jamaica, Barbados and the other West Indian islands, and from Newfoundland and the American mainland. One of the crew of the *Prince of Wales* in 1754-5 was a Swede named Marcus Norbry, although he gave Bristol as his usual place of abode.³ On very rare occasions, negroes joined Bristol ships in Africa.⁴

The most obvious conclusion to be drawn from this analysis is that very few men from inland towns and villages took to the seafaring life in this period, and that usually the only inland communities to provide men for the merchant marine were either close to major seaports, as were Brislington and Kingswood, or else were situated on rivers—Bath, linked to Bristol by the Avon, is an obvious example. The only time when landmen from inland

1. See, for example, the voyage of the *Pollard* to London, Society of Merchant Venturers, *Ship's Muster Rolls*, 1787, no. 145.
2. *ibid.*
3. *Ship's Muster Rolls*, 1755, no. 42.
4. The negro who joined a vessel going to the West Indies at this time ran a considerable risk of being sold into slavery on arrival in the Caribbean. A black who signed on at Bristol and an Indian named Josep were both sold at Jamaica during a voyage by the slaver *Ulysses* between December 1754 and September 1755. *Ship's Muster Rolls*, 1756, no. 62.

areas joined the merchant marine in even moderate numbers was during periods of warfare. Privateers carried large crews, and since many of the men on board a privateer were not required to sail the ship, they could be recruited from the ranks of landmen.

Some men from rural communities did enter the merchant marine through apprenticeships, for premiums were low, and, if wages were unattractive, at least the apprentice would be retained through the winter with a regular income.¹ Yet the number of such apprentices can never have been very large, and an Act of 1704 compelling owners to accept a certain number of pauper boys in proportion to tonnage gradually fell into abeyance. By 1789, the Hospital Trustees could report that many masters were unwilling to accept untrained boys.²

In general, then, there was little intercourse between rural and seafaring communities, and the seamen of Bristol, although relatively few in numbers, constituted what was virtually a separate social group. This division was emphasised by the fact that the seaman was accustomed to a transitory life at a time when many members of rural communities rarely strayed beyond the confines of their own parish.

By the 1780s, a large part of central Bristol was the exclusive preserve of her seafaring community, and the streets and alleys around the Backs were thronged by the many seamen who inhabited the boarding-houses of King Street, Queen Street, Prince Street, Pipe Lane and Denmark Street.³ Some of the many public houses which flourished in this area are still in existence, notably the Llandoger Trow and the Seven Stars, where Thomas Clarkson

1. A distinction should be made, however, between the apprenticeships of the sons of owners and masters, who entered the trade with a view to becoming officers, and those accorded to pauper boys, for whom it was merely an introduction to the lowest ranks of seafaring.
2. When compiling their report on the slave trade in 1788-89, the Lords of the Committee of Council for Trade and Plantations addressed a number of queries concerning the accuracy of the Muster Rolls and conditions in the trade in general to the Society of Merchant Venturers. See the *Report of the Royal Commission on the Slave Trade*, 1789, vol. xxvi (646a). Part II, *Queries concerning Muster Rolls and Seamen*, no. 6. There is an unpaginated copy of this Report in Bristol Central Reference Library, and an incomplete copy of the Society of Merchant Venturers' replies may be found among the uncatalogued bundles at Merchants' Hall.
3. Society of Merchant Venturers, *Ship's Muster Rolls*, 1787, no. 180. This Muster Roll for the *Prince William*, is unusual in that it gives Bristol addresses; the captain Hugh Inglis, resided in Trenchard Lane, and other members of the crew lived in King Street, Prince Street, Marsh Street, Pipe Lane, Bread Street, Denmark Street, Little King Street, Bullpaunch Lane and at the Hot Wells.

collected much of evidence on the slave trade from a sympathetic landlord and his customers. Bristol's sailor town was emphatically not for the landsman, for it was the scene of frequent drunken brawls, and the unwary landlubber, or even the "outlandish" seaman, stood a good chance of being knocked on the head and robbed. Crimping, too, came early to Bristol, and many crews were assembled from the unwary customers of the public houses and boarding houses, as Thomas Clarkson discovered in 1787. One of the commonest ploys adopted by crimping landlords was to encourage seamen to spend more than they could afford; when a crew was needed, they could then be presented with the alternatives of imprisonment in the debtors' gaol or signing on for a voyage in order to settle their debts with their advance money.¹ Despite this, however, Bristol's sailor town never acquired the notoriety of London's Ratcliff Highway.

It is of course hardly surprising that the seamen should have revelled in the wild life ashore, since they were couped up for such long periods on board ship. Many men, particularly those in the foreign trades, preferred using their hard-earned wages for the purchase of a few weeks' riotous living rather than to provide for their declining years, and of course the sailor quarters of major ports were always frequented by a multitude of prostitutes, brothel-keepers, sloop-sellers and landlords eager to fleece the sailor of his cash.

Three methods of assessing and paying wages were in use in the eighteenth century. The least important was by shares in the ship's earnings. This method was used primarily on fishing vessels, including whalers, although most privateersmen could claim a share in the booty if their ship took a valuable prize.² For short voyages, such as those from Bristol to Ireland, London and Liverpool, lump sums were customarily paid, while for most foreign voyages, to Africa, the West Indies, America and the Baltic, the usual practice was to pay wages on a monthly basis.

1. T. Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade by the British Parliament*, (1808), vol. i, pp.323-324. (Henceforth referred to as T. Clarkson, *The Slave Trade*). Clarkson's claim that crimping was only used to man ships in the slave trade seems unjustified, however. The slave trade was not particularly unpopular among seamen, and only ships with reputations for ill-treatment and bad conditions proved difficult to man. Also see *The Report of the Royal Commission on the Slave Trade*, (1789), vol. xxvi (646a), evidence of William James.
2. See, for example, the advertisement of the cruise of the *Hercules* privateer in the *Bristol Gazette*, 15 October 1778.

Peacetime wage levels seem to have remained remarkably stable during the eighteenth century. Ralph Davis suggests a fluctuation of perhaps 2-3% in the period 1680-1780.¹ In both London and Bristol, the able seaman's wage remained steady at 25-30 shillings per month, and as late as 1835 average monthly wages were only 45-50 shillings.² Differentials between wage levels in different trades were being ironed out, despite Clarkson's claim that wages on slave ships were higher (at least in appearance) than those on other ships in order to attract men to an unpopular trade.³ The following table, based upon specimen Ship's Articles sent by the Society of Merchant Venturers to the Royal Commission on the Slave Trade in 1789,⁴ shows the peacetime wages paid in Bristol in 1787:—

Table I.

Rank	Average Wage (shillings per month)
Landsman	18
Ordinary seaman	25
Able seaman	30
Cook	30
Carpenter's mate	20
Carpenter	70-80 ⁵
Boatswain	45-50 ⁵
Cooper	45-65
Master	80-100 ⁶

In wartime, however, wages fluctuated considerably as naval demands grew heavier. The outbreak of the Seven Years War, for example, pushed wages in London up to 70 shillings per month by the winter of 1757-58, and they remained at 60-65 shillings per

1. R. Davis, *The Rise of the English Shipping Industry*, (1962), p.137.
2. P. G. Parkhurst, *Ships of Peace*, (New Malden, Surrey, 1962), p.402, Appendix L.
3. T. Clarkson, *The Slave Trade*, vol. i, p.325.
4. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Slave Trade*, (1789), vol. xxvi, (646a), *Queries concerning Muster Rolls and Seamen*, no. 8.
5. C. M. MacInnes claims that the wages of boatswains in all the Bristol trades were 70 shillings per month; carpenters got 90 shillings. (C. M. MacInnes, *A Gateway of Empire*, (Bristol 1939), p. 234).
6. The wages of masters remained static in peace and in war, since demand for their services did not rise in wartime as did the need for seamen.

month until peacetime conditions returned.¹ The evidence suggests, however, that wage levels in Bristol were less affected by the onset of wartime conditions than they were in the capital. Bristol was not a major naval port, and her labour reserves did not suffer so severely from the efforts of the press-gangs. War, and the demands of privateering, undoubtedly did cause wages to rise, but the Seamen's Hospital Trustees reported in 1788 that increases had been moderate, and that ships in the African trade might expect to pay an additional five shillings per month in order to obtain crews in wartime.² Thus, the able seaman in Bristol might be able to earn up to 16% more than his peacetime wage. This, of course, is much lower than the 80-100% increase in wage levels which Davis suggests occurred in London.

It must be stated, however, that the seaman who joined a privateer in wartime might be able to earn considerably more than the wages set out in Table I, especially if a lucrative prize was taken. When the *Hercules* was fitted out for a cruise in 1778, an advertisement in the *Bristol Gazette* promised that "Every able Seaman shall receive £3 10s. per Month constant Wages during the Voyage, ordinary Seamen £2 10s. and able Landmen £2 . . . beside their Share of all Prizes taken".³ The advertisement does suggest, however, that these rates were unusually high, and many privateers, especially if they were merchantmen equipped with a Letter of Marque but plying their usual trades, seem to have paid the usual rates.

In London, these wage levels led to some dissatisfaction, especially after the close of the Seven Years War, when large numbers of men were released from the Navy and monthly rates immediately fell from 60-65 shillings to 25 shillings per month;⁴ yet in Bristol no attempt seems to have been made to increase wages by concerted action. As has been suggested, Bristol was not a major naval port, and the coming of peace did not lead to a great influx of unemployed seamen into her merchant marine, with a consequent depression of wage levels. Another reason why there

1. R. Davis, *op.cit.*, p.137. The merchant marine had to contend with the demands of privateering as well as the need for men for the Royal Navy. In Bristol, privateering reached a peak between 1756 and 1758, a fact which, if true of other ports, would help explain the unusually high wage levels in 1757. (See J. W. Damer Powell, *Bristol Privateers and Ships of War*, (Bristol, 1930), p.184.)
2. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Slave Trade*, (1789), vol. xxvi, (646a), *Queries concerning Muster Rolls and Seamen*, no. 7.
3. *Bristol Gazette*, 15 October, 1778.
4. R. Davis, *op.cit.*, p.137.

seems to have been little unrest amongst Bristol's seafaring community at this time is that seaman's wages in the outports compared favourably with those of landmen of similar social origins. In his three volumes on the state of the poor, Sir Frederick Eden suggested that typical monthly wages for agricultural labourers in Somerset were as follows:—

Minehead	24-28 shillings per month
Walcot (Bath)	30-39 shillings per month
Frome	35-39shillings per month ¹

The figure for Minehead was probably unusually low, but these wage rates suggest that the seaman was relatively well-off, and that even in peacetime there was sufficient incentive to keep men in the trade. Unlike the rural labourer or the town artisan, the seaman did not have to spend much of his income on his food. During each period of employment he was provided with his victuals, and this, of course, considerably increased the real value of his income. If he were married, he might have to spend part of his income on his dependents, but so too would the landsman with a family. In addition, the seaman had a much better chance of obtaining a moderate promotion, which might double his wage, than did his counterpart in the rural or urban workforce. On the *Hungerford* in 1775, seamen earned 30 shillings per month, while the third mate got 40 shillings and the boatswain 50 shillings. Both of these posts were usually filled by deserving able seamen.²

The Bristol seaman, it seems, was rather better off than his London counterpart. Wages of seamen were more or less the same in the capital and the outports, but prices were higher in London.

There were, however, a number of factors which tended to reduce the real value of the wages paid to seamen. Firstly, the seaman's income remained remarkably stable during the eighteenth century, and when an upward trend in prices began, probably in the 1760s, his living standards and social standing must inevitably have entered a decline.

Secondly, conditions of employment in the merchant marine tended to reduce the real value of the seaman's wage. Sixpence a month was automatically deducted from the pay of every seaman

1. Sir F. M. Eden, *The State of the Poor; a History of the Labouring Classes in England*, (1797). Reprinted in an abridged form and edited by A. G. L. Rogers, (1928), pp.301-306.
2. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Slave Trade*, (1789), vol. xxvi, (646a), *Queries concerning Muster Rolls and Seamen*, no. 8.

to finance the Seamen's Hospital Fund, while a rather less popular charge was the deduction for damage to cargo. Theoretically, seamen were obliged to pay for any losses which ensued from their carelessness or inefficiency in handling the cargo, but many captains used this as an opportunity to levy a general fine to cover damage which the crew could not possibly have caused. According to Davis, such deductions sometimes amounted to as much as 10% of the total wage bill.¹

Other losses resulted from the manner in which wages were paid. On long voyages, a contemporary noted that "it has always been the custom to advance a month's wages to all men intending to be ship't (except the chief mate) either to discharge the debt contracted to the landlord with whom they lodge or to fitt themselves with clothes and necessaries for the voyage."² Seamen signing on for African voyages, which might last for twelve months or more, usually received two months' salary. This practice, of course, often meant that seamen sailed out of Bristol with the knowledge that a considerable part of the wage due at the end of the voyage had already been spent.

Unlike the seamen, masters and mates often used their advances to purchase stocks of desirable items such as clothes, sugar, tobacco and spirits, which could be sold to the crew for high prices during the voyage. Sometimes, too, officers made cash advances in foreign ports, always at a high rate of interest, and a seaman might find himself actually in debt at the end of a voyage, so that signing on for another voyage was the only course left open to him.

On ships trading with Africa and the West Indies, the articles customarily laid down that one half of the wages due for the voyage would be paid on arrival in the West Indies. This represented a further drain on the seaman's income, since wages were paid at the rate of one pound local currency for one pound sterling, and the West Indian currencies were considerably below parity. A similar practice was followed by ships trading with the American mainland. Any seaman who was discharged in these areas was paid in deflated currency, and the dependents of a man who had died during a voyage usually received the whole sum due in West Indian money. Thus, as Clarkson discovered, the seamen in the most dangerous trades were receiving a wage which in real terms was considerably below its theoretical value.³

1. R. Davis, *op.cit.*, p.145.

2. See W. E. Minchinton, *The Trade of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century*, Bristol Record Society, vol. xx, (1957), p.153.

3. T. Clarkson, *The Slave Trade*, vol. i, pp.324-325.

The main reason why captains and owners adopted this practice was that both the slave trade and the West Indian trade were of dubious profitability. A ship arriving at an unpropitious moment might be forced to sell her cargo at a loss or be obliged to return to England in ballast, and so owners were always concerned to minimise wage bills. This could be done by the payment of wages in debased currencies, for most seamen were eager to have spending money while their ship was in port. In the slave trade, wage bills could also be minimised by returning home with smaller crews. Slave ships customarily left Bristol with large crews—usually 12 men per 100 tons instead of the 7 men per 100 tons which was the custom in the West Indian trade.¹ This was in order to control the slaves on the Middle Passage, and it was in the captain's interest to "persuade" some men to leave on arrival in the West Indies. Clarkson reported that ill-treatment was common on slavers,² and much of this may well have been due to the need to keep costs down rather than to personal animosity. More extreme devices were also resorted to on occasions. Giving evidence before the Royal Commission on the Slave Trade in 1789, William Jones, onetime seaman on the *Bristol* and *Juno*, reported that on arrival in the West Indies the crews of these vessels were paid half-wages and encouraged to go ashore, and that any man who remained away for more than 48 hours was deemed to have deserted, and refused admittance on board.³

Against these losses, however, is to be set the fact that during a voyage a seaman did not have to provide his own food. Ralph Davis has suggested that the food provided for the seaman was worth approximately 12 shillings per month,⁴ and if this was so, the real value of the able seaman's wage was about 42 shillings per month in the 1780s. The fare provided was certainly monotonous, as the following table shows:—

1. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Slave Trade*, (1789), vol. xxvi, (646a), *Queries concerning Muster Rolls and Seamen*, no. 6.

2. T. Clarkson, *The Slave Trade*, vol. i, pp.310-313, 338, 359 et seq.

3. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Slave Trade*, (1789)

4. R. Davis, *op.cit.*, p.145.

Table II.Provisioning on the Privateer *Tartar*, 30 March-26 April 1779.¹

Number of days on which the crew had	BEEF	18
Number of days on which the crew had	PORK	10
Number of days on which the crew had	PEASE	11
Number of days on which the crew had	FLOUR (for a a pudding?).....	4
Number of days on which the crew had	BREAD	7
Number of days on which the crew had	SUET	4
Number of days on which the crew had	CHEESE	2

The absence of any vegetables and anti-scorbutics is notable, and the imbalance of such a diet indicates that the merchant marine was not yet being influenced by the work of Lind and Blane on the subject of dietary deficiencies in the Royal Navy. A salt-meat diet was unattractive even when the food was relatively fresh, and in the eighteenth century the quantity and quality of the provisions usually declined as a voyage progressed, since it was impossible to prevent stored food from deteriorating, especially in tropical climates. A slow voyage often meant short rations before the passage was over, and the evidence suggests that some masters reduced rations as a matter of course to economise once their ship was at sea.²

The provision of a vitamin-deficient diet and short rations might have severe consequences, since bad food made it difficult for a man to recover from the effects of tropical disease. As Sir Gilbert Blane noted, "after the force of disease has been subdued at sea, men are frequently lost by relapses, or pine away in dropsies or other chronic complaints, for want of being supported by some cordial and nourishing diet".³ However, it must be stated that the diet of seamen does not seem to have been particularly bad by eighteenth-century standards. As Davis points out, "if salt beef or pork, with biscuit, cheese, beans, dried fish and beer were unappetising fare for long voyages, it may nevertheless be borne in mind that few people on land had a diet which included daily meat in any form, fresh or stinking".⁴

1. B. M. H. Rogers, "The Privateering Voyages of the *Tartar*", *Mariner's Mirror*, vol. xvii, (1931), p.241.

2. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Slave Trade*, (1789), vol. xxvi, (646a), evidence of James Arnold.

3. Sir G. Blane, "A Short Account of the Most Effectual Means of Preserving the Health of Seamen", reproduced in C. Lloyd (ed.), *The Health of Seamen*. Navy Records Society, vol. cvii, (1965), p.159.

4. R. Davis, *op.cit.*, p.145.

Nevertheless, the insufficiency of the seaman's diet was undoubtedly an important cause of the high mortality rate in the seagoing labour force of Bristol at this time: not only did it lead directly to deficiency diseases, such as scurvy and beri-beri, but it also appreciably reduced the seaman's resistance to other diseases.

An analysis of the Muster Rolls presented at Bristol in 1787 reveals that a total of 124 seamen were lost during 203 voyages in that year. Since 2,838 men in all signed on for these voyages, the mortality rate in 1787 was something like 4.5% of the total number of men employed. There were, however, substantial variations in the death rates for the various trades. Of 554 men employed on 23 voyages to West Africa and the West Indies, 100, or about 18%, are known to have been lost, while of the 1,151 men who signed on for 55 voyages to the West Indies 21, or 5.5%, died. Losses in the other trades were much lower. There were 125 voyages to other destinations in 1787, on which only three men out of a total of 1,133 were lost.

Contemporaries were well aware of the dangers of the African trade, and heavy losses were a reflection of the Englishman's vulnerability to tropical disease. Although some ships might remain unaffected, when disease struck it often took a heavy toll. In 1878, for example, there were no losses on 7 of the 23 voyages to Africa, while on the remaining 16, 100 men died. The heaviest losses were experienced by the slave-ship *Brothers* during her voyage to Africa and St. Vincent's in 1785-87, when 32 of her crew of 55 succumbed. Making the Middle Passage very short-handed, she took 25 months on the round trip.¹ This, however, was exceptional, and if we exclude it from our calculations, the percentage of men lost in the African trade immediately drops from 18% to 12% of the total.

While compiling evidence for the Anti-Slave Trade Movement, Clarkson used the case of the *Brothers* to support his claim that the slave trade was by far the most dangerous to seamen. Certainly, there were hazards which were unique to the slave trade. The purchase of the slaves often involved a lengthy cruise along the unhealthy Calabar coast, and disease, especially fevers and dysentery, often spread from the human cargo to the crew, but it is doubtful whether the other African trades were any less dangerous to the seaman. The Seamen's Hospital Trustees in fact claimed that slaving was less hazardous than the other African voyages: "In the Ships which go to the Coast of Africa for Wood

1. Society of Merchant Venturers, *Ship's Muster Rolls*, 1787, no. 146. See also T. Clarkson, *The Slave Trade*, vol. i, p.297.

and Ivory there is a much greater proportion of the Crew die and become subject to blindness than in the Ships of the Slave Trade, the most probable cause of which is that the former go up the rivers into the more interior parts of the Country".¹ Disease, in short, threatened the crews of all vessels which spent a long time on the coast, for the major tropical diseases—malaria, other fevers and dysentery—were contracted by close proximity to the mainland.

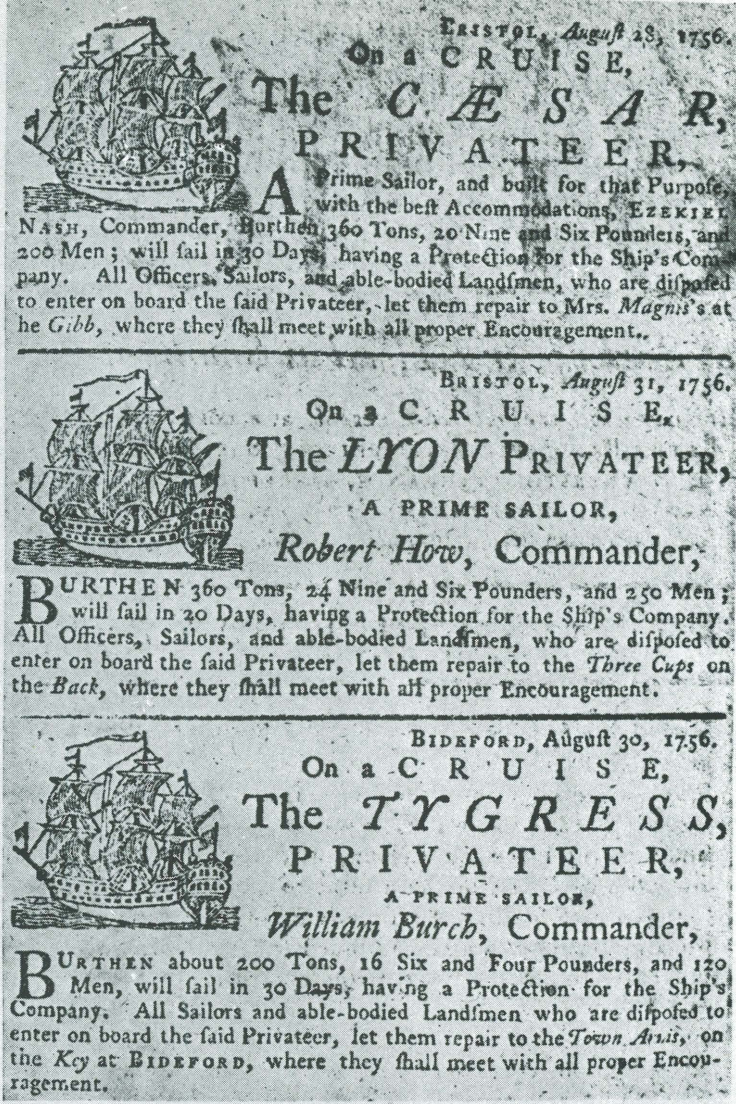
Tropical disease was also a major problem while ships were in West Indian ports. Naval vessels with sickly crews were often ordered to sea to "cure themselves", and since merchantmen spent a much greater proportion of their time in port than did naval vessels, their crews were in even greater danger.

However, the Muster Rolls do not tell the whole story, since they only give the number of men who died during voyages. They do not indicate the cause of death, and of course a ship wrecked or lost at sea would not present a Master Roll. If, as Davis suggests, the annual rate of loss by shipwreck and burning was about 4%,² the death rate of seamen must have been considerably higher than the foregoing analysis suggests. Furthermore, none of the available sources give any details of the numbers of men who died while unemployed.

Although it is impossible to determine the total mortality rate in Bristol's merchant marine, the Ship's Muster Rolls do at least indicate which of Bristol's trades were the most hazardous for the seaman. The evidence provided by the Ship's Muster Rolls can also be supplemented by reference to the 204 petitions for relief which were made to the Society of Merchant Venturers in its capacity of Trustee of the Seamen's Hospital Fund between 1747 and 1769. These petitions, together with a record of the action taken by the Society, are preserved in a volume entitled *The Seamen's Hospital Orders, etc.*, in the Society's archives at Merchants' Hall, Bristol. A total of 72 petitions were presented by the widows or dependents of dead seamen, while the rest came from incapacitated seamen who required pensions or casual relief.

Between 1747 and 1769, 46 petitions were presented as a result of the effects of disease. In the same period, accidents on board Bristol ships led to 83 petitions, 60 by widows and 23 by incapacable seamen. There were 30 petitions which resulted from wartime engagements, 8 coming from widows and 22 from men incapacit-

1. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Slave Trade*, (1789), vol. xxvi, (646a), *Queries concerning Muster Rolls and Seamen*, no. 11.
2. R. Davis, *op.cit.*, p.156.



BRISTOL, August 28, 1756.
On a CRUISE,
The CÆSAR,
PRIVATEER,
A Prime Sailor, and built for that Purpose, with the best Accommodations, EZEKIEL NASH, Commander, Burthen 360 Tons, 20 Nine and Six Pounders, and 200 Men; will sail in 30 Days, having a Protection for the Ship's Company. All Officers, Sailors, and able-bodied Landsmen, who are disposed to enter on board the said Privateer, let them repair to Mrs. Magnis's at the Gibb, where they shall meet with all proper Encouragement.

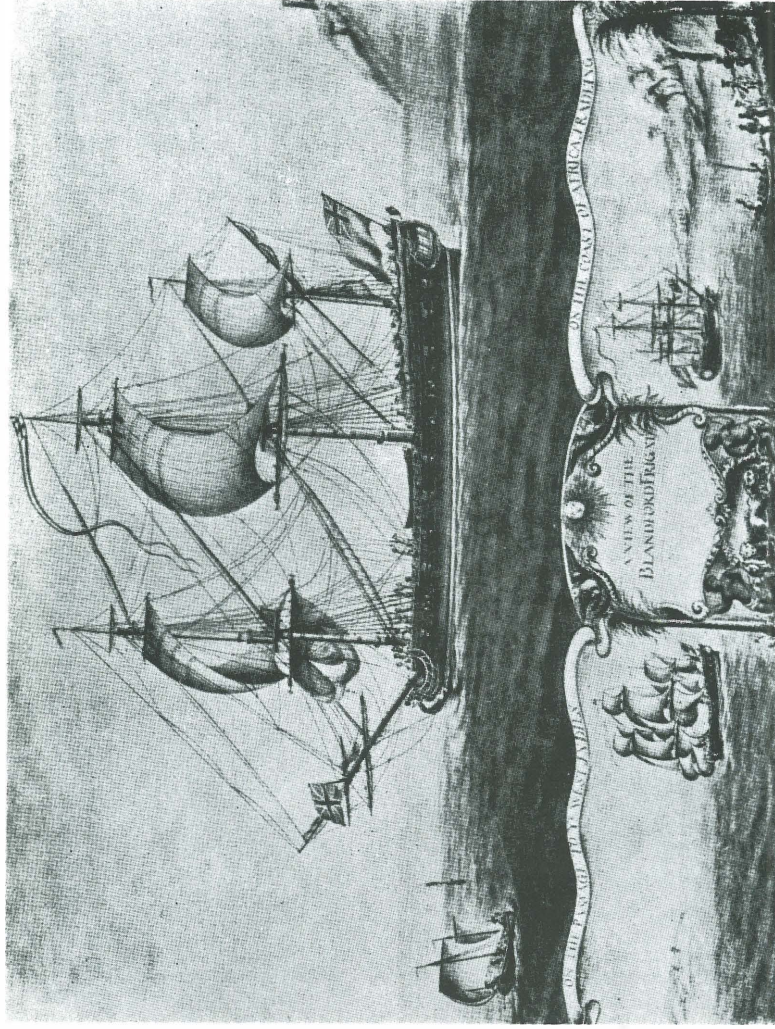
BRISTOL, August 31, 1756.
On a CRUISE,
The LYON PRIVATEER,
A PRIME SAILOR,
Robert How, Commander,
BURTHEN 360 Tons, 24 Nine and Six Pounders, and 250 Men; will sail in 20 Days, having a Protection for the Ship's Company. All Officers, Sailors, and able-bodied Landsmen, who are disposed to enter on board the said Privateer, let them repair to the Three Cups on the Back, where they shall meet with all proper Encouragement.

BIDEFORD, August 30, 1756.
On a CRUISE,
The TYGRES,
PRIVATEER,
A PRIME SAILOR,
William Burch, Commander,
BURTHEN about 200 Tons, 16 Six and Four Pounders, and 120 Men, will sail in 30 Days, having a Protection for the Ship's Company. All Sailors and able-bodied Landsmen who are disposed to enter on board the said Privateer, let them repair to the Town Arms, on the Key at BIDEFORD, where they shall meet with all proper Encouragement.

From Bristol Central Library.

Advertisements in Felix Farley's Bristol Journal inviting volunteers to join privateers in the Seven Years War.

Photograph: University of Bristol
Arts Photographic Unit



The BLANDFORD, a privateer of 380 tons which was active in the War of the Austrian Succession.

Photograph: Bristol University
Arts Photographic Unit



Print by Pocock showing eighteenth-century seamen playing cards in a boat.

By courtesy of the National Maritime Museum

15M Bricks at 20/-	0.3.9	55.13.9
To Entry, Halling, Shipping & Bills Lading	3.2.2	15.
To Freight & Primage	45.15.	
	<u>£132.10.11</u>	

A Portledge Bill for the Ship Fanny's B. Outsett
 Tho^s Richards Mas^r for Madera & Barbadoes

N ^o .	Mens Names	Stations	Wages p ^m	Wages ad ^d
1.	Thomas Richards	Master	£6.	
2.	J. P. Devonish	Chief mate	3.10	7.
3.	Jos. Henrick	2 nd Mate	2.5	2.5
4.	Andw Slaughter	Carpenter	4.	0.
5.	William Knowles	Seaman (liveried)	1.10	1.10
6.	Daniel Rider	ditto	1.10	1.10
7.	James Douglass	ditto	1.10	1.10
8.	George Elder	ditto	1.10	1.10
9.	Thomas Young	ditto	1.10	1.10
10.	John Miles	ditto	1.10	1.10
11.	William Spear	ditto	1.10	1.10
12.	Abraham Foyce	ditto	1.10	1.10
13.	Jos. Boggan	1/2 ditto	1.5	1.5
14.	Tho ^s Spear	} apprentices		
15.	Jam ^s Stokes			
			<u>£29</u>	<u>30.10</u>

Sailed 17th Decr 1783

The shipping accounts of the Snow Fanny, April 1777 — November 1791, include a number of portledge bills listing the hands and their wages. Bristol Record Office : 12162.

By courtesy of Miss Mary Williams, City Archivist

ated by wounds, while the remaining 44 cases were standardized petitions for pensions which merely stated that the petitioner was incapable of further service.

These petitions clearly show that loss of sight was the most common disability to result from disease. Blindness was the scourge of the African trades, and of 46 men from African ships given pensions by the Seamen's Hospital Fund between 1747 and 1786, 37 had lost their sight.¹ Between 1747 and 1769, the Hospital Trustees awarded pensions of between 6d. and 3s. 6d. per week to 36 petitioners who had lost their sight, and this disability seems to have been particularly prevalent on slave ships, for 13 of these petitions state that the claimant has lost his sight through "a distemper then raging amongst the slaves".

One of the most interesting features of this body of petitions is that only one refers to a man suffering from scurvy. Since the symptoms of this disease were easily recognised, the records would almost certainly tell us if scurvy was causing a high death rate in the merchant marine. All writers on the subject of seamen's diseases in the eighteenth century were concerned with scurvy, but they dealt primarily with the Royal Navy, and it may well be that in the merchant navy scurvy was less of a problem. The major task of the Royal Navy in wartime was to protect British shipping and blockade enemy ports, and this necessitated prolonged cruising. Crews were large, and provisioning difficult, and as a result surgeons found scurvy breaking out after six weeks at sea, with a large proportion of the men incapacitated after eight to ten weeks. In the merchant marine, however, this correlation between the duration of a voyage and the number of deaths which took place was less apparent.

The mean duration of 55 voyages to the West Indies in 1787 was eight months one day, while that of 23 voyages to Africa and the West Indies was eleven months one day, but the actual time spent at sea was considerably less. A vessel taking eight or nine months for the round trip to the West Indies would probably spend about a month to six weeks on each crossing of the Atlantic, remaining in port trading and provisioning for the rest of the time. Thus, while ships must have arrived in African and West Indian ports with their crews in a scorbutic condition, we rarely hear of merchantmen burying large numbers of scurvy victims at sea. Once in port, men quickly recovered or were discharged. Thus while

1. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Slave Trade*, (1789), vol. xxvi, (646a), *An Account of disabled Seamen from African Ships admitted into the Seamen's Hospital*.

more men died of scurvy at sea than of fever in tropical ports in the Royal Navy, the reverse was probably true in the merchant marine. Bristol, of course, had no share in the more distant trades to India and the East Indies, in which long passages did lead to deaths from scurvy.

However, the debilitating effects of scurvy should not be underestimated, for, as Lind pointed out, "where it does not rise (*sic*) to any visible calamity, yet it often makes a powerful addition to the malignity of other diseases".¹ The presence of such a disease may well explain why heavy losses occurred on some ships once an infectious malady became established. A common symptom of scorbutic patients was that small cuts would ulcerate, and after loss of sight, ulcered legs were the most common disability amongst seamen given grants by the Seamen's Hospital Fund.

Among those petitions resulting from accidents, shipwreck is frequently mentioned, for navigation was hardly an accurate science in the eighteenth century, but unfortunately the available records are insufficient to make any assessment of the number of Bristol seamen lost annually by shipwreck. However, between 1747 and 1769, 47 petitions resulted from deaths by drowning. Of these, 15 were definitely resulted from shipwreck, while others were due to carelessness, falling overboard while working the ship, or to the overturning of ships' boats.

Falling onto the deck while making or taking in sail was also a frequent cause of fatalities, while other men were incapacitated by similar accidents. In 1760, for example, William Ramsay of the *Kingston* was awarded a pension of 3s. per week after sustaining internal injuries in a fall.²

Other petitioners included 4 men who had lost a leg, one who had lost an arm, 9 who had suffered a broken leg and 2 who had broken arms. Those who had lost limbs were obviously incapable of further service, but seven of those who had suffered fractures were given casual relief to support them until they recovered. Since the other four petitioners were granted pensions for broken limbs, however, we may surmise that fractures frequently led to permanent disability. Although some large ships did carry surgeons, especially in the slave trade, there was little they could do to remedy complicated fractures or prevent infection, and if gangrene set in, amputation was inevitable.

As has been noted, the Hospital Trustees received 44 petitions

1. J. Lind, *A Treatise of the Scurvy*, (1753), reprinted in C. Lloyd (ed.), *The Health of Seamen*, Navy Records Society, vol. cvii, (1965), p.7.
2. Society of Merchant Venturers, *Seamen's Hospital Orders*, etc., no. 76.

for pensions from worn-out seamen between 1747 and 1769, and in only one of these cases did the applicant claim to be retired rather than incapacitated. These petitions make it clear that the merchant seamen could only rarely prolong his career into middle age, for his way of life made him peculiarly susceptible to rheumatic, arthritic and consumptive complaints as well as to tropical disease. Of course, there were exceptions, but usually most crew-members were under 30 years of age. For example, of the 34 crew-members of the *Prince of Wales* in 1754-55, one was a boy of 14, 3 were under 21, and 25 were aged between 21 and 30; only 5 were over 30 years of age.¹ Thus, at a comparatively early age, many men came to rely on the Seamen's Hospital Fund for relief.

In wartime, of course, the merchant seaman faced the additional hazards of being killed, wounded or captured in encounters with enemy privateers or men-of-war. However, merchant shipping losses in the Seven Years War do not seem to have aroused much comment, and wartime insurance rates suggest that most ships were expected to reach their destination. In the War of American Independence, Wright and Fayle have estimated the total English losses at 3,386 ships, and this was nearly the same number of ships as were lost in the wars of William III's reign, when the merchant marine was only half the size it was 100 years later.²

For those men who responded to the lure of privateering, or whose ship took out a Letter of Marque, the hazards were rather greater. In the Seven Years War, a total of 108 Bristol vessels took out Letters of Marque, and while they captured at least 209 enemy vessels, 34 of them were lost, approximately 31% of the total. Surviving reports indicate that 173 prizes were taken during the War of American Independence, while 54 vessels, or 33% of the total of 164 Bristol privateers, were lost.³

As Minchinton states, "privateering and the African trades had in common a high risk of loss from piracy, shipwreck or capture, and involved voyages of long duration, both requiring larger ships and bigger crews",⁴ and losses amongst the undisciplined privateersmen were heavy. There were sometimes dramatic disasters; in

1. Society of Merchant Venturers, *Ship's Muster Rolls*, 1755, no. 42.
2. C. Wright & C. E. Fayle, *The History of Lloyd's*, (1928), p.156.
3. These statements are based upon J. W. Damer Powell, *Bristol Privateers and Ships of War*, (Bristol, 1930).
4. W. E. Minchinton, "The Voyage of the snow *Africa*", *Mariner's Mirror*, vol. xxxvii, (1951), pp.187-188.

1778, for example, the 300-ton privateer *Levant* blew up during an engagement with the American privateer *Hancock*, and the boatswain and 16 men were the only survivors from a crew of more than 100.¹ Explosions seem to have occurred frequently in wartime, despite the use of prepared cartridges on some ships, and several petitions to the Hospital Trustees resulted from the chance ignition of gunpowder through carelessness or enemy action as well as from the bursting of guns.²

Of course, not all the men lost in wartime died during engagements. Of the 88 Bristol privateers known to have been lost during the Seven Years War and the War of American Independence, 27 were wrecked or foundered at sea. Many writers have suggested that the indiscipline usual among privateer crews, coupled with excessive drinking, was the cause of these losses, but perhaps of equal importance was the fact that many vessels sank after being handicapped by damage sustained in action. When the *Britannia* sank in December 1778 after having captured a prize, Captain Furze and 40 of the crew were drowned.³ Three years later, the *Prince Alfred* captured the *St. Anna* and sent her into Fishguard, but the Bristol ship was so badly damaged that she had to put into Santander in a sinking condition, where the crew were imprisoned by the Spanish.⁴

In general, the Bristol privateer stood a greater chance of being captured than of being destroyed by shipwreck or explosion; 57 out of 88 Bristol privateers lost between 1756 and 1783 were captured by French, Spanish or American vessels. This figure must have been largely the result of the eagerness of Bristol captains to take on enemy privateers. At best this was an unprofitable activity, and a privateer was a rather tougher proposition than a merchantman, yet both officers and men seem to have been prepared to risk the hazards involved. Those Bristol privateers which fell in with enemy men-of-war, of course, had little chance of resisting capture, except by flight. Treatment of prisoners in French prisons was often bad, and conditions in the gaols insanitary and over-crowded. In 1757, the 250-tonner *Hawke* blew up and was surrendered to the French privateer *Aigle*. The crew were imprisoned at Bayonne, and the captain, James Connor, reported that about 100 officers and 1,500 men were being con-

fined there in cramped and squalid conditions. The prison was "governed by a devil incarnate", prisoners were obliged to buy their own food, and the sole privilege accorded to officers was the right to hire a bed for 40 livres per month.¹

One of the causes of the rise in wage levels in wartime was undoubtedly the seaman's unwillingness to risk death or capture, but possibly a greater threat to the merchant seaman was the risk of being pressed into the Royal Navy. Although a considerable number of men were taken from prisons, the Admiralty obviously preferred to press seamen, and merchantmen were often stopped by tenders or men-of-war on the high seas or as they approached their home port, and their best men taken off. Such practices led to much discontent amongst crews, and particularly unpopular was the tenders' habit of lying in Kingroad to press the crews of returning merchantmen. The men were understandably reluctant to forego their shore leave to go on board a man-of-war, where, as Lind noted, they would have little chance of recovering from the debilitating effects of scurvy and tropical disease.²

Sometimes crews, particularly on heavily-manned privateers, succeeded in fighting off the press-gangs, but the press warrant was virtually a free mandate to obtain men by any means possible. On 10 September 1756, the *Virginia Merchant* was boarded in Kingroad by a naval tender after a voyage to Africa and the West Indies, and the crew fought off the boarding-party. The tender opened fire on the *Virginia Merchant*, killing one man and wounding several others, and the ship soon sank.³ One Bristol privateer, the *Samson*, had her Letter of Marque revoked after her crew killed four members of a press-gang in a fracas in New York.⁴

In short, wartime added considerably to the hazards which faced the merchant seaman, for not only did he have to fear death, incapacitation or capture in engagement with the enemy, but he also stood a good chance of being pressed into the Royal Navy, where discipline was harsh and disease often endemic.⁵ It is hardly

1. J. W. Damer Powell, *op.cit.*, p.270.

2. See, for example, *Seamen's Hospital Orders*, etc., nos. 84 & 190.

3. J. W. Damer Powell, *op.cit.*, p.253.

4. *ibid.*, p.280

1. *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 6 August, 1757.

2. J. Lind, *An Essay on the Most Effectual Means of Preserving the Health of Seamen*, (1757), reprinted in C. Lloyd (ed.), *The Health of Seamen*, Navy Records Society, vol. cvii, (1965), pp.28-29.

3. J. Latimer, *Annals of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century*, (Bristol 1893), p.322.

4. *Bristol Chronicle*, 4 October 1760.

5. See J. Lind, *An Essay on the Most Effectual Means of Preserving the Health of Seamen* (1757), Reprinted in C. Lloyd (ed.), *The Health of Seamen*, Navy Records Society, vol. cvii, (1965), pp.28-29. Lind noted that disease was commonest on multi-decker men-of-war, where ventilation was bad, and infection could spread rapidly amongst their large crews. This problem was particularly acute in wartime when many men were pressed from the prisons.

surprising, therefore, that wages rose in wartime, for additional incentives were needed to maintain a steady flow of men into the merchant marine, yet in Bristol at least, it would seem that the supply of men was more or less adequate to meet the demand.

During the eighteenth century, there was little that the seaman could do to remedy bad working conditions or to obtain redress for ill-treatment, but, of course, this kind of treatment of a labouring community was not unique; few of the lower income groups could expect much sympathy from their employers at this time. The merchant seaman, however, was fortunate in that he or his dependents could apply to the Hospital Fund for relief once he had fallen victim to the bad conditions in which he worked.

The Hospital Trustees took their duties seriously, and did much to deal with a problem that was beyond the capabilities of the Poor Law authorities. If a pension of between 6d. and 3s. 6d. per week was considerably less than an able seaman's wage at least it was better than the workhouse. Large sums were paid out by the Trustees—121 persons received a total of £734 11s. in 1770—and while they usually checked that an applicant had paid his sixpence per month for the five years stipulated by the Act of 1747, they were at times prepared to waive the regulations to help men in distressed circumstances. In September 1754, James Grant, previously mate aboard several Bristol ships, was granted the sum of 5 guineas because he was incapacitated and very ill, although the Trustees found that legally he was not entitled to any benefit.¹ Even when the Trustees doubted whether a petitioner was suffering from a serious disability, they usually gave him the chance to appear before a medical board at the Infirmary, and in several cases such men were later given relief when the Trustees received the results of their examinations.² Reviews were regularly carried out, and while such reviews sometimes redounded to the pensioner's disadvantage, the Trustees were often prepared to alter the conditions under which a pension was paid to help a seaman in distress.

However, while the Trustees did a great deal for the men who came to them for relief, it must be remembered that the Society of Merchant Venturers was a body of men united primarily by commercial, and not philanthropic, motives. For this reason, the Society, as Trustee of the Hospital Fund, was on occasions pre-

pared to take action against seamen who, although deserving relief, were acting against the vested interests of Bristol's merchants and shipowners. During a voyage to Africa and the West Indies on the *Thetis* in 1754-55, Robert Barker, the carpenter, made a complaint about the food, and was accused of incitement to mutiny by Robert Wapshutt, the acting captain, who confined him in irons and treated him so badly that he lost his sight. He returned to Bristol on board H.M. ships *Advice* and *Torbay*, and applied to the Seamen's Hospital Fund. On 5 October 1756, he was awarded a pension of 3s. 6d. by the Hospital Trustees, who claimed that his disability was due to "a distemper then raging amongst the slaves".¹ Barker also sued Wapshutt, and was awarded £26 damages by the examining magistrate in February 1758. Two years later he published a pamphlet entitled, *The Unfortunate Shipwright, or Cruel Captain, being a Faithful Narrative of the Unparalleled Sufferings of Robt. Barker, late Carpenter on board the Thetis snow of Bristol in a Voyage to the Coast of Africa and Antigua*.² This spurred the Hospital Trustees into action, and, reviewing Barker's case on 2 December 1760, they concluded, "It appearing to the Trustees that Robert Barker ... has imposed upon the Publick by publishing a pamphlet entitled the Unfortunate Shipwright, or Cruel Captain, wherein [he] has inserted several falsehoods calculated to Blacken the Character of Persons who appear to be innocent, and to raise the Compassion on his behalf, and to get money as an Unfortunate Seaman, IT IS ORDERED that the pension of the said Robt. Barker be from henceforth stopp'd".³ Possibly Barker exaggerated the hardships he had gone through, and there might have been a case for stopping his pension on the grounds that he now had an alternative source of income, but the wording of the review certainly suggests that this was a vindictive act directed against a man who had sought to justify himself against his superiors. Wapshutt can hardly have been innocent, as the captain of H.M.S. *Torbay* testified on Barker's behalf in court, and it was extremely rare for a seaman to obtain a favourable verdict against his employers and superiors.

Charitable bodies in the eighteenth century were concerned to restrict benefits to the deserving, and it was for them to decide who was deserving and who was not. In this instance, at least, the

1. Society of Merchant Venturers, *Seamen's Hospital Orders*, etc., no. 30.

2. See, for example, *Seamen's Hospital Orders*, etc., nos. 97 & 102.

1. *ibid.*, no. 50.

2. J. W. Damer Powell, *op.cit.*, p.188.

3. Society of Merchant Venturers. *Seamen's Hospital Orders*, etc., review of no. 50, 2 December 1760.

Trustees were following these precepts, and were administering the Seamen's Hospital Fund as if it were a charitable concern. In fact, they were not entitled to award or conclude pensions at their own discretion, for the Fund was not a charity, and the incapacitated seaman had a legal right to a pension by virtue of the obligatory monthly payments he had made.

This criticism of the activities of the Hospital Trustees, however, should not be permitted to obscure the fact their achievements were considerable, and that their efforts ensured the effectiveness of the Fund as a means of providing for incapacitated seamen and their dependents. If as shipowners and employers the members of the Society of Merchant Venturers were rarely prepared to act decisively to improve working conditions, at least in their capacity of Hospital Trustees they were able and willing to deal humanely with those victims who applied to them for relief.

Even in an age which rarely concerned itself with the working conditions of the working classes, the seafaring life was recognised as being exceptionally hazardous, and this short survey of the seamen of Bristol has shown that heavy losses were the inevitable result of tropical disease. Shipwreck and the perils of wartime conditions added to the seaman's chance of being killed or incapacitated in the course of his work. The picture was not entirely bleak, however; in Bristol at least, the seaman's wage compared favourably with those of landmen of similar social origins, while the food provided aboard merchant ships was not particularly bad by eighteenth century standards, although it was undoubtedly monotonous and deficient in vitamins. Fortunately for the seaman, if the worst came to the worst, he did have the Hospital Fund to fall back on, although it is difficult to say whether the Fund was established because large numbers of incapacitated seamen were placing an unbearably heavy strain upon the Poor Law authorities, or simply because the vital role of the merchant seaman in the economy of eighteenth-century England was recognised by the merchants and politicians who formulated the 1747 Act. The Society of Merchant Venturers proved humane and efficient administrators of the scheme, and by the late 1750s were expending considerable sums of money in providing for the men who came to them for help. If the creation of such a scheme was long overdue in 1747, at least when it materialized it proved remarkably effective by eighteenth century standards.

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