

HELP!

I know my family were associated with barges but where do I start to find information about them or their vessels?

We often get questions about vessel holdings, the fate of the vessels, the wharf or docks operated from and barge owners or employees. Because of the regulations governing passage along the River Thames the business of barge owning or working was often tied very closely to the profession of the Waterman and Lighterman. However the influence of the Watermen and Lightermen Company on the passage of boats along the Thames created some interesting anomalies. This is what Charles Dickens Jnr had to say about it in 1887 – *“A barge of 45 tons register will carry some 100 tons of goods, and is navigated by two men, who, if the vessel comes from Rochester or thereabouts, need not be freemen of the Watermen's Company. Anybody, in fact, may bring a barge from the Medway, but if the vessel start from Gravesend a freeman must be on board - an anomaly which appears absurd. Further, a barge coming up and going through the bridges is compelled, if it take a third hand, to take a waterman, although all the way from the Medway to London Bridge she may have been sailed by outsiders. Vested interests are indeed wonderful institutions, and singularly tenacious of life!”*

This meant that that if your barge ancestors originated in London then it is very probable they would have served an apprenticeship. If they came from Kent or Essex they may have called themselves Watermen or Lightermen but may not have served an apprenticeship with the W&L Company.

So if your ancestors were from London area your first 'port of call' should be the Watermen and Lightermen records. You can search through the index to see if your relative served an apprentice as a Waterman - Lighterman. You'll need to visit the Guildhall library to look at the microfilm index to see if your relative served an apprentice as a Waterman - Lighterman.

You'll also find registered W&L's recording the name of their vessel(s) in the Quaterage Ledgers. The '6308' films record the W&L's name, address and the name of vessel and sometimes tonnage. The vessels are loosely described, such as barge, punt, lighter etc. Occasionally you get a detailed description i.e. Sailing Barge or Decked Barge but most times you just see 'barge' which makes it hard to predict if they are talking about licensed barges or lighters.

Data transcribed from hand-written documentation is always subject to errors and you are advised to consult the original documents to confirm the accuracy of these records. This information was compiled from the BT108 list at the PRO Kew. For further information refer to "Merchant Shipping: Registration of Ships, 1786-1994 Domestic Records Information 94" (<http://catalogue.pro.gov.uk/Leaflets/ri2201.htm>). Be sure to visit www.bargemen.co.uk

Once you've got a vessel name the next sensible move is to see if it's listed in the Mercantile Navy Lists. This is a set of books that recorded every year British registered merchant vessels. Although the MNL is certainly less detailed than the Lloyd's Register of Ships, it can provide information to the family historian because it lists all British registered vessels even down to the very smallest sailing boat. It was published from 1850 to 1977. These records were collated from the customs declarations at the ports and so customs registers are the ultimate official source of data on British ships. Each ship has its own register, giving exact details of its size, build and owners. Two copies were kept; one may now be in the Public Record Office and the other in a local record office.

Copies of Mercantile Navy List are not as common as Lloyd's Register of Ships. We have listed those libraries that have some copies. The nearest to a complete run is in the Guildhall Library, London which has every copy published from 1857.

Edinburgh - National Library of Scotland.
Falmouth - National Maritime Museum Cornwall
Glasgow Mitchell Library
Liverpool - Merseyside Maritime Museum
London - Admiralty Library, British Library, Guildhall Library, Lloyd's Register, National Maritime Museum, Public Record Office, Kew*
Southampton - Southampton Central Library
World Ship Society
Merchant Ship Library and Archive.

Once you've got some vessel names you can check in the BT Transactions at Kew to see if the vessel was registered. You've got little chance with the earlier entries but the Record offices at Kew hold the official registrations for vessels at various ports (and primarily we'd be interested in London, although vessels may have been registered elsewhere and used in the London river). BT 111 and BT108 are the books you need which are still only available as hard copy.

You're probably best off checking the London registrations first. There is no index so it's a case of slogging through page by page. Go for the more unusual names first, Three Friends or William will just throw up any number of vessels! As we said earlier very occasionally the Quaterage Ledgers will give a tonnage and this is one of the things recorded on the BT records. You'll also find a record of the original owner(s) and if you turn the page you'll see details of the subsequent vessel masters with dates. If the registry was closed for some reason (converted to dumb barge, broken up or sunk etc) that should be recorded with a date.

There were a number of Acts governing what vessels should be registered and because of this vessels that fell below a certain tonnage or where only employed in river work were exempt from the requirements. So don't feel too bad if you can't correlate a name with an official registration. I've spent the last ten years looking for a barge called 'Hannah'!

www.bargemen.co.uk

Notes

* The MNL volumes at Kew on open access are: -

1859, 1860, 1861 original and three part copy, 1862, 1863, 1864, 1866, 1867, 1868, 1870, 1871, 1871 – 1872, 1872, 1873, 1874, 1875, 1879, 1881, 1884, 1889, 1893 Part I & II, 1894, 1896, 1901, 1904 Part I & II, 1913, 1925, 1930, 1933, 1938 Part II & III, 1949 and Supplement.

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