



Merchant Seamen Research - General

Introduction

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

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

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

Pre-1835

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

1835 - 1844: First Register of Merchant Seamen

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

1835-1836

First Register of Merchant Seamen Service: Series I, 1835-1836 arranged in five volumes alphabetically in [BT 120](#).

No.	Name	Age	Place of Birth	Quality	Ship belonging to	How disposed of
	Th					
3011	Thomas George	32	Cardigan	mate	Marina of Bristol 3 Oct 186	
3012	Thomas John	20	Fishguard	James Williams	of Montagu Oct 1866	

BT 120 Series. © National Archives.

1835-1844

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

	Carrigale John	744	8409	8632	9776	2148	2189
"	Robert	7669	12181				
"	James	7670	8029	9777	11480	12239	12474
"	Donald	7661	8550				
"	William	8283	8473	20574			
"	James	9581	11728				
"	Thomas	10656					
"	Isaac	11294					
"	Isabel	11312					Dead
"	David	11001					

BT 119 Series © National Archives

10655	Collinton, Michd	25-207					
	of London	Enrolled Dec 35					
10656	Carrigal Tho	287					
	of Orkney	Enrolled Dec 35					

BT 112 Series © National Archives

1845 - 1854: Second Register of Merchant Seamen

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

No. of	117874		Register Ticket	25	127 52	12 21
James Watts					12 21	
Born at	Hartley		in 1830	Age when	45 75	12 21
County of	Norfolk		9 day of	190 95	12 21	
Capacity	Seaman					
Height	5 feet 6 inches		Hair	Dark & Graying		
Complexion	Fairish		Eyes	Blue		
Marks	None		Can Write			
First went to Sea as	Apprentice					
			in the Year	1836		
Has served in the Royal Navy	No					
Has been in Foreign Service	No					
When unemployed, resides at	South Shields					
Issued at	Newcastle		day of	Dec 2 1845		

BT 113 Series. © National Archives

1854 - 1856: Third Register of Merchant Seamen

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

NAME AND DESCRIPTION			Age	1853		1854	
No.	No. of Certificate	No. of Ticket		Out	Home	Out	Home
			18				
James Watt							
Born at							
Somersea							
			17				
James Watts							
Born at							
Somersea							

BT 116 Series. © National Archives

1857 – 1912

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

1913 - 1941: Fourth Register of Merchant Seamen

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

1913-1917

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

1918-1921

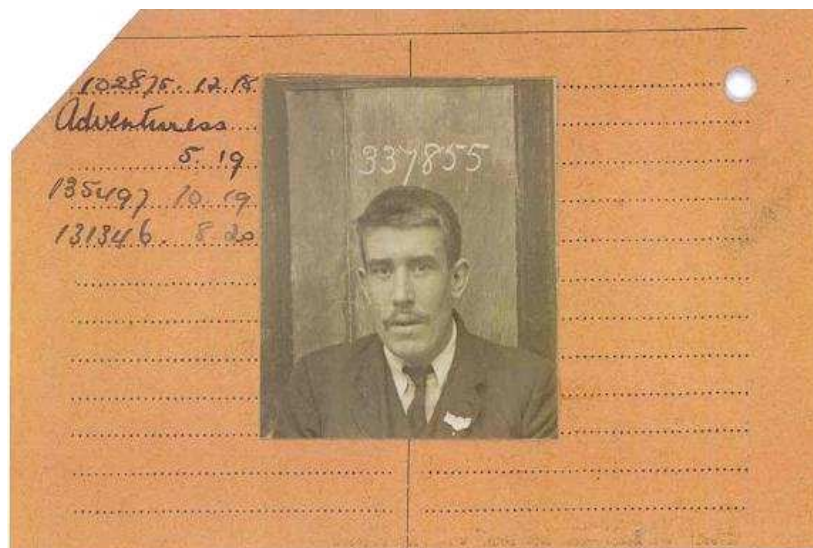
Although the majority of the cards from 1913 to 1920 were destroyed, a selection of them, dating from 1918 to 1921, can be traced using CR10 cards. Originals of these cards are located at [Southampton City Archive](#), however [The National Archives](#) holds copies of the registry cards on microfiche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

C.R. 10. No. of Identity Certificate. *337855*
M.N.S. Region *S.W.* Regional No. *A166825*
Surname *Thomas*
Christian Name *William Thomas*
Rating *St. Stephen's Idg. T.M.N.R.N.R.* No.
No. and Grade of B/T Certificate.
Date and Place of Birth *22.11.78 Millbrook Southampton*
Nationality *British* Father *Scotch*
Height *5'9 1/2* Colour Hair *Grey* Eyes *Blue*
Tattoo Marks *anchor & flag on the right forearm*
Dis. A No. *947168* N.H. Insurance No. *5422*
Name and Address of Next of Kin *Alice Maud Thomas*
Leahurst Rd. Totton, Southampton.

(32231) Wt. 20167-23 100m. 8/18. Av. P. (502).
(87421) Wt. 24257-26. Rpt. 10m. 9/18. Av. P. (730).

CR10 Card - Front. © National Archives

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



CR10 Card - Back. © National Archives

1921-1941

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

1941 - 1972: Fifth Register of Merchant Seamen

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

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

The series [BT 382](#) holds CRS10 Docket books which form the Register. These dockets create a sea service record for each registered seaman. They are arranged alphabetically within eight parts:

Part 1: Covering mainly Europeans and British Dependent Territories Seamen, originally for the period 1941 to 1946, but later service records can be found covering seamen who started their sea service after WWII

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

While the continuation page of the CRS10 Docket book shows:

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

Ship		Engagement		Rank by Rating	F. or H.	Initials	Discharge		Character	Nat. Inscr. Cons.	Initials
Name	O.N.	Date	Place				Date	Place			
WINCHESTER CASTLE	16249	16-11-45	Soton.	1 st Able		J.P.	30-12-49	Soton.	VG VG	8	J.P.
<i>Do.</i>	<i>Do.</i>	11-1-50	<i>do.</i>	<i>do.</i>			24-2-50	Soton.	VG VG	8	J.P.
<i>Do.</i>	<i>Do.</i>	8-3-50	Soton.				21-4-50	<i>do.</i>	VG VG	8	J.P.
RANGITATA	14936	17-3-53	Vic Dye	Do	F	B.P.	7-5-53	Vic Dye	VG VG	18	B.P.
<i>Effective</i>	<i>8/4/53</i>	<i>8-8-53</i>	<i>do</i>	<i>do</i>	<i>do</i>	<i>do</i>	<i>26-11-53</i>	<i>do</i>	<i>do</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>do</i>
RANGITATA	14956	19-11-53	Vic Dye	Do	F		30-4-54	Vic Dye	VG VG	20	
LARGBAY	13722	24-11-54	Vic Dye	Stoker	F		19-3-55	Vic Dye	VG VG	19	
RANGITATA	18306	10-5-55	Vic Dye	Stoker	F		3-9-55	Vic Dye	VG VG	18	
ARUNDEL CASTLE	14517	12-10-55	Soton	Stoker	F		25-11-55	Soton	VG VG	8	
ARUNDEL CASTLE	14517	7-12-55	Soton	Stoker	F		20-1-56	Soton	VG VG	8	

CRS 10 Continuation Page. © National Archives.

1973 - 1999

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

1999 - Present

The [Registry of Shipping and Seamen](#) is able to provide information taken from ships' Official Log Books and Crew Agreements, which (for a charge) can be recorded on to a Certificate of Sea Service.

C.R. 1.

Surname **COPPING**
 (in CAPITALS)
 Christian Name **Charles William**

Birth: Year **1892** Place **Reading**

Dis. A. No. **756023** Rating **Reference** R.V. 2 No.

Certificate (if any): Grade & No. P.R. No. (if any)

Health Inscr. No. **171261** Unemployment Inscr. No. **20663**

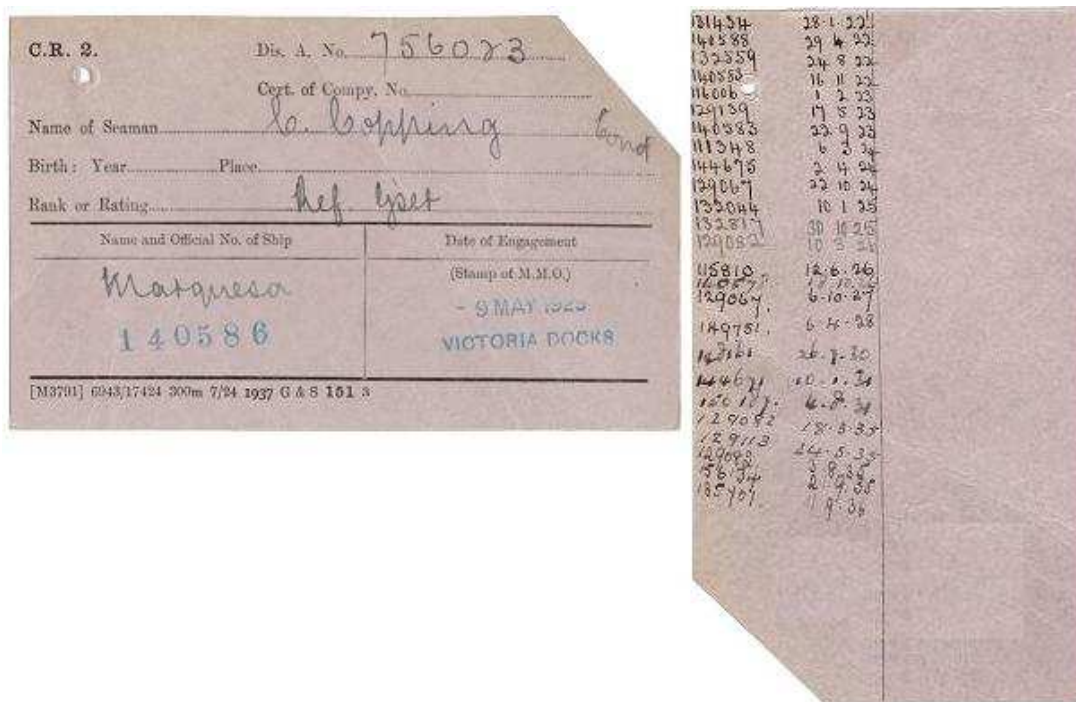
Height **5-8 1/2** Colour Eyes **brown** Hair **brown**

Complexion **fair** Distinguishing marks **Ch. on left arm**

(8001) 9081/220 500 (4) 8127 C&S/L/1 186 [Back over]

CR1 Card - Front. © National Archives

Once you have located the Discharge number, you can then search for the seaman's CR2 card in [BT 348](#) which is organised numerically by that number (omitting any prefix letter before it). These CR2 cards should show a list of the ships on which the seaman served, customarily by its Official Number. However, the clerks do not seem to have entered every change of ship and you may find that the record is incomplete and that some additional ship details may be recorded on the CR1 and CR10 cards.



Front and Back of CR2 Cards in BT348. © National Archives

Combined Index 1918-1941

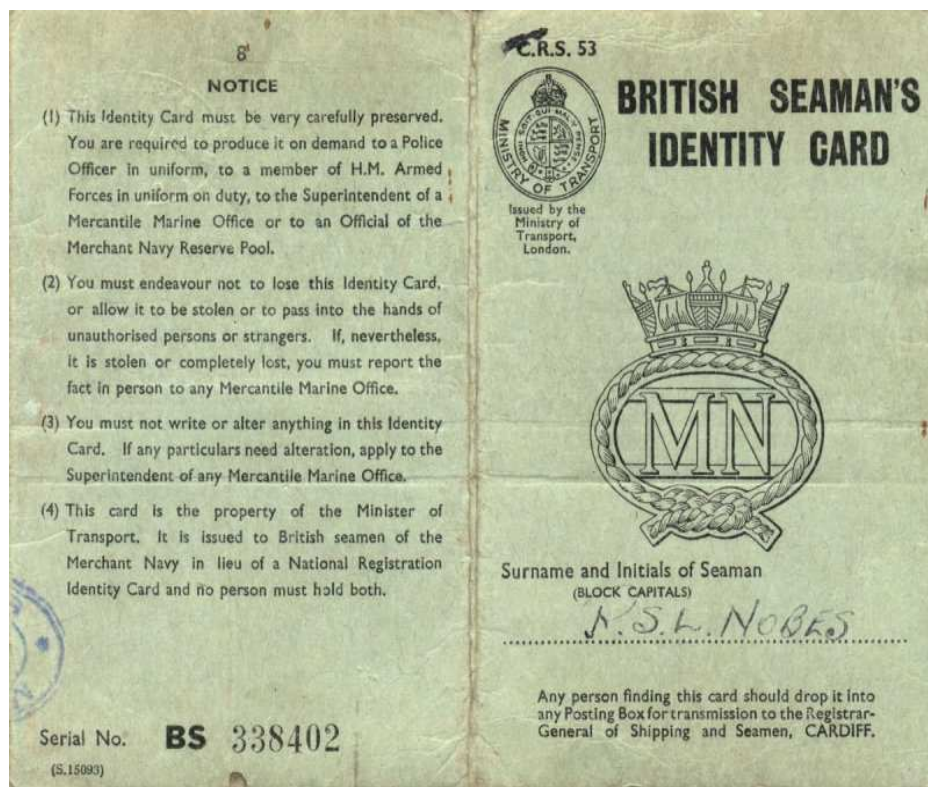
Organised by the seaman's Discharge 'A' number this index was compiled using extracted cards from the other three indexes. The reasons for doing this are unknown. They are located in series [BT 364](#) as the Register of Seamen, Combined Index (CR1, CR2 and CR10 cards) 1918-1941. For details of what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

Seamen's Pouches 1913 - 1972

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

Some special categories of pouches are to be found in [BT 390](#) (those who served on Royal Naval Auxiliary vessels) and [BT 391](#) (those who served in the liberation of Europe); these should be consulted, where relevant, in addition to

[BT 372](#). Some material that might have been expected to be in pouches can be found in [BT 364](#) and [BT 391](#) and can be searched for by surname using The National Archives [Catalogue](#).



Seamen's Pouch. © National Archives

Bibliography

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

Watts, Christopher, *My Ancestor was a Merchant Seaman: How Can I Find Out More About Him?* (2nd edition, London, 2002)

Bevan, Amanda, *Tracing your Ancestors in The National Archives* (7th edition, Kew, 2006)

Chater, Kathy, *Tracing Your Family History: A Complete Guide to Finding Out More About Your Ancestors* (Apple Press, 2008)

Fenton, Roy; Briody, Nuala and Macdonald, Mike. *Maritime Information: A guide to libraries and sources of information in the United Kingdom* (4th edition, 2004)

Useful Contact Information

<p>The National Archive Ruskin Avenue Kew Richmond Surrey TW9 4DU Tel: +44 (0)20 8876 3444 Web: http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/</p>	<p>National Maritime Museum Romney Road Greenwich London SE10 9NF Tel: +44 (0)20 8858 4422 Web: http://www.nmm.ac.uk/</p>
<p>Southampton City Archives Southampton City Council South Block Civic Centre Southampton SO14 7LY Tel: +44 (0)23 8083 4563 Web: Southampton City Archives</p>	<p>Registry of Shipping and Seamen MCA Anchor Court Ocean Way Cardiff CF24 5JW Tel: +44 (0)29 2044 8800 Web: http://www.mcga.gov.uk/</p>
<p>Guildhall Library Aldermanbury London EC2P 2EJ Tel: +44 (0)20 7732 1868 Web: Guildhall Library</p>	<p>Maritime History Archive Memorial University of Newfoundland St. John's Newfoundland A1C 5S7 Canada Tel: +1 709 737 8428 Web: www.mun.ca/mha</p>
<p>Crew List Index Project (CLIP) Peter and Jan Owens Glan Aber Aberffraw Ty Croes Ynys Mon LL63 5LX Tel: +44 (0)14 0784 0628 Web: http://www.crewlist.org.uk/</p>	<p>Imperial War Museum Lambeth Road London SE1 6HZ Tel: +44 (0)20 7416 5220 Web: http://www.iwm.org.uk/</p>