

FORGOTTEN WRECKS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR



Black and Asian Seamen
of the Forgotten Wrecks of the First World War

Contents

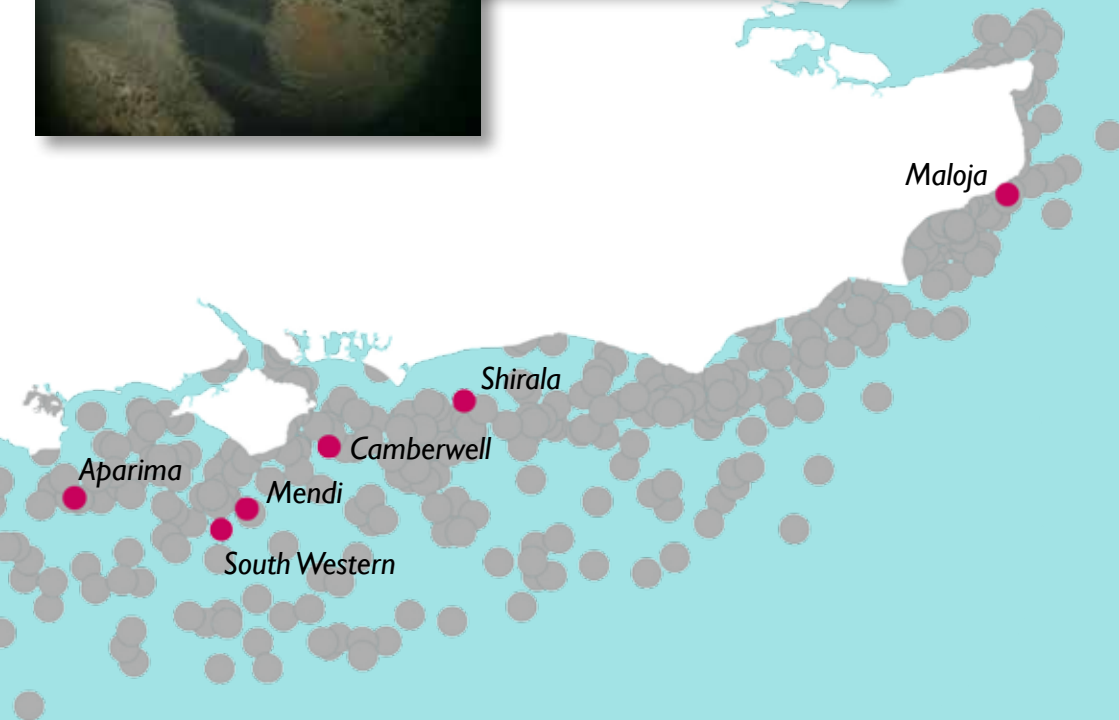
Introduction: a global maritime war	2
Facts & figures	8
Life in the Mercantile Marine	10
SS Aparima: a maritime empire at war	14
'Lascar' histories	18
SS Maloja: ocean liners and 'lascars'	20
Black sailor histories	25
SS Mendi: empire, memory and race	27
Chinese sailor histories	32
SS Camberwell and SS Vinovia: among the many other stories	34
Casualties and compensation	37
Post-war lives	39
Memorials and histories	40
Further reading	42



Vinovia

City of Corinth

The wrecks of the South Western
(below) and the Camberwell (right),
both sunk during the war.



Map: The 1100 First World War wrecks of the Forgotten Wrecks project,
with the 8 key wrecks mentioned in this booklet highlighted in pink.

Cover Image: Crew from SS Chyebassa, a merchant ship of the British India
Line, 1917. Image courtesy of the IWM

A Global Maritime War

In August 1914, Britain went to war. The British empire and all the people and places that encompassed went to war. The 'Great War' was not a European war, it was a war of empires, a world war.

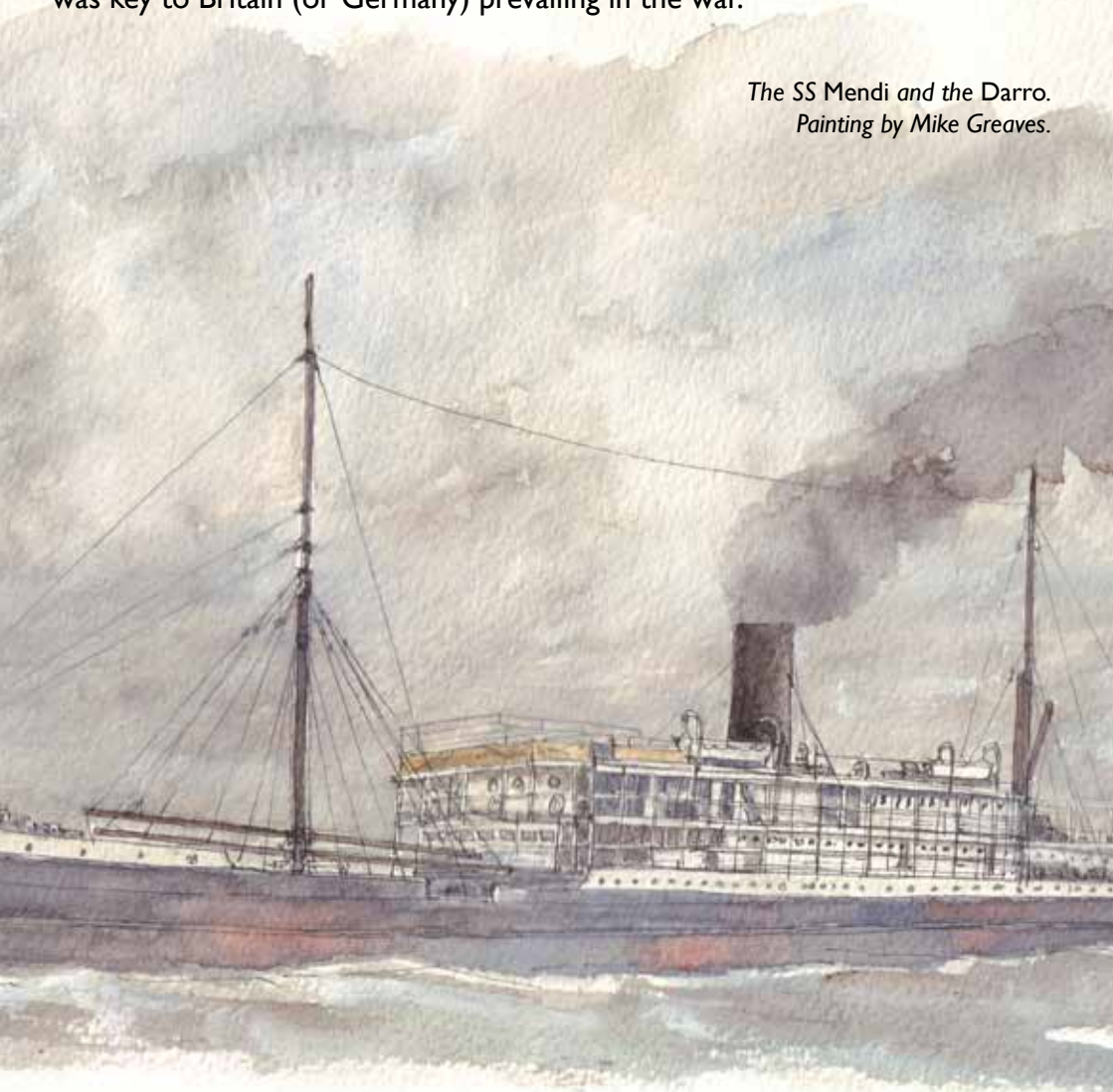
Between 1914 and 1918, Germany and Austria-Hungary (and other 'Central' Powers) fought Britain, France, Russia (and other 'Allied' or 'Entente' Powers). There was brutal fighting in continental Europe, particularly on the Western and Eastern Fronts, but the war was also fought in Africa, the Middle East, Asia and across the globe. It was fought by colonial troops as well as European troops. It was fought by colonial and European sailors.

At its height at the turn of the 20th century, the British empire covered 11,400,000 square miles and included at least 410,000 million people. In 1914 Britain was no longer the dominant economic power in Europe. Its empire was not uncontested, but it was extensive and wealthy. It included 61 colonies, protectorates, possessions and dominions in Africa, North and South America, Central America and the Caribbean, in the Atlantic Ocean, across Asia and the Indian Ocean, and in Australia and the Pacific Ocean.



In the age before air travel, it was a truly maritime empire. Goods, people, materials and ideas moved around by ship. Nearly two-thirds of the food and drink consumed by the British population came from abroad, along with cotton, oil, rubber and many ores and metals. This global transport and supply network—that fed, fuelled and sustained civilian and military populations—was key to Britain (or Germany) prevailing in the war.

The SS Mendi and the Darro.
Painting by Mike Greaves.





Britain's navy and mercantile marine were pivotal to the war. The most intense naval warfare was in the Channel, the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. Allied merchant shipping, and the naval vessels protecting it, frequently clashed with German submarines, ships and mines. Conflicts and supply lines also extended into the Mediterranean, Atlantic, Indian, Pacific and Southern Oceans. The Royal Indian Marine engaged in minesweeping and carried troops and supplies across the Indian Ocean, and the destruction of Germany's east Asian Squadron in the Atlantic was a key Allied naval victory in the winter of 1914.

Colonial seamen were integral to this maritime warfare. Many of those seamen were black and Asian. Yet, the stories of these men, as well as the black and Asian troops and workers in the First World War, are not often told.

Close to 17 million people, civilian and military, were killed during the war. There remains uncertainty about the total number of merchant and naval vessels lost during the conflict, but there are at least 1100 First World War shipwrecks in the Forgotten Wrecks project area off the south coast of Britain alone.

This booklet explores the lives and contributions of black and Asian seamen who lived, worked—and in many cases died—on those ships.

Left: Crew from SS Chyebassa, a merchant ship of the British India Line, 1917. © IWM.

Facts & Figures

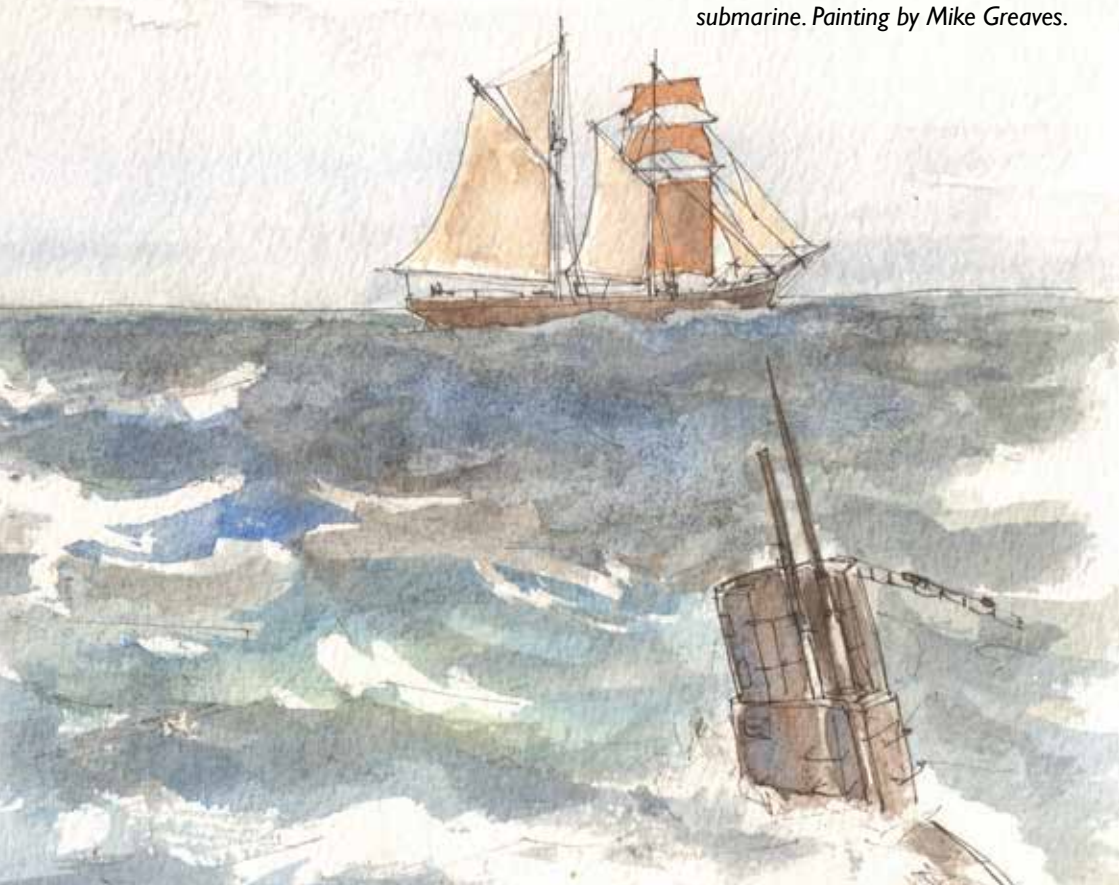


Of the 18 million people that lost their lives during the Great War, 14,600 of them were part of the Mercantile Marine. Britain's merchant fleet kept the country running during the war - nearly two-thirds of the food and drink consumed by the British population came from abroad (including 100% sugar, 79% grain, 65% butter and 40% meat).

There are 1,100 war time wrecks off the south coast of Britain alone, and they form the study area of the Forgotten Wrecks project. The vast majority of these were merchant vessels. German U-boats were the biggest threat, sinking 6,924 allied ships during the conflict.

Approximately 30% of seamen in the British Mercantile Marine were 'foreign', and 17.5% were 'Lascars' (seamen often of Asian and Arab origin) – this is nearly 1 in 6, or 51,000 men.

Rendering of the scene engraved on the British Mercantile Medal with steam ship, sailing ship, and submarine. Painting by Mike Greaves.



Life in the British Mercantile Marine

The British Mercantile Marine was not a single organisation, like the Royal Navy. Merchant mariners from all over the world were employed on individual contracts by a mass of private British shipping companies operating on cargo and passenger routes around the world, as well as in British waters. It was the ships, rather than the seamen, that were British. It is estimated that in 1914 30% of seamen in the British Mercantile Marine were foreign.

Many of the foreign seamen were European. Scandinavian seamen worked in the North Sea coastal trading and fishing fleets for example. But there were also significant numbers of Asian, African and Caribbean seamen. By 1914 17.5% of British merchant mariners, 51,000 men, were classed as 'lascars' (Asian, particularly Indian, seamen). Many of these men came from British colonies and crewed coasters or transoceanic ships sailing between colonies as well as to and from Britain. For example, Liverpool shipping companies, like the Elder Dempster line, sailed routes between West African colonies and Liverpool and regularly recruited crew in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast, Gambia and South Africa.

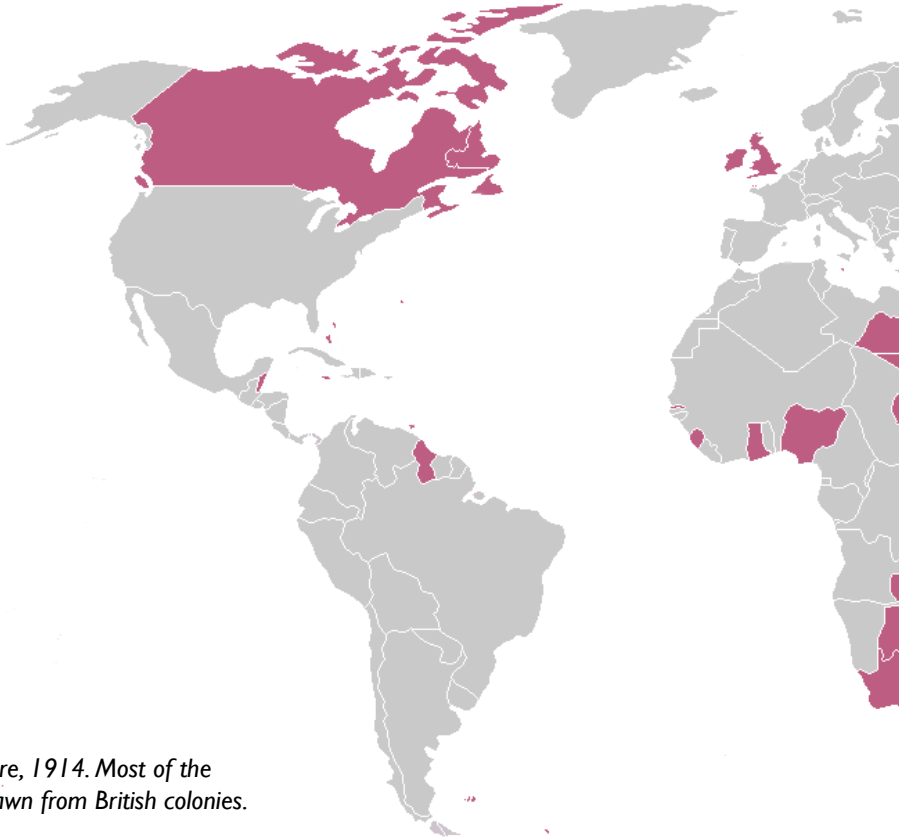
There were Yemeni, Indian, Malay, Somali, West African, Egyptian, Chinese, Burmese, Siamese, Indonesian and West Indian seamen, among others. They were most often recruited in colonial ports, including Aden, Lagos, Kingston, Cape Town, Calcutta, Bombay, Hong Kong, Singapore, but due to their itinerant lifestyle not always in their 'home' ports. In fact, many were migrants from interior regions who had lost land and homes as a result of imperial expansion.

Most of these men worked on steamships like the SS *Aparima* (p14-15), a 5704 ton steamship with a six cylinder, triple expansion engine and three boilers as well as schooner-rigged steel masts. Such ships were huge machines that required intense physical labour and new skills, rather than traditional sailing ones, from their crew.



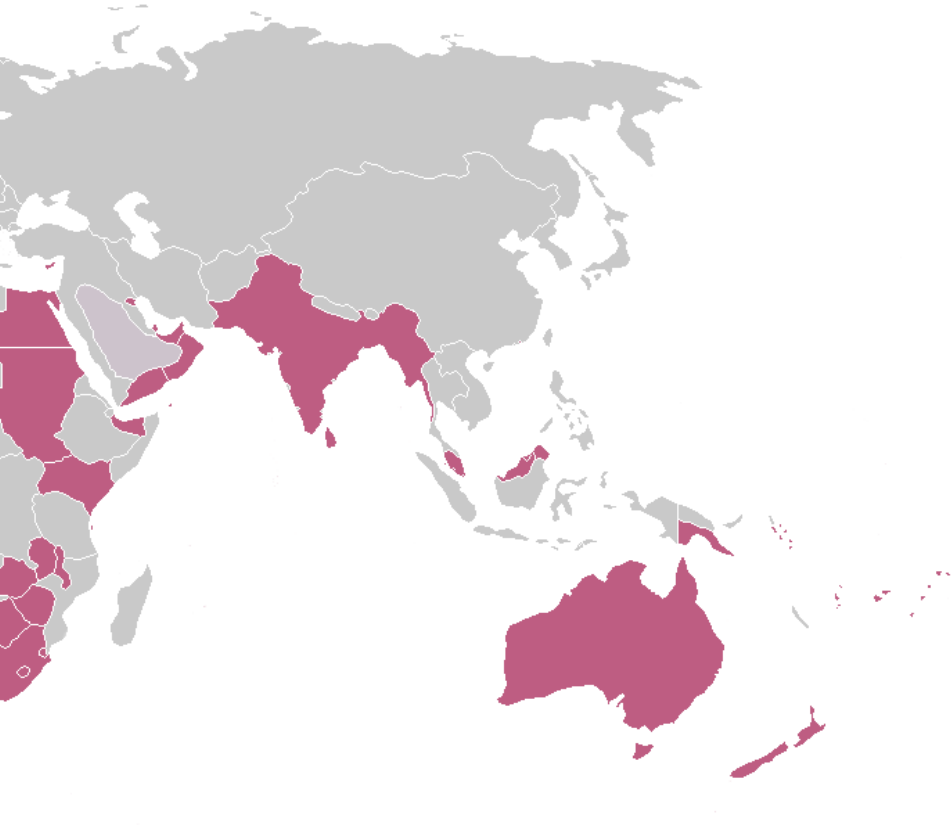
*Men working in the
stoke hold of a
merchant ship
© IWM (Q 18550)*

Many black and Muslim Asian seamen worked in the engine rooms or 'stokeholds'. They were firemen and stokers, bunkermen and coal boys, greasers (greasing machinery), trimmers (moving coal around to keep the ship balanced) and donkeymen (tending the auxiliary boilers). These jobs were dangerous, extremely hot and physically exhausting. Racist ideas about supposed physical attributes determined a seaman's role on a ship. Black and Muslim Asian men were generally employed in stokeholds, Hindu Asian and Chinese seamen in galleys, while Catholic, Portuguese-Asians from Goa were frequently stewards or in roles requiring regular interaction with white officers or passengers. Cunard refused to hire black men as deck crew of passenger liners until the 1950s.



The British Empire, 1914. Most of the 'lascars' were drawn from British colonies.

Seamen from the Indian Ocean were employed on 'Asiatic' or 'Lascar' articles of agreement for two years. They were paid 1/3 to 1/5 of the wage of men on standard, or 'European' articles (including the few black seamen on standard articles in the nominally free European labour market). Asian and most black seamen, or 'coloured crew' as they were categorised, on irregular contracts were given smaller berths, less pay and fewer rations. Their conditions and pay provided lucrative savings for shipping companies, but they suffered high rates of illness and injury due to their poor conditions. In port they were often required to stay on ship due to immigration fears and racist ideas about hygiene and disease.



These men had not joined the Navy but risked their lives, not always willingly, nonetheless. The imperial racial hierarchy, European ideas about race that had emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, regulated all of their working lives, but alternative choices were very limited. In 1916–17 there was a crisis in British shipping in Bombay when, with hundreds of Indian seamen dead, injured or missing, Indian seamen (including 4000 Punjabis) took safer jobs with the British Mesopotamian labour corps. Regulations and coercion, rather than better conditions, were used to force the men back to sea.

SS *Aparima*: a Maritime Empire at War



SS Aparima. Image courtesy of the Old Ships Picture Gallery

SS *Aparima* was built in Dumbarton, Scotland in 1902 for the Union Steamship Company of New Zealand, and was named after a river and settlement on New Zealand's South Island. It sailed the 'Calcutta run' (the inter-colony route between Calcutta in India and New Zealand) and was regularly crewed by men from New Zealand and India. Yet, the wreck of *Aparima* lies off the coast of Purbeck, Dorset. From its origins, owners, voyages and crew through to its end, *Aparima* reflected Britain's maritime empire.

In 1912 *Aparima* became the Union Company's officer cadet training ship, carrying 50 teenage cadets on each working voyage. The ship was designed to carry passengers as well as cargo and, with the war, it began transporting troops and horses and was requisitioned by the British authorities as a troop

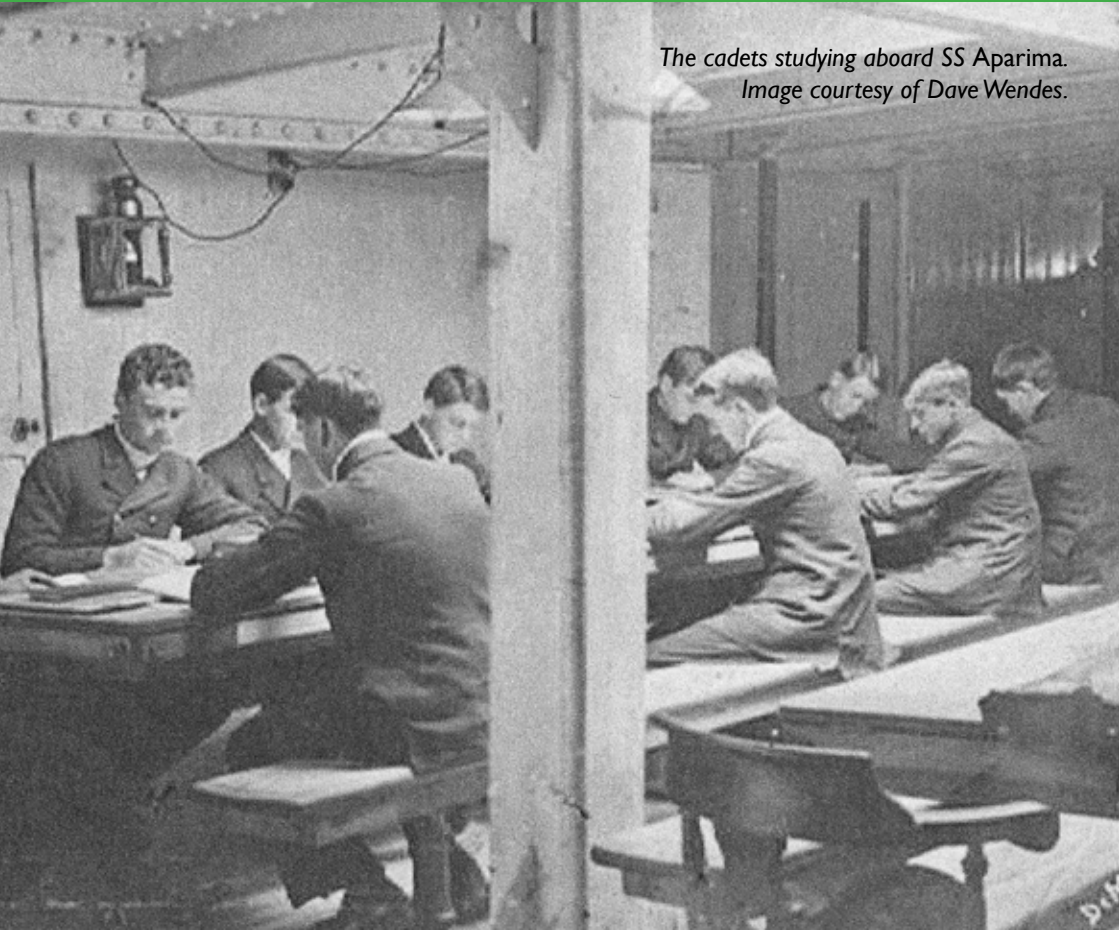
ship. It transported troops from New Zealand to Egypt regularly in 1915-16, before it sailed for Britain in February 1917. These early troop runs took it into war zones, so the company offered parents the opportunity to withdraw their sons from service. Few did. In November 1917, when it was sunk, there were 30 cadets among the crew.

On the night of 18/19th November 1917 *Aparima* was on route from London's Victoria Docks to Barry in Wales for coaling with 113 men on board. At 12.50am it was torpedoed by German U-boat *UB-40* and began to sink quickly. There was no time to launch lifeboats and the ship had sunk by 1am. 56 men were lost, including 17 of the 30 cadets. 24 of those who died were New Zealanders (including 17 cadets), 29 were Indian, two were British and one was Chinese.

It was one of the worst losses of men at sea New Zealand suffered during the First World War. Widely reported in the press, it has become an important story in New Zealand's Great War history. Newspapers sketched details of hometowns and families, along with the names, rank and ages of the New Zealanders lost. The story of the cadets was poignant and became emblematic. Several of the cadets who died were only 16. One, Colin McDonald, was the son of a designer of Union Company ships. Others who survived, including Tommy Bevan, recounted remarkable survival stories.

Along with newspaper accounts, there is an unusual depth of information about *Aparima* in the archives (both in the UK and New Zealand). Gerald Doorly, the Captain, left detailed voyage notes. There are letters and postcards from the cadets and officers. There are photographs of the ship, of the cadets at work and individual portraits of officers and cadets.

Aparima's crew, like the ship, was colonial. There were only two British Royal Navy Reserve Seamen among those lost. But like the newspapers at the time, historical records focus on the white officers and crew. Documents refer to Asian seamen as 'natives' or 'orientals', or more simply Indian and Chinese, while the white New Zealanders, also colonial subjects, are termed



*The cadets studying aboard SS Aparima.
Image courtesy of Dave Wendes.*

‘British NZ’ or ‘British’. The ages of the five Indian ‘coal boys’ and the ‘pantry boy’, unlike those of the cadets, are not recorded. The difference between the treatment of white colonial and Asian colonial seamen is striking, from their conditions and pay to their place in the records and our histories.

Britain was an empire at war. Seamen and troops from around the world risked and, in many cases, lost their lives, but the war also reflected the inequalities of the British Empire.

FATALITIES OF THE SINKING OF THE SS APARIMA

HARRY DANIELS
GEORGE MACDONALD
R. MILLINGTON
F. PERRY
W. WILLIAMS
I. MCKENZIE
C. MACDONALD
D. HOARE
A. RAMSAY
R. MARSHALL
W. MARSHALL
G. SMITH
A. STACEY
M. TOWNSEND
W. SHAW
R. PROUDFOOD
T. BARGROVE
G. CHALMERS
A. BANNATYNE
S. NEWTON
LEON MASSEY
T. ROGERSON
JAMES MACKIE
W. CHISTIAN
ISRAELALLEE
MUHANALLEE
HASSANOOLLA
ARFANOODY

ABDUL RAJACK
AGIS KHAN
HAZIDALLEE
ABDUL HELLUM
ALLEE BUX
MABASARALLEE
BASSO MEAH
ENAITH
SUDICKALLEE
RIASUDALLEE
ARGANALLEE
HAZARALLEE
ABASALLEE
KAIBOODIN
KHOOSHIDALLEE
RAJUB
ABDUL HAMID
MOBARUK
AMOO
SOBAN
ADBUL HASIM
ABDUL RAJACK
SAINDOO
AH SING
NOOROO
APSURUOOLLA
JAMES COWIE
JOHN W. SMITH

‘Lascar’ Histories

From the time European ships sailed into the Indian Ocean they relied on local seafarers. When Vasco de Gama’s ships crossed the western Indian Ocean in 1498, they were guided by a ‘Gujarati pilot’ and the maritime knowledge, seafaring skills and labour of Indian Ocean sailors was essential to European ships and Empires throughout the following five centuries.

‘Lascars’, sailors from the ‘East Indies’, were vital to the English East India Company (EIC) throughout the 17th and 18th centuries as it developed trading posts and fought for position in the lucrative Asia trade. During the long trading voyages to Asia, many European sailors died or were pressed into the Navy. The Portuguese, French, British, Dutch and Danish all regularly recruited, at times coerced and even kidnapped, local sailors.

During this period, over 220 EIC ships sailed from Britain, but few lascars signed on directly as crew members. Instead, the EIC tapped into the well-established, local, maritime labour-gang system. Ghat serangs, employment brokers in south Asian ports, supplied groups of men along with their ‘officers’ (serangs and tindals) to EIC ships. Lascars worked on EIC ships sailing to Europe, around the Indian Ocean, east to China and, later, south to Australia.

The Asia trade relied on seasonal monsoon winds, which meant lascars spent months in Europe between voyages. A transient community developed in London, Liverpool, Cardiff and Glasgow. 138 lascars were reported arriving in British ports in 1760, rising to 1,403 in 1810. Some married English women, but all were required to return home whilst also banned from working in Britain or their return voyage. This meant lascars relied on the EIC for subsistence and passage home. Some ended up in debtors’ prison or worse. Lascars were necessary to the EIC but troublesome to the British state. They were nominally free men, but the British state worked continually to contain and control them.

By 1914, lascars made up 17.5% (or nearly 1 in 6) of seamen in the British Mercantile Marine. A figure that grew during the war. As sail had given way to steam in the 1800s and British Imperial power hardened, employment regulation grew and the relative protection and support of the serang system was broken. By 1914, lascars were integral to European maritime empire and global trade and the majority of lascars were Indian.

The SS *Shirala* is a typical example. The ship, built in Glasgow, was owned by the British India Steam Navigation Company. On the 2nd July 1918, *Shirala* was sailing from London to Bombay, with 213 passengers and 5000 tons of cargo (including ammunition, mail, car parts, wine and marmalade), when it was torpedoed by the German submarine *UB-57*. Eight men died when the vessel sank off the West Sussex coast; seven of them were Indian seamen working in the stokehold.

When historian Frank Broeze wrote about Indian seamen and the Raj, he called them 'The Muscles of Empire'. The phrase highlights their importance, but it also describes them as bodies rather than people. It focuses on the muscular power needed to run a ship's machinery and in doing so, it dehumanises them. In this, the phrase is true to Indian seamen's experiences within the British Mercantile Marine.

FATALITIES OF THE SINKING OF THE SS SHIRALA

ABDUL MAJID
ABDULLAH AHMAD
AMHAD KANHI ABDUR
RAHMAN
ALI MUHAMMAD GHULAM

MUHAMMAD JABBAR
NAIMUDDIN SAIFUDDIN
SAHIBZADAH ABDUL
GHANI
MALCOM WRIGHT

‘Lascar’ was always a European word applied to non-European seamen, a corruption of an Urdu word meaning soldier or army. It was a flexible category. At times Arab, Chinese and even African sailors were categorised as lascars. It was used to regulate their employment, but also increasingly in the 20th century, to control their movement and define who was and was not British. Over time it changed from a European word describing job status to a racial idea. ‘Lascars’ in Victorian literature were dangerous and dirty. In a world deeply marked and regulated by colonial ideas about race, lascar was both an employment and a race category.

SS *Maloja*: Ocean Liners and ‘Lascars’

On the 27th February 1916 at about 10.30 in the morning, the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (P&O) passenger ship *SS Maloja* struck a mine in the Strait of Dover. It was carrying a general cargo and only 122 passengers (capacity was 670), including military and government personnel and civilian women and children. It had a crew of 301 British officers and ‘lascar’ seamen. Only 24 minutes after hitting the mine, *Maloja* had sunk. Of the 423 people on board 155 died.

Maloja’s starboard quarter struck the mine and a large explosion had blown in the second saloon bulkheads. A Canadian collier, *Empress of Fort William*, was in sight and went to assist, but it struck another mine and also began to sink (it was sunk within 40 minutes). Passengers and crew entered the ship’s boats, but due to flooding the engines could not be stopped and most of the lifeboats could not be lowered. Smaller vessels, including two tugs from the Port of Dover, went to assist, but with the ship still moving they were unable to take people from the deck and passengers and crew were forced to jump overboard. Many of those killed died of hypothermia, either in the water or after rescue.

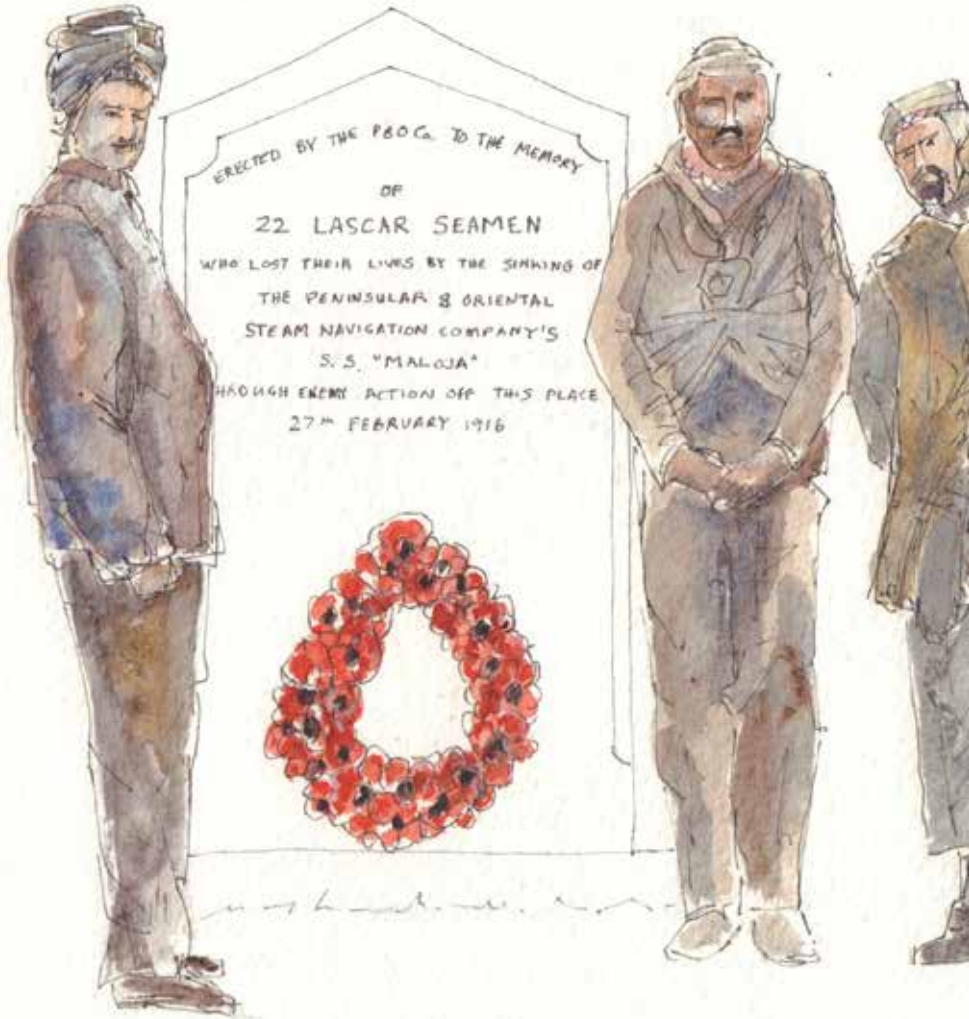
Survivors, pulled from the water, were taken to hospital ships HMHS *Dieppe* and *St David* or to Dover and eventually by special train to London.

By 11.30am bodies were already being brought into Dover, though more than 100 of those who died were never recovered.

P&O is synonymous with the 'golden age' of ocean liners in the first half of the 20th century. *Maloja* was in many ways a typical P&O ocean liner. Built in Belfast in 1911, it was an M-class passenger steamer of 12,358 tons. It sailed regularly between London and Indian ports. P&O customarily employed Indian seamen on lascar agreements with a small number of white British officers to crew its steamers. In the context of the British Mercantile Marine, P&O were known as 'good' employers among Indian seamen. Many Indian families worked for them over several generations. And characteristically, Indian seamen made up the vast majority of the *Maloja's* crew.

Unlike many other ships, the image of the ocean liner was important to its commercial success. Lascars were part of the image of P&O steamships. P&O employed the Marine Photo Service (MPS) to take commercial souvenir photographs for passengers to purchase aboard their ships. Most of the images of 'lascars' in the P&O archive are MPS photos. In them, Indian seamen are not photographed as individuals, but as part of the tourist experience. Their uniforms and depiction in these photographs reflect a European idea of submissive, Indian colonial subjects, the stewards and deckhands, not the firemen and trimmers.

62 members of the *Maloja's* crew were killed, all were Indian. The jobs of those killed reflect exactly the European ideas about race that organised rank and work on board ship. Muslim seamen worked in the engine rooms: among them Muhammad Ghulam Husain, trimmer, and Bhura Latif, paniwallah (water carrier). Goan seamen worked in roles that involved most interaction with white officer and passengers: including Antonio Da Costa, second cook, and Santana De Sousa, iceman. The majority of the crew killed, unsurprisingly given the speed of the sinking and the flooded engine rooms, worked below decks in the stokeholds.



On 3rd March 1917, The Dover Express reported the inquest of those killed whose bodies had been recovered. 13 were buried in St Mary's Cemetery, Dover. P&O erected a monument there to 22 of the Indian crew killed, one of the very few memorials to Indian merchant seamen in Europe.

'Lascars' of the Maloja.
Painting by Mike Greaves.



FATALITIES OF THE SINKING OF THE SS MALOJA

SAMUEL COLWILL	ANTONIO G DA	MOZAFFARUDDIN
JOSEPH FLAHERY	COSTA	SADRUDDIN
ANGUS	ANTONIO C DA	MUHAMMAD
MACDONALD	CRUZ	GHULAM
ALFRED LUCAS	REMEDIOS DE	HUSAIN
ADELAIDE PALMER	SOUZA	MUHAMMAD
JOSEPH PASSEY	SALVADOR DE	HUSAIN
HENRY HERRING	SOUZA	MUHAMMAD
JOHN KEMP	SANTANA DE	ISMAIL
BLEWITT	SOUZA	NARONHA
PERCY BOX	JOSE CAMILO	MARTINHO
WILLIAM SADLER	FERNANDES	NASIM GUL KHAN
GEORGE SANDERS	SALVADOR	NAWAB HUSAIN
ESTHER SEYMOUR	FERNANDES	EUSTACE
WILLIAM LINDSEY	ZEFERINO	FRANCISCO
MABERLEY	FERNANDES	PEREIRA
ABDUL GHANI	FIROZUDDIN	RAQAM FAZL
NUR GUL	SATTARUDDIN	RAQAM NUR KHAN
ABDULLAH	GHAFFUR KHUDA	ANTONIO
BEHRAM	BAKSH	RODRIQUES
ABDUL QAYYUM	ROZARIO GOMES	VINCENT
ABDUR RAHIM	GULAB FAZL	RODRIQUES
SAMARE DIN	GULAB GHULAM	SAID GHULAM
ALI KHAMSIN	HAMIDULLAH	FATEH KHAN
ALI MUHYUDDIN	RAHMAT	SAID JAAFAR
AMANAT LATIF	HASHMAT ALI	SHAIKH YAQUB
AMANUR RAHM	HAYAT FIROZ	MAKHDOM
AMIRULLAH	HAZRAT SHAH	SHAMUN FAQIR
HAMIDULLAH	FAQIR SHAH	SHERDIL MIR
AZIZUDDIN	HUKM KHAN	AFZAL
IMAMUDDIN	NADIR KHAN	SULTAN JABBAR
BADRIN	HUSAIN HAMID	TALIBUDDIN
JOHN BARRETO	IBRAHIM QASIM	QAMRUDDIN
BHURA LATIF	KALAN	UMRUDDIN
BRAGANZA	KHANGADA	QAMRUDDIN
NAZARO	KHAIR ALI CHAND	SABASTIAO VAZ
FRANCISCO	ALI	YAQUB QASIM
BRITO LAURENCO	KHURSHIDULLAH	GEORGE PERT
CARIDADE	PASCOAL LOPES	ASHLEY SINCLAIR
ANTONIO DA	PELEGRINO	
COSTA	MASCARENHAS	

Black Sailor Histories

Records of African sailors on British vessels begin in the 16th century and 250 years later there were black sailors in the British Navy at the Battle of Trafalgar. Many of these men were recruited in British colonies or from ports around the Atlantic: from West African, Caribbean and North American ports connected by the British slave trade and the plantation economy of the West Indies, which relied on the labour of enslaved people. Many black sailors were themselves enslaved. Olaudah Equiano, the famous 18th century writer and abolitionist, was both an enslaved sailor and, after he purchased his freedom, a free black sailor.

Britain's maritime empire, particularly in the Atlantic, was bound to slavery even after it was abolished in 1833. Through the 19th century, numbers of black seamen on British ships increased. They came from the Caribbean and West Africa, but also East Africa and the Americas. In the 1850s the Seaman's Ticket was introduced, a voluntary register of merchant seamen which recorded physical descriptions as well as birthplace. Among the 500,000 seamen registered, about 3500 were Caribbean (though the true number is likely higher). Among them, Henry Sinclair, born in Jamaica in 1770, went to sea an enslaved boy aged 6 and was working as a sea cook at 75, post-emancipation, when he received his Seaman's Ticket.

In 1914, just as most Indian seamen worked on Indian Ocean or British-Asian routes, most black seamen worked on Atlantic and West African routes. Some were employed on standard, 'European' articles, but there was, for example, a significant difference between being employed in British or West African ports. West African crews employed in colonial ports received less pay, water, food and space. For Liverpool's shipping companies, like the Elder Dempster Line, engaged in the 'West Africa trade' it was a significant saving, described as an incentive for the 'Africanisation' of crews. Despite the growth of black communities in British ports, most black seamen were employed on irregular articles.

By 1914 there were many British-born black seamen in British ports, notably London, Glasgow, Cardiff, Hull, Liverpool, Southampton and Barry in Wales. Barry is perhaps the prime example. In 1871 Barry had a population of about 100. In the 1880s Barry Docks were developed as a coaling station, and by 1913 it was the largest coaling port in the world. Many of its new inhabitants were black seamen and their families.

Marcus Bailey, a black Barbadian seaman, had crewed on 34 merchant and fishing ships by 1912. He married Lilian McGowan in 1913, a white English woman, in Fleetwood, Lancashire and had three children. He was the mate on *Wild Rose* in

1915, an unusual position for a black man, and in 1916 he was in the Navy on HMS *Chester*. Joseph Gomes, a fireman on SS *South Western*, a ship in the Forgotten Wrecks project area, died when it sank in March 1918 not long after leaving Southampton. Gomes was born in Trinidad and married Ethel from Sholing in Southampton. His circumstances suggest he was a black seaman, but without the family history or photographs of Bailey's story, it is impossible to be sure.

The categorisation of black seamen shifted over time, frequently incorporating 'coloured', sometimes 'African' or 'Negro', at times 'British' sailors. Somali and Yemeni seamen were often categorised as 'Arab' and at times even 'Adenese lascars'. These categories reflected European ideas about race. As colonial seamen's mobility, and their potential to migrate, was increasingly seen as a



Marcus Bailey (left).

Image courtesy of the Bailey family.

threat to Imperial racial hierarchies these categories altered according to the interests and politics of the British government, shipping companies and maritime labour unions. The categories were used to control who could be discharged in British ports, and ultimately, who was a British subject. By the 20th century there was aggressive regulation to prevent the migration of black and Asian seamen, including into Australia and other 'white' colonies. Non-white seamen were required to carry proof of nationality and black seamen were increasingly segregated.

SS Mendi: Memory and Memorial

The *SS Mendi* was rammed by the *SS Darro*, a 11,000 ton liner, just after 5am on the 21st February 1917. The *Mendi* was sailing for Le Havre carrying the last detachment of the South African Native Labour Contingent (SANLC) to work as non-combatants on the Western Front.

The troopship had left Cape Town on 16th January and stopped in Plymouth, picking up more military passengers, before continuing its journey escorted by the destroyer *HMS Brisk*. It was about 12 miles off the Isle of Wight when the *Darro* hit. The collision left a 20m hole in the ship's starboard side. Water flooded the hull and it immediately tilted and began to sink rapidly. Most of those on board were asleep in the troop decks. There was little time to order men on deck and only two lifeboats were successfully launched. In 25 minutes the ship had sunk.

There were more than 950 men on board, nearly 650 died. Of the 802 SANLC men, 607 died, along with nine officers and 31 of the ship's crew (although government figures reported 30 crew), including 10 West African seamen. Around 140 men likely died below decks and many more died of hypothermia in the water before they could be rescued.

The *Darro* made no attempt to rescue survivors. It was later found to have

been travelling too fast in the fog and the master of the ship had his licence suspended for a year.

The *Mendi* is the most well-known and most memorialised shipwreck in this booklet. It was wrecked through accident rather than combat and the black men who are remembered were not seamen but members of a non-combatant labour corps. Over time, heroic narratives often grow around war, narratives that can shape which stories are remembered and how. The stories we tell about the First World War often focus on soldiers in trenches and the sacrifices of white, British men. This booklet hopes to broaden the stories told a little and it is in this context that it is important to include the *Mendi*.

The *Mendi* highlights how central the empire was to the war and the neglected story of the non-combatant labour corps. In the last two years of the war around 300,000 labourers were recruited from Egypt, India, South Africa, China, Bermuda, the West Indies, Mauritius, the Seychelles and Fiji. 21,000 were from South Africa.

Before *Mendi* was a troopship, it sailed from Liverpool in the 'West Africa trade'. It carried passengers and cargo, often sailing for the British and African Steam Navigation Company (whose logo is on silver salvers and ceramics



Top: Plate with B&ASN Co. logo.
Middle: Cooking pot. Bottom:
Silverware. These artefacts, all from
the *Mendi*, are currently housed at
The Shipwreck Centre,
Arreton Barnes, Isle of Wight.

recovered from the wreck). Its history reflects Britain's colonial connections with West Africa. It sailed routes that mirrored the earlier slave trade upon which Liverpool's commercial wealth was built, crewed by seamen from Sierra Leone, Benin and Liberia. In South Africa, a British colony, the black, African majority were politically, culturally and economically oppressed by the white minority. The SANLC men were commanded by white officers, paid less than white men serving in the British Army and forbidden to bear arms, for fear of potential rebellion, but they were nonetheless recruited to travel to France and dig trenches, fell trees, build roads and camps.

The *Mendi's* story reflects the interconnected histories of Britain and South Africa, but also the differing public and political responses to the disaster. There are eight memorials in South Africa and two in Britain. In South Africa the disaster is written about by historians and poets, political scientists and literary scholars, and the ways in which the story has been retold over the last century reflect South African history.

For example, in 1917, the black press in South Africa reported the disaster extensively. The deaths were often connected to the hope that support for the war would encourage government sympathy for black self-determination. After all, in July 1917 King George V told members of the SANLC in France: *'You are also part of my great armies fighting for the liberty and freedom of my subjects of all races and creeds throughout the empire'*. But post-war inequality in South African society did not improve. The South African colonial government decided the men of the SANLC would not receive war service medals, including the British War Medal from the King, to which they were entitled.

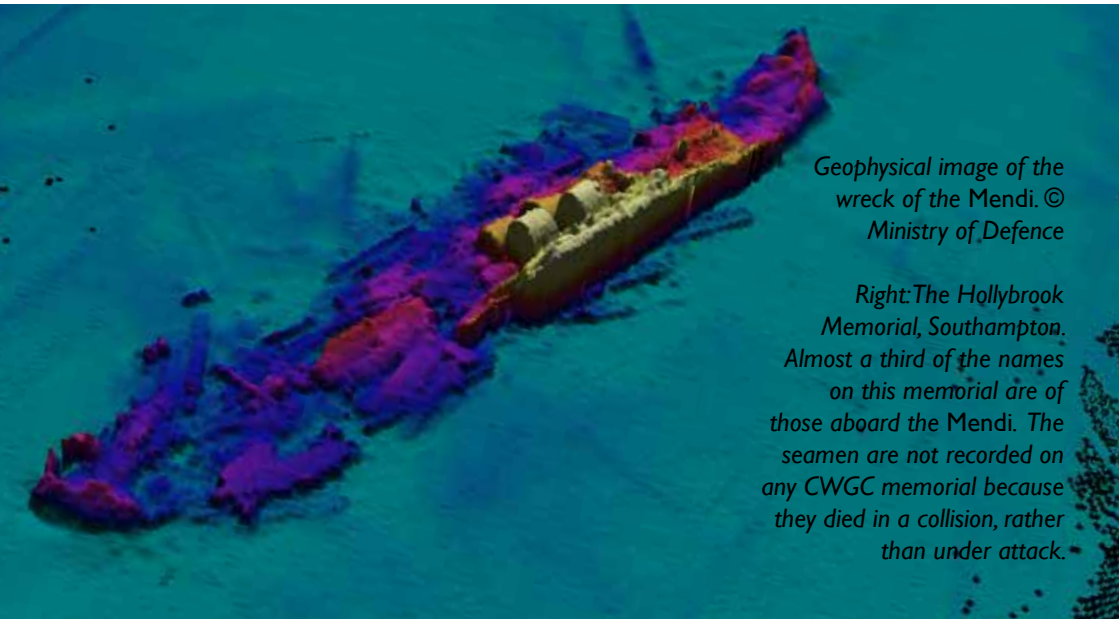
In the 1920s the Mendi Memorial Committee, an annual memorial day and educational fund were established by black leaders. By the 1950s, as the apartheid project developed, the *Mendi* story of African sacrifice and the importance of black labour to victory in the First World War were seen as a challenge to white authority and memorial days were curbed. In 1986 at the height of international boycotts and sanctions against apartheid, in an attempt

to improve their reputation, the white government added SANLC names to the Delville Wood South African National memorial in France, (which had previously only honoured white soldiers). Since then the *Mendi* story has become part of new narratives about post-Apartheid South Africa. In 2003 South Africa's highest award for extraordinary heroic deeds was named the Order of Mendi for Bravery.

The names of those lost are tragically too numerous to list here, but they can be found here: <https://livesofthefirstworldwar.org/community/3165>

Only the names of the 30 West African seamen who lost their lives in the tragedy cannot be found on any memorial (listed right).

The wreck of the *Mendi* was rediscovered in 1974 by Martin Woodward and is now a 'Protected Place' under the Protection of Military Remains Act 1986 (see the Maritime Archaeology Trust's War Graves of the Sea: Protecting Shipwrecks of the First World War).



Geophysical image of the wreck of the Mendi. © Ministry of Defence

Right: The Hollybrook Memorial, Southampton. Almost a third of the names on this memorial are of those aboard the Mendi. The seamen are not recorded on any CWGC memorial because they died in a collision, rather than under attack.

FATALITIES OF THE SINKING OF THE SS MENDI, NOT LISTED ELSEWHERE

J.A. BAILEY
W. BOGIE
R. BOWEN
J. BROWN
W.H CARROLL
SIDNEY JAMES
CARTER
W. COOK
R.CROSS
A. FARGLAR
H. FEARNLEY
W. FOSTER
S FRIDAY
F HARRIS
W. HENNESSEY
A . HOLMES

J. JAMES
T. JAMES
T. JAMES
D. JOHNSON
C. JOHNSON
J. JOHNSON
R. MOLE
B. MORRIS
J. NICHOLL
W. OBORN
H . O'KILL
H. RAINE
A.R. STEEL
W.W. SWALL
S.D. THOMPSON



Chinese Sailor Histories

There were Chinese sailors on East India Company (EIC) ships from the 1600s. Unlike south Asian 'lascars', they were hired individually and there were comparatively fewer among EIC crews. Their numbers in the British Mercantile Marine did not increase greatly overall until the nineteenth century, when, with the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), laws restricting non-British seamen on merchant ships were largely abandoned for a time.

There had been a small Chinese community in London's Limehouse, near the docks, from the late 17th century. In 1799 John Anthony, a Chinese sailor and Christian convert, opened a boarding house specifically for Chinese sailors in Shadwell. With the increase in the number of Chinese sailors in Britain from the early 19th century, a Chinese community began to develop in Liverpool.

Up until this point, Chinese sailors were categorised, along with Indian and other 'East Indies' sailors, as 'lascars' or 'Asiatic' (e.g. the numbers of 'lascars' recorded arriving in British ports included Chinese sailors). Historian Iona Man-Cheong describes British management and regulation of these seamen from this point as 'divide and rule'. For example, Indian sailors were sometimes required to administer punishments to Chinese sailors. They were housed in commercial 'barracks', rather than lodgings within port communities, and divided between 'lascars, Malays on one hand and Chinese' on the other. Chinese seamen were also characterised as less troublesome by British authorities, though by the 1830s they were increasingly demonised as opium-smoking in the British press.

There had long been demand in Europe for Chinese goods and material, but unlike India, British imperial engagement with China was tightly controlled by the Chinese through the port of Canton, and remained a trading relationship until the mid-19th century and the 'Opium Wars'. With the growth of Hong Kong as a British colonial port after 1842, numbers of Chinese seamen increased further.

In 1865 Liverpool's Blue Funnel Line established the first direct steamship route from Europe to China and crewed its ships with Chinese crew on irregular articles, with less pay and fewer rations. The majority of Chinese seamen in the British Mercantile Marine still sailed within the Indian Ocean. They were often employed in galleys or as stewards, jobs that were seen by employers, and perhaps other seamen, as 'women's work' (much as the jobs in the stokehold were seen as 'unskilled').

'The food and wages required to maintain one British seaman equal the needs of six or more Chinese; moreover, native crews work longer hours and can eat and sleep anywhere.' Shipowner, Charles Ainsworth. Letter to The Telegraph, 1933.



Chinatown in Limehouse,
1926 Courtesy of Tower
Hamlets Local History
Library and Archives.

From the end of the 19th century, who was and was not Chinese and who was from British Hong Kong or mainland China, was a growing concern of the British government, seamen's unions and shipping companies.

Again, this centred on who could be discharged in British ports and on rising opposition to colonial seafarers. In 1916 the Sailors' and Firemen's Union organized protest meetings around Limehouse and Poplar in London, against the increasing use of Chinese labour on British ships. From 1908 the term 'lascar' was defined as 'natives of British India' in order to exclude Chinese seamen – though Chinese seamen were employed on modified 'lascar' agreements during WWI, only for British authorities to revert to the ruling after the war.

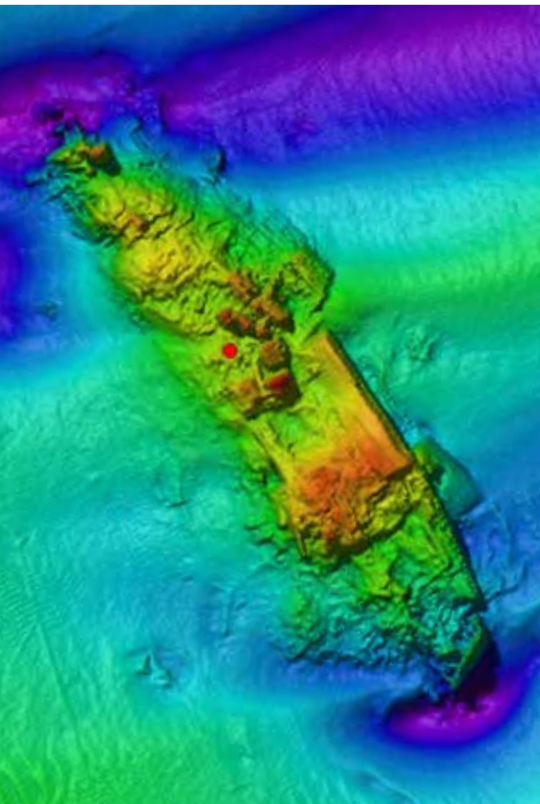
SS Camberwell and SS Vinovia:

among many other stories

Alongside the stories of wrecks like *SS Aparima*, *SS Mendi* and *SS Maloja*, there are hundreds of other stories among the shipwrecks of the Forgotten Wrecks project. These stories are often smaller in scale, though no less important. They represent an almost everyday occurrence, though they are extraordinary, not everyday, stories.

On the 18th May 2017 at about 7.15am, the *SS Camberwell* was steaming down the Channel, when, 5 ½ miles east of Ventnor, Isle of Wight, it struck a mine. The hatch covers were blown off and it began to take on water and list to starboard before sinking quickly. The 65-man crew evacuated. One of the lifeboats capsized as it hit the water and seven men drowned. All seven were Indian seamen. The master, Frederick Adamson, and the other survivors were taken to Portsmouth.

Camberwell was not an unusual ship and it was not on an unusual voyage. Built in 1903 in Sunderland, you can trace the ship's voyages through the 'Shipping Intelligence' columns of regional newspapers. On 9th September 1913 there was a fire on board whilst it was docked at Albert Docks, London. On Saturday May 22nd 1915, the Dundee People's Journal reports it having arrived in Colombo, Sri Lanka on the 18th. On 3rd May 1916 it left Port Said, Egypt for Dundee, Scotland. On its last journey, in May 1917, it was carrying a routine general cargo of 5000 tons to India and the ports of Colombo, Madras and Calcutta. Its cargo included wine, olive oil, cement, fertiliser and pre-paid postcards for use by British troops stationed in India. Some of those postcards, as well as 10-rupee banknotes and Indian copper coins, have been recovered from the wreck by divers.



FATALITIES OF THE SINKING OF THE SS CAMBERWELL

ABDUL AZIZ ABDUL GHANI
ABDUL GHAFUR ZAMIN
DURGA MANIA
LATIF BAHADUR
MATHTHU RAJAB
RAHMATULLAH DAMANE
IBRAHIM HUSAIN MIYAN
RIZA

Left: Geophysical image of the wreck of the Camberwell. The wreck is now a well-known dive site. Contains public sector information, licensed under the Open Government Licence v2.0, from the Maritime and Coastguard Agency.

FATALITIES OF THE SINKING OF THE SS VINOVA

AH SOO
CHAI CHONG
CHING SANG
CHONG SING
JAMES HENRY DOONAN

KOW CHANG
JAMES HERBERT LIGGET
TI LO
ROBERT PATRICK
WATSON

Seven months later, on 19th December 1917, the SS *Vinovia* was torpedoed approximately nine miles off Wolf Rock, Cornwall. The Cunard Steamship Co. cargo ship was on route from New York to London and had already been separated from its convoy, lost all its boats and damaged its rudder in bad weather. It was hit by a torpedo from the German U-boat, *U-105*, and its decks were awash within 40 minutes. Of the 51 crew members, mostly made up of Chinese seamen, nine were killed. Six of whom were Chinese.

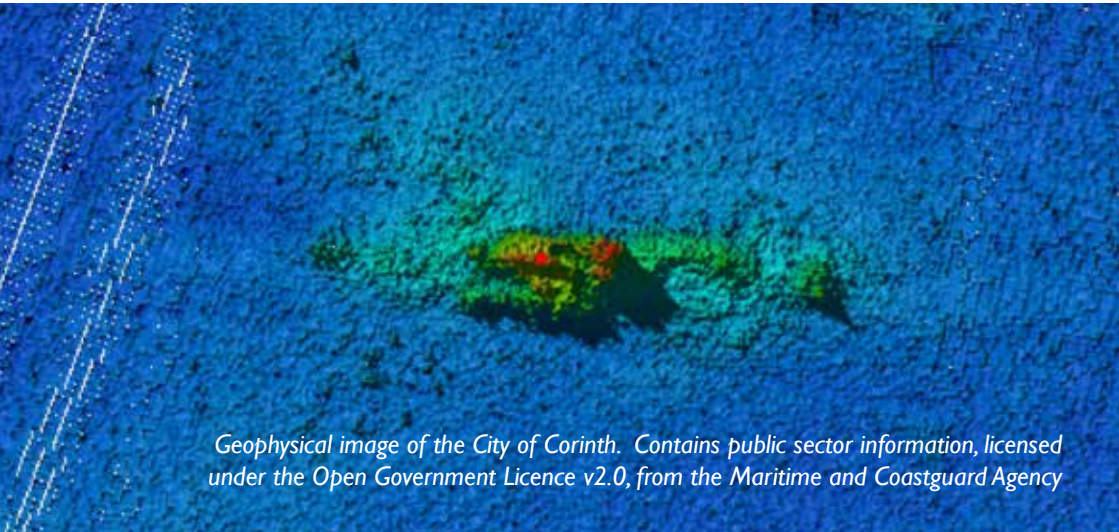
Disproportionate numbers of black and Asian seamen died among the crews of these sorts of vessels. This is partly because they were often employed in the most dangerous places in the ship. These ships often sank quickly and it was hard to get from the stokeholds below deck to the relative safety of lifeboats or the water. The engine rooms were also one of the most dangerous places to receive a direct hit. Seamen were unlikely to survive an explosion or engine room fire.

The bodies of those lost at sea were rarely recovered. Of the 155 people lost from the SS *Maloja*, only 55 bodies were recovered. These wrecks are now dive sites, but they are also grave sites (and unfortunately sometimes also salvage sites).

Casualties and Compensation

Three days after the loss of SS *Camberwell*, on the afternoon of 21st May 1917 at about 3.40pm, the SS *City of Corinth* was torpedoed 12 miles south-west of the Lizard peninsula, Cornwall. It was on its way from Singapore to London when it was attacked by a German submarine, *UB-31*. It attempted to get into port, flooding slowly, but with most of the crew on deck, a second torpedo hit midships and it sank four minutes later. The crew, mostly Indian and Chinese seamen, were picked up by patrol vessels and landed at Falmouth.

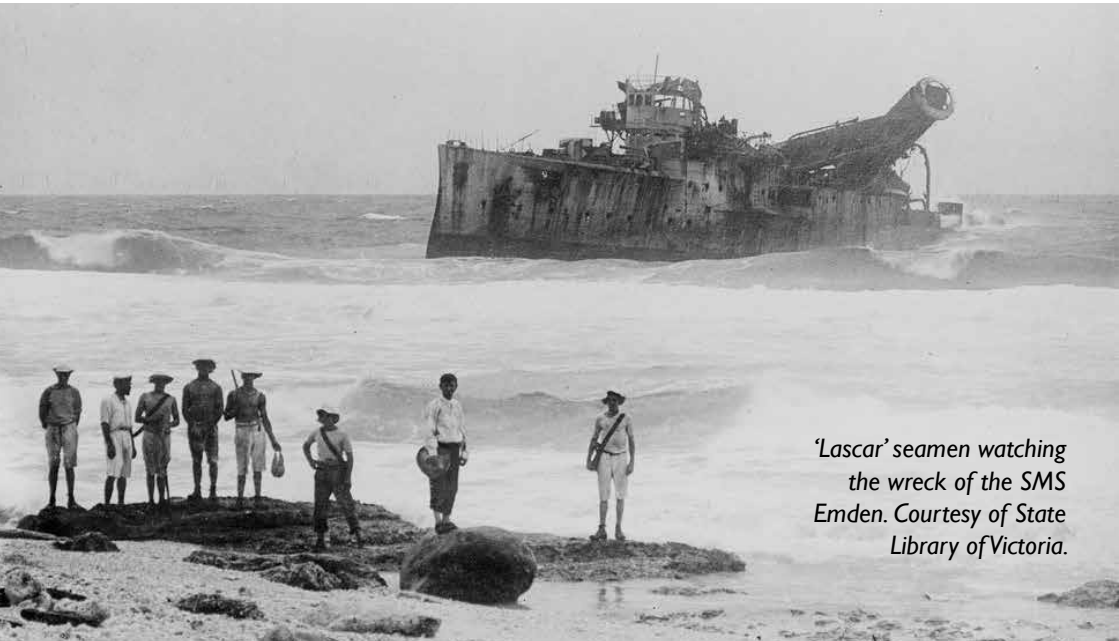
None of these men died, but they had experienced significant trauma and were a long way from home. The shipping company which employed them, Hall Line, was not responsible for repatriating them and, as was standard practice for all merchant seamen, their pay was stopped when the ship was sunk. Whatever the circumstances of their survival, most seaman had little choice but to sign on to another ship if they were physically able. It was the shipping company's responsibility to inform families of those injured or lost at sea, but this often took up to two months. Wives and families in UK ports, who generally collected half of a seaman's wage from shipping company offices



Geophysical image of the *City of Corinth*. Contains public sector information, licensed under the Open Government Licence v2.0, from the Maritime and Coastguard Agency

weekly, might discover a ship had sunk when there were no wages waiting for them, but without knowing whether the seaman had been killed or survived.

Casualties, as well as deaths, among black and Asian seamen were disproportionately high and although compensation for death or injury was awarded to British nationals living in the colonies or protectorates, it was only if that status could be proved. That depended on seamen or their dependents navigating administrative systems, geographic distances and, often, language barriers. There were significant numbers of men from the Kru people of West Africa among seamen recruited in Sierra Leone, but their national territories stretched across colonial boundaries and many had difficulty demonstrating their status as British subjects when it came to claiming compensation. Similarly, compensation and widows' pensions for the officers and crew of *Aparima* (p7–8) are listed in the immediate post-war records, but there is no record of payments to the Indian crew, or for Baboo Gomez, the third cook, whose leg was broken.



'Lascar' seamen watching the wreck of the SMS Emden. Courtesy of State Library of Victoria.

Post-war Lives

At times during the war, there had been demonstrations against the increased employment of black and Asian seamen in the Mercantile Marine. Post-war life was harder still, with unemployment, the return of servicemen seeking jobs and the economic and social impacts of the war. In this climate of civic turmoil, the hardening of hostility towards black and Asian seamen and their families grew in London, Liverpool, Cardiff and other British ports. In 1919, a series of 'seaport riots', attacks by angry mobs of white men and women invading racially mixed neighbourhoods, occurred in Liverpool, Bristol Channel ports, Newport, Cardiff and Barry. In several cases black seamen were killed. The British press termed them 'race riots' and authorities attributed the violence to black and white seamen competing for jobs.

Who was and was not defined as British was becoming more publicly about race and in 1925 the British government passed the Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order. The order stated that 'coloured' seamen in Britain without documentary proof of their British status must register as 'aliens'. Police were to apprehend 'coloured' men disembarking from ships and report them if they failed to show their documentation. War-era Certificates of Nationality and Mercantile Marine books were often not enough for the police. The Indian and Colonial Office received numerous complaints from colonial seamen and their families. Many black and Asian seamen from British colonies were deported.

Despite this aggressive regulation, black and Asian seamen continued to be crucial to British merchant fleets. Some who had crewed British merchant ships in the First World War, did so again in the Second. Some survived the first but not the second war. Marcus Bailey's son, Jim, joined the Merchant Navy in the Second World War, dying when the *Western Chief* sank in the Atlantic in 1941.

Memorials and Histories

In cases of men lost at sea, few bodies were ever recovered, so post-war memorials became very important. Notably, however, black and Asian seamen do not appear on the Tower Hill Memorial in London to the seamen of the merchant and fishing fleet who lost their lives during the war. There are other Commonwealth memorials in Mumbai and Hong Kong (along with private memorials like the Lascar War Memorial in Kolkata, erected by shipping companies and merchants in 1920). 1,708 members of the 'Indian Merchant Service' are commemorated on the Bombay 1914-1918 Memorial in Mumbai. 532 Chinese merchant seamen are memorialised on the Hong Kong War Memorial and 25 Egyptian seamen are remembered on the Suez War Memorial.

In the years following the war, new categories emerged, in addition to 'Mercantile Marine', around the administration of these memorials, including 'Indian Merchant Service' and 'Nigerian Marine'. Historian John Siblon suggests that during the 1920s the Imperial War Graves Commission separated seamen onto different memorials, so that only white British and European sailors would be commemorated in London. The memorials of the seamen who died on *Aparima* certainly reflect this. Of the 56 men who died, 54 were British colonial subjects. The 24 white New Zealanders are memorialised at Tower Hill in London, the 29 Indians are recorded on the memorial in Mumbai and the Chinese second carpenter, Sing, is listed on the Hong Kong War Memorial. Archaeologist, Antony Firth, suggests that the new 'Indian Merchant Service' category is a post hoc attribution to enable this policy.

These post-war practices reflect some of the reasons why the histories of black and Asian seamen are not often told in histories of Britain or the First World War. The records through which their lives can be traced were written by colonial administrators and shipping companies for particular commercial and political purposes. Names were anglicised. Ports where seamen were recruited were often given as birthplaces. Identities were blurred and

memorials were whitewashed. Despite this, the richest stories are increasingly coming from community histories researched and produced within Britain's ports, stories of Somali seamen in Cardiff, Bangladeshi sailors in London and of Barbadians in Yorkshire and Lancashire.

This booklet explores just a handful of the stories of the black and Asian seamen who crewed some of the 1100+ First World War ships wrecked within the Forgotten Wrecks of the First World War project area in the Channel.

Many of these wrecks are now popular dive sites, as well as war graves and in some cases salvage sites. The remains of these ships on the seabed can seem remote—forgotten—but this booklet aims to animate them with the lives of some of the men who crewed them: men who worked extraordinarily hard, travelling great distances, navigating the complexities of life as black and Asian seamen on British ships and in imperial ports, men who were both ordinary and exceptional.



'Lascars'
Painting by
Mike Greaves.

Further Information

Books we recommend:

- *“We ask for British Justice” - Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain* by Laura Tabili
- *Globalizing Labour? Indian Seafarers and World Shipping c. 1870-1945* by G. Balachandran
- *Black Salt: Seafarers of African Descent on British Ships* by Ray Costello
- *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes* by Rozina Visram
- *We Die Like Brothers: The Sinking of the SS Mendi* by John Gribble and Graham Scott

Websites and projects:

Black and Asian merchant seamen project drawing on and Southampton archives and merchant seamen’s identity cards: <http://porthorizon.uk>

Our Migration Story project: <https://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/migrants-and-merchant-shipping-west-african-seafarers-in-liverpool>

African stories in Hull and East Yorkshire community project:
<https://www.africansinyorkshireproject.com/marcus-bailey.html>

Port Towns & Urban Cultures blog on researching Asian seafarers in the First World War: <http://porttowns.port.ac.uk/bame-seafarers-first-world-war-rohama-hassa>

British Library’s Asians in Britain webpages: <https://www.bl.uk/asians-in-britain>

Fjordr’s East Coast War Channels Project: <http://www.fjordr.com/fjordr-blog.html> (July 2017 blog)

Lives of the First World War project: <https://livesofthefirstworldwar.org>

Commonwealth War Graves Commission: <https://www.cwgc.org>

About Us

The **Maritime Archaeology Trust** is a registered charity with more than 25 years' experience in research, investigations and pioneering techniques for the study and promotion of marine cultural heritage. Originating in the south of England as the Hampshire and Wight Trust for Maritime Archaeology, the MAT has grown from regional roots to an internationally renowned authority on maritime archaeology.

The HLF funded **Forgotten Wrecks of the First World War Project** explores an under-represented aspect of the Great War, and focuses on the 1100 shipwrecks from the era along the south coast of England. While attention is often focused on the Western Front and major naval battles like Jutland, historic remains from the war lie, largely forgotten, in and around our seas, rivers and estuaries. Sites, which include merchant and naval ships, passenger, troop and hospital ships, ports, wharfs, buildings and foreshore hulks, are often unrecognised and unprotected, and yet represent the vestiges of a vital, yet little known struggle that took place on a daily basis, just off our shores.

This booklet was written by Jesse Ransley. Particular thanks go to Dave Wendes for sharing his research on *SS Aparima*, Mike Greaves, the Maritime Archaeology Trust's Artist In Residence, Jim Baker of the 'Port Horizon' and 'Heroes at Sea' projects, Antony Firth of Fjordr, and Asif Shakoor and Cliff Pereira for discussing their research.



Back Cover: Deck view of a British Torpedo Boat Destroyer. © IWM (Q 18106)

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