

Changed Days.

Our ancestors realised that their island Kingdom was safe from an invading army unless and until they lost command of the seas and in the Stuart period positive steps were taken to improve maritime defence. At that time there was no established "fighting navy" but as the majority of merchant ships were armed as a protection against pirates they could easily be pressed into service – and those without armament could be equipped quickly and cheaply. Legislation to encourage shipbuilding was enacted and in order to ensure a plentiful supply of seafaring men the State encouraged the development of the deep-sea fishing industry. Our ancestors had foresight!

To ensure that the strength of this dual-purpose fleet was not diminished Richard 11 introduced "protectionism" in the form of the Navigation Acts and throughout almost 500 years these Acts were renewed and revised in an endeavour to make them more effective. The stated objective was "the increase of the shipping and the encouragement of the navigation of this nation, wherein the wealth, safety and strength of this Kingdom is so much concerned" but, in actual fact, their purpose was "commercial" - to ensure that English exports and imports were carried in English ships, manned in the main by Englishmen. Due to a shortage of ships and seamen the Acts were quite unenforceable and Elizabeth repealed them in 1559 although the English coastal trade was still barred to foreign vessels. Finally, in 1651 a more workable Act was passed and this remained in force, albeit with numerous amendments and deletions, until the Navigation Acts were finally repealed in the 19th. Century. This final Act defined an "English" ship as one whose Owner, Master and the majority of the crew were "men of England or the Colonies" – a broad definition carried over, in comparatively recent times, to that of a British ship.

The repeal of the Navigation Acts in the early 19th century had little effect on the strength of the British merchant shipping fleet and, for many years, it continued to be the largest in the world. Sail was the recognised method of propulsion but as technology advanced during the 19th century Britain took the initiative in "modernising" its mercantile fleet. The advent of the steam engine had a massive impact on shipping and soon many, but not all, sailing vessels were fitted with steam-driven paddle wheels.

The first Atlantic crossing under power was enacted in 1819 and some six years later the paddle steamer "Enterprise" voyaged to India via The Cape of Good Hope, steaming for 64 days of her 103 day passage. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 marked the demise of sail for international trading and as iron replaced wood, and steel replaced iron, ships got bigger and more economical. Oil replaced coal, the propeller made the paddle wheel almost redundant, the steam turbine ousted the "up and down" steam engine and by the early 20th. Century many of the ships plying the trade routes of the globe were oil-fired steam turbine propelled.

In the case of British ships the entire crew – from Captain to Catering Boy – comprised British or Commonwealth citizens holding the requisite Certificates of Competency issued by the regulatory body within, or responsible to, the United Kingdom. Medium tonnage cargo-carrying vessels carried crews numbering in the 60's and the majority of the maintenance to the hull, fittings and machinery was carried out by that crew under the supervision of the ship's Officers who were, in turn, answerable to their employer's shore-based Superintendents for any failure to keep their vessel "shipshape and Bristol fashion". Today, the largest container ships rarely have a total complement of more than 20.

Year in, year out, this "private enterprise" industry made a significant contribution to the "invisible exports" of Great Britain and, by 1914, nearly 50% of world shipping sailed under the Red Ensign.

The 1914-18 War took a heavy toll of British shipping (and seafarers) but the post-war fleet of modern and well-equipped ships still comprised the largest mercantile fleet in the world albeit smaller in percentage terms as many new marine ensigns were appearing on the world's trade routes.

The 1939-45 War again inflicted great losses on ships and crew-members but, with peace restored, the nation set about restoring the merchant fleet to its pre-war dominance. This was never attained and the steady growth of international competition slowly eroded the commercial advantages enjoyed by the pre-war British ship owner. In an endeavour to combat this the Government of the day relaxed the nationality requirements and today it is no longer necessary for the owner of a ship flying the Red Ensign to employ any British personnel and, many opt for less expensive crews recruited from a variety of developing countries. The cost-effectiveness of this is a matter for debate.

Today, our shipping industry is in crisis with relatively few employment opportunities offering for UK domiciled seafarers – particularly ratings – and with the age-profile of our Officers causing great concern. Changes in the manning regulations now allow a UK registered ship to be manned entirely by non-UK seafarers; officers and ratings from almost any corner of the globe sail in UK registered ships and "multi national" manning is commonplace.

Despite Government assurances that its policy of attracting ships to the UK register (following the introduction, in 2000, of the Tonnage Tax) has been successful few of these vessels employ British officers and even fewer employ British ratings. Regulations relating to the "Tonnage Tax" stipulate that the owners of ships enjoying this benefit must engage in, or contribute to, a training programme but there is no requirement for the trainees to be British and, understandably, many prefer to train their own nationals. Even more understandably, recruitment of young Britons is proving difficult and many initiatives are afoot to show that seafaring is still a rewarding and interesting career.