

Marriages at Sea.

On the bus the other day a young lady behind me was telling her friend that she and her boyfriend were off on a cruise in May and that she intended to try to persuade him "to ask the Captain to marry us". The bus stopped and both got off - leaving me to recall a balmy evening sailing through a tranquil Mediterranean when in command of the cruise ship "Reina del Mar". The door to the Boat Deck was ajar and, in response to some frantic knocking I opened it to behold a young man and woman, both of whom had obviously been imbibing heavily. The lady grabbed my shirt-sleeved arm and, without further ado, announced " We want you to marry us". After some further discussion I told them that I was not empowered to do sobut I would be very happy to give them a Cover Note for the duration of the cruise.



There is a widespread belief that the Master of a ship IS empowered to perform a marriage ceremony and in the long-past days of emigrant voyages under sail shipboard marriages were commonplace, with the Master officiating in the majority of them.

In the United Kingdom marriages are not legally recognised unless the ceremony is carried out by a Clergyman or an individual designated for that purpose. - and a UK registered vessel must comply with these regulations and a Shipmaster does not meet the legal requirements. That said, the Official Logbook requires the Master to record details of any marriage performed aboard his command but there is no guidance relating to the Master's inability to officiate. The Lords of the Admiralty, however, were more alert to the situation and they issued precise instructions prohibiting any such activity aboard HM ships.

Official Logbooks were introduced by The Mercantile Marine Act 1850 and it was at that time that the requirement to record shipboard marriages was stipulated. Prior to this the law relating to marriage throughout the UK had been clarified and changed - but there was no specific reference to shipboard ceremonies and some Masters interpreted the M.M.Act as conferring upon them the right to conduct marriage ceremonies and they did so in good faith. History relates the difficulties relating to shipboard marriages conducted by the Master of an emigrant ship on the New Zealand run in the late 1800's. He "married" two crew members to two passengers but, on disembarkation in New Zealand a Magistrate ordered the couples to re-marry in a Registry Office.

Certainly on long "emigrant" voyages under sail, marriages conducted by the Master were commonplace and it is recorded that one packet was the venue for some 200 weddings in the course of 116 round voyages. Undoubtedly, some were to confirm the legitimacy of children born aboard.

TODAY, however, although the situation relating to UK flag vessels is unchanged, in other registries the legal situation varies. Filipino law permits a Shipmaster (or the Captain of an aircraft) to carry out a marriage ceremony where one of those involved is on the point of death but the Japanese are more liberal and Japanese citizens may be bonded in matrimony by the Master of a vessel under the Japanese flag. Both the Maltese register and the Bermuda register offer shipboard weddings with the Captain officiating. and, by "deserting" the UK register and lowering their Red Ensigns many cruise companies have taken advantage of this to enable them take advantage of this lucrative development.

Princess Cruises and Cunard ,to mention but two, actually advertise the advantages - especially financially - of wedding aboard one of their ships and enjoying their lavish reception facilities and it is said that some Shipmaster have obtained credentials such as religious ordination or accreditation as a Notaries Public to ensure the legality of the ceremony. It is not, however, simply a case of a passionate couple asking the Captain to marry them " on the spur of the moment" and various procedures have to be finalised prior to embarkationnot least, the reading of the banns etc.