

"One Volunteer is worth"

For many years, throughout the United Kingdom, the "Sailors' Society" enjoyed the support and friendship of bands of willing volunteers who formed themselves into "Guilds" and who, by their fundraising for and assistance to seafarers, contributed significantly to the work of the Society locally and nationally.

Today, sadly, there is only one surviving Guild - in Southampton - and even this band of dedicated men and women is struggling to survive...

Recently, at a meeting of one of our Committees it was said that it would take only one dedicated person to re-establish a Guild - and someone commented "Better a Volunteer than three pressed men".

Where, I wondered, did that saying originate.

Over the centuries many measures were taken to ensure that ships of the Royal Navy were adequately manned. Some were legal, many were quasi-legal and most were abused by those appointed to enforce them. Broadly speaking, all of the legislation allowed for "eligible men of seafaring habits between the ages of 18 and 45" to be liable for "impressment" - compulsory service in naval ships.

A first-rate ship of the line carried a crew of almost 800 and, at Trafalgar, Nelson's "Victory" included more than 600 "pressed men" in her complement. In time of war the need was great and men had to be found so some 40 "impressment" depots were established.

These organisations were known as Impress Services. Each depot was under the control of an RN Captain (usually one that was not entrusted with a seafaring command) and the "press gang" comprised thugs and vagabonds known as "gangers" who could be depended upon to come up with adequate numbers of "eligible men" albeit many who had never seen a ship in their lives. Men in the street would be accosted and invited to volunteer for service at sea and, if they refused, they were either rendered unconscious by a blow on the head or, less frequently, the liberal application of strong ale in an adjoining tavern.

If the unfortunate wretch could be persuaded to "volunteer" for the navy and accept the "Kings Shilling" he was rewarded with a sum of money which, when he boarded his first ship, was immediately recovered from him to pay for a hammock, bedding and clothes.

This acceptance of money meant that most seafarers were classed as "volunteers" and this gave rise to the expression "Better a volunteer than three pressed men" as, presumably their suitability for shipboard service was greater than those who were hit over the head and carried aboard! The gangers were well rewarded and their earnings were supplemented by accepting bribes from those in the street who could afford to pay to be released from their clutches. In many instances the endeavours of the press gang were thwarted by the intervention of other citizens and many a mini-riot resulted from their attempts to make up their numbers.

Unfortunately, merchant ships were an adequate source of qualified seafarers and many a seaman arriving in a United Kingdom port after months and years away was denied a much longed-for reunion with his family when the press gang was sent aboard his ship. In many instances ships in port and at anchor were raided by the press gangs and although it was ruled that the ship must be left with "sufficient seafarers to navigate safely" this was seldom done. Many merchant Captains provided hideaways for their crew to shelter in when the press gang boat was seen to be in the vicinity but this afforded little protection from the ruthless and heavily armed thugs. Seafarers on foreign flag ships were often open to impressment and American seamen were particularly at risk because of their ability to speak and understand English.



Selected UK citizens - shipwrights and most of the seafarers engaged in the whaling trade, to mention but two categories - were issued with documentation known as "Protections Tickets, granted by The Lord High Admiral and issued at the Customs House which entitled them to exemption from impressment but these afforded scant protection and, indeed, when the manning situation was dire this protection was withdrawn officially.

Many magistrates sentencing men to a long term of imprisonment for very minor crimes offered the accused an opportunity to serve His/Her Majesty at sea rather than serve a prison sentence and many took advantage of this generosity only to regret it many times in the years ahead.

In an effort to regularise the supply of naval seafarers, in 1795 Pitt introduced two "Quota Acts" laying down the number of men that each county had to supply - based on its population and the number of ports contained therein. London had to supply 5700 and Yorkshire a mere 1100. In an effort to meet their quota many counties offered a seafaring bounty but when this proved inadequate local magistrates were instructed to increase sentences and then offer the accused the possibly more attractive option of serving aboard a warship - and, if they survived, a pension at the end of their service.

In 1815, at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, impressment ended "officially" but even as late as 1835 there were isolated instances of impressing although, by that time, the length of service of a pressed man could not exceed five years.

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