

Samuel Plimsoll

Plimsoll was born in Bristol on February 10th. 1824 and shortly afterwards the family moved to Sheffield and, later, to Penrith in Cumbria. His parents were not wealthy and the young Plimsoll was compelled to leave school at an early age and seek gainful employment as a clerk in a brewery which he eventually managed.

Throughout his work he continued his studies and this proved extremely advantageous in his later years. He was an ambitious man and, in 1853, he made his way to London and attempted to set himself up as a coal merchant. The project was not successful and the young Plimsoll was soon destitute and forced to live in cheap boarding houses in the dockland area.

Undoubtedly, it was there that he first met seafarers and listened to their tales of life aboard ship and the dangers of seafaring. Plimsoll had long been critical of the social injustices and the callous pursuit of profit with the total disregard for the misery and dangers it created. This was an era when there were few laws to protect people at their workplace and commercial pressure overrode safety considerations in the drive to compete in global trade. Nowhere was this more manifest than in seafaring and Plimsoll soon noticed the fear and apprehension amongst his fellow lodgers when they were leaving to join a ship in the adjoining docks.

As his business fortunes improved so his zeal for social reform increased and he resolved to devote his life to the reform of working conditions – especially those of the world’s seafarers. This was the era when shipping disasters were commonplace through poor maintenance and blatant overloading and the owners ensured that by over-insuring the ship and cargo they were guaranteed a handsome return if a ship foundered.

Destined to enter political life, Plimsoll, in 1867, was elected as the Liberal Member of Parliament for Derby and he immediately endeavoured to introduce a Bill that would ensure ships maintained a reasonable freeboard but this was opposed by many of the ship-owning MP’s in the House. Plimsoll battled on and in 1872 he published a book entitled “Our Seamen” which was widely read and which outlined the perils faced by the crews of merchant ships.

In 1873 he was rewarded by the appointment of a Royal Commission resulting in a watered-down Bill, which Plimsoll reluctantly accepted. However, before the Bill could be enacted, Disraeli succumbed to pressure from his ship-owning friends and announced that the Bill would be discarded. This was too much for Plimsoll and he reacted so violently that he was accused of a Parliamentary breach of order and suspended for seven days. Eventually, he was forced to apologise to the House but by this time, people were becoming aware of the need for positive action and the Government was compelled to pass the Bill that was soon included in the Merchant Shipping Act of 1876. In effect the Bill gave the Board of Trade stringent powers of inspection and resulted in vessels being compelled to adopt the Plimsoll Line – a line on the hull of a ship indicating the maximum safe loaded draft and the minimum freeboard for the vessel in various operating conditions.

Thus, for the first time it was stipulated that every British ship, with the exception of coasting vessels of less than 80 tons, pleasure craft and fishing vessels, must carry a conspicuous circular disk – 12 inches in diameter – so placed that “the centre of the disc shall indicate the maximum load line in salt water to which the Owner intends to load the ship for that voyage”. Initially, the positioning of the disc was left to the discretion of the owner but all foreign-going vessels had to display it and if it was submerged then the Owner faced a fine of £100 - big money in those days.

It was not until 1894, when the Merchant Shipping Act was revised, that the responsibility for positioning the line was taken over by the Board of Trade.

In 1880, Plimsoll was re-elected by a huge majority but he stood down in favour of Sir William Harcourt, the Home Secretary, who had lost his seat. Plimsoll knew that Harcourt carried more influence than he did and would influence Plimsoll’s “causes” accordingly. Such was his fame and popularity as a politician that more than 23 constituencies offered him a seat but he left the House to continue his crusading work for British seafarers by lecturing and writing numerous articles outlining the hazards of irresponsible seafaring. Subsequently he served for a time as President of The Sailors’ and Firemen’s Union.

He died in Folkestone in June 1898 but it took a further thirty years for the maritime nations globally to adopt his Plimsoll Line with the introduction of an International Convention.

Today, he is remembered occasionally by those who bother to read the inscription on the bronze bust on London’s Victoria Embankment – “in grateful recognition of services to men of the sea of all nations” but probably much more often by those whose job it is to study the hulls of the huge vessels entering and leaving our ports to satisfy themselves that the vessel is not overloaded.

