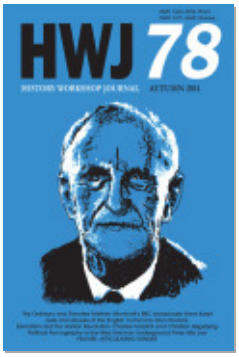
Black West Indian Seamen in the British Merchant Marine in the Mid nineteenth Century



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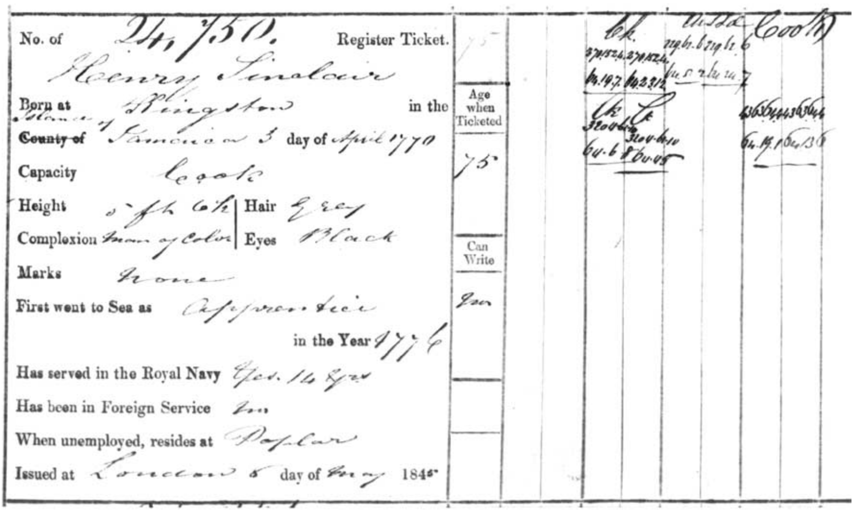
History Workshop Journal, Issue 58, Autumn 2004, pp. 259-274 (Article)

Published by Oxford University Press

Black West Indian Seamen in the British Merchant Marine in the Mid nineteenth Century

by Alan Cobley


No. of 24,750. Register Ticket.

Henry Sinclair

Born at Kingston in the Island of ~~County of~~ Jamaica 3 day of April 1770

Capacity Cook

Height 5 ft 6 in | Hair Grey

Complexion Man of Color | Eyes Black

Marks None

First went to Sea as Apprentice in the Year 1776

Has served in the Royal Navy Yes. 14 yrs

Has been in Foreign Service No

When unemployed, resides at Poplar

Issued at London 5 day of May 1848

Age when Ticketed 75

Can Write No

Board of Trade Records. Public Record Office.

Seaman's Ticket issued 1848 for Henry Sinclair, cook, born 1773 in Kingston Jamaica, who first went to sea aged six.

WEST INDIAN SEAMEN AND THE 'BLACK ATLANTIC'

The Emancipation Proclamation throughout the British Empire in 1834, although hedged around with qualifications to protect plantations from labour shortages, opened up the possibility of a legitimate escape from the plantations for many former slaves. Although the islands remained highly-stratified societies with largely mono-crop economies, deep-water seafaring was an option which promised economic, social and – perhaps – psychological, independence. Thus, it became an important alternative to plantation labour for thousands of Afro-Caribbean men during the nineteenth century.

A merchant seaman's wages were never especially attractive, and hardly showed any improvement in the course of the nineteenth century.[1] Yet notwithstanding low rates of pay seafarers had one enormous advantage

over the generality of wage labourers ashore: they routinely received food and board in addition to their cash wages, which were generally paid as a lump sum at the end of the voyage. This circumstance made it possible for them to accumulate a small nest-egg to meet their material needs in (frequent) periods of unemployment, or to support a family. In some cases, it provided capital with which a thrifty seaman could purchase property, or even set himself up in business in a small way. Many an old sea-dog whiled away his retirement as proprietor of one of the innumerable 'rum-shops' that could be found in the narrow back streets of Caribbean ports, or dotting the Caribbean countryside.[2]

However, the significance of Afro-Caribbean seafaring was much more than economic. As Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker have shown, seafarers in the Atlantic World were in the vanguard of the formation of a 'multi-racial, multi-ethnic, international working class'.[3] The task of pioneering methods of co-operation, association and collective struggle against capitalist exploitation fell largely to them, perhaps because the bonds born of close co-operation and community aboard ship could provide patterns for collective resistance ashore. Afro-Caribbean seafarers played a pivotal part in this, bringing with them the full repertoire of slave resistance to add to the arsenal of modern wage labour. It is no surprise that radical working-class movements around the fringes of the Atlantic in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were replete with black leaders, such as Crispus Attucks, Olaudah Equiano, Robert Wedderburn, William Davidson and Denmark Vesey. All of them had begun their working lives as seafarers in the Caribbean.[4]

Within the Caribbean itself, in many territories the earliest Afro-Caribbean political associations were formed by seamen and wharf workers. These were in turn the prototypes for the first popular political parties in the Caribbean, that would lead the fight for political independence in the region in the mid twentieth century. In addition, Afro-Caribbean seamen were key transmitters of radical political ideas and movements to other parts of the (black) Atlantic world in these years. The Garveyite newspaper, *Negro World* (founded by the Jamaican Marcus Garvey), and the Communist organ, *Negro Worker* (edited by the Trinidadian George Padmore), both relied on a network of black seafarers for their distribution during the 1920s.[5] It can be said, in short, that black seafarers provided the sinews which bound together the conceptual space which Paul Gilroy has called 'the black Atlantic'. It was for this reason that – wherever in the Atlantic world Afro-Caribbean seafarers settled – they posed a vital challenge to their host societies in social, cultural and political spheres, and were at times subjected to furious racial onslaughts by local authorities and governments as a consequence.[6]

Using the records of the Office of the Registrar-General of Seamen, which recorded information on seamen of all nationalities aboard British ships in the mid nineteenth century, this article presents a profile of this

important segment of the international working class as it emerged immediately following Emancipation in 1834.

THE RECORDS OF THE REGISTRAR-GENERAL OF SEAMEN

Various attempts have been made to document the number and quality of merchant seamen serving in the British merchant marine, dating back to a voluntary seafarers' registry operated by the Admiralty between 1696 and 1710.[7] This first attempt, like several subsequent ones, was motivated by the concern to ensure that a sufficient number of qualified seamen were available to man ships in the Royal Navy when called upon in time of war, a preoccupation that was reflected in the Navigation Acts during the eighteenth century. A voluntary register had obvious limitations as an accurate survey of available manpower: eventually, in 1835, a scheme was instituted which attempted to create a comprehensive record, based on data compiled from the muster rolls carried by every ship. The Merchant Shipping Act of that year required captains or ship owners to deposit a standardized form of crew list and agreement (setting out the terms of service for the crew) at the beginning and end of each foreign-going voyage, thus indicating any changes in the composition of the crew in the course of the voyage. For ships over eighty tons engaged in the home trade crew lists and agreements were to be deposited every six months. A new General Register Office of Merchant Seamen was charged with the responsibility of compiling 'Employment Books' based on these crew lists. In theory, at least, these books would provide information on the seafaring career of every seaman who served regularly on British ships.[8]

Unfortunately for those in search of accurate statistical and other data on merchant seamen, this ambitious scheme was doomed to failure. It was hard trying to keep track of hundreds of British vessels spread across the globe and to secure crew lists on a regular basis – especially since British ships were not identified by unique registration numbers until 1854.[9] In addition, crew lists often contained inaccurately recorded, similar sounding or false names. Trying to trace the movements of tens of thousands of seamen annually in such circumstances must have been a bureaucratic nightmare. Although data running to thousands of pages was compiled, the statistics produced from it were of doubtful value. Nevertheless, some useful information can be gleaned.

A sampling of the names in the alphabetical listing under 'A' and 'B' in the very first volume of the 'Register of Seamen' compiled in 1835–1836 identified fifty-three as West Indian born.[10] Their birthplaces were as follows:

Table 1. Birth places of 53 West Indian seamen (sample), 1835–6

Birthplace	Number
Jamaica	14
Barbado(e)s	7
Bermuda	7
St Vincent	5
Antigua	3
St Kitts	3
St Domingo	3
Bahamas/New Providence	2
Demerara	2
Dominica	2
Grenada	2
Nevis	1
Porto Rico, St Domingo	1
Trinidad	1
TOTAL	53

Source: Alphabetical 'Register of Seamen', vol. 1.

Several useful conclusions may be drawn from this sample. Firstly, as might be expected, Jamaica, Barbados and Bermuda account for almost half of the West Indians identified. These territories sat astride the main deep-sea trading routes between Britain and the West Indies and housed Britain's main naval bases in the region: by this date they had already been supplying significant numbers of men for both the Royal Navy and the British merchant fleet for more than a century. However, the figures suggest that several smaller territories also had strong nautical traditions. Second, the ages of the West Indians in the sample ranged from fifteen to sixty-three years of age (one was unstated), and were distributed as follows:

Table 2. Ages of 52 West Indian seamen (sample), 1835–6

Age	<20	21–25	26–30	31–35	36–40	41–45	46–50	51–55	56–60	60+
No.	7	16	10	5	5	4	2	2	0	1

Source: Alphabetical 'Register of Seamen', vol. 1.

No information is given on complexion or ethnicity in the register, and in general no inference can be drawn from the given names, although it seems safe to assume that Mingo Anthony (Register No. 3627) was a 'man of colour'. However, the register records the 'Quality' or capacity aboard ship of each man, as follows: two masters, one mate, twenty-three cooks, sixteen stewards, one cook/steward, and nine 'Mariners'. While it seems unlikely,

though not impossible, that the two masters were 'men of colour', it seems very probable that most, if not all, the men listed as cooks and stewards were black. The three oldest men recorded in the sample were Joseph Black from Dominica, aged sixty-three – cook aboard the *Buoyant* of Whitehaven, Thomas Brown from Antigua, aged fifty-two – steward aboard the *Mary Cooke* of London, and John Blanch of Jamaica, aged fifty-one – cook aboard the *Lord Lyndhurst* of London. By contrast, the oldest of nine men listed simply as 'Mariner' was twenty-four, indicating that the heavy work involved in sailing the ship was a job for younger men.

One other interesting feature of these early records is that the home port of each ship from which the data is derived is listed in most cases. They included sixteen ships from London, eight from Liverpool, four from Glasgow and three from Bristol. Four ships were from other English regional ports, five from other Scottish ports. Of the remainder, three were from Irish ports, and six were unlisted, while only four ships had home ports in the American colonies, namely Halifax (Nova Scotia), Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and Quebec.[11]

After almost a decade, the unworkable system of using crew lists to track individuals was changed by the Merchant Seamen Act of 1844.[12] The new system sought to place the onus on the individual seaman for ensuring proper records were kept by requiring that all seamen leaving the United Kingdom on a British ship carry a Seaman's Ticket. The ticket was obtainable by personal application only. Apart from name, place and date of birth, with the current capacity in which the seaman was serving, the ticket also had space for a physical description, including 'Height', 'Hair', 'Complexion', 'Eyes' and 'Marks'. The inclusion of information on 'complexion' makes it possible to estimate the proportion of black and brown seamen as compared to other groups aboard British ships at this time. Information on the man's seafaring career included the date when he first went to sea, and in what capacity; and whether he had served in the Royal Navy or in any foreign service. The information was rounded out with a note of the place of residence when unemployed, when and where the ticket was issued, the age of the holder at the time of issue, and whether he could write. Once a ticket had been issued and the information had been entered on a central register, it was possible to add information received from local shipping masters on subsequent voyages undertaken by the ticket holder.[13]

Ultimately this attempt to make registration mandatory and comprehensive also broke down, 'foiled', according to V. C. Burton, 'by seafarers' resistance to record keeping which they perceived as a threat to their freedom of employment'.[14] This resistance took the form of evasion and the widespread use of aliases to confound the efforts of the enumerators: a seaman who had deserted on a previous voyage would hardly register under the same name the next time he shipped out. Also, in view of the exigencies of the seafaring life, it is not surprising that tickets were frequently reported lost or destroyed. Unpopular among the seamen, costly to

administer and difficult to maintain, the ticket system was abandoned by the Board of Trade in 1854.[15] A new register which recorded only name, date of birth, ship, port of departure, and notes on the voyage was opened in 1854, but this too was abandoned in 1856, when the enumerators fell back on the crew lists as the only reliable means of counting seafarers.[16]

Despite its failure as an administrative device, however, the brief existence of the ticket system between 1844 and 1854 has bequeathed to posterity a priceless body of material on the social history of seafarers in the British merchant marine in the mid nineteenth century. The alphabetical index to the tickets alone takes up twenty-two volumes, while the register of tickets itself (in numerical order) runs to 282 volumes. The material contained in these volumes helps to fill out and contextualize the few snapshots of seafaring life in the mid Victorian age that can be found in the work of Henry Mayhew and in contemporary autobiographies.[17]

There are obvious limitations to using this data, however. One of the difficulties is the sheer number of entries in the registers. This can be illustrated by a rough calculation using the alphabetical index. The first volume has 235 pages, the second, 240 pages, and the third, 237 pages, giving an extrapolated average for the twenty-two volumes as a whole of 238 pages per volume. Each page has space for up to 160 names. However, some pages are only half full, while others are empty; it is reasonable to estimate that each heavy hand-bound volume is two-thirds full. Based on a calculation of 159 full pages containing 160 names each, we arrive at a total of 25,440 names per volume, or over 559,000 names for the collection as a whole. The Board of Trade's own estimate in 1853 was that between 400,000 and 500,00 tickets had been issued by that date.[18] Another problem relates to the variable quality of the handwritten entries, with some names and many numbers obscured by difficult penmanship, faded ink and possible transcription errors.

In order to get a sense of the incidence and characteristics of the West Indian seafarers in these records for the purposes of this study, it was necessary to select a sample of entries. The first three volumes (A to Campbell) of the twenty-two-volume Alphabetical Index were reviewed, giving a sample size equivalent to a little over ten percent of all entries. Some of the names of seamen identified as of Caribbean origin were then cross-checked against the numerical register.

Inevitably questions will arise about the validity of this sample. West Indian surnames tend to cluster under some initial letters, while virtual voids may exist under others, according to the surnames of the local European colonizers that were adopted by the formerly enslaved populations. For example, many Scottish and some Irish surnames are found in the English-speaking Caribbean, while Welsh names are less common; similarly, English names from the West Country are found much more frequently in the West Indies than those from northern England. Sample selection based on initial letters may also introduce regional or even

individual island biases, since some names are common in one part of the Caribbean but rare in others; Alleyne and Brathwaite are generally Barbadians or of Barbadian descent, but West Indians with traditional Scottish clan names such as MacKenzie, MacIntosh, and MacPherson are much more likely to be Jamaicans. Overall, however, the sample size was probably sufficiently large to overcome the potential problem of data clusters.

A more serious difficulty was identifying Caribbean-born seamen on the basis of incomplete information supplied about birthplace. Often the clerk recorded the town or village of birth, but not the country, leading to confusion in cases where place names from the UK or Ireland were duplicated in the colonies. Sometimes too, the information supplied by the seaman himself might be misleading. For example, data from the main register suggests that a substantial number – if not the majority – of seamen issued with tickets in the 1840s and early 1850s who gave their place of birth as Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia or Quebec were 'men of colour'. But the indigenous black population in these places was not large, and some may have had their origins elsewhere. Nova Scotia in particular had been a haven for black loyalists, exiles and runaway slaves from the United States and the Caribbean since the late eighteenth century, while Prince Edward Island attracted many skilled West Indian immigrants when it became a major centre for the building of sailing ships during the nineteenth century.[19] In any event, individuals have been excluded from the sample in all cases where any doubt as to their place of origin existed. The number of seamen in the records of West Indian origin are probably undercounted for this reason.

Notwithstanding inconsistencies in record keeping and other difficulties associated with using this data, it was possible to identify 165 Caribbean-born seamen and 262 other foreign seamen in the first volume of the Alphabetical Index, 174 Caribbean-born and 261 other foreign seamen in Volume Two, and 135 Caribbean-born, and 322 other foreign-born seamen in Volume Three. The combined total for the first three of the twenty-two volumes in the Index is therefore 474 Caribbean-born, and 845 other foreign-born, seamen. If we assume that a similar pattern exists throughout the complete run of twenty-two volumes, we arrive at a total of approximately 3,500 Caribbean-born and 6,300 other foreign-born seamen in the complete data set of over 500,000 names. From these figures we can conclude that Caribbean-born seamen were by far the single largest cohort of non-British born seamen aboard British merchant ships in the 1840s, although the overall proportions of West Indians to native-born Britons aboard British ship is much more difficult to estimate. The table below records the incidence of named birthplaces for Caribbean-born and other foreign-born seamen in the first three volumes of the Alphabetical Index (in descending order of incidence):

Table 3. Origins of Caribbean and other foreign-born seamen, 1845–54

Caribbean origin	Total	Other foreign origin	Total
Jamaica	124	Malta	188
Barbados	105	St John's, New Brunswick	174
Bermuda	54	Quebec	74
Demerara	25	Halifax, Nova Scotia	60
Antigua	25	Heligoland	56
Nassau	24	India (incl. Bombay, Madras, Calcutta, Bengal)	53
St Kitts	22	St John, Newfoundland	36
Trinidad	18	Africa (not specific)	36
Dominica	17	Prince Edward Island	34
St Vincent	12	South Africa	20
St Lucia	8	Gibraltar	16
Grenada	7	United States	15
Tortola	4	Australia	12
Belize	4	Mauritius	10
Berbice	4	Ceylon	8
Nevis	3	St Helena	8
Tobago	3	Corfu	8
St Thomas	2	Toronto	8
St Martins	1	Pictau	4
St Domingo	1	New Zealand	3
Montserrat	1	Norway	3
Carriacou	1	Stockholm	2
Martinique	1	Montreal	2
West Indies (not specific)	8	Singapore	2
		Malacca	2
		Italy	2
		Penang	1
		Rangoon	1
		Valparaiso	1
		Port Moresby	1
		Labrador	1
		Prussia	1
		Spain	1
		Copenhagen	1
Total Caribbean born seamen	474	Total other foreign-born seamen	845

Source: Alphabetical Index of Register of Tickets, vols 1–3 (A to Campbell); sample.

In order to collect a representative sample of the data recorded on each ticket, 8,000 tickets in the main register were reviewed: the runs chosen were ticket numbers 100–1,100; 8,000–11,000; 24,000–25,000; 50,000–51,000; and 100,000–102,000.[20] In many cases the entries vary in

terms of the range of information provided, with quite full entries in early volumes but much less information in entries found in later volumes, especially where runs of tickets had been issued at local centres such as Hull, Drogheda, Ramsgate or Greenock. In some cases nothing is recorded other than the seaman's name; in others details relating to physical description or earlier career are omitted. This variation influenced the choice of volumes sampled. It is important to note that even in cases where key information was included, there was some variation in the manner in which it was recorded. This is nowhere more evident than in the description applied under the heading 'Complexion'. The usual term to identify seamen of African (or Indian) descent in the Register – the main object of this study – is 'Man of Colour'; however, the words 'Coloured', 'Black' and 'Dark' were also used on occasion. Where hair and eyes are also described as 'Black' or 'Dark' it seemed safe to assume that the man in question was of African or Indian descent. However, John Bonstadt, a carpenter from Demerara (Ticket No. 242260), is less easy to categorize so definitively in light of a physical description which lists him as having a 'Dark' complexion, 'Dark Brown' hair and 'Hazel' eyes. There is no such difficulty in identifying John Applethwaite, a chief mate from Barbados (Ticket No. 5086), as one of the small number of white West Indian seamen included in the register; he is described as of 'Pink' complexion, with 'Light' hair and 'Blue' eyes.

The complete sample of approximately 8,000 tickets included seventy-seven men who were identifiable as of Caribbean origin. Of these sixty-six were described as 'man of colour' or 'dark', six had no physical description recorded, and five were evidently of European descent, being described as of 'pink', 'fresh' or 'fair' complexion. A further thirty-six 'men of colour' can be identified from the same sample of tickets who were not born in the Caribbean, although some may have been of Afro-Caribbean descent. The birthplaces of the non-West Indians were given as follows:

Table 4. Birth places of foreign-born black seamen except Caribbean born, 1845–54

Place of Birth	Number
Bombay	2
Calcutta	1
Cape Coast	1
Cape of Good Hope	1
Cape Town	1
Sierra Leone	8
The Gambia	3
Liverpool	3
London	1
Limehouse, Middlesex	1
St John's, NFL	6

Table 4. Continued

Place of Birth	Number
Nova Scotia	3
Upper Canada	1
Quebec	1
Montreal	1
New Zealand	1
At Sea	1
TOTAL	**36**

Source: Alphabetical Index of Register of Tickets, vols 1–3 (A to Campbell); sample.

The birth places of the West Indians in the sample were given as follows:

Table 5. Birth places of 77 seamen born in the Caribbean, 1845–54

Place of Birth	Number
Jamaica	23 (1)
Barbados	17 (2)
Bermuda	5 (1)
Demerara	5
Nassau, Bahamas	4
New Providence, Bahamas	3
Dominica	3
Antigua	3
Tortola	2
Belize	1
Berbice	1
Carriacou	1
Grand Cayman	1
Grenada	1 (1)
St Kitts	1
St Lucia	1
St Vincent	1
St Domingo	1
Montserrat	1
Turks Islands	1
Trinidad	1
TOTAL	**77 (incl. 5 white)**

Source: Alphabetical Index of Register of Tickets, vols 1–3 (A to Campbell); sample.

As in 1835–36, the three key British naval stations in the West Indies – Jamaica, Barbados and Bermuda – provided the largest number of Afro-Caribbean seamen found aboard British merchant ships. However, the sample suggest that the Bahamas and Demerara were emerging as increasingly notable sites for recruitment of seamen, as compared to the sample from 1835–36.

Apart from 'Complexion', the tickets provide some illuminating information on other physical characteristics. Under 'Marks', visible scars were noted in the register in eighteen cases; this relatively high incidence of scarring gives some sense of the hardship and dangers of a seafaring life in the first half of the nineteenth century. A further five men had tattoos.[21] Information recorded on the height of sixty-nine West Indian seafarers suggests a median of approximately five feet six inches, though a quarter were less than five feet five inches tall:

Table 6. Recorded Height (Feet and Inches) of 69 West Indian Seamen

5.1	5.1½	5.2	5.2½	5.3	5.3½	5.4	5.4½	5.5	5.5½	5.6	5.6½
1	2	0	1	0	3	8	1	7	3	13	2
5.7	5.7½	5.8	5.8½	5.9	5.9½	5.10	5.10½	5.11	5.11½	6.0	**Total**
9	3	4	2	0	2	3	1	2	1	1	**69**

Source: Alphabetical Index of Register of Tickets, vols 1–3 (A to Campbell); sample.

These figures are consistent with a claim by Bolster that in the early nineteenth century most sailors were under five foot nine, and that the average height was five foot six.[22]

The ages of the West Indian seamen in the sample at the time of the issue of their tickets ranged from fifteen years to seventy-five years of age (five were unstated), and were distributed as follows:

Table 7. Ages of 72 West Indian seamen on issue of ticket, 1845–54

Age	<16	16–20	21–25	26–30	31–35	36–40	41–45	46–50	51–55	56–60	60+
No.	1	12	22	20	8	2	2	2	0	2	1

Source: Alphabetical Index of Register of Tickets, vols 1–3 (A to Campbell); sample.

This data confirms the impression that deep-water seafaring among Afro-Caribbean people in these years – as for other population groups – was predominantly a young man's profession. However, a large proportion of the West Indian seafarers in the sample – forty-three of those for whom data is available – had been seafarers for ten years or more by the time of issue of their ticket. Of these, fourteen had been seafarers for more than fifteen years, and eight for more than twenty. Only thirteen had been to sea for five years or less, of which only five had been seamen for less than three years. Taken together, this data points to two important features of those West Indians who adopted the seafaring profession in the first half of the nineteenth century; first, many continued to go to sea regularly after their first voyage, and presumably knew no other life; and second, most went to sea at a very young age. The latter point is borne out by the data recorded on the age at which each seaman first went to sea, as summarized in the table below:

Table 8. Age at which 71 West Indian seamen had first gone to sea

Age	<11	11–15	16–20	21–25	26–30	31–35	36–40	41–45	46–50	51–55	56–60	60+
No.	9	32	22	4	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Source: Alphabetical Index of Register of Tickets, vols 1–3 (A to Campbell); sample.

Only eight men had begun their seafaring careers at age twenty-one or over, while forty had gone to sea at fifteen or less. The dubious distinction of being the youngest to embark on a life at sea in this sample belongs to William Henry Harvey Cumming (ticket no. 101032), born in Demerara on 9 August 1826, who first went to sea as an 'Apprentice' ('slave'?) in 1830, at the age of four. However, the most startling personal story to emerge from these statistics is that of Henry Sinclair (ticket no. 24750), who was born on the 3 April 1770 in Kingston, Jamaica, and went to sea as a six-year-old 'Apprentice' in 1776 (the time of the American Revolution). When his ticket was issued Sinclair, already seventy-five years old, was working as a sea cook. The register shows that he continued to ship out regularly from his home base in Poplar, East London until at least 1848, when he would have been seventy-eight. Thus Sinclair had a seafaring career spanning over seventy-two years, including fourteen years of service in the Royal Navy. Given the hardships of the seafaring life in the era of sail, this was an incredible feat.

Data on the 'capacity' or nature of employment of the seventy-seven men in the sample shows, as expected, that a majority were serving as cooks or stewards. The next biggest category was of men recorded simply as 'seamen'. However only one man was specifically identified as an 'Able-Bodied Seaman' – indicating that he was a seaman of superior experience and skill. Of the five white seafarers identified in the sample, one was an apprentice, one was a steward and seaman, one was a seaman, one was a mate, and one a chief mate. Although the statistics confirm that Afro-Caribbean seafarers were overwhelmingly cooks, stewards or simply seamen in these years, Stephen Dennis, a 'man of colour' from Jamaica (ticket no. 179) had risen from 'Boy' to third mate during his twenty-three years at sea, while two of three West Indians identified as chief mates were also probably 'men of colour'.[23] One, Dominick Loague (ticket no. 10001) from St Thomas, Jamaica, is described as having black hair, black eyes and a dark complexion; the other, Christopher McGeorge (Ticket no. 21346), as having black hair, a dark complexion, and hazel eyes. Loague had risen from the lowest-ranked person aboard ship – a 'Boy' – to chief mate in only eleven years at sea, while McGeorge had risen from apprentice to chief mate after only ten years; this would have been a remarkably rapid ascent from the fo'csle for 'men of colour'. Both men must have been seamen of considerable skill, and their tickets confirm that both were literate. However basic literacy was not so rare aboard ship as might be supposed:

thirty out of sixty-seven men for whom information was recorded were said to be able to write, including a number of men serving on the lower deck.

One other specialist skill that was always in demand aboard ship was carpentry. In the course of a voyage the wooden hulls and rigging of sailing ships took a ferocious beating from wind and waves, and the need for repairs was constant. While larger ships invariably carried their own carpenter, smaller vessels sometimes picked up artisans with the necessary skills in ports along the way. During the 1830s 'native carpenters' from the Bahamas were employed regularly by the Royal Navy aboard small cruisers based at the Jamaica station.[24] There were three carpenters identified in our sample of West Indian seafarers, at least two of whom were 'men of colour': these were Samuel Sims of Nassau, Bahamas (ticket no. 10396) and Henry Francis Bell of Barbados (ticket no. 782). However, the case of Sims demonstrates that artisan skills were no guarantee of regular employment in that capacity; shortly after his ticket was issued in 1845 he was forced to take a berth as a cook and steward.

The full statistics on the 'quality' of the seventy-seven West Indian seafarers identified are as follows:

Table 9. The 'quality' of seventy-seven West Indian seafarers

Quality	Number
Steward	17
Cook	15
Cook and Steward	8
Seaman	25
Able Seaman	1
Apprentice	3
Mate	2
Chief Mate	3
Carpenter	3
TOTAL	**77**

Source: Alphabetical Index of Register of Tickets, vols 1–3 (A to Campbell); sample.

The Registrar of Seamen was particularly interested in knowing the number of men who had served in the Navy. In the sample under discussion, nine men had served time in the British Royal Navy, as well as four in the United States Navy, and one in the Portuguese Navy. However, all of those with British naval experience were older men, indicating perhaps that military service was becoming less common with the decline in the size of the Royal Navy after the end of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.

Seafarers have often been portrayed as a highly mobile, even rootless, population, sometimes settling in ports far from their place of origin. The statistical evidence drawn from this sample tends to support that general picture. Of the seventy-seven men identified as having Caribbean birthplaces, thirty-five gave home addresses in London. Predominantly they

came from the poor multi-ethnic East End communities in the hinterland of the London Docks, such as Stepney, Limehouse, Poplar and St George's East; several gave their address as a local Sailors' Home. A further seven men gave Liverpool as their home base, while three had addresses in Glasgow, one in Greenock, and one in Hull. In total forty-seven of the seventy-seven West Indian seamen gave home addresses in the UK, while two others identified Halifax, Nova Scotia as their home port. More than a quarter of the sample – twenty-one men – still identified their homes as being in the Caribbean, even though many of them had had seafaring careers spanning a decade or more. There is clearly a suggestion here that some of these men retained active family ties in the Caribbean. This data, combined with that on the age profile of West Indian seafarers and on length of service at sea, seems to be consistent with key aspects of Bolster's portrayal of African-American seafarers in the nineteenth century as compared to whites, which he summarized thus: 'Black sailors were older than their white shipmates; more rooted in their home ports; more likely to be married; more likely to persist in going to sea; and more likely to define themselves with dignity as respectable men because seafaring enabled at least some of them to provide for their families'.[25]

CONCLUSION

British merchant ships (and those of other European nations) had been the principal vehicle for the enslavement of Africans in the Caribbean. It was a considerable irony that during the tumultuous course of the nineteenth century they were transformed into vehicles of potential opportunity for Caribbean men of African descent who were seeking new social, cultural and economic freedoms. At the same time, Afro-Caribbean seafarers played a key role in the transmission of new movements and ideologies in the black Atlantic world. The data recorded on seamen's tickets and on ships' articles are an important resource in the continuing effort to reclaim this hidden social and cultural history.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Jon Press, 'Wages in the Merchant Navy, 1815–1854', *Journal of Transport History* Third Series, 2: 2, 1981, pp. 37–52; Lewis R. Fischer, 'Seamen in a Space Economy: International Regional Patterns of Maritime Wages on Sailing Vessels, 1863–1900', in *Lisbon as a Port Town: the British Seaman, and Other Maritime Themes*, ed. Stephen Fisher, Exeter, 1988, esp. pp. 60, 62. Of course, as Fischer points out, wages paid to seamen shipping out of West Indian ports were always highly seasonal; experienced seamen were at a premium during the hurricane season from August to October but at other times of the year wages were markedly lower, pp. 74–5.

2 A record of savings accounts opened in Barbados between September 1904 and September 1905 included twenty-three seamen, seven mariners, and five ship's carpenters among the account holders: figures cited in Patricia Stafford, 'Acquiring Affluence in

Barbados, 1880–1937', unpublished seminar paper presented to the History Forum, Department of History and Philosophy, University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, Barbados, 21 Nov. 2003. Seaman's Village in Christchurch, Barbados, is reputed to have been named for the several seamen who had bought plots of land and settled in the neighbourhood in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

3 Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, 'The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves and the Atlantic Working Class in the Eighteenth Century', *Journal of Historical Sociology* 3: 2, 1990, pp. 225–52. For the most recent version of their argument see their *The Many-Headed Hydra: the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, London, 2000. See also Jesse Lemisch, 'Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America', *William and Mary Quarterly* Third Series, 25: 3, 1968.

4 Linebaugh and Rediker, 'The Many-Headed Hydra'; Paul Edwards, *Unreconciled Strivings and Ironic Strategies: Three Afro-British Authors of the Georgian Era*, Edinburgh, 1992.

5 Nigel Bolland, *On the March: Labour Rebellions in the British Caribbean, 1934–39*, Kingston, Jamaica and London, 1995; Richard Hart, *Towards Decolonisation: Political, Labour and Economic Development in Jamaica*, 1938–1945, Kingston, Jamaica, 1999. On the role of Afro-Caribbean seafarers in spreading Garveyite ideas see Tony Martin, *Race First: the Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association*, Dover, MA, 1986; see also Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism and Early Twentieth Century America*, London, 1998.

6 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London, 1993. On the role of Afro-Caribbean seafarers in South Africa, Alan Cobley, 'Far From Home: the Origins and Significance of the Afro-Caribbean Community in South Africa to 1939', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 18: 2, 1992, pp. 349–70.

7 'Public Record Office, London: Records Information 5. Records of the Registrar General of Shipping and Seamen', unpublished information sheet on Records held at the PRO, Kew Gardens, London.

8 Nicholas Cox, 'The Records of the Registrar-General of Shipping and Seamen', *Maritime History* 2: 2, 1972, pp. 168–88. The Register Office was established under section 19 of 5 & 6 Gul IV c19.

9 Registration Numbers for British ships were not required until the Merchant Shipping Act of that year (17 & 18 Vic c104) made them compulsory; however, a partial system had been in use for some time prior to this date.

10 The volume consulted, from which the data below was compiled, was found in the Board of Trade Records kept at the Public Records Office, London: ref: BT119/1: 'Alphabetical Index to Register of Seamen: Series II – Register for Years 1835–1844: Volume 1'.

11 A survey of crew-lists of Bristol-registered ships for 1863 found only twenty West Indians in a combined total of 3,465 men. However, only 110 Bristol-based ships were engaged in the foreign trade. Of these, just eighteen worked the route to the West Indies – a symptom of the sharp decline in the West Indies trade in the latter half of the nineteenth century. It seems possible, viewed in this light, that most if not all the ships engaged on the West Indies run carried at least one West Indian seaman: Barbara M. Austin, 'Notes: The Merchant Seamen of Bristol: the Evidence of the Crew Lists of Bristol-Registered Ships – 1863', *Mariner's Mirror* 73: 4, 1987, pp. 407–14.

12 7 & 8 Vic. C 112.

13 The data from which the following sections of this article were compiled was found in the Board of Trade Records held at the Public Records Office, London: refs: BT113 'Seamen's Tickets for 1844–1854 in Numerical Order'; BT114 'Alphabetical Index to Tickets 1844–1854'.

14 V. C. Burton, 'Counting Seafarers: the Published Records of the Registry of Merchant Seamen 1849–1913', *Mariner's Mirror* 71: 3, August 1985, p. 306.

15 The Marine Department of the Board of Trade had taken over responsibility for supervision of the merchant service, including registration of seamen, under the terms of the Mercantile Marine Act of 1850: Jane H. Wilde, 'The Creation of the Marine Department of the Board of Trade', *Journal of Transport History* 2: 4, 1956, pp. 193–206.

16 BT116 'New Seaman's Register: Series III 1853–1856.' It should be noted however, that even ships' articles did not provide a comprehensive record. In the Caribbean it was a common practice for ships engaged in trade between the Islands and along the American coast to take on additional crew to assist in handling cargo. Generally these men did not appear on ship's articles at all, and were not counted in any official statistics: see para.26 in 'Report of the

Committee appointed by the Board of Trade to Enquire into the Manning of British Merchant Ships. 1896. Volume One' (c.8127) in *British Parliamentary Papers: Reports From Commissioners*, 26, Vol. XL, 1896.

17 David M. Williams, 'Henry Mayhew and The British Seaman', in *Lisbon as a Port Town*, ed. Fisher; Richard Henry Dana Jr, *Two Years Before the Mast: a Personal Narrative of Life At Sea* (first published in 1840), Harmondsworth, 1986.

18 N. Cox, 'Records of the Registrar General', p. 175.

19 David A. Sutherland, 'Race Relations in Halifax, Nova Scotia, During the Mid-Victorian Quest for Reform', *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* New Series, 7, 1997, pp. 35–54.

20 The ticket numbers listed were found in the following volumes: BT113/1, BT113/6, BT113/13, and BT113/51. Ticket number 100 was the first ticket issued.

21 On tattoos and scarring see W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks. African American Seamen in the Age of Sail*, Cambridge, MA, 1997, pp. 92–3.

22 Bolster, *Black Jacks*, p. 102.

23 Dennis was the first West Indian 'man of colour' recorded in the general numerical register – Ticket No. 179.

24 'Admiralty to Vice Admiral Griffiths Colpoys, 22 May 1830', in ADM 128/34, p. 47.

25 Bolster, *Black Jacks*, pp. 189 and 170.