

Infosheet No. 34 Researching the Earliest Registers

Gareth Butler has done extensive research on the early years of Lloyd's Registers. Gareth has kindly given us permission to publish the following information extracted from his articles *Research Into Old Ships - Some Helpful Information* and *Ship Researchers: A Potted History of the Early Years of Lloyd's Register*, both originally published in the 'Teas Packet' (May 1998).

The First Volume

The first published volume of Lloyd's Register in 1764 was well laid out and had a 1765/6 column for 'updates'. This presentation would suggest considerable planning went into the Register. [View online.](#)



Ex-Names

For approximately the first twenty years the Register Book recorded ex-names. The ex-name quoted was the immediate former name only; there often could have been others that were not quoted. For example, an entry would state *Three Brothers*, ex *Friendship* with an overstamp 'Now *Rebecca*'. The following year the entry would read *Rebecca* ex *Three Brothers*. One needs to start at the earliest Registers and work meticulously forward for any hope of

accuracy. Some ex-names were quoted in the Supplement, but when checked against the main A-Z had no rename overstamp though obviously the same vessel. Many 'Main Entry' ex-names simply cease to be quoted, though not superseded by a more recent ex-name. After about 1785 the only rename information is an occasional overstamp, for example, 'Now *True Friend*'. This name appears in the 'T' section for the following year with no mention of an ex-name. It is thus all too easy to duplicate vessels on a 'Port Built' or 'Port Register' list. This lack of information on ex-names is a major problem with the early Registers, and continued well into the 1860s with ships simply being listed under current name.

Year of Build

In 1798 Lloyd's Register altered the 'Year of Build' to 'Years of Age'. This was to do with a Lloyd's Register arbitrary discrimination in favour of River Thames built (13 years) and eight years elsewhere. This led to a shipowners' revolt and to the establishment of their own 'Red Book' in 1799 (the Lloyd's Register was known as the Green Book). The 1798 'Years of Age' arrangement involved a typesetting alteration for every ship in the Register - both expensive and a source of errors. Many ships have 'one too many' between consecutive Registers, and in some cases 'one too few'. To be accurate one needs to log all

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supplement entries as this is the only time the actual 'Year Built' is quoted during the period 1798-1834.

Economic reality caused amalgamation of the 'Red' and 'Green' books in October 1834, the anniversary of Trafalgar, and 'Year Built' was reverted to.

A reasonably accurate build date can be found from the Classification/Survey columns in pre-1859 Registers.

However, it should be noted that survey months are only quoted for the current year, previous ships having year only. As Lloyd's Register ran 1 July to 30 June, it follows that, for example, 1855 built will only show months for those built in the January-May period of the 1855 Register. The rest of 1855 Year/Month will only be quoted in Supplement entries. But the 1856 Register will only quote 1855 in the Survey column for any 1855 built ships. It follows that June-December survey dates in any pre 1859 Register can only be found in a posted edition with Supplement entries. Ships with January - May 1856 survey dates in the 1855 Supplement will be carried over into the 1856 A-Z section.

Access to Supplements is therefore essential for accuracy with ships where no alternative date source like shipbuilders' records exist.

From 1851-1854 a build date 'fiddle' operated. Ships built in November/December of these years were in the Register Book as built the following year, provided the ships were not registered or sent to sea. Lloyd's Register later cancelled this fault and the vessels concerned were reverted to their true build date. The 1834-40 Registers and 1859 onwards give month/year for build

date, making matters more straightforward. Build dates quoted up to August 1887 are launch dates, and completion dates thereafter, apart from wooden ships, whose dates always referred to their launch. When most ships were wooden, their life was measured from date of entering the water, rather than completion. The life of iron and steel was measured from when the hulls and machinery entered service i.e. completion.

Registration

In 1786 a compulsory 'Ship Registration Act' was passed. Prior to this registration was on a voluntary basis, and only for foreign going ships.

Before 1786 ship tonnages were recorded in the Register Book as round figures such as 100, 150 etc. The 1786 Act meant more precise tonnages were given, as older ships were re-surveyed/re-measured. One needs to carefully check the 1785 and 1786 Register Books against each other, as the variation can be so great that the same ship could be easily confused as two different ones, suggesting that many pre-1786 tonnages were little more than sheer guesswork.

The first new Register Book after the amalgamation of 1834 contained all British registered vessels of over 50 tons, courtesy of the Board of Trade 'Masterlist'. Not many have full details as the new Lloyd's Register required re-survey of all existing ships before such details were entered. From 1837/8 the category 'under 50 tons' and not surveyed seems to have been dropped, and from 1839/40 all ships, regardless of

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tonnage, that had not been surveyed since 1834 were 'dropped'. It will be apparent that there was a considerable 'phantom fleet' existing after 1840, though these would still be registered at Customs and be on the Mercantile Navy List.

The Board of Trade required all steam vessels, of whatever size, to be registered, so research of old steamers should be simpler than for sail.

Class

The first Register Book (1764) used the letters A, E, I, O and U to assess the hull, and 1, 2 and 3 for equipment. 1768 changed the hull assessment symbols to a, b and c. The 1775/76 volume used symbol A1 - 'A' for highest Hull Class and '1' for ship's outfit. As ships became 'overage' from A1 class, there was no system of regaining it by thorough repairs. This led to needless new buildings simply to acquire an A1 class, with resulting wastage of scarce timber, not to mention an over-supply of ships which depressed freight rates. The 're-class' problem was eventually tackled in 1834, with the restored and continued categories. Survey under construction also dates from 1834.

Year Statistics

Early Lloyd's Registers ran Financial Year statistics, not Calendar Year - the period ran April to April until April 1841 when calendar years were used. Few ship historians are aware of this, presumably the reason why various Sunderland outport lists always overlook the 1840 figures (4/1840-4/1841: 246 ships of 62654 tons). The 1835-1840 Registers are actually 1834-1839 financial years. This four month overlap is probably

the reason for a 'one-year discrepancy' between the 'Years of Age' Registers and the 1834 'Years Built', for a number of ships which lasted long enough to enter the 1834 Register. The only sure date between 1798-1834 is the actual year built.

Voyages

Lloyd's Registers' 'Voyage Details' are nearly all foreign going or regular coasters, very few are given as 'Whitby/Scarborough collier' The collier fleet, both North and Irish Seas, was always large so it is reasonable to assume many were never in the Register pre 1834, when all surviving British registered ships of 50 tons and over were listed. Mid 1780s-1834 the Register had a separate listing of Australian-bound ships with those carrying convicts marked.

Rig

The Register Books do not seem to differentiate between some similar rigs, for example brig and snow, for some years. Thus a ship seemingly becoming a snow may always have been so. This may also apply to early barques given as 'ship' rig.

Place of Build

Occasionally 'Place of Build' details are not precise. For example, some Middlesborough built vessels are given as Stockton, the Customs entry stating 'Built within the Port limits' which could mean Stockton / Yarm / Middlesborough / Hartlepool.

One needs to be an expert on British and colonial ports, large and small, in order to decipher many of the 'places of build' which are heavily abbreviated, vowels being missed. A few ports cause major problems, for

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example Boston, which could be either in Lincolnshire or the USA. Hwdn could be Howden in Humber or Howden in Tyne. Chrstn could be Charleston in Cornwall, Fife or the USA. Newquay, Cornwall can be confused with New Quay, (sometimes given as Quay Bach) West Wales. Those built at the latter usually have masters with Welsh names, and also Welsh registered ports. Newburgh is a problem, both being in Scotland (one in Fife and one near Aberdeen). Arundel (Sussex) and Arendal (Norway) are also easily confused, as are Kingston (River Spey, Grampian) and Kingston (Channel coast, West Sussex). Kingston upon Hull was always called Hull.

A good percentage of ships built before 1783 were built in the American colonies.

Shipbuilders

Builders' names in the Register date from 1859/60. However, only the first part of partnership names was given, and there was rarely any builders 'up-date' for ships built pre-1859. In the 1830s/40s numerous Sunderland 'builders' were actually Timber Merchants and Stock Brokers, who supplied material and finance to 'small men'. The 'Builder's Certificate' carried the financial backer's name as a legal ploy, to guarantee his investment should things get sticky.

Some names of shipbuilders were recorded before 1886, but it was the Universal Register of this year that began to record a list of names of shipbuilders together with the names of the existing ships they had built, their tonnage and material. The first yard numbers were in the 1894-95 Appendix.

Dimensions

1st January 1836 saw new measurement rules come into force. Length/Breadth/Depth were given as Old Measurement (OM, in heavy print) and New Measurement (NM, in small print). Before 1836 depth was not taken into account, hence many unscrupulous shipowners had their vessels deepened, leading to stability problems and numerous cases of capsizing in bad weather.

Official Numbers

Official Numbers date from 1855 and will be in Customs House Registers and Mercantile Navy Lists. Before Official Numbers, identification must have been extremely complicated. For example, there were 240 *Mary's* in the 1805 Register, many of the same tonnage, rig and port of registry. Ships of the same number were listed in alphabetical order of the Master's name, which meant typesetting alterations from year to year as masters changed. Surprisingly, same name ships were never permanently arranged in descending order of tonnage. Later legislation prohibited name duplication to avoid confusion with signals.

Machinery

The engine builder and dimensions were given from 1874. It follows that the 1874 machinery information is that fitted in the ship at that date. Original machinery information is difficult to obtain, short of Customs Registers checks or time consuming searches of local newspapers. The only clues to a possible new engine/boiler pre 1874 are an 'MC' (Machinery Certificate) date some

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years later than the ship's build date, more likely if horsepower has altered also, and 'New Deck', as the deck section was removed to fit engines and boilers.

From 1874-75 Lloyd's Register Ships of over 100 tons plus that were not Lloyd's Register surveyed began to be listed. These are probably Liverpool Underwriters' Register Ships. Lloyd's Register surveyed ships have an MC date and a Build/Year month date, whereas the others have no MC date nor a build month. A fair number of ships in Lloyd's Register of 1874/75 have 2-cylinder compound and 4-cylinder compound machinery details, but no mention of any new engine boiler or new boiler conversion, even though the vessel is too old for compound machinery to have been original. In the mid 1860's there were a few P&O Pacific Steam Navigation Company and Randolph/Elder machinery sets which were early compounds.

Steam Vessels

In July 1859 Mr T Baring published a 'List of Steam Vessels in the UK, at 1 Jan 1859'. This may be part of the series published as Parliamentary Papers from about 1858-1870. These papers list a surprising number of early iron steamers in the 1840's, for example, the *Waterman* series of River Thames paddle ferries. The papers are arranged on a port by port basis, with the oldest registered ship as 'entry 1' on each port list.

Liverpool Register of Shipping

The short-lived Liverpool Register of 1835-44 was created due to the problem of many Liverpool owners buying Canadian built 'speculation' ships, considered by Lloyd's Register

to be poorly built and not worth surveying (later they did, but only for a minimum 4 year class. Canadian builders later funded the salaries for a couple of Lloyd's Register surveyors, who were liberal with their advice. Thereafter Canadian techniques and workmanship dramatically improved, many being listed 'SS' (Special Survey) while building.

Liverpool Underwriters' Register

This dates from 10 September 1862, its creation being due to dissatisfaction with wooden ship framing rules being applied to iron, resulting in over-engineered ships. LUR operated till 1885, when it amalgamated with Lloyd's Register. It listed all UK and many foreign iron built vessels over 50 tons and was good on ex-names and builders. In addition, from 1872 LUR had both engine and boiler builders with dates - thus the publication is extremely useful for researching small iron ships never featured in Lloyd's Register, but careful checking for accuracy is still necessary.

British Corporation

In 1890 another competitor to Lloyd's Register appeared, the British Corporation in Glasgow. This was formed due to Scottish ship owners feeling that Lloyd's Register rules on steel ships resulted in 'over-engineered' vessels, whereas a BC design could save many tons of steel. BC amalgamated with LR after World War II, in March 1949. It published its own Register of classed ships, which often gave more information than Lloyd's Register, for example boiler builders. In Lloyd's Registers, BC classed vessels only have year

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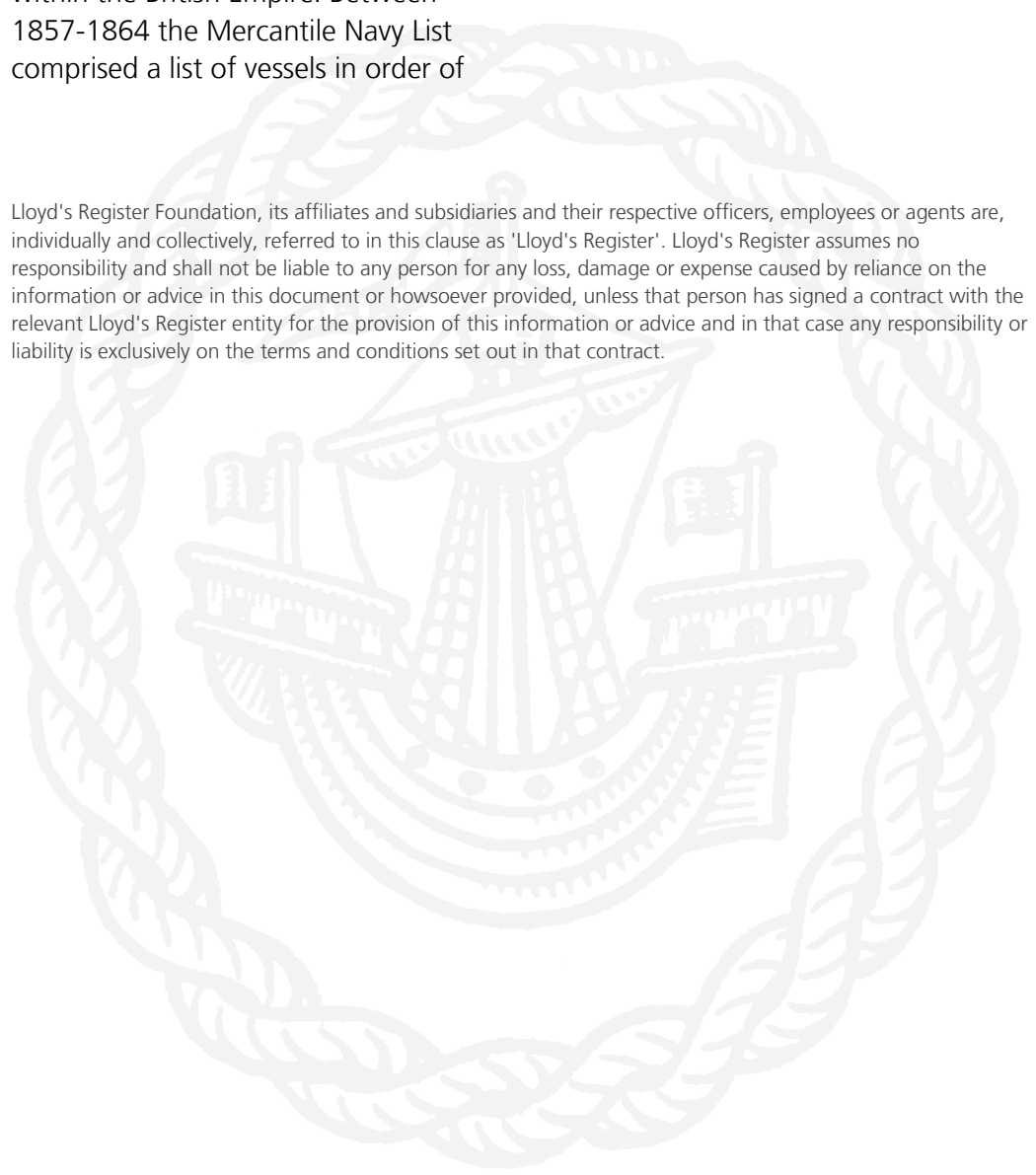
built, not month, unless they survived to 1949.

Mercantile Navy Lists

These first appeared in 1850, and at first simply gave the name of the vessel, official number, signal code and tonnage. Later more details were added. Apart from the period 1858-1864, during which some vessels were included in appendices, the Mercantile Navy List was exclusively confined to British vessels including those registered at overseas ports within the British Empire. Between 1857-1864 the Mercantile Navy List comprised a list of vessels in order of

their official numbers, with an alphabetical index. This numerical list was replaced, between 1865-1870, by a single alphabetical sequence. In 1871 this was split into two, for steamers and sailing vessels. The 1869 and 1871 issues have copies of the British code list, listing British vessels in alphabetical order of signal code. Like Lloyd's Register, the Mercantile Navy List includes a number of appendices, most of them published only for short periods.

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Appendix A - Key to the Earliest Registers

1764 Register

Col. 1: Former name, if applicable
Col. 2: Present name
Col. 3: Master's name
Col. 4: Port of registry/Home port
Col. 5: Destined port
Col. 6: Tons burthen, roughly equivalent to today's net tonnage
Col. 7: Number and size of guns and description of vessel
i.e. 8 4 = eight four pound guns or carronades
SDB = single deck with beams
SD = single deck
DB or dble = to double or doubling, meaning to cover a ship with extra planking when the original skin becomes worn or weak.
lengthd = vessel had been lengthened
Col. 8: Possibly mean (M) draft
Col. 9: Where built and in which year. 'River' indicates built on the River Thames, 'Plant' indicates a vessel built in one of the colonies (plantation)
Col. 10: Name of owner. Capt & Co. indicates that the majority (not sole) shareholder of the vessel was the captain.
Col. 11: Classification of the vessel. From 1764 to 1774 the letters of the vowels were used (A, E, I, O and U) to indicate the condition of the hull, A being the highest and U the lowest. G, M or B (good, middling or bad) indicated the condition of the masts and rigging.

Place names and company were often shortened in the early Registers, due to a lack of space. Usually the letters of the vowels are omitted.

Armaments

It was usual during this period for merchant ships to be armed. As noted above, in the earliest Registers the

number and size of guns is listed in Col. 7. A 'P', preceded by the number of guns and their size distinguishes the armaments in the later Registers. The notation appears under the Destined Port in Col. 8.

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1775 Register

Col. 1: Name of vessel, together with indication of type of rig i.e.

S = Ship

Bg = Brig

H = Hoy

K = Ketch

Sw = Snow

Sp = Sloop

G = Galliot

Col. 2: Master's name

Col. 3: Tonnage, together with an indication of number of decks, for example SDB = single deck with beams.

Col. 4: Place of build, with indication of repairs i.e.

trp = thorough repairs

rfd = reinforced

ND = new deck

nuw = new upper wales

grp = good repairs

srp = some repairs

rp = repairs

Col. 5: year of build

Col. 6: name of owner

Col. 7: Draft (loaded) in feet

Col. 8: Port of survey (usually ports of registry or home port) and destined port

Col. 9: Classification - hull as before, equipment rating now 1, 2 or 3, so first use of A1.

sW&C = sheathed with Copper over Boards

break43 tons = termination of an upper deck, when interrupted by a sunk-forecastle, a raised quarter deck etc.

Some other abbreviations explained in later editions of the Registers:

s&d = sheathed & doubled

sC = sheathed with Copper

sCIB = sheathed with Copper and Iron Bolts

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Appendix B - Examples of some place names used

| | |
|---|---|
| Abrdn = Aberdeen | N'cftl = Newcastle |
| Amftm = Amsterdam | Nflnd = Newfoundland |
| Apldre = Appledore | NSctia = Nova Scotia |
| Arkgl = Archangel | P. au P. = Port au Prince |
| B.Cha = Bristol Channel | Petrfb/Ptrfbg = St Petersburg |
| Bdfrd = Bideford | Pifcat = Piscatagua Harbour (near Portsmouth, 50 miles south of Cape Cod) |
| Br/Brs = Bristol | Po = Poole |
| Bremn = Bremen | Privtr = Privateer |
| C.Cst.C = Cape Coast Castle | Prmbc = Pernambuco |
| C.G.I. = Cape of Good Hope | Qebc = Quebec |
| Chlstn = Charleston | Richbt/Rchbt = Richibucto (also known as Liverpool), New Brunswick |
| Chftr = Chester | River = River Thames |
| Cpngn = Copenhagen | Rofth or Rstck = Rostock |
| Ddbrk = Dodbrooke, South Devon | Rtdm = Rotterdam |
| Dmra = Demerara | Scrbro = Scarborough |
| Dntzc or Dantz = Dantzig | Sdrlid = Sunderland |
| Dort = Dortmund | S. Fish = South Fishery |
| Dstrt or D. St'ts = Dover Straits | S. Seas = South Seas |
| Elfinr = Elsinore | St. Jgo = St. Jago |
| Emdn = Emden | St. Mic = St. Michael |
| Gbrlrr = Gibraltar | St. Tho = St. Thomas |
| Glafg = Glasgow | Stettn = Stettin |
| Grenok = Greenock | Stklm = Stockholm |
| Grnds or Grnda = Grenada | Strls'nd = Stralsund |
| Grnfy = Greenland Fishery (whaling) | Swnfe = Swansea |
| Grnin - Gronin | Tbag = Tobago |
| Gtnbg = GothenburgHlnd or Holnd = Holland | Trnfp = Transport (ie carrying prisoners or troops) |
| H Pans = Howden-Pans, Tyne | Ulvstn = Ulverstein |
| HlStraits = Hull Straits (packet) | V.C.I. = Vancouver Island |
| Hmb = Hamburg | V. Cruz = Vera Cruz |
| Hbt.Tn or HobtT = Hobart Town | Wtfd = Waterford |
| Hrwch = Harwich | Wn or Whtvn = Whitehaven |
| Imdm = Isle of Madeira | Wybg = Whitby brig |
| Jy = Jersey | WyCollr = Whitby Collier |
| Laga = Lagos | Ya or Yrmo = Yarmouth |
| Lbrdr = Labrador | Yghal = Yourghal |
| Lncftr = Lancaster | |
| Lh = Leith | |
| Li = Lisbon | |
| Lvrp'l = Liverpool | |
| Ly = Lynn | |
| M/Mn = Moulmein, Burma | |
| Meml = Memling | |
| MRIMC = Merrimac (Wisconsin or R. Merrimac, New Hampshire) | |
| Mrypt = Maryport | |

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