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The Honourable East India Company

Introduction

The Honourable East India Company (HEIC) began as a small trading venture at the close of the 18th century and prospered rapidly. For most of its existence it enjoyed a monopoly of trade with India and China, and during the 18th century it virtually accomplished the military conquest of India. Not until after the Indian Mutiny did the government of India pass from the company to the crown. The HEIC established a vast bureaucratic rule over the country and it maintained, in addition to its marine service, a large standing army and even a small navy.

The East Indiamen, as the merchant ships were called, were the largest merchantmen of their day. Heavily armed to defend their valuable cargoes, they were sometimes mistaken for warships. Only a few were owned by the HEIC; most were chartered by their owners who were consortia each led by an influential merchant or gentleman known as the Husband, who had the 'right' to charter ships to the HEIC at a most advantageous rate. The shareholders might consist of a couple of merchants, someone from nobility, the Master, the shipbuilder and the sailmaker. Involvement in the HEIC was common among the British nobility and many of the officers were gentlemen; some were even titled. Command of the East Indiamen could make a captain very rich.

Many of the East Indiamen were built in London to the highest of standards then known for merchant ships, but many of the Husbands also had smaller ships built in India for local trade, and a number of these enjoyed long lives as convict ships and emigrant carriers.

Some of the regular East Indiamen were chartered as convict ships. After 1833 the HEIC ceased to operate a merchant fleet and the Indiamen found it hard to compete in other trades. They were succeeded first by the faster Blackwall frigates and then by the clipper ships.

Researching the HEIC

Sources include the HEIC collection as well as Government of India Records between 1858-1947, held within the Oriental & India Office Collection at the British Library:

Oriental & India Office Collection

The British Library
96 Euston Road
London
NW1 2DB

☎ +44 (0)20 7412 7676

The collection contains log books, crew lists, records of officers and captains, reports of courts of inquiry, miscellaneous letters relating to the officers and ships, records of cargoes, and basic details of vessels, losses, pensions, etc.

In addition to the marine records, mostly filed in the L/MAR series, the collection contains records of civil servants and military officers, muster rolls for the army, official minutes, despatches, letters, registers of births, marriages and deaths, books, maps, manuscripts and newspapers.



Included under reference L/MAR/C863 are quarterly returns recording *Estates of British Merchant Seamen realised in India and remitted to England 1855-1865*.

The newspapers in the collection are held on microfilm. Published at Madras, Calcutta and Bombay, they record the arrival of ships and the names of passengers who disembarked. It should be noted, however, that only those passengers deemed to be of 'reasonable standing' would be listed in the arrivals! Details of births, marriages and deaths; entertainment on offer; executions; reports from London, and a great deal of general gossip, are also to be found. If an issue is missing it is possible to locate articles in subsequent issues of newspapers from the other titles. Important/interesting news items tended to be printed in all of the newspapers.

The National Archives

Ruskin Avenue
Kew
Surrey TW9 9WU

☎ +44 (0)20 8876 3444
✉ <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

The National Archives (incorporating the UK Public Record Office and the National Register of Archives) holds official records, principally from 1787 when the Port of London Annual Registers commence. These provide names, addresses and shareholdings of the owners, details of the vessels and names of the masters. From 1825 the Transcripts and Transactions give even more detailed information.

Guildhall Library

Aldermanbury
London
EC2P 2EJ

☎ +44 (0)20 7332 1868

The Guildhall Library houses the Lloyd's Marine Collection, part of the archive of Lloyd's of London. This collection includes the shipping *Newspaper Lloyd's List*, which provides a useful source for the HEIC period. Published from 1740 it records arrivals and departures, speakings, casualties and captures.

The Library also contains the *Gentleman's Magazine* and *The Times*, both of which give information about the HEIC including selected births, marriages and obituaries. "The Times" printed French accounts of the capture of notable English merchantmen as well as warships.

National Maritime Museum

Greenwich
London SE10 9NF

☎ +44 (0)20 8858 4422

This vast collection includes a great deal on the HEIC including journals, and the photographic collection has a number of negatives of East Indiamen.

Suggested reading

Hardy's Register of Ships 1760-1833

Contains brief voyage details, a list of officers, pursers and surgeons by voyage, records of losses and captures and a great deal of useful information on uniforms, freight rates and the rules of the HEIC as they affected the merchant service.

Lords of the East
Jean Sutton

Published by Conway Maritime. The most recent study of the HEIC, it concentrates on the organisation of the company and focuses on a few voyages, rather than giving ship histories. The bibliography is excellent.

History of British India
Sir W. W. Hunter

History up to 1708.

Trade in the Eastern Seas
C.N. Parkinson

Covers 1793-1813.

The Old East Indiamen
Keble Chatterton

A general account, but a good introduction and strong on atmosphere.

East Indiamen: the East India Company's Maritime Service
Sir Evan Cotton

Ships of the East India Company
Rowan Hackman

Contains information on voyages, as well as when ships were built, who by and who for and when they ceased trading for the HEIC.

Also an analysis of 100 voyages to and from China performed by ships in the Honourable East India Company's service by Henry Wise.

Researchers should check availability, accessibility and opening times with the repositories listed before making a personal visit.

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