

The East India Company

48-60 minutes

The 'Honourable' East India Company (1600-1857)

**^ realistic guide to
what is available**

**to those looking into the
careers of seagoing
servants**

(1600-1834)

by **Len Barnett**

‘The Company’

What precisely was the H.E.I.C., or ‘the Company’ as known by its servants? A difficult question to answer, especially in a short piece, over its long life span it was many things. It should be noted that the term ‘Honourable’ was one used internally, the Company directors referring to themselves in this not necessarily accurate manner when issuing orders to their servants.

Originally it began as a (form of) speculative joint-stock trading venture by London merchants in 1599 with a fifteen-year charter from the Crown, to voyage to the East Indies for pepper and spices. Sailing from the Thames in early 1601 (accounts differ as whether it was in January or February), the survivors returned in September 1603. Opinions as to the remuneration from that first operation differ. Some accounts reckon that this was *highly* encouraging to the shareholders, even if the trading had not exactly gone to plan. Others, including those that have gone into the matter in *great* detail, give less sanguine assessments.

Apart from anything else, these English adventurers were challenging the perceived preserves of others who were far from pleased at further competition. The Dutch had recently gained influence in the East Indies, trading there on a relatively large scale since 1595 and this in itself had been theoretically ‘taken’ from the Portuguese. Although fading, as a superpower Portugal still regarded *mainland* India as the centre of its own sphere: even if the Mughals and other native rulers thought otherwise! Not unnaturally after initial *very* poor relations in the opening decades, sporadic, low-intensity warfare (although only through the relatively few assets involved) characterised relations between the European rivals. Having originally been at war, the English

engaged in privateering against the Portuguese even before the first official Company voyage (*partly* forming the basis of the profit for this first voyage) and this continued, by all, even after the European states had made their peace. Already having dispatched heavier-armed vessels (than seemingly in some previous voyages) shortly before, in 1613 a 'naval' coastal defence organisation, the East India Company's Marine, better known in its shortened title as the [Indian Marine](#), was formed. (It should be noted that most of the general histories ignore the activities of the Company's naval forces. So, reference to the linked page may be of interest to readers.)

Often highly dynamic even in *severe* adversity and *wildly* fluctuating profitability, through the efforts of its servants on station during the seventeenth century, commercial operations expanded greatly, if not at all uniformly. As well as gaining a not insignificant presence variously around India early on (including in Bengal in the north east) and engaging in local politics from the start, the Company was also active in southern Arabia very early and within the Persian Gulf by the 1620s (important tactically, politically and financially). Also looking eastward, trade was initiated spasmodically even from the very early voyages with Siam, Japan, Formosa and by the latter 1690s even on the Chinese mainland, at Canton: encountering the usual opposition from fellow Europeans, including the Spanish, already established. Nevertheless, the Dutch proved too strong in the East Indies and the Company backed off there (at least for the foreseeable future).

At home there had been vociferous opposition to the monopolistic companies, as well as interlopers into the Company areas (and others sniping from the sidelines) that needed to be seen off. And,

having been associated closely with royal house of Stuart, the demise of James II in 1688 meant further trouble for the gentlemen of Leadenhall Street (in the City of London) as the Directors were known. With the government in want of funds and the throne in the hands of William of Orange, a new English E.I.C. (as opposed to the existing London E.I.C.) had been raised in 1698. Two such companies in direct competition proved mutually disastrous in practice and when the E.E.I.C. failed to raise the £2,000,000 pledged to the government as a loan it was not seen as so useful after all and lost political interest. Therefore, after prolonged negotiations the upstart was swallowed up in 1709 and 'amalgamated' became the United East India Company.

Initially the Company in India had not challenged the powerful Moslem Mughal rulers and instead, being utterly essential, had entered into various treaties, often to the detriment of the Portuguese. However, a punitive expedition to Bengal in 1686, employing all of 308 specifically raised Company troops, had ended this. An unsuccessful venture in many ways, the tiny English force under the then senior factor, 'Honest' Job Charnock (along with Portuguese mercenaries and Rajputs), was massively outnumbered by the Nabob of Dacca's army. Unsurprisingly, the Indians put effective military pressure on their enemies; resulting in Charnock being recalled and Bengal being evacuated. (Bizarrely, this evacuation was apparently all part of the London Directors' plan and the Mughal Empire was supposed to be assaulted through the invasion and occupation of Chittagong around the Bay of Bengal!)

The Nabob's overlord, the Mughal Emperor Aurangzib, was said to have been magnanimous in victory and allowed the English back

into Bengal. (Of course, another explanation can be found, namely that by this time the English were useful in two ways - in the export of calicoes and the import of specie. Both of these will be explained below.) Saliently, Aurangzib's death in 1707, with considerable pressure from the Hindus and Europeans, spelt the slow disintegration of this Moslem Empire though.

By this time the Portuguese had effectively lost all influence on the sub-continent, but as of the 1660s the French had entered the fray. Their company (merging three smaller entities in 1719) lacked political support back at home, under capitalised and struggling financially had previously diversified into acquiring Indian land - deliberately as a way of raising funds through taxation. This meant the French getting deeper involved in Indian politics. Interestingly, the earlier Anglo-French Wars of 1688-97 and 1702-13 had *not* been fought on Indian soil. Nevertheless, this changed during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-48).

Although the French had been keen to engage in combat against the British, it was the deployment in theatre by the Royal Navy of four men-o-war that brought the first clash - in capturing French vessels in 1745. In claimed retaliation and with political support from the Nawab of the Carnatic, on the orders of Joseph Dupleix, the French briefly bombarded Madras, leading to British surrender there. There was then the further humiliation of the destruction of Fort Saint David. Admiral Boscawen's naval blockade of the French Pondicherry was also abandoned, as it was ineffective. Soon after the war in Europe was over, with Madras returned to the British in the subsequent peace treaty.

Even so, with both the French and British highly active in local politics by this time, the fighting between the two companies was

not over, whatever the governments in London and Paris wanted. Robert Clive had already made an appearance in the Company's troops (having originally been a clerk). It was in the continued fighting over the Carnatic succession that Clive was initially to make his name. The French under Dupleix had gained the initiative, to be wrested away militarily in the early 1750s, in actions such as those of Clive at Arcot and Stringer Lawrence at Trichinopoly. Although the scale of fighting had seemingly lessened considerable, by 1754 the French there were in dire straits and a truce between the two nations' companies ensued. It was short-lived, but the British had secured not-insignificant land in the south.

The Seven Years War (1756-1763) although again initially disastrous to the British in losing Calcutta to the Nawab of Bengal, ultimately triumphed. Although largely forgotten nowadays, for a long time this conflict in India was often remembered for the infamous happenings in the 'Black Hole of Calcutta'. Looked at dispassionately, this may be seen as more the result of misunderstandings than anything, but what occurred was indeed terrible. Equally, victories such as Plassey, again through Clive's command, are now not often remembered. Nevertheless, by the end of this particular war, not only had the French been ejected (until allowed to return under the general peace terms in 1763), but the Company had received a 'favoured' status in Bengal.

Additionally, back in the south the First Anglo-Mysore War between 1767 and 1769 had occurred. In concluding peace with Haidar Ali, a promise of Company support in his conflict against the Marathas was made, but broken. This was to lead to further bloodshed.

All these military adventures masked a fundamental financial weakness, although modern research indicates that this was dealt with. Per traditional understanding British goods, mainly coarse woollens (and ironware to a lesser degree) had never been wanted in these East Indies markets, or necessarily elsewhere such as in Japan that had been so optimistically approached in the early seventeenth century voyages. Eastern traders generally required bullion, or other products, such as the Indian calicoes that were already a routine part of their trading activities. Plundering Portuguese ships (whether for bullion or calicoes, the latter as in the privateering of 1602) was not a long-term solution. Nor indeed was the export of specie from England a lot of the time. (Certainly by the eighteenth century, it can be reasonably argued that there was already a complex 'global' system of trade. In peacetime at least, Britain acquired its specie in directly trading manufactured goods with Spain and Portugal that had in turn obtained these from within their empires in South America.) The Company later found opium to be substantially the answer to this conundrum for a time. Grown in India and *indirectly* exported to China by 'country' ships (explained in the next section), it was 'bartered' for the tea, so popular in Britain, the American colonies and Europe.

Regionally various 'country' trades contributed significantly to the Company's liquidity. And, of course, there was also the export to Britain of cheaply manufactured Indian cotton goods (greatly resented in the British textiles industry). For all the fabulous wealth amassed by *some* of its servants, by 1772 the Company was in dire financial straits. Reversing earlier events, in London the Directors approached the government for a loan of £1.5 million. In acceptance His Majesty's Government was given indirect control of all the Indian possessions.

Research, especially by Professor Huw Bowen, has shown that the commanders of East Indiamen were responsible for a *great* deal more export to the East Indies and China, in their private dealings, than has traditionally been acknowledged by historians. (This also *really* shows the underlying purpose of those vying for officers' appointments on East Indiamen that were personally financial and this can be reflected in the price for commands and the official company pay for commanders.) For instance, there was Welsh copper from Swansea that was shipped in large quantities. Of fascinating note, British cloth manufacturers also continued in their exporting efforts, in producing new, lighter varieties that were more suitable for eastern markets. In totality, the variety of bulk and general cargo shipped, with and without 'the Company's blessing', was bewildering in its complexity. At least on the surface, this was all for the Europeans living and working abroad, although cannot necessarily be taken at face value. Having sold their outward bound cargoes, mostly but not necessarily in India, proceeds (assuming there were any, as not all commercial transactions were successful), could and were disposed in a variety of ways. Most commonly, profits (whether in hard cash, or other financial tools) were used in acquiring replacement cargoes, either for China, or home: depending on orders and local situations. So, the whole process began again, with private cargoes on the final leg supposed to be surrendered to 'the Company' in London: for subsequent sale. Open to all sorts of abuse, commanders and officers took advantage of every weakness that they could find, from under declaring tonnages and worth of goods shipped (including shipping Chinese porcelain as ballast), to engaging in sophisticated smuggling operations: both outward and inward. Of course, at all stages officials were

supposed to stop these practices, but as trade was so interdependent on the country traders and these same Company men were also involved in their *own* business activities, illegalities were all but impossible to stamp out. So, while there were occasional clamp-downs, with Indiamen's officers fined and 'dismissed', these can be regarded as not necessarily more than token gestures.

Returning to 'higher' matters, from the mid 18th century onwards these wars and similar themes recur with depressing regularity. Time and again, both H.M.G. and London Directors issued orders stating that there were to be no more wars and territorial expansion, but were ignored in theatre. Whether in direct acquisition, or through status of 'protection', areas immediately adjacent to Company activities would become problematical. Sometimes this was due to the perceived or actual anti-British behaviour of the local rulers. If not, it was the reverse - that is a claimed or actual state of anarchy. Border, or other incidents required 'satisfaction' through military expeditions, that in turn brought fighting and ultimately, further acquisition of favour and/or territory and the whole process began once again...

From late 1778 the British and French resumed combat on land and sea in southern India, originally due to the American War of Independence. Interestingly, although enemies in their own rights, the Marathas and Haidar Ali had formed a temporary alliance in order to get rid of the British. In the Carnatic, Haidar Ali's forces (often under the command of his famous son Sultan Tipu) were fought as the Second Anglo-Mysore War of 1780-84; and also to the north-west with the Marathas besieging Bombay. Although suffering serious reverses, such as being forced back to Madras

and besieged, generally the Company (on land and sea), supported by Royal troops and the Royal Navy when appropriate, eventually prevailed. This can be seen in terms of superior discipline, firepower and tactics (the latter imported from Europe, such as the very effective infantry-square in defence against cavalry attacks). In great debt again through these exertions though the 1784 India Act foisted a government Board of Control over the gentlemen of Leadenhall Street, in the City of London, where the Company headquarters were.

Governor-Generals of Bengal (and later India) came and went. Major-General Lord Charles Cornwallis although a soldier (with a not entirely successful career in the Colonies) proved to be an able administrator and tax-collector. An Imperialist, with a loathing for Indians he is said to have begun the process of 'Europeanising' the Company's trading. All Indian officials were dismissed; a separation of roles into Judicial, Revenue collecting and Commercial was made; and in some ways most importantly, private trading by Company servants was abolished: at least theoretically. (See the next section on the Maritime Service for more on this). He also presided over the Third Anglo-Mysore War of 1790-92. After the usual reverses (in the Carnatic), Cornwallis took command of the situation. In combination with the Marathas and after mixed experiences, in 1792 a massive army of 22,000 Company troops and 18,000 of the Nizam of Hyderabad's besieged and successfully attacked the fabled fortress of Seringapatam. Sultan Tipu's surrender was humiliating, with a massive indemnity and half of his land being taken by the victors. Of the three constituents, both the Marathas and the Nizam lost out greatly to the Company, which acquired the majority.

Incidentally, to ensure compliance Cornwallis had had Tipu's two of his young sons taken hostage.

But, it was Richard Wellesley, as Governor-General of Bengal, (along with his younger brother, Arthur, an officer in the Royal Army) who oversaw *massive* territorial expansion between 1793 and 1805. Severely alarming the Directors in London, the Company's armies in the Carnatic and Bengal were overhauled and enlarged. The invasion of Tipu's remaining lands opened hostilities, on the largely dubious ground that the Sultan was under French influence. Seringapatam was again taken and Sultan Tipu killed in the process. By the end of this period not only had the French been seen off by Company and government troops, the Marathas of central India were also badly weakened. India had never been a country as such, but by the time the Wellesley's were finished, between the territories directly owned, the subsidiary states and those partly under British 'supervision' it was beginning to look not unlike one!

Increasingly the Company was called on to provide martial resources for the British State's operations. In the hideously complex Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1793-1815) the [Bombay Marine](#) was employed variously, from Perim (1799) and Suez (1801) in the west, to the taking of Ceylon (1795), Mauritius (1810) and Java (1811) in the east.

Although Europe post Bonaparte was a continent of peace, this was not necessarily the case elsewhere and in Asia the British martial acquisitions continued for all the reasons already articulated. In aggregate, with ever greater military strength, in time British sights were set on the Punjab and Nepal to the north; Burma to the east; and variously in the East Indies and Malaya to

the south-east. Conflict with China, partly relating to British merchants' 'rights' to export opium there also followed. For other reasons, Aden was also acquired. (When there was a maritime input in these wars, they are discussed in more detail in the other Indian guide - see links above for the 'Bombay Marine' and 'Indian Navy' below.)

Nevertheless, the basic nature of the Company changed further and inherently. Due to effects of the Napoleonic Wars on shipping, the Company's monopoly on trade with India was abolished in 1813. With the idea of 'Free Trade' gaining in political currency, twenty years later, not only was this ended for China as well, the Company was also ordered to desist from trading completely. Instead, it was to concentrate on administering the territories under its control. That is not to say that it did not engage in *some* lesser commercial activities, in mail and passenger services operated by the then [Indian Navy](#) (as the Bombay Marine was re-styled in 1830) - by 1840 in competition with the [Peninsular & Oriental Steam Navigation Company](#) and others. The Company itself ceased in the aftermath of the horrific great Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, although the I.N.'s commercial operation continued certainly until 1870.

As a point of interest, contrary to what was being propagated widely in the U.K. in 2007, even when the 1833 Act outlawing the *owning* of slaves was enacted, this only covered the West Indies. While Stamford Raffles, an interesting Company man, without authority in the early 1820s freed the Company slaves at Fort Marlborough, in Sumatra and fought for abolition, this was not necessarily the Company line. In fact, although slavery had not had blanket support for a long time, the H.E.I.C.'s 1833 charter

only required more restrictions. It was a full ten years on, in **1843**, *that slavery in Company administered territory was abolished!*

The Company's Maritime Service

This was a term to cover the direct mercantile shipping between England and the Company's far-flung possessions. The long-haul voyages to and from the east were made annually by the Indiamen and although armed, sailed together for protection. In wartime they tended to be [convoyed](#) by the Royal Navy to and from the Company island of Saint Helena in the South Atlantic; and by the [Indian Marine \(and successor organisations\)](#) when threatened by privateers, pirates and the like in Indian and Persian waters.

In some respects the Maritime Service was similar to the Royal Navy, especially in shows of pseudo-military behaviour. For instance, there were gun salutes for captains when on station and their own flags were worn when within Company areas. (It must be pointed out that gun salutes were not unknown of on other merchantmen in the 17th and 18th centuries though.) Their officers' uniforms, introduced in 1781, initially closely resembled the more junior ranks of the navy: although there were changes in 1787 that made these much less so (with red breeches). In time (certainly by the late eighteenth century) there were also the formal requirements for professional qualification for officers. An important element of this was in time put in for the Company. Candidates as mates and captains had to show past time either on 'regular' ships (that is East Indiamen proper), or 'extra' ships (those taken up for particular charters). It should also be noted that considerable wealth was required to gain commands though, as payment of sums up to £10,000 to the owners, past captain or his

family was required (depending on the age of the vessel and the era).

Structures of rank were far simpler than in the [monarch's service](#), primarily because there was no need for commissions and warrants. In the 1790s the officers on larger Indiamen comprised not only of the mates and commander (as the captain could also be termed), but also the surgeon, one surgeon's mate, the purser, one midshipman-coxswain and four midshipmen. The remaining specialist heads of department, that of the boatswain, carpenter and gunner, were rated as petty officers. The lesser specialists, such as the sailmaker and armourer, were lumped in with the mass of 'the people'. Readers may find it interesting to note that midshipmen were regarded as junior officers in the Company, as opposed to senior petty officers in the Royal Navy; and also that the term 'the people' is actually used in Company documents, something that I have never ever seen in any naval records.

Not entirely unheard of in the Royal Navy (and not just officially sanctioned specie); or in other mercantile service (being prevalent in some types, such as in slaving and short-sea voyages to the Baltic and Mediterranean); in time private trade came to be *highly* important to seagoing Company servants as a way of trying to fostering loyalty and maintaining their claimed commercial right. (Although the Company was armed with impressive monopolistic charters covering massive areas of the planet, in real terms these were unenforceable. Even if lobbying the government saw off *some* of the occasional threats from British interlopers from ports such as Bristol and Liverpool, this was only one danger. For a start, numerous Company servants simply broke the rules by having business relationships with British masters that had the gall

to sail to the East Indies anyway. Similarly, British merchants could merely use foreign tonnage to ship the fabulous cargoes from the east: both in peace and war. And, at least some of this was 'clandestine' - technically from northern Europe such as Antwerp, but actually owned and manned by Britons.) Up until 1694 private trade (or 'indulgence' as also known) on Indiamen was theoretically limited to officers, but after this year limited space was also made for 'seamen' to engage in their own speculative dealings. This can be seen as merely legalising what was already going on though (as evidenced in High Court of Admiralty documents for instance), in the hope of curbing the worst excesses. Barring shipwreck, combat, capture and other misfortunes like the vagaries of 'the market,' fortunes could and *were* made.

Already touched on briefly, by necessity the trade the Company was involved in was *far* more complicated than wished for in London. Early on the Indiamen attempted to secure their own cargoes locally, calling at ports variously: although for some wares, shipped by the Chinese especially to points westward, it was more a matter of being in the right place at the right time to buy up these exports. However, this *generally* gave way to the 'country trade', whereby 'free merchants' were licenced to conduct coastal and regional shipping: eventually as far as the Red Sea, east coast of Africa, China and even Australia. Often these 'free' merchants and mariners were past European Company servants and in conjunction with servants ashore, the *real* money could be made. For a variety of reasons, this trade tended to be centred on Bengal. In all likelihood, the majority of the great web of regional trades they tapped into were ancient and their business colleagues

were multifarious and exotic. It should be noted that the British activities were only ever a small constituent within the *total*. Nevertheless, saliently these dealings provided the exchange of goods that gave the Company access to *some* specie (such as silver from the Persian Gulf) and other precious commodities that it required for its own transactions. Additionally it meant that regular services (subject to seasonal natural occurrences like monsoons) could be maintained, such as for mail (until post 1815) and vessels could also be utilised as transports (for military operations) when required. Occasionally 'country' vessels were even employed as 'extra' ships, venturing to England (but as far as can be made out the charters normally did not extend to the return voyage back to the east).

Their trade with China requires some specific comment. In the 1650s the Company had begun exporting opium there. Due to the detrimental effects on their population, the Chinese authorities had tried to stop the import and even sale of this drug during the eighteenth century. In order that the 'Honourable' E.I.C. did not lose its trading rights Indiamen stopped shifting opium. Instead, it was auctioned at Calcutta; bought by 'independent' traders; shifted in 'country' ships and subsequently sold to Chinese traders that smuggled it ashore. Paid for in specie, this was this that eventually was used by Indiamen to buy the tea for export to London and re-export to Europe and the Americas. Incidentally, before tea became synonymous with the 'English', this was mostly acquired by the Company for re-export to Europe and the Americas.

Although substantially relaxed during times of war, especially in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, sailing from the Thames the ships' companies of East Indiamen were overwhelmingly of

British subjects. By the time they returned they were often *very* different indeed though. For a start there were all the normal risks of illness and accident at sea, resulting at worst in incapacity, or death. Desertion and tropical illness, as well as the effects venereal disease could and did take their toll. And, others gaoled ashore made further inroads into companies. In wartime, impressment into naval service was also a factor (as well as those that legitimately volunteered). Technically, if outward bound and especially if protection orders had been procured, impressment should not have been significant, although there are cases recorded of this happening. At the time of writing I am not aware how prevalent this practice genuinely was, but the London Directors are on record as reckoning that this was serious. Anyway, out in the east pressing was more serious to commanders, particularly when petty officers were taken, as there was little chance of securing equally qualified replacements. Of necessity, substitutes, as they were called were indeed shipped. There were Britons, Europeans apparently of *all* varieties (potentially including subjects of enemy nations), Americans and apparently increasingly from the late eighteenth century onwards, Lascars. This was then a loose term for natives of the sub-continent, through Malaya and beyond, sometimes even covering those from China. Until 1803, by law, slightly less than twenty-five percent were to be Lascars, but with wartime shortages this officially became almost seventy-five percent! The toll on Lascars through illness and mortality on inbound voyages could be heavy. And, in wartime, for the others there was a higher risk of impressment in the final stages, particularly in the English Channel. At least when paid off, they could be regarded as free. The Lascars instead found themselves in a strange limbo ashore,

where it was exceptionally difficult to be returned to their homelands.

Indiamen - a few pointers

Initially East Indiamen were built and maintained by the Company itself, in its own yard leased at Deptford (on the south side of the Thames), between 1607 and c.1627 supplied from a Company timber yard at Reading. Abandoned due to the considerable costs from these activities, from then onwards they chartered vessels built to tight specifications. They were then constructed increasingly at Blackwall, on the northern side of the Thames (immediately to the east of the Isle of Dogs), by ships' husbands that were also their (part or total) owners. By the end of the eighteenth century one person characterised the dynamism of this breed - Sir Robert Wigram. As an example of the social fluidity of the time, his first association with the Company had been as a lowly surgeon's mate.

Tonnage versus size relating to East Indiamen is a complex subject in its own right and will only be briefly mentioned here, in order to bring to readers' attention the concept. Events, including Acts of 1773 and 1774 that normalised the 'builder's measurement' for the registration of tonnage, basically meant that Indiamen would have to be described more accurately than they had been for almost a century. Previously, their royal charter of 1698 had required East Indiamen of 500 registered tons or more to carry a chaplain. So, seemingly on grounds of cost the Company registered all affected vessels as 499 tons: in spite of the fact that increasingly these could be seen to be very much larger. The fiction was that the Company was only *chartering* the lower figure though, which makes me wonder whether the particularly

generous allowances of 'indulgences' became linked.

In 1772 the Company had been allowed to build ships in India, but only for local trade. However, because of various strains brought about by war with France in 1793, two years later and contrary to the Navigation Acts (when not relaxed during war), the Company was authorised to utilise 'proper' ships constructed in the East Indies for trade to the United Kingdom. So began the building at Bombay of Indiamen that were in many ways *superior* in sailing qualities to the London-built vessels.

Incidentally, the name of Wigram continued to be associated with the trade to India and the Far East, even after the loss of the Company's monopoly. This was through the building of the famous 'Blackwall frigates', that still resembled the beautiful Indiamen well into the nineteenth century.

Ownership should also be mentioned. The traditional view is that the 'principal' owners as shown in *Hardy's* are accurate. However, a friend of mine, the late Hugh Lyon, conducted greatly in-depth research into the 'Transcripts' - that is the registers of ships' certificates, in this case for London registered vessels. This has thrown up considerably different results and dovetails with other research into individuals involved in naval contractors. According to Hugh's work, the ownership was far more complicated, with the named owners seemingly only being those convenient for the purposes of certification. To a greater, or lesser degree, these were men with a considerable spread of investments. An example of this can be seen in Sir William Mellish; who made an immense fortune from the family butcher's business as a naval contractor of meat to the Royal Navy, based on the Isle of Dogs; and who was also associated with Wigram (mentioned previously). One of Sir

William's brothers was also involved in shipbuilding nearby. Also, Indiamen's commanders that had made good at sea could and did buy into ownership as well.

Finally, as an associated point of interest, the owners of the country ships were just as likely to be Parsis, Moslems or Hindus as British. This then potentially widens the picture *even* further.

Tracing Individuals in Company Service and Further Research

For most researchers' purposes, the main collection of papers for the 'Honourable' East India Company is housed together in one collection. However, this is at the British Library and for those that do not have experience of this institution, *numerous* difficulties can be encountered there. Also, between a fire in the nineteenth century and more recent destruction of records by civil servants, there are very large gaps in these. **Also, it should be noted that with exceptions, realistically only officers can be researched.** Even with all these weaknesses, what has survived is frequently both fascinating and when produced, a joy to study.

Although the Company records are generally well indexed (as compared to the later India Office records that are a mess in places), pertinent documents for individuals can be spread across numerous classes. Unfortunately, finding these within the multifarious catalogues on the shelves can prove a time-consuming and confusing process. So, once found, if at all possible one should memorise where within the shelves the approximate positions of required catalogues are and pray that users return catalogues to the proper places.

Thankfully a small number of guides and indexes to the British Library catalogues have been produced that are invaluable in

getting started. For genealogists of all things Indian, *Baxter's Guide* should be referred to at an early stage. Nevertheless, this is general in nature as delving into the actual documents soon shows. Overseen by Anthony Farrington, his biographical and ships' indexes are particularly useful. Other researchers, such as Tony Fuller and Anne Bulley have also contributed further on specific topics and their publications can be of real use in some types of investigations. Of course, there is always Horatio Hardy's register, the original standard. While still handy, in some respects this has been superseded by the modern titles.

It is difficult to determine quite when the Company began producing recognisable [officers' records of service](#), but they are now surviving from the early 1770s. It is interesting, that some of these are not dissimilar to certificates of service as used in the Royal Navy. (For the earlier periods, the indexes and catalogues overseen by Anthony Farrington are particularly useful in tying individual officers to ships served on.) It would seem that it was not until the Company was ordered to wind up its maritime trade that similar [records of service were constructed for petty officers](#).

There are other [listings](#) that give limited info on officers and sometimes petty officers. One possibly useful series on commanders begins in 1737 and runs through to 1832, giving dates of resignation, or death. Another, from 1828 to 1834 gives some salient details of service for both officers and petty officers. Of slight use is a nominal list of masters and mates of 'extra' ships 1796 to 1825, this is arranged by rank chronologically, but only dates and names are given. A not dissimilar nominal list of commanders and officers on 'proper' ships for 1796 to 1828, is of even less use, simply because there is a giant hole between 1797

and 1813.

Of course, *Hardy's* can also be trawled through. Consolidating information from considerably earlier than their years of publication; for annual voyages of Indiamen sailing from the United Kingdom between 1708 and 1759 commanders only are recorded; and from 1760 to 1790 commanders, the first four mates, surgeons and pursers are shown.

Officers' appointments can apparently be found through Court Minutes and Committee of Shipping Minutes (the latter from 1802 to 1834). At the time of writing I have not had cause to investigate this particular avenue and suspect, as in naval officers and using Admiralty records, that this needs a great deal of time and effort. Additionally, there are a few documents directly relating to appointments, being a list of [applications](#) from officers from 'proper' ships 1763 to 1810 and two volumes of nominations of surgeons and surgeons' mates 1801 to 1833, giving such appointments.

Before moving onto operational and administrative records for those aboard Indiamen, two other types of documents are worthy of some space. Firstly, there are four volumes of certificates of birth and/or [baptism](#), mostly of midshipmen (apparently known as 'guinea pigs'), but also including some more senior officers from c.1780 through to c.1830.

Then there are those relating to the [Poplar fund](#) that may be *highly* useful. In explanation, through a mandatory scheme, from 1625 until c.1783 Company mariners of *all* ranks and rates paid tuppence in the pound; and subsequently thruppence or 11/4 per cent of their pay. From this temporary or permanent relief,

including widows' pensions or admission to almshouses was doled out frugally. Open to all mariners in Company service, it was not only those of the lower orders that made such representations. From 1809 onwards these are externally indexed and entries can give important genealogical details. At first sight these records are far from simple to get to grips with. Nevertheless, the registers of applications should be used to find the relevant case number(s). From there the actual pension records can be found. Also, there is a printed list of pensions awarded to seagoing Company personnel, 1793 to 1833, by order of Parliament that can be of material use.

When progressing on to the actual operational and administrative documents for named Indiamen, although there can be other varieties there tend to be three types. Two of these should be used in conjunction.

The books of printed [receipts for wages](#), probably maintained by Indiamen's pursers, not only give the sums signed for by individual members of Indiamen's companies, *may* also contain other interesting, or useful snippets. Officers were personally responsible for their servants and so, also drew their pay as well. Some officers, petty officers and men signed for their own, but wives are commonly shown as taking possession of their husband's pay on discharge in London. Occasionally, other family members, such as sons, also feature in this way. Attorneys are also shown, some of which will have been lawyers proper. But, there are also others described in this way that may, or may not have been. After all there were also other people that had call on returning mariners' pay, that is those that the sailors had gone into debt with prior to sailing - lodging housekeepers and/or crimps.

(According to one modern source, crimps were not the anti-social nuisance in earlier centuries that they had become by the nineteenth century. I am not entirely convinced by this argument though.) Sadly, sometimes there were also administrators, dealing with the proceeds of the deceased. Indiamen's [pay ledgers](#) can be used in conjunction with the receipts of wages, giving a little more info on the breakdown of individuals' pay. .

The third of type were ships' journals and were detailed navigational logs, [kept by chief mates](#) and are *highly* technical in nature and may be daunting to the general researcher.

Nevertheless, for those that understand the navigation of the time, the information logged has been in my experience *far* superior to that of most naval masters' logs. As well as giving their location, or where bound; weather; principal events; stores and individuals embarked/disembarked; ships in company and their relative movements etc., etc., are noted. Occasionally individual seamen are mentioned by name, although at the time of writing I have only seen this when recording their deaths. Also, for the casual reader, weather terms such as 'gale', or 'pleasant gale' should not be understood in their modern sense. Proper study of such journals may take many days, or even weeks each.

These are not the only varieties of original records that can be drawn on when studying the careers of officers either. Among the *vast* collection of administrative papers, for example, there are also the Company's [letter books](#). These are the orders from the Directors in London to Company servants 'in the East'.

Fascinating, in total they cover all the main aspects of business. It should be pointed out that a general knowledge of business of the time is a pre-requisite to fully understanding these. Pertinent to this

particular aspect is the concept of corruption. For instance the Company's history is peppered with such charges levelled at homecoming Governor-Generals, sometimes proven in inquisitions, at other times not. Often Company servants said that they were misunderstood and were merely adopting the customs of trade in the East. Nevertheless, original instructions show that the Directors could and did take a poor view to pilferage by their servants.

There are other potential sources as well. The Guildhall Library in the City of London has a considerable number of documents relating directly, or indirectly with the Company. One of these is devoted to the Society of East India Commanders, as something of a mutual aid society. The documents themselves are bound, all higglety-pigglety, hand-written and printed, covering numerous subjects of interest to the members, including aspects of private trade. Incidentally, there were apparently also minute books for this society that were held by the Baltic Exchange. These *may* now also be at the Guildhall Library - but uncatalogued. Another of these 'secondary' sources, if only in the closing stages of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, are the surviving ledgers devoted to boys coming into contact with the [Marine Society](#). It should be noted, that the first entry that I have found was in 1777 and this possibly reflected the personal attitudes of commanders in recruiting their own (ships') companies.

Books too, can provide relevant information. Apart from those now in print and judging from those on the bookshelves at the Indian and Oriental Collection at the British Library, Camden, London and the National Maritime Museum's Library, Greenwich there is a not inconsiderable number of these. When delving further, there are

also antique titles and these can be worthwhile tracking down. One of these produced contemporaneously was by a Company writer named Grose. Entitled *Voyages to the East Indies* it is rich in description of the wonders of his travels. All the same, for readers not used to eighteenth century English and their spellings (that are not dissimilar to more modern German in Gothic script) this and others may prove difficult to read!

Having touched briefly on the H.E.I.C. and surviving records, as a general note in researching its servants, as elsewhere in society, interest or patronage was of *extreme* importance in the centuries that the Company was in existence: even towards the end. This should be taken into consideration when researching individuals and can sometimes be clearly seen even in basic searches, such as when using Anthony Farrington's biographical and ships' indexes. Past brother officers not infrequently turn up later in terms of owning Indiamen (in full or part). For those that made good and returned to London as 'Nabobs' (wealthy former Company servants), they were among that part of Society that invested widely across the board in the City. It is, therefore, not surprising to find their names cropping up in all sorts of other entities, in other areas of shipping (obviously including slaving) for instance, or the great insurance companies. Of course, there was also the political angle to think of, with more potentially lucrative deals arising from this. With such cross-fertilisation in investment circles, it is therefore not unnatural for this to also perhaps occasionally show itself in the careers of sea-going followers, whether as officers or petty officer levels at least and probably wider to some of 'the people'.

Also, although not even just English, but initially very much centred

around London, certainly by the mid-eighteenth century the Company was drawing its servants *far* wider within the British Isles. From my researches so far, Scots and Irish families were well represented. Once involved, it was not unusual for there to be generation after generation of these families in subsequent service. What is more, they could be spread across the differing fields of endeavour - as civil servants and soldiers.

Apart from where already mentioned, the main sources of information for this guide has come from the following published works:-

H.V. Bowen: 'Sinews of trade and empire: the supply of commodity exports to the East India Company during the late eighteenth century' in the *Economic History Review* (2002) volume LV number 3

H.V. Bowen: 'Privilege and Profit: Commanders of East Indiamen as Private Traders, Entrepreneurs and Smugglers, 1760-1813' in the *International Journal of Maritime History* (December 2007) volume XIX number 2

H.V. Bowen: 'Welsh commanders of East Indiamen: a case-study of John Jones' in David Jenkins, Owain Roberts, Michael Stammers and Lynn Francis (Editors): *Cymru A'r Môr/Maritime Wales* (2010) number 31

Jaap R. Bruijn and Femme S. Gaastra (Editors): *Ships, Sailors and Spices: East India Companies and their Shipping in the 16th, 17th and 18th Centuries* (Amsterdam, Neha, 1993)

Anne Bulley: *The Bombay Country Ships 1790-1833* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000)

K.N. Chaudhuri: *The East India Company: The Study of an Early Joint-Company 1600-1640* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1965)

K.N. Chaudhuri: *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company 1660-1760* (London: CUP, 1978)

Sir Evan Cotton (edited by Sir Charles Fawcett): *East Indiamen: The East India Company's Maritime Service* (London: The Batchworth Press, 1949)

Brian Gardner: *The East India Company* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1971)

Lawrence A. Harper: *The English Navigation Laws: A Seventeenth-Century Experiment in Social Engineering* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939)

Lawrence James: *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India* (London: Little, Brown & Co., 1997)

John Keay: *The Honourable Company: A History of the English East India Company* (London: Harper Collins, 1993 in paperback)

B.B. Misra: *The Central Administration of the East India Company 1773-1834* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959)

R.H. Mottram: *Traders' Dream: The Romance of the East India Company* (London: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1939)

There were also more minor (or indirect) consultations from others including:-

Annals of Lloyd's Register (In house publication, 1934)

Brian Lavery: *Nelson's Navy: The Ships, Men and Organisation 1793-1815* (London: Conway Press, 1989)

N.A.M. Rodger: *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian*

Navy (London: Fontana Press, 1986)

There was also one other current book that I drew a few snippets from (and subsequently checked in original legislation and documents), not mentioned in this list because the general standard of understanding of the seamen has been shown by the author to be absolutely woeful.

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