RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

TUDOR SEAMEN - AN APPEAL

Contributed by P.E.H. Hair

A collection of some eighty wills of English seamen who died during voyages to Guinea in the 1550s and 1560s was published in 1992. This is the earliest traced set of wills relating to English overseas voyages and tells us much about Tudor seamen. The wills name several hundred other persons, mates of the dying seamen, relatives, and ‘hostesses’, the keepers of lodging houses in which unmarried seamen lived between voyages. The seamen who left wills were generally resident in London, Bristol or other seaports of southern England, but the stated locations of relatives show that the seamen originated from many parts of England, even from as far afield as Yorkshire, Liverpool and the Scottish Border. While the wills illuminate aspects of life shipboard, it would be useful to learn more about the seamen’s background on land, including their earlier life and, for those who survived, their later life.

In the book published by J.D. Alsop and myself we listed the names of all the seamen and all the other individuals, and we attempted to trace these persons in other records. We did, for instance, trace one individual in the town records of Liverpool. However, our attempts to trace the burials of the few seamen who died after their ships reached port failed, because the parish registers of the ports concerned are missing for the relevant period. Again, many seamen who died in the 1550s or 1560s will have been born at a date before parish registers were instituted. Nevertheless, we believe that a proportion of the names could be traced in respect of events recorded in local parish registers or other local documents of the period. Some of the individuals named must have been married, had children baptised, or been buried at dates up to perhaps the end of the century; and some must have appeared in other later local records.

The difficulty for us was that these events could have occurred almost anywhere in England, for instance, could have been recorded in almost any extant parish register. We gave up. I now address those local historians who have access to local material of the Tudor period, both published and unpublished. This includes local probate material, since, as we explain at length in the book, some Guinea seamen’s wills may have escaped our attention because probate was obtained in regional probate jurisdictions. For some of our seamen their original home location is recorded, although for many it is not. We would be much indebted if dedicated local historians could search the relevant material for traces of any of our seamen, perhaps particularly the parish registers, and report all successes. Our book is expensive but should be available in libraries, and I will be happy to send any prospective researcher a photocopy of our lists of the names of the Tudor seamen and associated individuals. We think that
the more is known about the lives of Tudor seamen the sounder the understanding of the initial stages of an important historical relationship, that between British internal and overseas history.

NOTES


Why not join

LOCAL POPULATION STUDIES SOCIETY (LPSS)

Members receive the journal Local Population Studies together with two issues of the LPSS Newsletter per year and may purchase LPS supplements and back numbers of the Journal at reduced rates. LPSS members also receive regular information as to the wide range of publications available at a discount through the Local Population History Book Club and advance details of day and weekend conferences organised by the Society each year. Current subscription rates are £10 for students and £12 for ordinary members (£15 for members living outside the European Community).

For further details, payment of subscriptions and renewals please contact the Honorary Secretary:

Colonel Sir David Cooke (Bt)
78 Harlow Terrace,
Harrogate, North Yorkshire,
HG2 0PN