

A report on the hygienic condition of the mercantile marine in the Port of London / by Harry Leach.

Contributors

Leach, Harry.
Royal College of Surgeons of England

Publication/Creation

London : Simpkin, Marshall, 1871.

Persistent URL

<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/dhffycpg>

Provider

Royal College of Surgeons

License and attribution

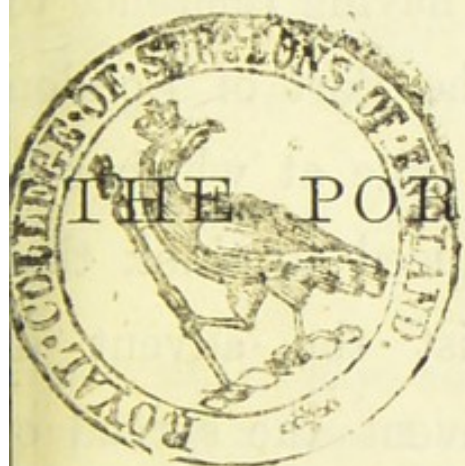
This material has been provided by This material has been provided by The Royal College of Surgeons of England. The original may be consulted at The Royal College of Surgeons of England. where the originals may be consulted. This work has been identified as being free of known restrictions under copyright law, including all related and neighbouring rights and is being made available under the Creative Commons, Public Domain Mark.

You can copy, modify, distribute and perform the work, even for commercial purposes, without asking permission.



Wellcome Collection
183 Euston Road
London NW1 2BE UK
T +44 (0)20 7611 8722
E library@wellcomecollection.org
<https://wellcomecollection.org>

A REPORT
ON THE
HYGIENIC CONDITION OF THE
MERCANTILE MARINE



IN
THE PORT OF LONDON

BY

HARRY LEACH

SENIOR MEDICAL OFFICER, SEAMEN'S HOSPITAL, GREENWICH

REPRINTED FROM 'THE BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL'

C
LONDON
SIMPKIN, MARSHALL, AND CO.
STATIONERS'-HALL COURT

1871

PREFACE.

AS NO LEGISLATIVE ACTION having reference to the sanitary condition of the Port of London has been taken since the date at which this Report appeared, I am induced to think that its republication may assist the advent of measures calculated to prevent the spread of epidemic diseases in the ports and harbours of Great Britain. No apology can be needed in publishing a detail of defects that have just resulted in the perpetuation of one epidemic and will as surely and as completely assist the coming of another.

H. L.

August, 1871.

REPORT

ON THE

HYGIENIC CONDITION OF THE MERCANTILE
MARINE IN THE PORT OF LONDON.

FOUR YEARS have now elapsed since I took occasion to publish a Report on the Hygienic Condition of the Mercantile Marine, and the preventible diseases of merchant seamen. The investigations upon which this Report was based were instituted on account of the progressive decadence, for some years past, both in the number and quality of British seamen annually required to man the ships of the United Kingdom; and it was plainly shown that this decadence arose more from causes chiefly preventible, and from causes, too, that tarnish the reputation of the British nation as a great commercial community. It is not too much to say that this and other journalistic utterances, emphasised by recorded facts of a most conspicuous description, at length roused the active attention of the Government, and resulted in a measure commonly called the 'Duke of Richmond's Act,' or, more correctly, the 'Merchant Shipping Act of 1867.' This Act was much curtailed as to the provisions embodied

in the original Bill, but it provides a fit and proper supply of lime and lemon-juice to all sea-going ships; a tolerably liberal space for the berthing of the crew; a proper supply of medicines and medical stores, and an authorised 'Ship Captain's Medical Guide'; and also contains a permissive clause as to the medical inspection of seamen before signing articles. The clauses relating to the lime-juice and the accommodation of seamen appear to work well, though no statistical facts indicating the diminution of scurvy and other diseases can be gleaned before the close of the current year.* The clause relating to medicines and medical stores is defective, because no provision is made for ascertaining if these articles are really shipped — and, even if shipped, are of good quality. *Apropos* of this subject, I may refer to a conviction which took place before the Hull magistrates last year, when the captain of a brigantine was very properly fined £15 for omitting to carry a proper supply of lime-juice, medicines, and medical stores on a voyage from England to South America. But the ship returned with a scurvy-laden crew, and though the fine was inflicted, the mischief was done. The Medical Guide, for the compilation of which I am responsible, is authorised under the Act, and is partly the work of the late Dr. Rooke, surgeon to the Dreadnought Hospital Ship. That clause of the Act which relates to the inspection of seamen, all-important as it is, has been up to the present time almost a dead letter. It is permissive only; the fee of 2s. for the examination of each man is chargeable to the

* Since this Report first appeared, it is calculated, from returns furnished by the Seamen's Hospital Society, that scurvy has diminished about 70 per cent. in the British Mercantile Marine.

owners of the vessel; the liberal owners do not use it because the best men come to them, and parsimony, of course, carries the day with those who do not scruple to risk life for the sake of lucre.* Two remedies may be recommended whereby this now valueless clause of an Act might be utilised for the benefit of the sailor as well as the owner. The clause should be rendered obligatory, and the fee somewhat reduced, or the members of Lloyds' should be induced to raise their premiums of insurance unless all vessels and cargoes insured were sent to sea with sound and healthy crews. In the introductory remarks to the 'Ship Captain's Medical Guide,' it is remarked that 'the adoption of this section of the Act will give a practical surety to the captain that his crew are in as good order as his spars and gear; to the crew that they will not be compelled to do more than a fair day's work for a fair day's wage; and to the owner that he will really get a fair day's work out of every hand shipped.' These remarks are plainly put, and are so obviously true, that it is the duty of the present Government to amend this clause, and to provide some means whereby it may be positively known that medicines and medical stores of proper quality, and in proper quantity, are provided and put on board every sea-going ship before her departure from port. These changes can be readily made by the President of the Board of Trade when the Merchant Shipping Acts are amended and consolidated under his auspices during the ensuing session.

But this retrospect has reference solely to the wel-

* Grimsby is the only port where the clause relating to the inspection of seamen has taken effect, more than 200 seamen having been examined by the medical inspector during the past three months.

fare of those seamen who sail in foreign-going ships. They start off on their watery way, the hum of business in the busy Port of London goes on, and the world on land forgets them. There are many vessels moored in the Thames, the sanitary welfare of whose inhabitants should as specially claim our care and concern. The coasting vessels are always with us. They steam up and down, or dodge in and out of the river week after week, but I dare to say that not an appreciable fraction of London's vast population knows anything whatever as to the manners and mode of life appertaining to those who live, move, and have their being in the coasting craft of Great Britain. We read of lee-shores, of dangers and discomforts caused by wind and rain, but there are dangers and discomforts that proceed from within as well as from without, born of many insanitary conditions of existence. I propose to show briefly what these insanitary conditions are; how necessary it is that these purlieus of water-ways, as well as highways, should be under skilled sanitary control; how dangerous the absence of that control is to the citizens as well as to the seamen of London; how miserably inefficient is the piecemeal system of legislation that at the present time obtains on the Thames; and hence (to use the concluding words of a report presented by Dr. Letheby to the Commissioners of Sewers) 'it is expedient, as well as imperative and necessary, that the several nuisance authorities on the two sides of the River Thames should agree on some mode of co-operation whereby a proper inspection of all the shipping in the Port of London shall be regularly and systematically performed in accordance with the provisions of the Act of Parliament.'

In pursuance of this subject, I may at once record that from twelve to fourteen thousand coasting vessels of all kinds enter the Thames year by year, the great majority of which are moored on either side of the river between London Bridge and Woolwich. The steamships carry from fourteen to twenty, and the sailing vessels from three to seven hands; and, as these men are commonly engaged for the voyage, their work is continuous, whether in port or at sea. The large steamships usually come to moorings between the Tunnel Pier and London Bridge, and lie on either side of the river in tiers of two, three, or four deep; so that contiguity exists, for the time being, as completely as in the case of houses placed side by side in a street. Thus any contagious disease existing in one vessel is likely to be carried to another. It must be admitted, however, that, in the case of steamships, this evil is lessened by the fact that they do not usually remain long at moorings. Loading and unloading go on almost incessantly, and forced work with the sailor is of much more common occurrence than forced marches with the soldier. Coasting seamen live well; and, in the case of steamships, their quarters are, as a rule, sufficiently roomy, though there is good reason to believe that strict attention to cubical space, as provided by the Merchant Shipping Act, 1867, is not in all instances complied with. For the ninth section of that Act enjoins that 'every place in any ship occupied by seamen or apprentices, and appropriated to their use, shall have, for every such seaman or apprentice, a space of not less than seventy-two cubic feet, and of not less than twelve superficial feet, measured on the deck or floor of such place.' So far, so good. But, inasmuch as no inspection is made for the purpose of

seeing that this clause is faithfully carried out, the comfort of the seaman is a secondary consideration, unless the owner chooses to make any necessary alterations, whereby he becomes entitled to have the crew-space deducted from the registered tonnage. It is also provided that no such deduction from tonnage shall be authorised, unless 'there is permanently cut in a beam, and cut in, or painted on or over, the doorway or hatchway of every such place, the number of men which it is constructed to accommodate.' I have very recently visited a number of vessels moored in the Port of London; and, with one exception, no outward or visible sign existed in compliance with the above requirements of the Act:* this, too, fourteen months after the Act has become law, and in the case of vessels that pass in and out of the Thames week by week! Next, as to ventilation. The Act enjoins that every place (*i.e.* used for the accommodation of seamen) shall be 'securely constructed, properly lighted and ventilated, properly protected from weather and sea, and, as far as practicable, properly shut off and protected from effluvium which may be caused by cargo or bilge water.' I inspected four vessels, none of which had any provision for light or ventilation, except by means of the hatchway. Another fore-castle, divided longitudinally for the accommodation of crew and firemen, had no outlet from above; and great complaints are made as to the hawsepipes, which in this case, as always, causes a chronic state of wet bunks whenever the cables are bent. The men employed on board this ship begged me to have this source of discomfort remedied. They averred that the

* I believe that the requirements of this section of the Act are now fairly fulfilled.

sea sometimes washed through the port hawsepipe with so much force that the flooring of the lower bunks was started, and the bunks themselves rendered, of course, quite uninhabitable.

The next section enjoins that there shall be 'one or more properly constructed privy or privies for the use of the crew.' All the coasting steamships and many sailing coasters are provided with these places, but in most of the smaller vessels they are unknown. The sixth section of the Act enjoins that every place for the accommodation of the crew 'shall be kept free from stores or goods of any kind, not being the personal property of the crew in use during the voyage.' In four of the vessels inspected, cordage, sails, and gear of various kinds were found in the forecastles, obstructing the modicum of ventilation that existed, and rendering nugatory any attempt at measuring for crew-space. Thus much for the requirements of the Duke of Richmond's Act, and the mode in which they are at present fulfilled. I have adhered to brevity, because I believe that facts are more forcible in this form, and they need, too, very little comment. But if the requirements of the Act had been up to the present time fulfilled; if every clause and section had been rightly interpreted and righteously carried out in all instances, the insanitary conditions caused by want of cleanliness on board coasters are still superlative enough to demand energetic attention. And here the fault appertains chiefly to the men themselves. There is no doubt whatever that coasting sailors are as a rule a dirty race of beings, and that their persons are even more neglected than the places that they inhabit on board ship. Masters and mates will reiterate this with some warmth when

sanitary questions are brought to their notice, and there is much truth in their protestations that it is seldom possible to keep a clean fore-castle. In many instances, indeed, it appeared impossible from personal inspection to say when the bunks, deck, and sides of the fore-castle had been last washed, scrubbed, or swabbed. The men frequently turn in as they stand, close any ventilators that may exist, and lie in a stifling atmosphere, and in many instances in wet clothes until their watch recommences. There is also great carelessness, often amounting to culpable negligence, in sending sick seamen from the ship when she arrives in port. The medical officers of the *Seamen's Hospital* have much practical experience on this head. A man is frequently sent to that hospital, having spent two days in his bunk after the vessel has come to moorings; and a case recently occurred in which three Swedes were admitted from a barque lying in the port, all of whom had been ill with fever for upwards of three days. A great many instances of this kind of neglect were brought to light during the ship-to-ship visitations of 1866, when men were found in their bunks unfit for duty on account of other diseases than diarrhœa and cholera, and induced by the visitors to go to the hospital. Prompt removal is in such cases the more necessary, as coasting vessels *are not compelled by law to carry medicines and medical stores*, so that for the most part vessels are unprovided with any kind of so-called disinfectants, and thus the importation of a case of fever into a tier of vessels occurs under circumstances specially favourable to the spread of disease. I am willing to concede all that can be urged by masters and mates as to the apathy of seamen, and

their unwillingness, even when laid up from sickness, to go to hospital. The obstinacy of Jack in this matter is proverbial; but by so much the more does this fact emphasise the necessity for inspectorial authority, so that mercantile marine officers may be assisted in a duty pertinent to the welfare of the population, but very difficult of execution. I have in the foregoing remarks endeavoured to point out the insanitary conditions of existence that obtain in the Port of London, and propose next to show how inefficient are the means at present adopted to remedy these evils.

Before explaining the present want of supervision as to sanitary matters that exists in this port, it is well to record certain statistical facts in connection therewith. By an official return for 1867, it is found that 24,406 vessels were entered inwards and 14,948 entered outwards during the year, giving a total respectively of 6,676,420 and 3,666,629 tons. This return includes, of course, repeated voyages. There are also 2,385 sailing barges and 4,000 dumb barges belonging to the port, and it is calculated that these latter craft alone represent a floating population of about 15,000 souls. During the year above quoted, 1,400 casualties occurred in the coasting trade of the United Kingdom, and 250 casualties of various kinds in the trade between Great Britain and the Continental ports. It is shewn that these casualties occur oftenest to small coasters, for of a total of nearly 2,000 casualties in 1867, 99 only took place in the case of vessels over 600 tons, and 150 only in the case of steamships. The waste of seamen in vessels belonging to the United Kingdom is at the rate of 16,000 annually; this total being exclusive of firemen, stewards, and others who serve afloat, but are not

strictly connected with the working of the ship. I am permitted in this place to quote the valuable experience of Dr. Dickson, R.N., Medical Inspector of Her Majesty's Customs, who says: 'I have often found the crew accommodation of the smaller vessels to be exceedingly defective, and it is marvellous that more sickness does not exist;' and of Dr. Letheby, who (in the report above quoted) says: 'In nearly all cases the sleeping accommodation is very insufficient, for the sailors' berths are in the fore-castle, where the space is limited and the ventilation most imperfect.' An official report respecting vessels belonging to Sunderland and Seaham, a great many of which trade to London, records that the 'fore-castles of the ships are in a bad sanitary condition in height, length, and breadth, lumbered up with stores, the want of sufficient space, and the leaky condition of the deck overhead. The space is very badly disposed of, or badly arranged, the same varying in height from only $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet upwards, which I consider is not fit at all for men to live in.' The evidence of these latter authorities, with that adduced in my report four years ago, goes to prove the magnitude of the evils enumerated; and the result of an inspection, as detailed above, shows that these evils still exist, because the legislative enactments at present in force are frequently ignored, and are, moreover, insufficient. I may here call the attention of my readers to a letter which appeared in the *Times* of the 18th March 1869, on this subject, and a leading article thereupon both of which endorse the correctness of the foregoing remarks.

Next, as to the means provided for the hygienic control of the port. Most of my readers are probably aware that the metropolis is now parcelled out into

forty-two districts, to each of which is appointed a medical officer of health. That part of the river (*i.e.* from London Bridge to Woolwich) with which I am at present concerned flows through eleven of these districts—those on the north side of the river being the City of London, Whitechapel, Limehouse, Poplar, and West Ham; and those on the south side, St. John's and St. Olave's, Southwark, Bermondsey, Rotherhithe, Greenwich, and Charlton.

As the law now stands, each and every officer of health appointed to these districts is responsible for the sanitary condition of the floating inhabitants of that portion of the river that flows through his district. For it is provided by the 32nd section of the Sanitary Act of 1866 that 'any ship or vessel lying in any river, harbour, or other water, shall be subject to the jurisdiction of the nuisance authority of the district within which such river, harbour, or other water is, and be within the provisions of the Nuisances Removal Acts in the same manner as if it were a house within such jurisdiction; and the master or other officer in charge of such ship shall be deemed, for the purposes of the Nuisances Removal Acts, to be the occupier of such ship or vessel.' Few words and no sophistry are required to show that, in the case of the Port of London, this is a sublime instance of the absurdity of piecemeal legislation, and that much-vaunted principle commonly called local self-government. If we premise for the nonce that every district is actively inspected, it is plain that, with little difficulty, the master of any vessel who has received orders to remove his garbage, and put the dwelling-places of his crew in order, may loose moorings, drop into another district, and laugh to scorn inspector and order alike.

But we premise a condition of things that does not exist. The authorities of the City district alone, of all those above mentioned, have instituted a systematic inspection under the Sanitary Act of 1866. This district comprises a space of two thousand two hundred and seventy yards, and that on the northern half of the river only, so that, practically speaking, two thousand two hundred and seventy yards only, out of a distance amounting to about twelve miles of water-way (reckoning both sides of the river between London Bridge and Woolwich) are at the present time under hygienic restrictions. Small, however, as the City district is, Dr. Letheby reports that 'during the past two years there have been four thousand two hundred and twenty-three inspections of the ships and vessels within this jurisdiction, and on one hundred and forty occasions it has been found necessary to amend their sanitary condition.' I may here remark that the City district does not include by any means the worst class of vessels; that only about six hundred and fifty yards of this part of the river are much frequented by shipping, and that a great proportion of this space is constantly occupied by steamships belonging to the General Steam Navigation and other companies, most of which are kept in very fair order.

I have purposely abstained from any kind of generalisation in the setting forth of this report; and having regard to the facts detailed therein, must inevitably arrive at the conclusion that there is as yet no sanitary supervision of the port, and that such supervision can only be conducted by uniting these fragmentary districts under one head. For it is as reasonable to suppose that the shore-police should be instructed to repress crime on the river, as that the

medical officers of the districts through which the Thames flows should be expected to perform sanitary inspections thereon. The river is provided with a very efficient body of police, and theft on the Thames has decreased to an almost incredible extent since its organisation. The real governing power on the river, however, is the Board of Conservancy, and to it is confided all matters relating to the commercial welfare of the port, and to the safety of the river as a main channel of intercommunication. The conservators superintend the moorings of vessels, keep the stream clear for traffic, dredge shallows, and have absolute power over all wrecks. And hence it is fit and proper that the sanitary supervision of the port should be placed in their hands, and that they should receive powers to appoint a medical officer of health. Such an officer would be specially useful in many ways; for, inasmuch as the Board of Trade, as well as the City Corporation, is represented at the Board of Conservancy, this officer could efficiently co-operate with the inspectors and surveyors recently appointed by Government under the Merchant Shipping Act of 1867, and at once communicate to them any breaches of the law. The consummation of the plan suggested would afford to the Board of Trade a surety that certain clauses of the Duke of Richmond's Act were fully and faithfully carried out; to the shipowner, an assurance that his crews were kept in good working order; to the ship-master, a valuable aid to discipline when his vessel is in port; and to the sailor, a material guarantee that the legislative enactments created for his benefit were applied with constancy and precision. Further verbiage on this subject is unnecessary. The evil is patent, the remedy is plain. I commend

this report to the consideration of the President of the Board of Trade and the Thames Conservators; and have to tender acknowledgments to Dr. Letheby and others, whose polite assistance in furnishing statistical information has greatly aided my work.