

London Metropolitan Archives

Information Leaflet Number 18

Records of the Company of Watermen and Lightermen



Important access information

Access to some of the records described in this leaflet may be at Guildhall Library. Please see our online catalogue or contact us for specific advice before making a special journey.

The Company's archives

The movement of goods and passengers along the River Thames has been central to the City of London's development. This trade has largely been controlled, since the sixteenth century, by the members of the Watermen and Lightermen's Company. The Company's records reflect its rich and diverse history. As well as court and committee minutes, financial records and letter books, there are records of the company's estates and charities, in particular its almshouses at Ditchling, Sussex and its former almshouses at Penge, Kent.

Further records relating to the Company of Watermen and Lightermen can be found the City archives (COL/CP/02 and COL/CC/17).

Any enquiries concerning records not in the custody of LMA should be addressed to The Clerk, Watermen's Hall, 16 St Mary at Hill, London EC2R 8EE.

Tracing your family history using the records of the Watermen and Lightermen's Company

There is much of interest for the family historian. The trades of waterman and lighterman frequently continued through several generations of a family and so records can often be traced through a long span of years. Those admitted to the freedom of the company did so, until the late 19th century, exclusively through apprenticeship, and so it is usually best to begin a search for a freeman in the apprenticeship records.

We suggest that readers begin by searching the apprentice binding books 1688-1908 (CLC/L/WA/C/020/MS06289) and the apprentice affidavit books 1759-1897 (CLC/L/WA/C/026/MS06291), which together will tell you the name of the apprentice, the date and place of his baptism, the date his apprenticeship begins, the name of his master and the date he became a free waterman.

From 1865 the Company started to take on older members, who did not fit within the age range permitted through the apprenticeship system. They were taken on as members after a shortened training period of two years, after which they obtained a contract licence. Their admissions can be traced in CLC/L/WA/E/017/MS19548A (this covers the period 1865-1926).

Name indexes of apprentice bindings, 1692-1949, apprentice affidavits, 1759-1949, and contract licences, 1865-1926 have been compiled by R. J. Cottrell. Microfiche copies of these indexes are available on request from enquiry desk staff.

The indexes together with a complete list of Doggett's Coat and Badge race winners are also available for purchase on fiche or CD-ROM from R. J. Cottrell, Trueflare Ltd, Sudbury, New Barn Road, Longfield, Kent, DA3 7JE (e-mail: RJCindex@aol.com). He charges £5.00 to search under one surname in the bindings' index, and £1.00 to search for an individual name in the affidavits' index (please make cheques payable to Trueflare Ltd and enclose a large SAE with your request).

Readers who are keen to find out more about their ancestor's career can search the quarterage books (CLC/L/WA/C/033/MS06819, CLC/L/WA/C/031/MS06404, CLC/L/WA/C/030/MS06402, CLC/L/WA/C/029/MS06401, covering 1764-1923), which record addresses or moorings, subscriptions paid to the Company and occasionally dates of death.

Individuals can often be traced in the Company's complaint books (CLC/L/WA/E/026/MS06301, CLC/L/WA/E/027/MS06302, CLC/L/WA/E/029/MS06303, CLC/L/WA/E/024/MS06304 and CLC/L/WA/E/025/MS06305 cover the period from 1802) which were used by individuals to air their grievances about other members. The number of individuals who appear in these records is surprisingly high (in the region of twenty percent of members) but they are not indexed. You need to search through the relevant period to see if you can find your ancestor as a complainant or as a defendant. Even if you are not able to find a particular person, these give a valuable insight into the day-to-day working lives of those on the River.

There are a variety of sources which record Sunday ferry services (e.g. CLC/L/WA/E/033/MS06292, 1721-1831) including the names of individual ferrymen and the money they earned. There are also registers of lighters, barges, passenger boats etc which also provide names of their operators and addresses of moorings (e.g. CLC/L/WA/E/001/MS06308, CLC/L/WA/E/002/MS06309, CLC/L/WA/E/009/MS06311 mainly covering the late 19th century and early 20th century). These records are more piecemeal than the apprenticeship records and they do not cover the entire period of the Company's history.

You may find records of the end of an individual's career as the Company provided pensions to Company members and their wives. There are account books of pensioners receiving money from the Company 1794-1928 (CLC/L/WA/G/004/MS06400) and records of payments made to those resident in the Company almshouses in Penge 1841-1859 (CLC/L/WA/G/023/MS06602).

Trinity House watermen

The Corporation of Trinity House also licensed watermen. These men were ex-mariners and therefore became watermen in their 30's, 40's, 50's or 60's rather than at 21. They were also much fewer in number than the Company's watermen. The only surviving register of Trinity House watermen covers 1829-64 (CLC/526/MS30335). A microfiche index to this register is available on request from enquiry desk staff.

Thomas Martyn's charity school

A Watermen's School in Putney was founded in 1684 by Thomas Martyn after he had been rescued from the river. 20 sons of local Putney watermen were admitted when the school opened in June 1718. The school was situated in Southfield House at the junction of Oxford Road and Putney Bridge Road. This building was demolished in 1887 to make way for the extension of the District Line. The school moved to new premises, but closed in 1911. The Thomas Martyn Foundation still exists and today provides grants for the sons and daughters of watermen. The surviving records of Thomas Martyn's Charity School 1716-1977 are listed under LMA reference LMA/4523.

Corps of River Fencibles

Thames watermen and other groups of river tradesmen voluntarily formed associations of River Fencibles in 1798, the same year that the Corps of Sea Fencibles was established as a coastal home guard. The River Fencibles were officially established in 1803, and by 1804 had uniformed commissioned officers. Members of the London Corps in small boats escorted the barge carrying the body of Nelson along the Thames during his state funeral in 1806. The force was disbanded in 1813. The surviving records of the Corps of River Fencibles are listed under LMA reference CLC/057.

The history of the Watermen and Lightermen's Company

Until the mid 18th century the only means by which to cross the River Thames were London Bridge or boat. Because of the potential difficulties this posed, the Corporation of London was appointed Conservator of the Thames in 1193, its duties including the licensing of boat operators on the river. There is evidence to suggest that the Corporation passed regulations in 1370 governing watermen, i.e. those who carried people by boat across the river. Acts to regulate charges were also passed by Parliament in 1514 and 1555 to make the passenger safe, both in the durability of the boat and in the reliability of its owner.

The Company of Watermen was formed in order to put an end to what a 1566 Act of Parliament calls *divers and many misfortunes and mischances*, caused by *evil and ignorant persons who robbed and spoiled of their [passengers'] goods, and also drowned them*. Its original function thus differs from the City livery companies in that it existed not only to protect the economic interests of its members but also to bring them and their activities under control. Elizabeth I granted the company its arms in 1585, while the ordinances performed the function of a charter. This was eventually granted in 1827.

The structure of the Company was that of a fellowship. Officers empowered to license operators were not elected by members but appointed by the Lord Mayor. In 1641, following a twenty-year campaign, the wishes of ordinary members were taken into account; licensed watermen elected 55 assistants who nominated twenty candidates for office. Out of these twenty the Lord Mayor appointed four to join the previous year's four who continued in office. Measures to promote safety and efficiency soon appeared; a system of 1696, for instance, meant that boats and their owners had to bear a number and operate from an approved plying place. Printed tables of fares became an annual publication by the early 18th century.

In 1700 the lightermen, i.e. those who unloaded cargo from ships and carried it into port by lighter, joined the watermen, having formerly been members of the Woodmongers' Company. In the long run this greatly benefited the Company, if not the watermen themselves, since the bridge-building programme of the late eighteenth century and the introduction of steamships in the early nineteenth meant a decline in demand for the waterman's skills. With the expansion of the Port of London, on the other hand, the lightermen flourished.

The Company differs from the City livery companies in several ways. Its influence on the Thames stretched from Gravesend to Windsor so that, unlike most of the City livery companies, its members were often drawn from areas a considerable distance from the City of London. Since the Thames Conservancy Act of 1857 the western limit of jurisdiction has been Teddington Lock. Also, the Company has no livery. One reason for this might be that the freedom of the City that the liveried would enjoy would exempt them from impressment into the Navy - a fate inflicted upon many members of the Company from the fourteenth century. CLC/L/WA/E/060/MS10799 contains correspondence with the Admiralty relating to impressment and the compilation of a list of those members eligible for service in 1855; CLC/L/WA/E/059/MS06386 records the names of 105 company members killed or invalidated in action in the early 19th century.

Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* includes 19th century interviews with watermen and lightermen.

Thomas Doggett's Coat & Badge Race

The will of Thomas Doggett (a Drury Lane comedian), dated September 1721, provided for a scarlet coat and a silver badge with a representation of Liberty on it to be awarded annually by the Fishmongers' Company; these were then to be rowed for by six watermen within a year of completing their apprenticeships. The race, from The Swan, London Bridge, to The Swan, Chelsea, has taken place annually ever since, save the war years.

More information about the race and a list of winners 1780-2004 may be found in Information Leaflet No.19, 'Thomas Doggett's Coat and Badge Race'.

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