

A QUIET SEA
RMS TITANIC



White Star Cap
Credit: War Hats

BECOMING AN OFFICER

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Young Britons seeking to become ship Masters in the British Merchant Marine first had to serve as indentured apprentices with commercial shipping companies, as required by the Merchant Seaman Act of 1823. To learn their profession, apprentices as young as 13 or 14 traditionally went to sea in deep water sail—a tough and dangerous environment.



Ship Grace Harwar under tow
Credit: Wiki Commons

Because the big, iron windjammers taxed the modest physical stature of these boys, candidates were required to obtain a doctor's letter attesting to their good physical condition and ability to endure the grueling labor. Shipping lines also required a letter from a member of the clergy, stating that the applicant was of good moral character and that living in close quarters would not encourage aberrant behavior. First-time apprentices were sent to the highest yards and were responsible for setting and furling the lightest sails, but even these could weigh up to half a ton. Barely able to get their arms around the wet, thrashing canvas, they would wrestle with and finally subdue the sail to the yard.



British ship Grace Harwar, mizzen topgallant and royal yards
Credit: Wiki Commons

Conditions were spartan, and the ships were guaranteed to be infested with rats and cockroaches. Food was notoriously poor, rations short and privations common. Owners and masters were well known for their penny-pinching ways, skimping on crew necessities to maximize profits. It cost money to load fresh water in foreign ports, so many ships left with insufficient drinking water for the homeward passage; masters depended on collecting rain water along the way. However, rain water was brackish, and when opened, the tanks could get contaminated with salt water. Apprentices (and seamen) provided their own clothing and bedding, which consisted of a straw mattress called a "donkey's breakfast." Wooden bunks were infested with bed bugs. When ships were deep-laden with cargo and heeled over in heavy winds, there wasn't much to keep the sea from coming aboard. Some vessels were reputed man killers, losing a sailor a voyage. The incessant flooding and rolling would toss the seamen about or knock them together in a pile. Landing on a deck structure or hatch corner could result in

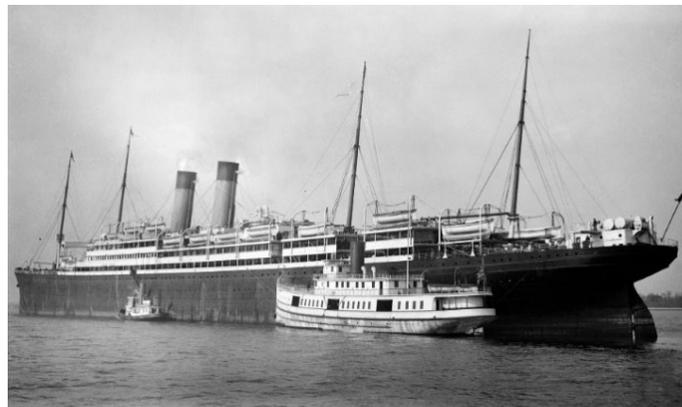
grave and sometimes fatal injuries. The risk of getting washed overboard in heavy seas when working on a flooded deck or a pitching bowsprit was great. In cold, higher latitudes, ice would accumulate in the rigging, increasing the risk of getting pitched off on a dark night. Warm quarters were non-existent and were often flooded; once men and clothes got wet, they stayed wet. Getting aloft in foul weather on a dark night wearing oilskins and heavy sea boots tested one's strength and wits. All wasn't gales and high seas, however. There were the doldrums, where a ship could be becalmed for weeks, or favorable trade winds, known as flying fish weather, where good progress was made. (Flying fish would land on board and supplement the dreary fare.) Discharging, waiting for and loading cargo could take months, and voyages could last a year. Ship's work was continuous and kept mischief at bay.



Ship Monkbarns, 1895
Credit: Word Press

Bullying was rife and a dependable part of apprentice life on windjammers. There was little effort by Masters to shield passive apprentices from hazing by officers, crew and the more aggressive apprentices. Some cracked from the abuse and jumped overboard; others found different ways to commit suicide. The romance of the sea fueled myths that these boys had healthy, open-air lives and great opportunities to see beautiful and exotic places. Sometimes, they did. But this whimsy was tempered by the harsh and exploitive realities of apprentice life at sea. The system was intended to make professional seamen and, in spite of its callousness, it did. Those who survived and earned good fitness reports took their examinations and graduated as mates. Most returned to windjammers briefly, but steamships were the future. After serving as mates on powered vessels, most entered one of the nautical schools ("crammers") to study for their Master's certificates.

The safe navigation of a liner in all seasons depended upon their good judgment and skill. Only officers with experience and good safety records were entrusted with serving on or commanding the premier ships of the transatlantic ferry service. Steamship companies that signed mail contracts with the British government were obliged to keep the schedule, in addition to providing fast, reliable and impeccable service for businessmen and wealthy passengers. Thus, only the most qualified men were sought out and recruited.



White Star liner Adriatic (1907)
Credit: Wikipedia

