

The State of Sailing Ships of the 19th Century

By Suzette Lampier Grist

In the days of sailing ships, life was rigorous, very hard and dangerous. Ships were not checked prior to sailing although there was a Merchant Shipping Act, unfortunately not enforced until 1854 when the Board of Trade was formed.



Ship preparation and cleaning before and during the voyage included 'tar rigging', a filthy, hot and gruelling process. All brass had to be polished. Coarse sand from the hold was spread on decks for 'stoning'; slabs of soft red sandstone were dragged across the wood by ropes then washed down with sea water. Clothes and bodies had to be cleaned afterwards.

Figure 1: Model of The Chapman, the first Settler ship to arrive at Algoa Bay

Overloading was common. "Lifeboat", the journal of RNLI (Royal National Lifeboat Institute still operating today) reported the loss of the *Utopia* (Liverpool to Bombay). She was so overloaded that she ran aground in Brunswick Dock before sailing. The surveyor had painted a loading line limit on her hull, but she was loaded until that line was 6 inches below the water, then another 120 tons of coke were loaded in another dock. The captain resigned and another captain was employed and threatened. *Utopia* put to sea on 10th March, 1867 and she sunk three days later with all lives lost. It was a national scandal.

Samuel Plimsoll took up the case. He was an MP and known as the 'fisherman's friend'. He tried to get the lot of seamen improved through Parliament, but it took until the late 19th century for his submissions to be enacted and for seamen's lives and families to be protected. Many MPs fought against these costly improvements as many were themselves shipowners.

There was actually more profit in sinking a ship than doing the original trip. Buy a ship for £300, insure for £1000, owner collects £2,500 with loss of cargo. The loss of 20 lives was incidental. Seamen were lost, families destitute. They were called 'coffin ships'. Even with the Board of Trade, investigations took time to conclude and receive a result.

There were many cases of ships sinking in the harbour, or early in their voyages due to poor and illegal stowing of cargo on the decks. The captains were unhappy and complained but they were made "unemployable" or imprisoned.

In seven years, 61 passenger carrying ships were wrecked, costing 1,600 lives. As late as 1880, one in 60 seamen died in the course of their duties. Compare that with the fact that, in an equally dangerous occupation, one in 315 miners died.

References:

Stuart, Andrew 'Of cargoes, colonies and kings' 2001

Google.... Wikipedia and Britannica on Samuel Plimsoll, RNLI, and 19th century shipping.