

Maryport Coasters and Coaster Men, 1855-1889

David J. Clarke

Of all the ships and men who have plied the world's seas, perhaps none go so unrecognized in story, song and general fame as those in the coasting trades. It almost goes without saying that coasting is a less glamorous occupation than the blue-water trades. In the latter, seafarers might find themselves in exotic locales and situations unimaginable to their contemporaries. The "roller coaster ride" experienced by Jack on such a voyage can be suggested by the frequent desertions, dissolution, occasional mutinies and even deaths reported in logbooks.' Coasting, on the other hand, is a more mundane affair, and coasters travel short distances to places familiar even to landsmen. In the British case, Ireland was arguably the most exotic locale. Moreover, the coasters were themselves "ugly ducklings" compared to the China tea clippers. In most cases coastal cargoes were also prosaic. A vessel would likely carry nothing more exciting than coal, iron, or even china clay.' Crew agreements for short-sea voyages rarely required detailed logs. When a crew member departed the vessel following a coastal voyage, the reason was seldom other than "paid off" or "discharged."

Although a number of important studies have detailed the careers of ships and sailors in the foreign trades, much less has been said about coasting.' The case can be overstated: John Armstrong's recent bibliography on coastal shipping contains 295 books and articles, many of them recent.' That being said, this is precious little compared to the thousands of works on other forms of transport, like railways or deep-sea shipping. As a step toward gaining a better understanding of this neglected maritime sector, this essay will examine the coastal shipping owned in Maryport, a town in northwestern England, and the crews who served on them.

To do this requires a variety of sources. But the backbone of this study comprises two particular sets of British government documents: the Board of Trade 108 series of vessel registries and the British Empire Crew Agreements. Information on vessels comes largely from the first of these documents. The BT 108 series contains records of most decked vessels greater than fifteen tons registered in Britain and throughout the Empire. This included Maryport, which was a port of registry during the period of this study. These registries contain information on vessel name; official number; type and rig of vessel (or horsepower if steam-propelled); date of registry; date, number and port of previous registry, if applicable; when and where built; owners' names and occupations; and the reason and date of registry closure, among other things. These data allow the historian to answer a myriad of questions.

To study the voyage patterns and crew characteristics of these vessels, the Crew Agreements are the best source. These "crew lists," the majority of which are housed at Memorial University of Newfoundland, were legal documents signed by a master and each crew member. This means that they contain much information about each crew member, including name; age; birthplace; occupation; and reason for discharge. The agreements also specified details of the voyage, such as intended route; expected duration; provisions to be provided; wages; and other relevant conditions under which a mariner shipped. Because on foreign voyages masters were required by law to have the agreements stamped by an official in each overseas port, they are superb for tracing deep-sea voyage patterns. On coastal routes, however, there was no such requirement, and the record was normally kept by the master. While it is not always quite as complete, many agreements allow the historian to reconstruct particular voyages.' For the present study, over 1100 crew members and more than 140 separate voyages made by Maryport coasters have been examined.

The crew agreements, however, do little to flesh out the individual behind a name. Since the coasting trades allowed a mariner more time with family than deep-sea trades, it is reasonable that such considerations must have played a role in the decision to serve on coasting vessels. It would certainly be of interest to compare the numbers of married versus unmarried men in the two distinct trades over time, but the agreements are silent on such matters. They also give no indication about the role of women in coasting families. Surely with husbands at sea for weeks at a time, more of the burden of child-rearing would have fallen to wives than was normal even in Victorian Britain. Such women may not have experienced the long periods of separation that deep-sea wives did, but they must have been extraordinary nonetheless. Unfortunately, on their lives and interaction with seafaring husbands the agreements are mute.' With these caveats in mind, we now turn our attention to the case study.

Maryport today is located in the modern county of Cumbria, a designation that was unknown to the Victorians. In the nineteenth century, the town was situated administratively in the county of Cumberland, near the Scottish border and the city of Carlisle, famous for its battles with border Reivers and Bonnie Prince Charlie.' Next to Cumberland were the counties of Westmorland and Lancashire, parts of which today are in Cumbria. By dint of its coastline and resources, especially iron and coal, that needed transport to other parts of the UK, Cumberland was a natural centre for coasting.

Maryport was a small, but important, cog in Britain's nineteenth-century coastal and foreign trades. Coal was one pillar of the town's Victorian economy. Local reserves provided an early impetus for Maryport's development. From a tiny hamlet, Maryport grew into a town of over 1000 persons by the late eighteenth century. A majority of the economically-active population was employed in coal mining. By the late 1820s the town exported about 40,000 tons of coal per annum. In 1865 Maryport sent 459,725 tons to other ports in the UK compared to a national total of 10,747,568. Compared to total British coal exports, Maryport's trade may seem insignificant, but it must be placed in a regional context. According to estimates by the 1871 Royal Commission on the Coal Supply, total coastal exports of coal from Cumberland, Lancashire and Cheshire in 1869 were 1.1 million tons; Cumberland's portion of this total was just under two-thirds. Given that Maryport's coastwise exports comprised over half of Cumberland's total, it obviously was significant. Although other county ports, like Workington, were important exporters, Maryport's prominence within the region is clear.¹⁰

Another product important to Maryport was iron ore. By mid-century one-fifth of British production of haematite, about 100,000 tons, came from the region. Maryport had its own iron industry, which produced mainly pig-iron. By the early 1870s the town boasted two haematite iron companies. Although Maryport did not move into steel production, Cumberland was a centre of Bessemer steel output. From 1851 to 1911 metal workers grew from 3.3 to 13.5% of western Cumbria's workforce."

By 1899 Maryport exported steel rails and coal along with stone, lime and cast iron. Imports included iron ore, timber and general merchandise. These amounted to 373,000 and 385,000 tons, respectively. Maryport was an import centre for Spanish iron ore, which was then shipped to the mills in Workington. Maryport reciprocated by exporting pig iron. From the 1880s, Maryport boasted two docks to accommodate its import and export traffic.¹² The small Elizabeth Dock was constructed for coal traffic in 1867 and was joined by the larger Senhouse Dock in 1884, the latter mainly intended for iron exports. The Maryport and Carlisle Railway, along with the Newcastle and Carlisle Railway, linked the docks to their hinterlands." These two docks remain today and the harbour's basic form is much as it was during the last century, although the coastal traffic is now absent.

Maryport was thus an important, if hardly dominant, trading port in the second half of the nineteenth century. Given the lack of historical inquiry into the British coastal trade, an examination of a specific port and its trades makes a good deal of sense, since only by understanding the workings of a great many ports and trades will we be able eventually to comprehend the entire system. Indeed, the fact that individual trades are parts of a larger whole provides another justification for studying Maryport ships and mariners. Just as all British coastal trades fit into a nationwide system of transport, Maryport fit into a regional context. Even when examining only Maryport-registered vessels and their crews, a picture emerges of the coasting trades in northwest England. Indeed, the same men who served on Maryport ships also served on craft owned in Workington, Whitehaven and other regional ports. Not surprisingly, the birthplaces of these coastal seamen spanned the entire area. Maryport's trade network ranged from Scotland in the north to Wales in the south, and across the Irish Sea.¹⁴ Like a living ecosystem, it could not thrive in isolation. In addition to being at the centre of its own trades, Maryport was part of the commercial spheres of larger centres, such as Belfast, Liverpool and Dublin. In a sense, then, the story of Maryport's coasters and coaster men is not just about one town but about an entire transportation network.

The typical Maryport coaster of this period was sail-powered, since Maryport was relatively late in adopting steam technology.¹⁵ Even in the late 1870s and 1880s, Maryport shipowners were still adding more sail than steam tonnage to their fleets. Indeed, it was only in 1876 that as much as forty-four percent of new additions to the town's fleet were powered by steam. These vessels came from a variety of locales, although most were either of British or Canadian construction. In Britain, the places of build included Aberdeen, Workington, Sunderland, Glasgow, Isle of Man, Greenock, Belfast and the town itself. When Maryport began to switch to steam, ports like Sunderland became more important. All Canadian-built vessels came from Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Québec. From the mid-1850s through the 1870s, it was not uncommon for over half of all new registries in Maryport to have Canadian origins.¹⁶

In the mid-1850s, four vessel types were prevalent in Maryport: barques, brigs, brigantines and schooners. Barques, which tended to be the largest, still averaged under four

hundred tons carrying capacity. During the next two decades carrying capacity tended to increase. But barques were seldom used as coasters; those vessels that were – the brigs, brigantines and schooners – were smaller, and average size for any of them was never much more than two hundred tons. In fact, the average tonnage of brigs and brigantines declined over time. Since many ports along the coast, such as Wigtown and Dumfries, were small and poorly equipped, this was undoubtedly the optimal operating size."

Table 1

Average (Registered) Tonnage of Newly-Registered Vessels by Decade and Rig Type

Decade	Barques	Brigs	Brigantines	Schooners	Total
1850s	371	126	129	93	180
1860s	383	196	135	185	225
1870s	528	157	126	202	253

Source: Great Britain, Board of Trade (BT) 108, Maryport Vessel Registries, various years.

In the decade after 1855 brigs and barques dominated purchases by Maryport investors, representing 8418 and 8558 tons of new shipping, respectively, compared to 4145 tons of all other types of vessel purchases. Only two vessels during this time period were steamers, and they were likely harbour tugs. During the late 1860s and early 1870s brigantines dominated in terms of capital outlays. Investors remained conservative, however, and sailing tonnage predominated in Maryport purchases until the 1880s. Even in the latter decade, the "steam revolution" remained incomplete and no new steamers were added to Maryport's registry during the middle part of the decade.¹⁸

Although no single voyage made by Maryport's coasters can be called "typical," there were definite patterns. Voyages were normally within the geographic boundaries noted earlier, from Scotland to Wales and across the Irish Sea. But this was not always the case. Coasting was part of the larger "home trade," which was defined as anywhere on the continent between the River Elbe and Brest in France, as well as around the British Isles. Voyage patterns also give lie to any notion that coasters always had to be engaged in the coastal trades. For example, in November 1866 the brigantine *Farmer* arrived in Newport from Archangel, which clearly made this a foreign passage. But for the remainder of the year it returned to coasting. Voyages were normally made on a half-yearly basis and the ship's papers would generally be submitted in June and December. Crews would sign on in January and July, with new crew members being brought on board to replace those discharged or paid off.¹⁹

One other voyage involving *Farmer* is instructive, since it entailed calls at Belfast and several west coast ports. Many voyages undertaken by Maryport coasters followed a similar pattern, crossing the Irish Sea to link Irish ports with those in the western part of England. Indeed, trade with Belfast, Dublin and Londonderry was far more important to Maryport than was commerce with its west coast neighbours. In 1875, Maryport shipping to and from Ireland amounted to 1,520,068 tons, compared with only 30,327 tons for all other coasting.²⁰ The disparity over the entire period was of a similar magnitude. Trade with Ireland largely involved coal. In fact, Maryport owed much of its development as a port to the Irish coal trade, which in the latter half of the nineteenth century experienced continued expansion.²¹ It should not be surprising that *Farmer* carried coal on the voyage in question.

Built in Molbayne in 1851, *Farmer* was a second-hand craft when it was registered in Maryport in 1854 and again in 1869. The majority of the vessel's crew agreements indicate that it was employed in the coal and general coasting trades between ports in England, Scotland and Wales. There are few passages where it is completely certain what the vessel was carrying beyond coal. Other items may have supplemented the main cargo, but no direct evidence was found in the crew agreements. Some of *Farmer's* voyages certainly were made in ballast, since a requirement that the crew handle ballast was often included explicitly on the crew agreements. The one log which indicates specific cargoes covers the period between January and June 1871 and was kept by the master, Thomas Lowden. On 23 January Lowden's vessel departed Belfast for Garston in ballast. As the trip was recorded as taking over two weeks, *Farmer* likely made one or more unrecorded stops. After another fortnight Lowden's crew finished loading a cargo of coal and returned to Belfast; the passage in this case required a mere three days. Although such turnaround times may seem particularly lengthy, they were the norm. There are a number of reasons why this might have been the case. The voyage itself, made during winter, might account for some of the delays. The long trip noted above might have caused damage requiring repairs to *Farmer's* masts, rigging, hull or fittings. In January, with the small craft buffeted by wind and waves, such an explanation is not unreasonable. But the vast majority of these voyages record similar turnaround times, even on short summer passages. The answer, then, must lie elsewhere. A description of facilities for coasters in Liverpool written by Adrian Jarvis may shed some light on this. Jarvis suggested that even when ports possessed good infrastructure, it was often reserved for steamers and larger foreign-going craft. In this hierarchy, coasters were at the bottom and their accommodation was often inadequate. As Jarvis remarked:

the berths [coaster owners] had to use in [Liverpool] were generally allocated not on the basis of what the ships needed, discharging equipment, well-lighted capricious sheds...for example, but on what they did not need, such as great depths of water and wide entrance passages. Few of the coastal berths were rail connected, with the result that...cargo was once again at the mercy of the ubiquitous carter, to take its chance in penny lots on the congested and ill-surfaced avenues and quays...and the process was, of course, repeated in reverse when coasters arrived bringing in goods for export overseas?¹

While this description of Liverpool cannot reflect the situation at Belfast or *Farmer's* other ports of call directly, it is suggestive. Garston had coal drops which could load a vessel of *Farmer's* size in about two hours, but it is possible the brigantine was unable to make use of them.²³ Bearing this evidence in mind, along with the time taken in loading/unloading coal and ballast, it seems that whatever the infrastructure, most work was done manually. Jarvis' description of the coal trade in Liverpool is even more revealing. His study indicates a miasma of mismanagement and underutilised potential. If the rest of Maryport's trading partners were anything like this, protracted turnaround times should not be unexpected.²⁴ Table 2 illustrates the average voyage times between ports as well as turnaround time in port for Maryport coasters.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from *Farmer's* voyages. First, it is clear that it was expected to pay for itself on only one leg, with the return trips usually made in ballast.

The willingness of the owners to employ the vessel this way indicates the importance of the Irish coal trade to Maryport. It is also clear from the records that conditions at sea could cause considerable delays for a sailing vessel. Given *Farmer's* log, the normal time seems to have been no more than two or three days. Finally, even on a short passage across the sea or along the Irish Coast, delays were to be expected both when loading and unloading coal (the vessel averaged twelve days in port). This latter figure is not bad, even in the rather speedy 1870s, when average turnaround times for Maryport coasters generally remained over two weeks.²⁵

Table 2
Average Travel and Turnaround Times for Maryport Coasters by Decade

Decade	Average Time Spent in Transit	Average Time Spent in Port
1860s	3.06 Days	Three Weeks, 2.7 Days
1870s	2.7 Days	Two Weeks, 0.49 Days
1880s	3 Days	20.8 Days
Total	2.92 Days	Two Weeks, 5.7 Days

Note: Sailing vessels only. Figures are for voyages between ports along the coast and across the Irish Sea.

Source: Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN), Maritime History Archive (MHA), Board of Trade 99 Crew Agreements, various years.

The crew agreements also give some indication of the frustrations of a coastal shipowner or mariner. On occasion coasters had to undergo repairs which could keep them in port for extended periods. For a wooden sailing coaster, maintenance was especially important. In 1867 *Farmer* spent all of January and much of February being repaired. For the master, such a hiatus must have reduced his chances of having a successful half-year, even if failure to achieve this goal would not necessarily have been ascribed to him. For the owners, lay-ups in port meant lost revenue as well as the additional cost. Yet repairs were a necessary evil if the vessel were to continue to be a viable piece of capital.²⁶

When vessels needed repairs, shipowners had to trust the skills of local shipwrights. Once underway, however, its fate was in the hands of its master and crew. Mariners signing on to a Maryport coaster could expect to serve as part of a crew of between five and seven in the years before 1870, rising in some years after 1871 to as many as twelve. This latter figure, though, generally included replacement crew rather than depicting the number actually on board at any one time.²⁷ Most often the crew would consist of a master, mate and between three and five able-bodied seamen (ABs), although the latter group could be more numerous. Occasionally these coasters carried a bosun, one to two apprentices, runners, ordinary seamen or a cook. The cook's job might be combined with other duties, and sometimes there was no cook listed at all. If the vessel did not carry a cook, the men were provided with food to prepare themselves.²⁸ From the articles, work appears to have proceeded fairly smoothly, and the grade of "very good" for performance was practically universal. Coastal seamen in trades emanating from Maryport were almost never dismissed for reasons of conduct or failure to perform their duties.²⁹

The mariners serving on Maryport coasters were relatively homogenous, especially in terms of where they were born. On deep-sea voyages, sailors on a British vessel might hail from any part of the country, empire, or world. The situation was exactly the opposite on Maryport's coastal vessels. Few foreign mariners or colonials served on these craft (see table

3).³⁰ Similarly, men from the UK outside the immediate region were a small minority until the 1880s. From the 1860s, when the best data are available, about forty-three percent of all mariners came from Maryport itself and another seven percent from elsewhere in Cumbria, such as Whitehaven, Wigton and Carlisle. Just over fourteen percent hailed from Maryport's major Irish trading partners, Belfast, Dublin and Londonderry. The remainder, about thirty-six percent, were born in other parts of the UK. Only a small proportion came from locales far removed from Maryport's coastal trade area. In this context Maryport coastermen might be regarded as a truly regional workforce. While this began to change in the 1880s, even then Cumbrian crewmen and those from the major Irish trading partners accounted for approximately fifty-five percent of crew. With Cumbrian coal and iron mines, along with agriculture, competing for this "unskilled" workforce, larger numbers of non-locals might have been expected over time. This seems to have been the case after the 1870s, but the trade still retained its essentially local flavour. It is perhaps not surprising that this period coincided with a decline in Cumbria's coastal coal shipments. Perhaps local seamen, closer to the situation, could better perceive a decline and filtered away to other industries. It might also be that they were simply taking advantage of the upturn in coasting further south.³¹

Table 3
Places of Birth for Maryport Coaster Coastal Seamen, 1860-1889 (Percentages)

Decade	Maryport	Cumbria	Ireland	Other
1860s	53%	14%	--	33%
1870s	56%	8.5%	8.5%	27%
1880s	27%	5%	24%	44%
Total	43%	7%	14%	36%

Note: **Ireland** includes Belfast, Dublin and Londonderry only.

Source: MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements, various years.

In addition to being "local boys," the data indicate a fairly mature workforce. Although certain crew members, such as apprentices, were by definition young, there was a trend toward the employment of mariners over the age of thirty, and more than a few seamen were actually middle-aged. By the 1870s and 1880s, just over eleven percent of Maryport's coastal tars were above the age of fifty. During the 1860s about forty-five percent of mariners were above age thirty and in the next two decades a majority were above this mark. In fact, from the 1860s through the 1880s the average age of crew never fell below thirty.³² While a study of average ages of mariners by the late David Alexander found "an industry...dominated by young men," there were few coastal sailors in his sample.³³ It is clear that coaster men were different than those who signed on for long-distance voyages.

Alexander studied the men who served on vessels registered in the port of Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. In his introduction he noted that in the Norwegian, American and Canadian merchant marines few seafarers continued beyond their early thirties. In the 1860s over eighty-two percent of Canadian sailors in Yarmouth were under age thirty. By the 1880s, however, Alexander noted a decline in the number of boys under twenty who went to sea. Conversely, over time the number of men over thirty manning Yarmouth craft grew steadily, a trend that indicated an aging workforce. Alexander suggested that either sailing was becoming unattractive to Yarmouth youth or that seafaring was becoming a lifetime career.³⁴

Unlike Yarmouth, in Maryport the presence of older crewmen was always the norm, although the proportion increased, especially in the 1870s. The Maryport case showed large numbers above the age of thirty-five throughout the period. During the 1860s about thirty-six percent of all coastermen were above thirty-five. By the next decade this had jumped to forty-six percent, stabilizing in the 1880s at a slightly lower level (forty-two percent). Although crews did not seem to be aging after the 1870s, a variation of Alexander's second theme may have merit here. In the period 1860-1889, Maryport coastermen did not gravitate toward coasting early in their sea careers. This suggests coasting as an attractive choice for mature seamen. Indeed, Alexander suggested coasting as a natural option for aging mariners. The percentage of seamen above thirty-five was, all things considered, fairly stable. This indicates, if not a stagnant workforce, one that was not aging too rapidly.³⁵

These data also call into question the old truism that coasting was a "nursery" for the more challenging blue-water trades. As John Armstrong has argued:

the view of the British coastal trade handed down by writers on deep-water marine activity has sometimes been patronizing and has downplayed its role. The notion that the coasting trade was the "nursery" of seamen suggests a kindergarten for immature sailors who would eventually graduate to a higher form of education, presumably the blue-water trades.³⁶

Without tracing the careers of individual mariners over time it would be difficult to prove that Maryport's coastal shipping was or was not a training ground for deep-sea sailors. Nonetheless, important clues from the crew agreements call this notion into question. The presence of so large a number of those over thirty-five, and even above fifty, suggests that coasting was not a place to start one's career at sea but rather a place to finish it (see table 3). This becomes even more evident when one looks at the number of experienced seamen who were above the age of thirty: sixty-two percent of all ABs, mates and masters in the sample fell into this group. With such a high proportion above thirty, it is clear that these men were not abandoning coasting for a "more mature" environment.³⁷

Table 4

Decade	Percentage of Mariners by Age Group		
	Less than 35 Years	35-50	Over 50
1860s	64%	28%	8%
1870s	57%	34%	12%
1880s	58%	30%	12%

Source: MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements, various years.

Another important way of characterizing the Maryport coaster crews is the area of education. Although a man's marine training is indicated fairly well by the position he occupies, this gives little hint of how much formal education the average coasterman was likely to have had. The crew agreements say nothing about this directly, although they do give some clues indirectly. This is because all seamen had to sign the crew agreement when joining a vessel. If a crew member was illiterate and could not sign his name, he had to make a mark, which the master would usually certify. While the ability to write does not tell us precisely how much education an individual had, it can still be used as a rough surrogate.

According to Alexander, the ability to sign one's name is a "middle-level indicator of literacy." Although fewer people could sign their name than could read, more could do so than could read and write fluently. Sailors signing articles were more likely to need this ability than manual labourers. For this reason, they may have had more cause to memorize their signature even if they really could not write. Alexander realized the problem and simply argued that the ability to sign one's name must at least indicate some ability to read and/or write.³⁸ J. D. Marshall and John Walton agree on this point. They assert that for large groups "consistent trends appear...and it is evident they are not statistically meaningless, even though they may well overestimate by 5 or 10 percent the numbers of people who were generally literate."³⁹ From this a rough idea might emerge as to how literate sailors were compared to the general populace.

Table 5
Maryport Coasting Crews: Percentage Able to Sign Their Name

Decade	Able to Sign	Unable to Sign
1860s	78%	22%
1870s	75%	25%
1880s	84%	16%

Source: MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements, various years.

Table 5 suggests a fairly well-educated workforce, assuming Alexander's criteria for literacy. For the first two decades the literacy rate among seamen can be compared to Carlo Cipolla's research on bridegrooms who were able to sign the marriage register. By this standard Maryport's coaster crews were comparable to the populace as a whole, although their performance dropped off slightly in the 1870s before rebounding in the next decade (see table 6). Considering the working-class background of most sailors, their literacy is actually quite impressive.⁴⁰

Table 6
Cipolla's Marriage Signatures Compared to Coaster Crew Literacy

Decade	Marriages	Crews
1860s	79%	78%
1870s	83%	75%

Notes: Literacy is defined as the ability to sign one's name. 1860s includes the years 1865-1869 only.

Source: MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements, various years; Carlo Cipolla, *Literacy and Development in the West* (London, 1969); and David Alexander, "Literacy Rates Among Canadian and Foreign Seamen, 1863-1899," in Rosemary Ommer and Gerald Panting (eds.), *Working Men Who Got Wet* (St. John's, 1980), 19.

Given the slight decline in the literacy of coaster men in the 1870s and the recovery in the 1880s, there is no definite trend about the direction of maritime literacy in the northwest of England. But it is interesting that compared with Cipolla's findings, they were lagging behind the national rate. It is unfortunate that Cipolla's data only run until 1879, but it is significant that the percentage of literate mariners in the 1880s was lower than that found in the marriage registers for 1875-1879.⁴¹

A fairly high literacy rate among mariners, especially those from Cumbria, is not surprising. The county and nearby Westmoreland were among the top in county lists of those

who could sign marriage registers from even before mid-century, a distinction they maintained. There were a large number of schools and teachers in both counties and as far as we can tell a high proportion of the young population had the opportunity to attend school.⁴²

Aside from this factor, Alexander suggested a number of factors peculiar to mariners that might help to explain these literacy rates. In Yarmouth, literacy was essential for anyone who wanted to leave the forecastle for the bridge. While this rule was not quite as hard and fast in the coasting trade, the officers in Maryport were generally literate, as we shall see. In addition, Alexander suggested that sailors were not the irresponsible lot that they have often been portrayed. For a young Yarmouth man, the possibility of not advancing at sea might have made a career on dry land the best option. In this case a better education provided a buffer against hardship. In Maryport, similar considerations likely existed. Alexander made the further case that literate men outside Yarmouth were likely to earn more than illiterates, even as deckhands. Wage data from Maryport are too fragmentary at this stage to support such a conclusion, but neither can it be ruled out. Of all Alexander's conclusions, perhaps the most applicable to Maryport may be that seamen did not comprise a less literate substratum of the working class. Maryport crews provide more proof that "Jack" by no means "came from the dregs of his society."⁴³

If crews tended to be functionally literate for the most part, were there any barriers to filling positions on a coaster if a seaman were not? For the most part the answer appears to be no. Throughout the crew agreements there are examples of illiterate mariners filling a variety of positions, including AB, seaman, boy, runner and cook. For such lower ranks this is not surprising.⁴⁴ But of greater interest are the officers, for whom the ability to write may have been a virtual requirement. This contention is largely borne out by data in the crew agreements. The vast majority of mates could at least sign their names. Nonetheless, there were also a few illiterate mates.⁴⁵ For at least some first officers on Maryport coasters, practical seamanship and experience must have acted as their primary credentials.⁴⁶

The masters were a different story. Among seafarers the rank of captain marked one as a member of an elite, a status that befitted a person who controlled the destiny of his vessel and was responsible for the safety of his crew. Even in the "lowly" coasting trades, this distinction existed to some degree. Ashore, a master mariner's prestige carried over throughout the circles in which he moved. For such men literacy must have gone hand in hand with their standing at sea and in their community. Of the more than one hundred voyages sampled, none was commanded by an illiterate.⁴⁷ The reasons for this were as much practical as social. In testimony before the Commission on Unseaworthy Ships in 1873, concerning the certification of officers, Thomas Gray noted some of the duties required of a master: "the examination of officers for the mercantile marine does not only include seamanship [but also]...various questions the master has to consider when away from the owner; handwriting, spelling, [and] certain parts of the law."⁴⁸ While coastal masters were not held to the same high standards, given the tasks they had to perform it is unlikely that there were many coastal masters who did not possess at least basic literacy skills.

Aside from the characteristics discussed above, a final insight into Maryport's coaster men might be gained from the wages they were paid. This is perhaps the most troublesome evidence in the agreements because of the difficulty of interpretation. Wages on coasting voyages were normally dispensed in one of four ways: by the run, voyage, week or month. Unfortunately, many coastal crew agreements gave no direct indication as to how

the crew were paid. Masters were expected to select the pay period from several choices on the agreements and to cross out all but the one that applied. But this rule was not strictly obeyed and on most agreements it was not done.⁴⁹

Moreover, the first two types of pay period are further complicated in that their duration is not defined because a "run" or "voyage" could be of variable length. A "run" meant a single trip between two points, say between Maryport and Whitehaven. When a "by run" designation appeared, it appears to have been an expedient way to hire men for a short trip. This was most likely the case when crew could not easily be found on short notice. In some cases, pay for a run was quite high, even though the recipient was only engaged for a short time. Therefore, "by the run" hiring seems generally to have been an emergency measure. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that the designation did not even appear on the crew agreements but instead was pencilled in next to the wages.⁵⁰

The "per voyage" designation was the most common on Maryport's coasters, but it is still problematic to interpret. As with "by the run," the duration is not stated, although a rough estimate can be inferred. When compared to monthly wages for deep-sea mariners, as compiled by Lewis Fischer, the "per voyage" pay for Maryport coaster men was higher. From the mid-1860s to about 1880, monthly pay for blue-water tars averaged £3.18. Wages peaked in 1873-1874, but never went higher than £3.60 per month. Given the longer voyage duration and higher risks, the foreign trades would likely command greater pay than coasting in most instances. Yet "per voyage" rates on Maryport's coasters were noticeably higher than Fischer's rates for their fellows. Thus, Maryport coastal crews were probably receiving pay less often than once every four weeks. The trick is being exact about how long this was.⁵¹

An examination of many crew agreements showed that an average Maryport coastal voyage in this period required between five and seven weeks. But we know that passage and turnaround times for sailing vessels, even on the same run, were notoriously irregular. For this reason, a sailor making the trip from Wigtown to Dublin might be looking at a delay of more than a week, depending on weather conditions. Likewise, time spent in port could vary from a few days to several weeks.⁵² Adding to the confusion is evidence that "per voyage" pay to one port may not have been the same as to another, even if this differential was almost never noted. Take as an example the crew of the brigantine *Fairhaven*, under master Heskett Hood, who were employed on a run between Maryport and Belfast, Dublin and Londonderry, most likely carrying coals west. Although Hood gave little insight into wage periods on most voyages, two contained a curious detail: wage rates "per voyage" by individual port (see table 7).⁵³

Table 7
Fairhaven: Per Voyage Rates by Port, July 1883-June 1884

Port	Mates	ABs
Belfast	£4 14 0	£4 4 0
Londonderry	£5 14 0	£5 4 0
Dublin	£5 4 0	£4 14 0

Source: MUN, MHA, *Fairhaven*, Crew Agreements, 1883-1884.

Admittedly, this may be a unique case, as no other such pay scales have been located in the agreements. Nonetheless, if there were differing pay rates for ports, perhaps dependent on factors such as sailing times, use of the common "per voyage" designation becomes even

more convoluted. For this reason, the best choice to examine wages would be either by the week or by the month.⁵⁴

The first is of little value because very few voyages using such a pay scale have been located. It is therefore to the monthly pay dispersals that we must turn. Unfortunately, the only examples of monthly wage rates in the Maryport agreements come from the 1870s and 1880s, and even here not all the years are represented. Given this fact, the average monthly wages calculated provide only a rough estimate of coaster pay levels. Further, only for the positions of mate and AB were there enough cases to make reasonable calculations.⁵⁵ Wages for masters were almost never noted and in most of the few cases where they were, the dispersals were "per voyage." Just for comparison, however, *Farmer's* articles for 1878 show that ABs were paid £5 4 0 per voyage, while mates received £5 14 0 and the master got £7 5 0. It is reasonable to assume that a similar gap in wages was present for masters who were paid by the month.⁵⁶

Table 8
Average Monthly Pay Rates for Maryport Coaster Crews

Decade	Mates	ABs
1870s	£4 19 13	£4 5 6
1880s	£3 10 0	£3 3 15

Source: MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements, various years.

A number of things can be learned from the figures in table 8, notwithstanding their crudeness. As might be expected, mates were paid better on average than ABs, although this was not an absolute. During the 1870s there were fairly large wage fluctuations. The lowest pay for a mate was £4 10 0, compared to a low of £2 0 0 for an AB, but the top of the scale is a different matter: the highest recorded monthly pay for a mate was £5 14 6 compared to £6 5 0 for an AB. Since the number of agreements in this sample is limited, not too much should be read into this, and it is virtually certain that the number of cases in which ABs were paid more than mates was extremely small.⁵⁷

The most interesting feature of the wage data concerns the large drop in average monthly pay from the 1870s to 1880s. As Fischer noted, most maritime wages seem to have peaked in the early to mid-1870s. This is somewhat different than the Maryport case, where wages peaked toward the end of the decade. This finding was not unexpected since many deep-sea trends developed later in the coastal sector. But the timing of the wage peak may help to explain why after the 1870s there was a noticeable decline in the number of Maryport residents on the town's coasters. Perhaps the level of remuneration was not so attractive compared to landward employment.⁵⁸ But since at this point I have no comparable time series for employment on land, this should be treated as no more than conjecture.

Wage rates fluctuated from voyage to voyage, perhaps dependent on the availability of cargoes, their price and the state of the relevant labour pool. Wage differences by port were not a factor in change over time. Again using *Farmer* as an example, the January to July agreement for 1868 recorded all men, except two, as signing on in Dublin. For the second half of the year the entire crew signed the articles at Maryport, receiving the same rates as those who enlisted in Dublin. The situation was similar in 1878. Mariners in the first half of the year joined at Whitehaven, Dublin and Maryport, while on the next set of articles all joined at Maryport. Again, wages were the same for comparable jobs. This suggests some

striking differences with Fischer's findings for deep-sea mariners. In particular, he found a consistent wage premium for crew members who signed on in Irish ports, but this was not in evidence in the Maryport agreements.⁵⁹

What, in short, does all this documentation tell us about the "average" Maryport coaster man? In the first instance, it tells us that Maryport's coaster crews generally comprised a regional or even a local workforce. They were drawn primarily from the port itself, other regions of Cumbria and major coastal trade partners. After the 1870s increasing numbers of mariners came from outside this area, a trend possibly occasioned by wage levels and changes in the coal trade. As noted above, wages which stood at over £4 for both mates and ABs in the 1870s dropped by about a pound per month in the next decade. These mariners also appear to have been literate on a scale comparable to the nation as a whole. As a group, the officers were almost universally literate. This general literacy is not surprising in the context of Cumbria and Westmorland, which ranked near the top of county lists in education. It does not appear that the coaster men were training for careers in the deep-sea sector. While young men were certainly present, there was a high proportion over the age of thirty-five and it was not uncommon to find coaster men active well into their fifties. This was also true of masters: Captain Tweedie of the schooner *Polly* was still sailing well into his eighties and died in his cabin of old age.⁶⁰ The records indicate that the typical sailor serving on a Maryport coaster was an experienced mariner who chose to make coasting a long-term career. It seems that family considerations played a role in this decision, but more work needs to be done to test this hypothesis.

Still, whatever can be said about Maryport coasting has to be placed in context. But until we have more studies of the people who provided the labour on these vessels, this task will be difficult. This study should therefore be viewed as a stepping stone rather than a finished piece of work. In short, it is but one step in shedding light on a somewhat neglected group within Britain's seafaring community.

NOTES

* David J. Clarke is a PhD student in maritime history at Memorial University of Newfoundland and a former winner of the CNRS Young Scholars Award. He wishes to acknowledge the assistance of the Cumbria Record Office in providing microfilm documents unavailable in Newfoundland. As well, he would like to thank the Maritime History Archive (MHA) at Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN) for obtaining them.

1. MUN, MHA, Board of Trade 99, Crew Agreements, various years. These types of examples can be found in a myriad of nineteenth-century agreements.

2. See John Armstrong, "Introduction," in Armstrong (ed.), *Coastal and Short Sea Shipping* (Aldershot, 1996), xii.

3. One of the best treatments of the scholarly neglect of coasting is found in *ibid.*, ix-xxiv. Both

Knut Weibust, *Deep-Sea Sailors: A Study in Maritime Ethnology* (Stockholm, 1969); and Judith Fingard, *Jack in Port: Sailortowns of Eastern Canada* (Toronto, 1982), are concerned primarily with deep-sea sailors. Even critical first-hand accounts of life on the high seas, such as Richard Henry Dana, *Two Years Before the Mast* (Boston, 1916), do little to dispel its allure.

4. See John Armstrong, "An Annotated Bibliography of the British Coastal Trade," *International Journal of Maritime History*, VII, No. 1 (June 1995), 117-192.

5. Lewis R. Fischer and Eric W. Sager, "An Approach to the Quantitative Analysis of British Shipping Records," *Business History*, XXII, No. 3 (July 1980), 137-138. On coasting voyages it was generally the master who recorded arrivals and departures. Unfortunately, these accounts often lack precise details, particularly dates.

6. Coasting agreements give no information about marital status or family size. Certain of the crew, especially apprentices, were almost surely unmarried. But the majority were likely married and family men, as the social mores of the period would have dictated. Family considerations and their role on coasting careers can only be speculative at this point. Other circumstances may have carried even more weight. For example, availability of work may have limited one's options. Men who preferred to work ashore might have been forced into some form of work at sea, with coasting the lesser of two evils.
7. See Margaret S. Creighton, "Women and Men in American Whaling," *International Journal of Maritime History*, IV, No. 1 (June 1992), 195-218. This article deals with the relationship between men and women during long periods of separation on whaling voyages. Although mainly concerned with how men at sea dealt with the absence of a spouse, Creighton also devotes some space to how wives coped. The idea of loved ones being present in spirit runs through the essay. To an extent coaster families must have felt such emotions, albeit likely less intensely.
8. Museums and markers attesting to this history can be found today throughout the county, but especially in the city of Carlisle.
9. For additional information, see David J. Clarke, "Maryport: A Late Coastal Switch to Steam Propulsion, 1865-1910," in David J. Starkey (ed.), *Steam at Sea* (Hull, forthcoming); and J.D. Marshall and John Walton, *The Lake Counties From 1830 to the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Manchester, 1981).
10. Herbert and Mary Jackson, *Holme Shipping Line* (Workington, 1991), 7-12; L.A. Williams, *Road Transport in Cumbria in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1975), 21; and B.R. Mitchell, *Economic Development of the British Coal Industry 1800-1914* (Cambridge, 1984), 17 and 31.
11. Williams, *Road Transport in Cumbria*, 92.
12. Stephen White, *Old Ordnance Survey Maps: Maryport 1899* (Gateshead, n.d.); and Jackson and Jackson, *Holme Shipping Line*, 11.
13. Gordon Jackson, *The History and Archaeology of Ports* (London, 1983), 137; and White, *Old Ordnance Survey Maps*.
14. Indeed, understanding Irish Sea trade may be especially important, as this was one of the pioneer areas in which steam propulsion was tested. See Philip Bagwell, "The Post Office Steam Packets and the Development of Shipping on the Irish Sea," *Maritime History*, I (1971), 4-28. This transition to new technology was largely dependent on the individual trade. Maryport was an example of a slower switch to steam. See Clarke, "Maryport."
15. For more insight into this facet of Maryport's coasting, see Clarke, "Maryport," which shows how the port lagged behind much of the rest of the nation in the switch to steam in the coastal trades.
16. Great Britain, Public Record Office (PRO), BT 108 series, various years. There were a number of reasons why Canadian-built tonnage was so attractive to Maryport buyers. First, the vessels were relatively inexpensive. Second, by the 1850s improved building techniques had eased the longevity problems associated with these craft; in this decade the average life of Canadian softwood vessels was just over twelve years. All in all, they represented a good return on capital. See Eric W. Sager with Gerald E. Panting, *Maritime Capital: The Shipping Industry in Atlantic Canada, 1820-1914* (Montréal, 1990), 62-68. As a further cost-saving measure, Maryport investors tended to purchase such tonnage second-hand.
17. PRO, BT 108, various years. The use of small sailing vessels in small ports had a number of advantages for the shipment of low-value bulk goods. For a discussion of this, see John Armstrong, "Management Response in British Coastal Shipping to Railway Competition," *The Northern Mariner/Le Marin du Nord*, VII, No. I (January 1997), 17-28.
18. PRO, BT 108, various years. The emergence of steam in Maryport was largely a result of the entrepreneurship of the Hine brothers, Wilfred and Alfred. The pair invested heavily in steam, and Wilfred was the most important shipowner in the community. Without their willingness to innovate, it is doubtful that Maryport would have had much of a presence in steam, even by the turn of the century. This is discussed at length in Clarke, "Maryport." For this reason, combined with sparse numbers of coastal steam voyages located in the agreements, the discussion of crew characteristics to follow is based on Maryport's sailing mariners.
19. MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements, various years. It was quite common for mariners below the

ranks of master and mate to stay for only part of a six-month voyage. The articles indicate that certain men re-signed on one vessel repeatedly, while the officers, especially the master, tended to remain for more extended periods.

20. Great Britain, Parliament, *Parliamentary Papers (BPP)*, 1876, LXXII, 289.

21. Jackson and Jackson, *Holme Shipping Line*, 65.

22. Adrian Jarvis, *The Liverpool Central Docks, 1799-1905: An Illustrated History* (Phoenix Mill, 1991), 125.

23. In any event, this information is a bit of a red herring in this case. Garston's four coal drops, courtesy of the country's largest railway company, were only in the process of being built by 1876. See Jarvis, *Liverpool Central Docks*, 106.

24. *Ibid.*, 100-116.

25. MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements, various years.

26. *Ibid.*, *Farmer*, 1867. Although ships were repaired at Maryport, the port had no dry dock. It did, however, possess two patent slips. See Michael K. Stammers, "The High Character Obtained by Cumberland Ships: A Shipbuilding District in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *International Journal of Maritime History*, X, No. 1 (June 1998), 121-150.

27. Generally, larger numbers signing articles represented a higher turnover in the workforce. About five to six men seems to have been the norm at any one time, but this was of course also a function of vessel size and, to a lesser extent, rig.

28. In some cases the table of provisions might simply note "Sufficient without waste." Most of *Farmer's* agreements, especially in the earlier years, were specific about foodstuffs. A weekly table of provisions might provide one pound of bread per day; one-half pound of beef on alternating days; one-quarter pound of pork every second day; a pound of flour on Thursday and Sunday; one-eighth ounce of tea per day; one-half ounce of coffee daily; as well as two ounces of sugar and three quarts of water every day. See MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements, *Farmer*, various years. The job of cook has come under scrutiny in recent years. There is currently a debate on the importance of the job in various national merchant marines.

29. MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements, various years. In the records examined thus far no such dismissals were found.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*; and Mitchell, *Economic Development*, 31.

32. MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements, various years. This excludes 1870 and 1875, for which no relevant figures could be extracted.

33. David Alexander, "Literacy Rates Among Canadian and Foreign Seamen, 1863-1899," in Rosemary Ommer and Gerald Panting (eds.), *Working Men Who Got Wet* (St. John's, 1980), 6.

34. *Ibid.*, 6-8.

35. MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements, various years; and Alexander, "Literacy Rates," 31.

36. Armstrong (ed.), *Coastal and Short Sea Shipping*, xiii.

37. MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements, various Years. Again, no age data were available for the years 1870 and 1875.

38. Alexander, "Literacy Rates," 6.

39. Marshall and Walton, *Lake Counties*, 138.

40. MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements, various years; and Alexander, "Literacy Rates," 19. It must be remembered that Carlo Cipolla's study took in the range of the UK's populace, while the Maryport data concern a small section of the working class in a limited geographic area. For this reason, no broad conclusions should be drawn.

41. Alexander, "Literacy Rates;" and MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements, various years. The difference in literacy rates may relate to the mariners' proletarian background, but this is purely speculative. The agreements also provide a sense of relative education levels of Irish versus British mariners. Although performing more poorly than their counterparts in the 1870s, by the 1880s five percent more Irish sailors could sign their names than could others. These figures, however, represent only Maryport's major trading partners, Belfast, Dublin and Londonderry. As large centres, they may not reflect trends in the country as a whole.

42. Marshall and Walton, *Lake Counties*, 138-139.
43. Alexander, "Literacy Rates," 30-32.
44. MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements, various years.
45. Two mates on another Maryport coaster, *Creole*, were forced to make their mark in lieu of signing their names.
46. MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements, various years.
47. *Ibid.*
48. Irish University Press Series of British Parliamentary Papers, "Preliminary Report From the Commission on Unseaworthy Ships with Minutes and Digest of Evidence and Appendix, 1873," Shipping Safety 6.
49. MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements, various years.
50. *Ibid.*
51. *Ibid.*; and Lewis R. Fischer, "International Maritime Labour, 1863-1900: World Wages and Trends," *The Great Circle*, IX (1988), 1-21. Fischer argues that Britain's wage rates for seamen remained low at this time by international standards despite the nation's maritime dominance.
52. MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements, various years.
53. MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements, *Fairhaven*, 1883-1884.
54. MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements, various years.
55. The monthly pay for these two positions is somewhat higher than Fischer's figures for deep-sea mariners in the 1870s. It must be remembered that most other jobs on the coasters, such as ordinary seaman, runner, cook and boy, were paid much less and that their inclusion would bring average wages down considerably.
56. MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements, *Farmer*, 1878.
57. MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements, various years. The highest rates were generally given to ABs of long service, or on vessels where no mate was present. In the latter case an experienced seaman might well perform the duties of mate and hence would be paid appropriately.
58. Another factor in this decline may tie in with Cumbria's coal trade. It was in the 1880s that the county's coal trade to Ireland began to decline. Perhaps seeing the writing on the wall, local workers may have begun to trickle away to other jobs. In fact, the fall in wages may itself have some relation to the coal trade's downturn. See Mitchell, *Economic Development*, 31; and MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements, various years.
59. MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements, various years; and Fischer, "International Maritime Labour," 8-9.
60. Annie Robinson, *Maritime Maryport* (Whitehaven, 1978), 33-34; and MUN, MHA, Crew Agreements, various years.