



Press Release

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Historic Naval Record reveals sailors' link with ink

The traditional link between sailors and tattoos has been laid bare by **The National Archives** DocumentsOnline website, with the records of more than 500,000 Royal Naval Seamen who served between 1853 and 1923 made available online at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline

The records, held at The National Archives in Kew, provide a wealth of information for family and naval historians. Alongside a seaman's name, age, place of birth, summary of their service and a list of ships on which they served, you can read a description of your ancestor's appearance. This includes their height, hair and eye colour, as well as any scars or tattoos.

'There is nothing akin to this on the web for people wanting to find out about Naval ancestors. These men served in the Crimean, Boer and First World Wars,' said The National Archives naval specialist **Bruno Pappalardo**.

He said the period covered by the **Seamen's Records (1853-1923)** saw the most significant technological changes in naval history, yet it was an age when tattoos were still the best means of identifying personnel.

'The description of tattoos and scars in the records were used in identifying and catching those sailors that deserted the navy,' Mr Pappalardo said, 'because photography was not yet readily used for identification.'

'This was a period of time in which the Royal Navy moved from the age of wood and wind, through iron and steam, to the steel and engine-powered era of today.'

These Seamen's Records show the diversity already present in the Royal Navy between the late 1800s and early 1900s. For instance you can find more than 1,700 sailors from India, more than 1,000 from the West Indies and Jamaica, as well as hundreds from the Americas, African countries, New Zealand and Australia.

Among those in the Seamen's Records are:

The man they could not hang

John 'Babbacombe' Lee - The man they could not hang – is one of the hundreds of thousands of sailors listed in the records.

The notorious John Henry George Lee served aboard the vessel 'Implacable' - originally a French warship captured by the British at Trafalgar in 1805.

Lee was sentenced to execution at Exeter on 23 February 1885 for allegedly murdering elderly spinster Emma Keyse on 15 November 1884.

He famously survived three execution attempts at the gallows, after which his sentence was changed to life imprisonment, and he became known as 'the man they could not hang'.

The Navy's youngest Victoria Cross winner

Also featured in the records is the Navy's youngest ever Victoria Cross winner, John Travers Cornwell. The 16-year-old was mortally wounded on 31 May 1916, at the Battle of Jutland, off Denmark while aboard the HMS Chester.

According to his service register, Boy First Class Cornwell also served aboard HMS Vivid during the First World War.

Notes:

Seamen's Records: More than 500,000 seamen can be searched by first/last name, place of birth, official number(s) and date of birth. You can download images of the register to find out their occupation and the ships on which they served. In the later records there is a description of their physical appearance, details of any wounds and character. Each image costs £3.50 to download. These Seamen's Records are held in the series ADM 188. If a man entered before 1873, he will have an additional service record in the series ADM 139, which is not online. Records of Naval Officers are not online.

Tattoos: Many of the designs are traditional naval tattoos, including roses, naval flags, daggers through hearts and swallows; while the words 'Mother', 'True Love' and 'Hands Across Sea' were prevalent; it's also revealed that the body art was predominately confined to sailors' forearms.

Also to be found in the records are references to tattoos of 'St George & Dragon', a thistle with 'Scotland Forever', and one particular recruit with a Japanese woman and bathing girls. The roll also noted sailors' scars and the condition of their skin (for example, fresh or sallow).

DocumentsOnline: Provides online access to The National Archives' collection of digitised public records, including academic, military and family history sources. We are committed to providing online access to the records, and DocumentsOnline forms a key part of this strategy.

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline

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