

# Findmypast.co.uk's merchant navy archives reveal photos of UK's forgotten 'fourth service'

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Findmypast.co.uk has announced one million 20th century Merchant Navy Seamen records are now online for the first time ever.

The launch saw records of crew members of UK merchant ships from 1918 to 1941 made available online, including rarely seen photos of the mariners. This is the first time that many relatives will be able to see what their seafaring ancestor looked like and also learn more about the people who made up Churchill's 'fourth service'.

However, when asked what the Merchant Navy was, 54% of the British population couldn't answer correctly, even though almost 90% have heard of them. This is a sad fact considering the Merchant Navy was integral to putting Britain on the trade and industry world map and were named by Churchill as Britain's 'fourth service'.

The navy records (<http://www.findmypast.co.uk/search/merchant-navy-seamen>) provide fascinating details about each individual mariner. The most complete records have extremely detailed descriptions, including hair and eye colour, height, and distinguishing marks such as tattoos.

The shocking gap in Britain's general knowledge is highest amongst the younger generation - just 26% of those aged under 35 know what the Merchant Navy is, compared to a wiser 64% of over 55s. Many will therefore be surprised to learn that the Merchant Navy consists of all seagoing UK vessels with commercial interests and their crews.

So it may be a shock to many that at various points in the last millennium, Britain had the largest merchant fleet in the world. The workforce on these vessels was a casual, 'jobbing workforce' so in any one year as many as 1.5 million people could be employed in the Merchant Navy, meaning many people are likely to find ancestors in these records.

Debra Chatfield, Marketing Manager at findmypast.co.uk, commented: "This is the first time the UK Merchant Navy Seamen records, with their fascinating images of the mariners, have been made available online. Many people aren't sure what the Merchant Navy is, even though a large proportion of the UK population will have Merchant Navy seamen in their ancestry. Hopefully these records will help fill the gaps and people will enjoy learning about what life was like for the brave, seafaring merchants who helped the island nation of Britain prosper."

The Merchant Navy Seamen records are the only set of their kind available online and have been published in association with The National Archives. The military records (<http://www.findmypast.co.uk/content/search-menu/armed-forces-and-conflict>) show that the seamen who made up the Merchant Navy not only came from the UK, but from every continent, with large numbers from across the English-speaking world (notably the Maritime provinces of Canada), from the West Indies and Sierra Leone, and from Scandinavia, Somaliland, China and Japan. There are even some seamen from landlocked Switzerland.

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About findmypast.co.uk:

Leading UK family history website findmypast.co.uk (formerly 1837online.com) was the first company to make the complete birth, marriage and death indexes for England & Wales available online in April 2003.

Following the transcription, scanning and indexing of over two million images, the company launched the first website to allow the public easy and fast access to the complete indexes, which until then had only been available on microfiche film in specialist archives and libraries. The launch was instrumental in creating the widespread and growing interest in genealogy seen in the UK today.

Findmypast.co.uk has subsequently digitised many more family history records and now offers access to over 750 million records dating as far back as 1200 and including details from the 1901 Census (<http://www.findmypast.co.uk/CensusPersonStartSearchServlet?censusYear=1901>). This allows family historians and novice genealogists to find out more about their ancestry (<http://www.findmypast.co.uk/>) among comprehensive collections of military records, census, migration, occupation directories, and current electoral roll data, as well as the original comprehensive birth, marriage and death records.

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