

Grange-over-Sands and the Plimsoll Line

Many readers will have heard of the Plimsoll Line, that mark on the side of a ship that must remain above the water line if the vessel is to go to sea safely. Far fewer, I suspect, know that the line is named after the Victorian campaigner Samuel Plimsoll; and that Plimsoll's major treatise *Our seamen: an Appeal* was written in 1872 at the end of a year's retreat to Grange-over-Sands. Few books, it has been claimed, have ever moved a generation of the British people so widely and deeply. So why did Plimsoll write it?

Prior to Plimsoll's campaign, merchant seamen on ocean-going vessels had no rights whatsoever. Unlike seamen in the Royal Navy, who had a modicum of protection, those in the merchant navy had none. And while there were many Victorian shipowners who operated safe ships, there were also many who did not.

A song 'A cheer for Plimsoll' showed the unsafe side *experienced* by many seamen:

*There was a time when greed and crime did cruelly prevail
and rotten ships were sent on trips to founder in the gale
When worthless cargoes well-insured would to the bottom go.
And sailors' lives were sacrificed that men might wealthy grow.*

Huge profits could be made from transporting goods and passengers around the Empire; if the ship foundered, equal profit could be gained from insurance claims. Since any evidence suggesting the ships were unseaworthy was at the bottom of the sea, courts were forced to take the word of the shipowners. And, since the crew went down with the boat, there were no wages to pay either. From the point of view of the shipowners, overloading made commercial sense.

In addition, as Nicolette Jones has pointed out in her fascinating book *The Plimsoll Sensation*, merchant sailors were generally regarded as 'idle, dissolute wastrels, who no sooner came ashore than they spent their pay in brothels and on drink'. The law required that these sailors could not refuse to go to sea if they felt the vessel unsafe – though many chose the squalor of the cells to the squalor *and danger* of vessels at sea. In 1866, several whole crews were jailed, one after the other, when they refused to set sail in an old ship named *Harkaway*. The sailors complained that even at anchor on a calm sea, the ship took in water to a depth of more than a metre each day.

To achieve his aim of greater safety at sea, Samuel Plimsoll knew that he had to have a corrective law passed by Parliament. To that end, he managed to have himself elected MP. Here he used every opportunity to harangue MPs whom he considered to be opponents of reform. At the same time, he needed to change the public perception of merchant seamen, to show that the seamen were genuinely hard-working men. And he had to provide evidence to prove that their complaints of lack of seaworthiness were valid.

In his year in Grange-over-Sands, Samuel managed to bring all these disparate statistics together into one immensely powerful volume. He used Board of Trade statistics to show that many ships went down close to the coast, often in 'very fine weather'. Between 1861 and 1870 5,286 ships had gone down – with the loss of 8105 lives. The statistics were overwhelming, and they had nearly included Samuel and his wife, whose ship was one of the few not to founder on a trip to Redcar. The

public were already aware of the Bridlington disaster that had been widely reported in the newspapers: overladen coal-carriers went down close to the shore in easy sight of the people of the town – who also had to watch their own lifeboat crew founder in a vain attempt to rescue stricken passengers on the ships.

It is one of the features of Plimsoll's campaign that both Samuel *and* his wife were equal partners in the campaign. Even though the national newspapers in male-dominated Victorian England gave all the praise to Plimsoll, without his wife Liza and her female supporters the campaign could not have succeeded. They worked tirelessly but in the background, ensuring that male supporters like Lord Shaftesbury had the ammunition to take the fight to the country. Significantly, Florence Nightingale donated £5 to campaign funds, thereby endorsing the positive image of merchant seamen, and reinforcing the *national* importance of the Plimsolls' campaign.

Financial support for the campaign came partly from individuals from every walk of society; and, crucially, from workers becoming increasingly unionised in the second half of the 19th century. The coal mined in Durham and Yorkshire was taken by ship to the London market, and the miners well knew the dangers their comrades faced on the sea. Each miner in the NE coalfields donated one shilling, and this enabled two substantial cheques (each of £1,000) to be sent from the Durham and from the Yorkshire miners to the Plimsolls.

Plimsoll's Grange-written treatise provided the essential focus for the whole campaign. It identified irrefutable evidence of the need for change, together with ammunition to counter the arguments of the rogue shipowners. And it presented both shipowners and crew with a simple, easy to administer solution that would enable all parties to establish instantly whether or not a ship was overloaded and therefore not seaworthy – the aptly named Plimsoll Line. Samuel Plimsoll and his wife had raised sea safety to the national conscience. Samuel could not have done this without retiring to Grange-over-Sands to collect his thoughts, to assemble his evidence, to write the book that moved a nation.

Grange-over-Sands can be justifiably proud of its (not yet) famous son!

Will Garnett