



Devon Family History Society
Joint Project Publication with
Devon Record Office



BRIXHAM TRAWLER APPRENTICE REGISTER

1891-1895

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The Board of Trade kept registers of apprentices to maritime occupations from 1824. These are now held at the National Archives. However, after the Merchant Shipping (Fishing Boats) Act of 1883, the Board of Trade superintendent in each port was required to keep registers of fishing apprentices. Only the registers for Brixham and Grimsby have survived.

The Brixham register dates from 1891 to 1912. It records the name of the apprentice and his master, the name and port of registry of the master's ship, the date of the indenture and the date it was registered, the apprentice's date of birth and the length of time for which he was bound. The place where the apprentice was to lodge is also noted because he was expected to live in his master's house when he was not at sea. There is also a description of the apprentice, his height, hair and eye colour and any distinguishing marks, such as tattoos. The name of his nearest relative, if any, and their address, are also entered in the register, together with the fact that they consented to the apprenticeship.

The apprentice and his master were expected to meet the superintendent every two years to make sure that both parties were fulfilling their part of the indenture. The master would say if the boy was well-behaved or not, and the boy had the opportunity to complain if he was badly treated. In practice, these meetings do not seem to have taken place very frequently, but when they did, brief notes on the comments made by master and apprentice were written in the registers. There are also notes on spending money given to the boy and payments made into the savings bank for him, more especially in the latter part of the register.

Finally, there is a small space at the bottom of the page to write in the date when the indentures were cancelled and the reason for doing so. Often it is just that the boy did not like the sea. Sometimes the master had to give up his boat, or he had died, so the apprentice had no employment, but the more common reason for the cancellation of the indentures is that the boy was drowned at sea.

Many of the Brixham apprentices were local boys, apprenticed with the consent of their fathers. Some were orphans or pauper children from Devon poor law unions and workhouses. A large number, however, came from outside Devon, from children's homes, training ships and industrial schools of various kinds. The institution which

provided many of the boys was the Training Ship 'Formidable' which was moored off Portishead near Bristol. Registers, from 1878, of the boys detained on the training ship are now held at Bristol Record Office, 38687/NS/A7.

The Devon Record Office has a collection of Crew Lists for boats registered in Devon ports, and it is possible to trace some of the voyages made by the apprentices through these. The collection is arranged in alphabetical order of vessel, and there is an index to Ships' Masters. The printed catalogue of crew lists can be consulted at the Record Office and is also available for purchase; an electronic version can be viewed on the Access to Archives web site.

For more information on the trawler fishing apprentices, see the article by Martin Wilcox of the Maritime Historical Studies Centre, University of Hull, published in the 'Genealogists' Magazine' 28:4, in December 2004. There is a copy of the article on the bookshelves in the Devon Record Office searchroom.

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