



MERCHANT NAVY WELFARE BOARD

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FULL HISTORY OF THE MERCHANT NAVY WELFARE BOARD

The Merchant Navy Welfare Board has a long pedigree which extends back through two organisations to 1927. The following is intended to give a brief account of the history since that time...

British Council for the Welfare of the Mercantile Marine

In 1927, the British Council for the Welfare of the Mercantile marine (BCWMM) was established to co-ordinate those charities specifically caring for merchant seafarers in the United Kingdom.

The objectives of the BCWMM were to:

Initiate and encourage schemes for the welfare of the merchant service.

Co-ordinate and develop local welfare efforts and further the provision of recreational and medical facilities (for British seafarers) in all parts of the World.

Consider schemes for securing the provision of funds for the welfare of seafarers.

The BCWMM was successful in forming the first Port Health Committees; predecessors of today's Port Welfare Committees. Equally importantly, the BCWMM attended and supported the 1938 [International Labour Organisation](#) (ILO) Conference which set down 'Recommendations on Seaman's Welfare in Ports'. As a direct consequence of this, the 'Seaman's Welfare Board' (SWB) was established in 1940 to succeed the BCWMM.

The Seaman's Welfare Board

Active throughout the War years, the Seaman's Welfare Board (SWB) was administered by the Government and chaired by the Joint Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Labour and National Service.

The prime function of the SWB was to advise the Ministry on issues concerning the welfare of seafarers in British ports as well as British crews in overseas ports. It also owned and managed a large number of hostels and clubs within the UK which provided temporary homes for seafarers. Port Welfare Committees were formed to provide local expertise in support of the clubs and hostels.

Seamen's Welfare in Ports

In 1943 the Ministry of Labour & National Service and the Minister of War Transport set up a committee to examine the issues of Seamen's Welfare in ports. This was chaired by Mr. H. Graham White MP with membership from the ship owners, trade unions, Shipping Federation and King George's Fund for Sailors. It consulted all parts of the merchant shipping and fishing industries as well as many of the nautical charities. The findings were published in 1945.

The completion of the report, coinciding with the end of hostilities, set the direction for the future. The principal recommendation was the establishment of a board whose aims and objectives were to include the:

Promotion of co-operation between all persons, associations, societies, or other bodies whose objects are, or include, the provision for seafarers of residential, or non-residential, clubs or other centres of recreation; the provision for seafarers, or their widows, or dependants of educational or religious facilities; the provision for seafarers (including the aged or disabled), or their widows, or dependants of financial or other assistance; the general welfare of seafarers and their dependants.

Drawing up of minimum standards of shore accommodation for seafarers; advice on the provision of new facilities, or the adequacy or otherwise of existing facilities; generally to act as an Advisory Body in connection there with.

Funding

The report also recommended that the charity should have statute powers and government funding. As a result, the initial funds came from subscriptions collected among the many British ship owners employing non-domiciled seamen in lieu of National Insurance Contributions. The timing of the Board's inception, in fact, coincided with the post war National Insurance Act. Another source of funding came from fines imposed on seafarers for disciplinary offences. This source of income was equally divided between the Board and the Royal Seamen's Pension Fund (the latter providing regular grants to British ratings, in financial need, in lieu of a pension). The Board's share covered all its administration costs. The Merchant Navy Welfare Board ultimately came into existence, once the Act was in place, on 31 March 1948. Members of the Council of Management were drawn from the ship owners, seafarers' trade unions, nautical charities and Government.

Merchant Navy Welfare Board

The Port Welfare Committees were transferred to the Board's administration and charities caring for merchant seafarers and fishermen were encouraged to become Constituent Members. Most subsequently did so. An active interest in the welfare of seafarers aboard British ships abroad was also taken. At one point, MNWB had a full time representative based in New York! All the assets of the Seamen's Welfare Board - the hostels and clubs - were also transferred. The Board immediately set about examining its properties. A reduction in the

need for such accommodation, following the War, meant that some were now surplus to requirements whilst many of the others required modernisation. Surplus premises were disposed of and a programme of refurbishment or replacement was set up to upgrade hostels to hotels.

Ultimately, the Board had hotels in many of the major ports, including London, Liverpool, Glasgow, Middlesbrough, South Shields, Cardiff, Southampton and Swansea. It also had clubs in Avonmouth, Milford Haven and the Isle of Grain. This was at a time when Britain had a large merchant fleet regularly returning to their home ports. The hotels provided accommodation, at a very modest tariff, where the seafarers and their families could stay. Some of the guests were nautical students attending courses at the local colleges. The Clubs, too, had a key role in providing recreational facilities for the crews of the ships, some of which, even in those days, were on comparatively fast turn rounds. This included film shows, dancing, snooker and, inevitably, a well-stocked bar and shop.

Changing Times

Both the rapid changes in the British Merchant Navy from the 1970s onwards, and in the general nature of international shipping, had a catastrophic impact on the hotels. Crew changes and refits increasingly took place abroad. Conventional cargo ships and tramps were replaced by container vessels and bulk carriers, often reducing turn round times from days to hours, all ships, especially tankers grew in size, almost out of recognition, whilst the sizes of crews on all but passenger's ships diminished dramatically. At the same time many British seafarers became redundant, to be replaced by lower cost foreign labour.

As the hotels became less utilised, it became necessary to financially support them from the Board's funds. Over a comparatively short period all but the London hotel were sold. The clubs at Avonmouth and Milford Haven were later transferred to the 'missions' whilst that on the Isle of Grain was closed.

The other factor that changed the fortunes of the Board was the withdrawal of Government support, both in providing funding and as members of the Council. The funding was withdrawn in the mid 1970's, which was a severe blow. This decision was due in part, at least, to the reducing number of UK seafarers. Nonetheless, it went against the spirit of the ILO conventions and recommendations. It was therefore fortuitous that the sale of the hotels happened in tandem, as this provided capital that was invested to provide the main income source for the Board's continuing work.

Merchant Navy Hotel, London

Though the Merchant Navy Hotel in Lancaster Gate, London had been retained, by 2001 it too was giving rise to concern despite the constant efforts made to keep facilities up to date. National and international events caused a dramatic downturn in visitors to the UK and, in particular, the London. Sadly the Hotel was not immune to the effects of this and the Board

agreed, with great sadness, that it should be sold for redevelopment. The doors finally closed to guests on 22nd December 2002 and the Board relocated to Southampton a month later.

On a very positive note, the sale of the Hotel enabled the Board to greatly increase its investment holdings and consequently its annual income. This has enabled it to provide substantially more support to its Constituent member charities at a time when resources are under considerable pressure. Surplus income is now utilised towards assisting funding capital projects (refurbishment or replacement of facilities) evaluation studies, training needs and provision of caseworkers.

Local Partnerships and Networking

The eyes and ears of the MNWB are its sixteen Port Welfare Committees (PWCs). These are situated throughout the United Kingdom, based in and around the major ports and one in Gibraltar.

Membership consists of ship owners' representatives, often these days the shipping agents, the seafarers' trade unions and local representatives of the voluntary societies. In addition, members come from the port authorities, port health, police, pilots, local authorities and other organisations concerned with the welfare of seafarers.

Matters discussed can be concerns of a local nature, for example restricted access to a quay, or wider issues that affect seafarers nationally and even internationally, such as the provision better health advice to visiting seafarers. Although the main purpose of each PWC is to discuss matters of common interest, there are clearly enormous strengths to be gained from the opportunity for local organisations to network.

Services

The Board provides a number of services to its Constituents, including training packages; evaluation or feasibility studies; accessing advice; providing trained caseworkers for home visits and lobbying Government and other organisations.

Grants

Members of the PWCs are asked to consider local capital applications to see if any similar projects are planned, or whether other organisations have any suggestions. The Board itself provides a number of grants but views of the PWCs are taken into account by all the funding charities. A senior member of the Board's staff acts as secretary and attends all the PWC meetings, reporting directly to the Chief Executive on all significant matters.

Working Groups

Since 1997 the Board has chaired Working Groups with membership drawn from among its Constituents. These groups provide a partnership forum to review the needs of seafarers and promote best practice. They cover grants to other organisations, financial support to seafarers

and their dependents, seafarers' retirement homes and port based welfare facilities and services. Each Group publishes and updates reports which include recommendations.

Looking Ahead

Each year the Board reviews and agrees its overall Objectives and a Strategic Plan. This Plan is then circulated to the Constituent members and the Port Welfare Committees for comment. The Board takes a proactive role within the MN Charity network. Relevant issues are examined regularly by Working Groups. These are chaired by the Board, with membership taken from its Constituents and outside expertise is utilised when appropriate. These Groups help to ensure that the nautical charities continue to evolve with the industry and social changes and provide those in need with the highest standards of care in the most effective way. Useful information is disseminated both to its members and via the PWCs. The Board has long been an active member of the [International Committee on Seafarers Welfare](#). This organisation promotes the port based welfare recommendations published by the ILO, many of which are based on the UK model!

The Merchant Navy Welfare Board has, for almost 60 years, been a forum where those whose interest is the welfare of seafarers can work in harmony. These efforts will continue to evolve to meet the many changes taking place affecting both the serving and retired seafarers. The Council of Management and staff accept the challenges and look forward to their continuing contribution towards the welfare of seafarers.