

Hidden Sailors

Spaces & Places
A Photographic Journey



Crew on the merchant ship SS Chyebassa of the British India Line, 1917. © IWM Q9460.7t

Hidden Sailors, Spaces and Places



Asian seamen – painting a Union flag on the deck of the P&O liner 'Chitral'
© National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London

This visual resource is suitable for anyone over 12 years old, interested in photography, archival images, and local history. This is intended as an educational resource funded by the Greater London Authority. This booklet forms part of the Bridging History Project, whose aims are to connect people, learn about the past, and create positive change for the future. Images.

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Written & Created by
Trisha McCauley,

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The inspiration behind Hidden Sailors Spaces and Places.

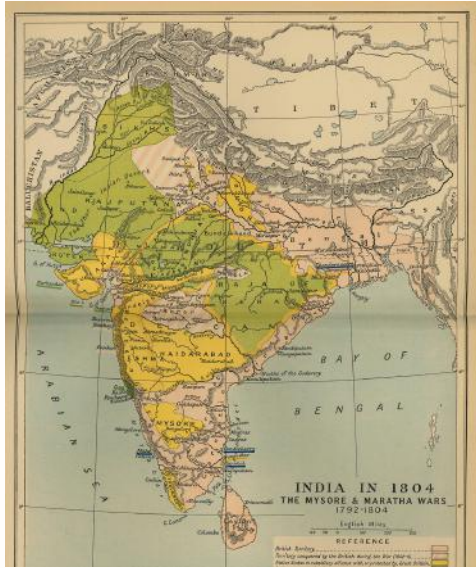


While researching a photography project, I came across some archival material about a diverse community of sailors and soldiers who lived in Canning Town, East London, during the late 19th & early 20th Centuries. This neighbourhood was locally known as 'Draughtboard Alley' because of the black and white people who lived there. I was surprised to learn about this community because I had previously worked and lived in the area for years and had no idea they existed. There was a growing presence of South Asian Sailors within this community referred to as 'Laskars.' I began to wonder about them. Where did they come from? What were their lives like aboard the ships? What jobs did they do? Did they regret migrating to the UK? I was keen to learn more about them and share their story".

Trisha McCauley

Curator at The Humble Gallery

South Asian Sailors – A brief history



Hidden Sailors, Spaces & Places provides a snapshot of the lives of South Asian Seafarers who were renowned for their ship handling skills and had been serving on European ships since the 15th Century. The sailors played a valuable role in British maritime trade and were recruited by the Royal Navy during World War I and World War II.

The word 'Laskar' is derived from the Persian word 'Lashkar,' meaning an army, a camp, or a band of followers. However, this term was eventually used as a generic term to describe all Asian and Middle Eastern sailors from across the globe.

A growing number of Indian Seafarers hailed from East Bengal, present-day Bangladesh, were employed on British ships to replace British sailors who abandoned their posts because of the appalling working conditions. The sailors were employed as cooks, machine cleaners, coal carriers, and in the engine room, they stoked coal in up to 40 degrees heat. Sadly, the sailors were badly treated, poorly paid, and like the British men, many jumped ship. In contrast, their employers abandoned others without pay and found themselves unable to return home and left to fend for themselves. Inappropriately dressed for the British winters and unable to find adequate shelter or food, some men perished in the streets. Inappropriately dressed for the British winters and unable to find adequate shelter or food, some men perished in the streets.

'Many lascars died in the streets of the East End, especially in winter. It was estimated that before 1810, 130 lascars died in Britain each year (making 2,600 in 20 years). During the severe winter of 1813, nine deaths occurred on one single day.'

Visram, 1986, p.40



"SHIPPING," 12.9.1882.
Down in the East End - Lascars huddling in their dips in the rain.

The Lascar Sailorman

An Eastern Sidelight on our Western Shipping Strikes.

Down in the East End of London they are used to strange sights: the policeman, shivering from the wind and rain against the wall, gazed steadily at the three lascar, slumped, like spectral visitants of the "Indians" of peaceful days standing upright on their heels, that pulled silently along the wet street. As they approached, the halting upper pad became a rain-soaked blanket, gathered in folds over head and shoulders, overhanging, hood-like, throwing the face into deep shadow save when now and then the whites of eyes flashed in some erratic beam of reflected light. The thin legs of each figure were encased in clinging dingy trousers that sagged and swung round the ankles. The walk was peculiar, with knees always slightly bent and flung outwards, the feet moving not to leave the ground, but to glide over it fat-footed. The policeman followed them with his eyes as they passed, approvingly, and slowly to give trouble. Lascars, the women of all rounds plying to far Eastern ports, returning to the docks and their ship.

On the bleak dock side and the wind-swept upper docks of stevedores, through the latter side of a London winter, you will see them yearning, hunched up in their overcoat and gloves, going about their business in nothing more than thin cotton clothes, with possibly extra bits of rag that look like (and are) cheap printed muslin curtains wound round their chest and shoulders. The expression of their grimy, rather sunken brown eyes is unloading. "Poor beggars, dragged from their hot climates into this, and nothing warm to wear." You shiver sympathetically in your warm wrappings. The pity is on the other side; they will tell you that they have some enough to put the warmth into the proper place, inside—not outside where the warmth will permeate their meagre bodies.

Two sorts of lascars—the first the sailorman, stevedore, engine-room man, and such; the second the catch-all "other"—the cook's, and steward's assistants. But these latter do not acknowledge "lascar"; they will tell you they are Portuguese—Lascars from that old colony of Portugal in India—Gos. They are Homerus Corbello, and down in their crowded quarters you will see a thin shrike or shrike, with a little Virgin and Child, standing amongst decorative flower and other symbolical enigmatic materiality

worked in broad-bladed layers of jute, with needles, thrust into the necks of bottles, curling over in the softening lead; and "the point comes along and collects their impromptu the day before the ship sails."

Then comes the "walkers," are drawn always from a different district—ant, mainly, from around Calcutta, another Bombay. They start on—"wallyah" and work their way in stages of "wallyah" —the "darker-wallyah"—the sailorman, being the highest stage and being separate to the lower grades. The quarters of all are divided into narrow lanes by

that contains each man's weekly goods, though when he first joins usually a handkerchief holds the lot. In this crowded and crowded space the lascar lives and eats and sleeps, and, if the fancy takes him so to do, then sits. Then he sees the last of it will be, by the way, a few holes held by all dockworkers, and they will give you chapter and verse to prove it. His cooking is done, by himself, in separate galleys, and if you enter one of these you will quickly find out how the lascar keeps himself warm; should you have a sensitive throat the "spices of the East" will almost choke you. The fat top of the stove is covered with inconspicuous copper pots, of all sizes, making boiling rice and curries, with large fat cakes rimed in pomegranate and nearly a couple of feet across.

The crew—a sort of sergeant-major of the lascar crew—has, as public his dignity, his quarters hoarded off in a corner to himself. His command, backed by his stick, is law, and when a word from a white officer might almost cause a mutiny, the crew may half kill a dozen without a murmur from the rest. On occasions of ceremony he is a fat and stately figure, clothed in white and bearing a cane from head to foot, with huge turban of striped black and gold and hanging fringe, and his polished black turban case of order. His able yet scowling body a western colour to this hoarse community of "shymocks." W. L. KENNEDY WOODS.



The coloring work of a mack-hall: Lascars in their quarters as heard a lascar.

The lascar crew in their quarters aboard ship. They bring more than a line of old Baghdad and the brilliant coloring of the lascar in the dock provinces of maritime machinery.

Some men found alternative ways of making a living by doing odd jobs; road sweeping, selling Indian spices, or working as street herbalists.

The sailors settled in areas such as Capel Street, Shadwell, and Canning Town and some married local women who were looked down upon and referred to as 'Lascar Sally' or 'Calcutta Louise.'

Spaces & Places

The Royal Docks

The Royal Docks is situated in the London Borough of Newham in East London. It consists of three docks; Royal Albert, Royal Victoria, and King George V. They were constructed between 1855 and 1921 and collectively formed the largest enclosed dock in the world, with a span of 19.3 km. The docks were built to accommodate large shipping vessels importing foodstuffs and raw materials from across the world. Many factories and warehouses were built along the quayside serving hundreds of cargo ships.



Photograph: View from King George V dock, 2021, Trisha McCauley



Photograph: Seafarers at working the Royal Albert Dock. Port of London Authority, 1936

Royal Albert Docks, Seaman's Hospital

Living conditions aboard ship was difficult for all sailors. Asian seafarers had a higher death rate in comparison to Europeans. This was hardly surprising as they were forced to live in harsh conditions; overcrowding, a poor diet and inadequate health care led to diseases that spread quickly amongst the crew.



Location:

Alnwick Road, Custom House
E16 3EZ



Seaman's Hospital and London School of Tropical Medicine, Custom House. Image: London Borough of Newham Archive and Local Studies.

Lascars Club – Lascars Avenue

The 'Lascars' Club was founded in 1909 by K Chowdry. It was located near Victoria Docks, making it an ideal stopping point for the sailors in London. The club was a safe space for the men to support each other, eat traditional foods and pray. Between January to June 1910, 4180 sailors made use of the club. The building no longer exists, but there is a street named after this community.

Location:

313 Victoria Dock Road
London,
E16 3AA



Photograph by Trisha McCauley 2021.

Coloured Men's Institute

Kamal Chunchie born in 1886 in Celon (Sri Lanka) founded 'The Coloured Men's Institute' located at Tidal Basin Road, Victoria Docks. His organisation catered for the Black and Asian community by providing food and shelter to stranded sailors, dockworkers, and their families.

The building was demolished road widening scheme in 1930, the organisation continued to function at a local church and until Chunchie's death in 1953.

Location: 13-15 Tidal Basin Road, Canning Town



Copyright: Newham Archives

Shah Jalal Coffee House

Location: 76 Commercial Street

Ayub Ali Master a former sailor from Bangladesh who jumped ship in the US and made his way to the UK arriving in Tilbury Docks 1920. Ayub settled in East London and opened the Shah Jalal Coffee House, the cafe became an important meeting place for seaman.

Location: 13 Sandys Row, E1 7HW

Ayub ran advisory and educational services for ex-sailors from his home to serve the Bengali community. In 1943 he founded the Indian Seamen's Welfare League.

'He gave them free food and shelter and helped them register at India House and the local police station. When they got jobs, many would go on to rent rooms in his house in Sandys Row, known locally as 'Number Thirteen', where they would continue to receive support from Ali in the form of letter reading and writing, and help with remittances to India. He was known by them as 'Master'.

<https://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/makingbritain/content/ayub-ali>

Sowabullah Munshi

Location: Code Street, near Brick Lane.

Sowabullah Munshi arrived in the UK from Sylhet, Bangladesh. He had jumped ship because of the awful conditions and settled in the East End. Sowabullah married a local white woman and settled at 16 Elder Street. Sowabullah and his wife set up a lodging house in Code Street near Brick Lane to provide support and shelter to ex-sailors and members of his local community. Some of these men who stayed at the shelter, later became influential community leaders across the UK.

East India Docks & East India Company

The East India Docks constructed between 1803 – 1806 to accommodate the growing trade from aboard. It was the third enterprise built after the West India Docks and the London Docks and constructed exclusively for the British East India Company.



A View of the East India Docks, Aquatint by William Daniell, 1808 .

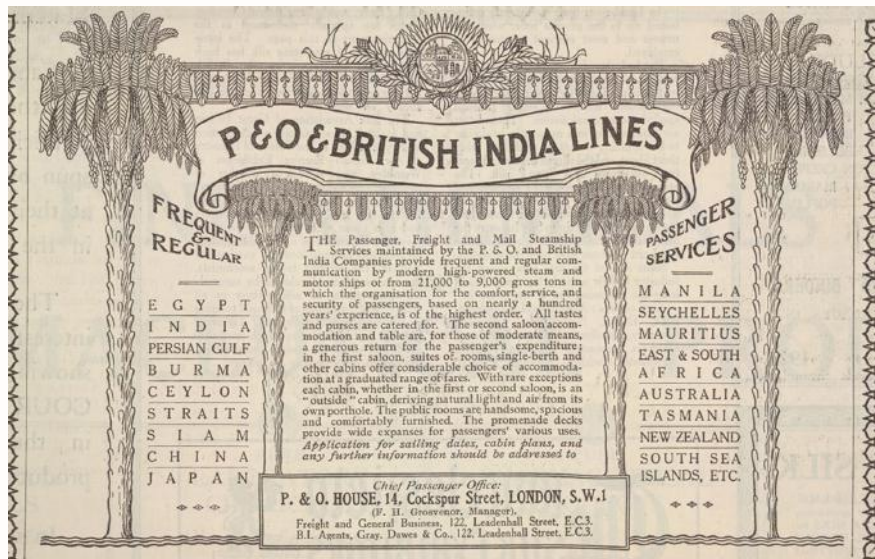
Founded in 1614, East India Company's headquarters was situated in Leadenhall Street, East London, until it was demolished in 1862. The East India Company (EIC) held a monopoly on the Indian merchant trade. As the shipping industry grew, there was an increased demand for cheap migrant labour; this relationship led to a steady migration of South Asians Sailors who eventually settled in Britain.



© National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London

The Old East India House in Leadenhall Street (1648-1726) Long Caption: The East India Company's original headquarters on Leadenhall Street in London.

EIC and other companies such as P&O recruited large numbers of Asian sailors to work on their ships almost exclusively as deck and engine room crews. P&O continued to use traditional Indian deck crews up until 1986.



This advertisement for P&O and British India Lines – which transported freight goods, post and passengers – was published in 1924

© National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London

© Reproduced by kind permission of P&O Heritage Collection



Twelve Lascars during lifeboat drill on navigation deck of Viceroy of India (1929) Credit line:

© National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London

Thames Iron Works Company (1837-1912)

The Thames Iron Works Shipbuilding Company was founded in 1837. It played a major role in British shipbuilding and was one of the largest shipyards on the Thames it produced the world's first iron clad warship HMS Warrior in 1860. The Indian seafarers would have sailed and worked aboard the ships made by this company.

Location:

East India Docks

E14 0JU



Photography by Trisha McCauley, 2021

"It produced ships for the Royal Navy (including HMS Warrior and HMS Thunderer) and many foreign navies, as well as private yachts for Queen Victoria and the Pope. It also undertook civil engineering projects, such as Blackfriars railway bridge and Hammersmith suspension bridge in London and the Kotri bridge in Pakistan'.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thames_Ironworks_and_Shipbuilding_Company

Tower Hill Memorial

Tower Hill Memorial commemorates Merchant Sailors who died in the First and Second World Wars and includes names of Bengali Sailors who were employed aboard the ships. However, it's believed that 4000 -5000 Indian sailors died at sea but whose names were never known.



Photograph by Ethan Doyle White, 2020

'Indian sources give the figure of 3,427 lascars dead and 1,200 taken prisoners in the First World War. They also estimate 6,600 Indian seamen dead, 1,022 wounded and 1,217 taken prisoner in the Second World War'.

www.swadhinata.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Bengalis-in-Londons-East-End-Book.pdf

Despite being faced with extreme hostility, harsh living conditions and treatment, the Asian seafarers who settled in London grew to make positive contributions to the local community. Entrepreneurial individuals developed commercial businesses, bought houses and rented them out to other sailors, built Mosques, opened cafes, restaurants and formed many charitable organisations across London and the UK. This historical picture resource has highlighted just some of the stories of the Asian Seafarers from East London and remembers their contributions both locally and beyond.



Photograph: SS Chybassa, a merchant ship of the British India Line, 1917.
Part of P&O Collection of Merchant Navy Photographs.

How to analyse a photograph

Observe, Think, Wonder



© PLA Collection Museum of London

A photograph is a great source of historical information. When we 'read' a photograph carefully, we can extract information often overlooked by just a glance.

Look at the photograph

- Observe: What do you see? Identify the elements - describe what is in the image.
- Think: What do you think of this image? Make connections - interpret some of the symbols.
- Wonder: What do you wonder about this image - what questions do you have?

Look at the photograph; using OTW, what questions do you have?

Here are some starting points:

- Describe what you see.
- If you could interview these men, what questions would you ask them?
- How do you think the British public responded to this image at the time?

Photography Activity

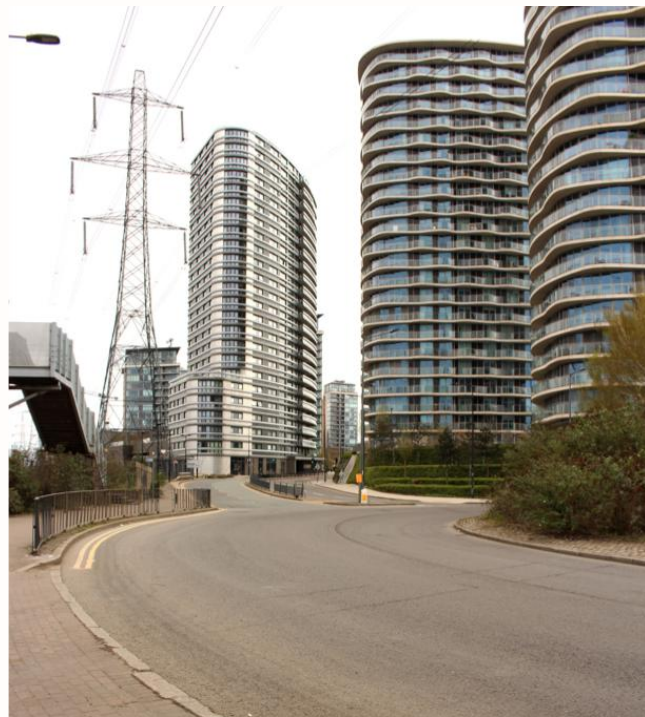
Document Your Community

Photograph the areas within your community that you find interesting. Or start with the locations in this resource.

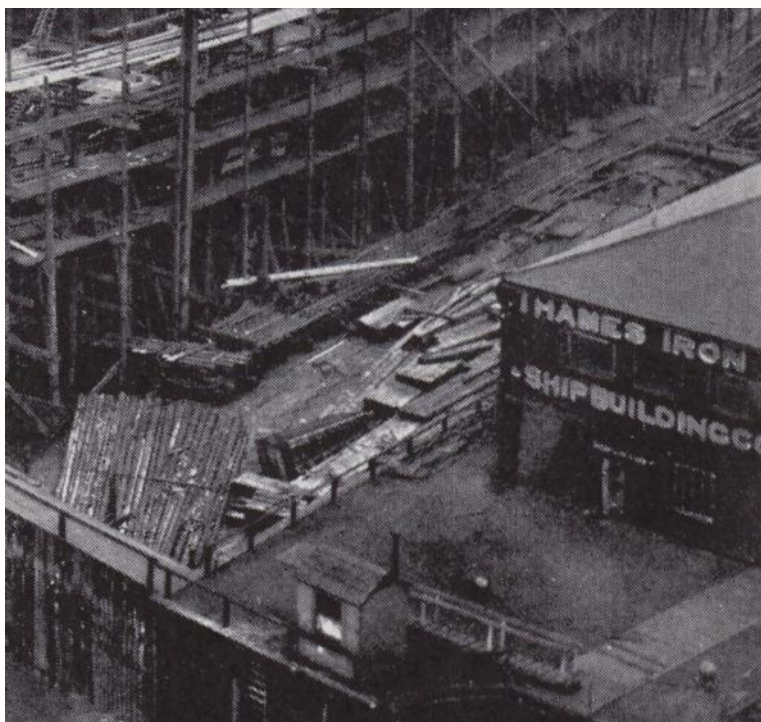
Visit your local library and search through archival records or google images of your community from the past. Compare your photographs to the ones you have found. Are there any changes? What is different? Or has things remained the same?



1926 Coloured Men's Institute, Tidal Basin Road
Copyright: Newham Archives



2021 Tidal Basin Road photograph by Maggie Falshaw



1800s: Bird's-eye view of the Thames Ironworks Shipbuilding Yard.



2021: Thames Iron Works (Photo by Trisha McCauley)

Photographic Activity

Create a Photographic Collage

Collect various images, prints, artwork that you find interesting print them in various sizes. If the photographs/prints are originals re-photograph them using a mobile phone or a camera and print them out.

Next, find a sketchbook or use thick cartridge paper and start arranging them on the pages until you are happy with the layout then and then stick them in.

Look at the images and make a note of any feelings, words or thoughts that come to mind, use this as a source of inspiration for your Haiku inspired poems.



Lascars on British ships: the question of their retention 1906.

© Illustrated London News Ltd/Mary Evans

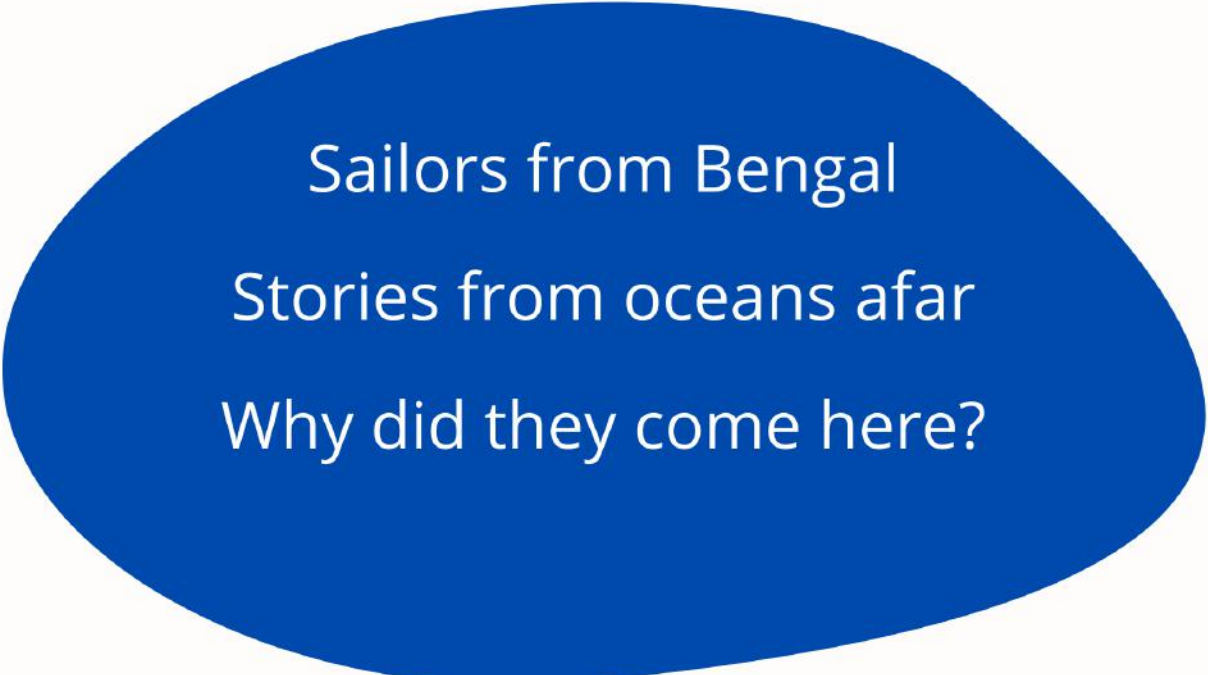
Creative Writing Activity

Haiku Poems

Traditional Haiku poems are short, unrhymed and typically inspired by nature.

They are written in the following structure:

- The first line has five syllables
- The second line has seven syllables
- The last line has five syllables



Sailors from Bengal
Stories from oceans afar
Why did they come here?

Haikus do not all have to be about nature or the seasons. Choose a person, object or one of the images in this booklet for a source of inspiration.

RESEARCH/RESOURCES/LINKS

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Research

[https://www.museumoflondonprints.com/products/pod449807?
_pos=1&_sid=cd362bdde&_ss=r](https://www.museumoflondonprints.com/products/pod449807?_pos=1&_sid=cd362bdde&_ss=r)

[https://www.iwm.org.uk/sites/default/files/transcripts/2018-
04/The%20South%20Asian%20seaman%E2%80%99s%20role%20during%20the%20wars%2
C%20Ansar%20Ahmed%20Ullah%20.pdf](https://www.iwm.org.uk/sites/default/files/transcripts/2018-04/The%20South%20Asian%20seaman%E2%80%99s%20role%20during%20the%20wars%20C%20Ansar%20Ahmed%20Ullah%20.pdf)

[https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/short-reads/article/3044306/who-were-
lascars-where-did-they-come-and-where](https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/short-reads/article/3044306/who-were-lascars-where-did-they-come-and-where)

<https://www.rmg.co.uk/stories/topics/lascars-east-india-company>

<https://www.newhamheritagemonth.org/records/asif-shakoor/>

<https://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/the-lascars-britains-colonial-era-sailors>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_smPQW2ixg

<https://ezitis.myzen.co.uk/albertdock.html>

<https://images.rmg.co.uk/>

<https://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/makingbritain/content/ayub-ali>

<https://mha.mun.ca/mha/mlc/seafarers/lascars/>

<https://www.lookandlearn.com/index.php>

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<https://www.blpawards.org/competition/photo-rights>