



Peter N Davies Seminar 2021, 3 November 5:30pm,
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‘Maritime Education in the 1890s: microhistories from the Liverpool Nautical College’ by Dr Wayne Turnbull, PhD Candidate LJMU

and Derelict Avenue. At the turn of the millennium, Kennerley lamented the paucity of published research in the field of maritime education and training, observing that of the 189 articles published over a thirteen-year period (1989-2002) by the *International Journal of Maritime History*, only one focused on seafarer education. More recently, Hérubel in correspondence with an anonymous ‘historian of higher education’ was advised: “The short answer to your inquiry is that there is no obvious connection between quality and institutional histories published by their own presses. The fact is, no other presses are interested in publishing such works”.

Such circumstances may explain why the early years of the Liverpool Nautical College (now part of Liverpool John Moores University) have been forgotten. Yet in the 1890s the creation of the College (in response to successive legislative advances) was a bold and radical move, not without its critics. Serendipitously, a unique cache of documents from those early years has been preserved and is now safely maintained within the LJMU Archive. The documents include admissions ledgers containing information about the Nautical College’s students, from the first recruits in 1892. Information about the management of College, in the form of the first Headmaster’s report book and the minute book of the College’s governing body, offer a rare insight behind the public façade. Perhaps most intriguing are the random ephemera, annotated reports and press clippings that appear to have been gathered from the desk of the first headmaster by his successor and deposited into a box.

Yet such primary records can take us only so far in fashioning a detailed understanding of the staff, students and activities of the Liverpool Nautical College. Extensive accounts of the political debates around maritime education and the College feature in contemporary newspapers, particularly those published in Liverpool and in the ‘trade papers’. Skeletal student and staff records can be fleshed-out with reference to genealogical material, including census records and documentation relating to birth, marriage and death events. Specific databases containing, for example, information about Ship Officer certification by the Board of Trade and crew lists of ocean-going vessels held by the Liverpool Record Office can offer important additional information about the seafaring careers of the College’s students.

Each of these separate lines of enquiry, including the biographical research, analysis of press coverage and the minutiae of committee bureaucracy all produce distinct yet complementary outcomes. By meshing these ‘micro-histories’ we can begin to view the ‘big picture’, bringing the early years of the Liverpool Nautical College into focus. This also allows us to ascertain the impact of the College both by virtue of its creation and from the lived legacies of its former students. An institutional history developed in this way is greater than the sum of its parts and throws a lifeline to this struggling sub-discipline. The historian emerges from immersion in such data in the guise of alchemist, turning base records into treasure. Rescuing institutional research from the hinterland of maritime history would really be magic.