

The Lascars Historical Story



History



The Lascars 17th Century



The people who were once called “the Lascars” first met British people in the beginning of the 17th century. These British people worked for the East India Company.

The East India Company was after India’s wonderful spices, silks and other treasures.

Spices especially were becoming really popular back in England. But it took up to four months to sail from England to India. Some sailors fell ill and a few even died. Lots of them ran off as soon as they reached dry land. This left the East India Company needing new sailors to bring back their ships and all those lovely (very valuable) spices.



18th Century



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The Lascars were now important workers on British ships. Despite this, their treatment was cruel and unjust.

Being a sailor was a tough job. But it was much tougher for the Lascar sailors.

Lascars were paid less than British sailors.

Lascars received less food than British sailors.

Lascars had less sleeping space than British sailors.

Their cramped conditions meant infectious diseases could spread easily. Their poor diet did not keep them healthy and made it harder to fight off illness.

More Lascars fell ill than British sailors.

And more Lascars died.



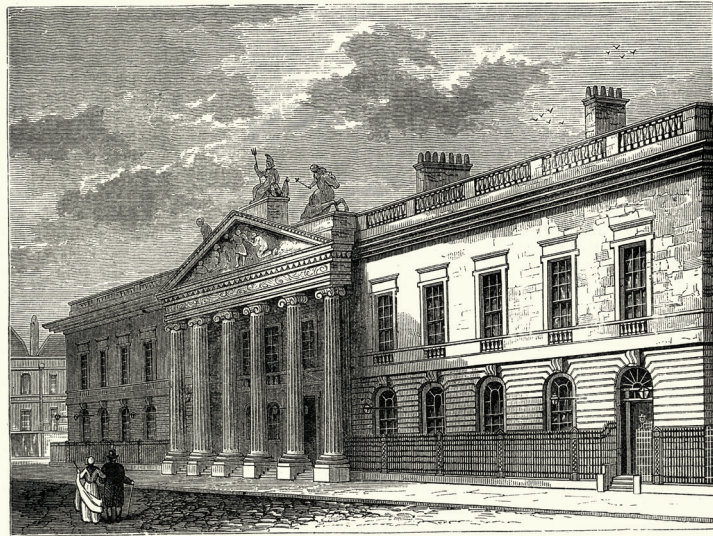


Lascars had their own chain of command on the ships.

At the top of the chain was the Serang. His job was to recruit Lascar sailors and to look after “discipline”. “Discipline” sometimes meant beatings. Second in command was the Tindal.

Serangs and Tindals could speak English, and they liaised with the British sailors and the other Lascars.

Serangs often had to bribe the British captain for their job. In turn, the other Lascars often had to bribe the Serangs.



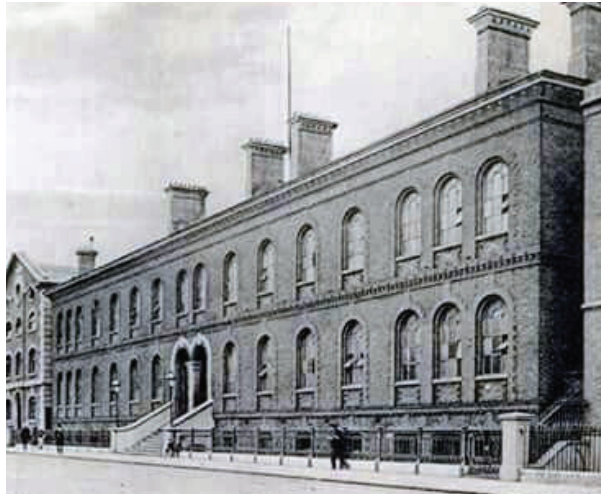
THE OLD INDIA OFFICE, LONDON (1703).

Their poor pay at sea left Lascars just as poor on land. Local Londoners would see them on the streets, shivering and starving. Many people were worried, and some wrote angry articles in the newspapers, criticising the East India Company for treating the Lascars so badly.

Eventually, the East India Company gave the Lascars somewhere to live. But most of the buildings were damp, draughty, dirty and over-crowded. And most Lascars were too poor to afford good food or warm clothes.

Many Lascars fell ill and some even died.

19th Century



The Strangers' Home, West India Dock, c. 1900.

The Society for the Protection of Asiatic Sailors was founded in 1814. Its aim was to help the Lascars and tell the public about their plight.

Even so, life was still very hard for the Lascars. Records from 1850 show that 40 Lascars actually starved to death in London.

Robert Marsh Hughes of the East India Company and Joseph Salter of the London City Mission formed a charity to build a home for the Lascars. The first donation was from Maharaja Duleep Singh, who was an Indian prince exiled in Britain.





In the Main Hall of the Strangers' Home, West India Dock, c. 1902.

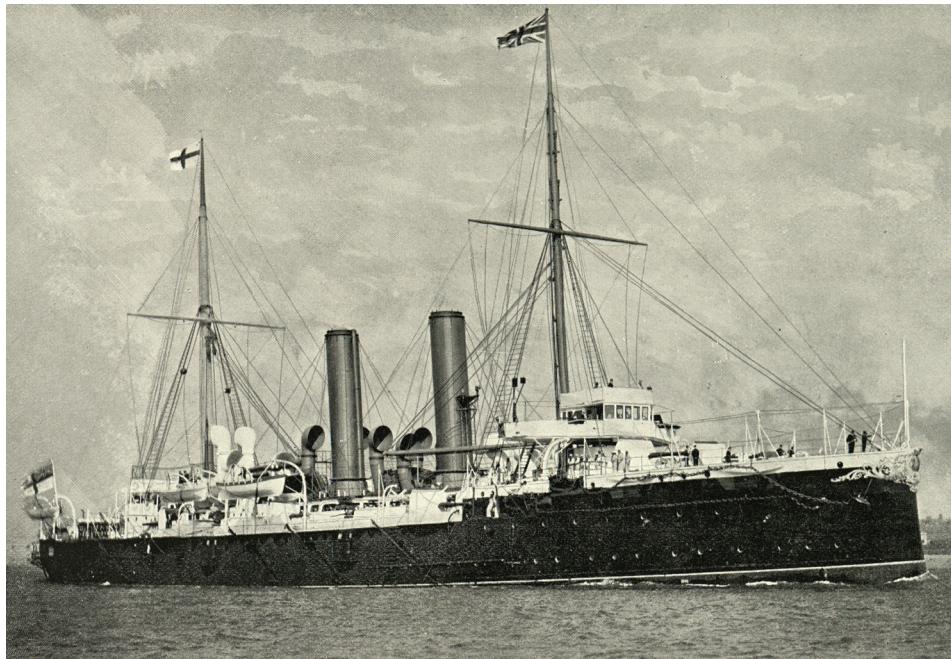
In 1857, Robert Marsh Hughes and Joseph Salter opened the Strangers' Home for Asiatics, Africans and South Sea Islanders in London. The Strangers' Home eventually closed in 1937.

The Strangers' Home gave the Lascars somewhere to stay. The missionaries also provided a library of Christian books in Asian and African languages.

But the Home only admitted Lascars who were able to find work or who were planning to leave Britain.



In the second half of the 19th century, two major events happened that made Britain rely on the Lascars even more.



The first was steam.

The railway had arrived, with steam-powered trains. So had steam-powered ships.

Steam ships no longer had to rely on wind and sail (sometimes even oars), so they could travel farther and more often.





The second was the Suez Canal.

The Suez Canal joins the Red Sea to the Mediterranean.

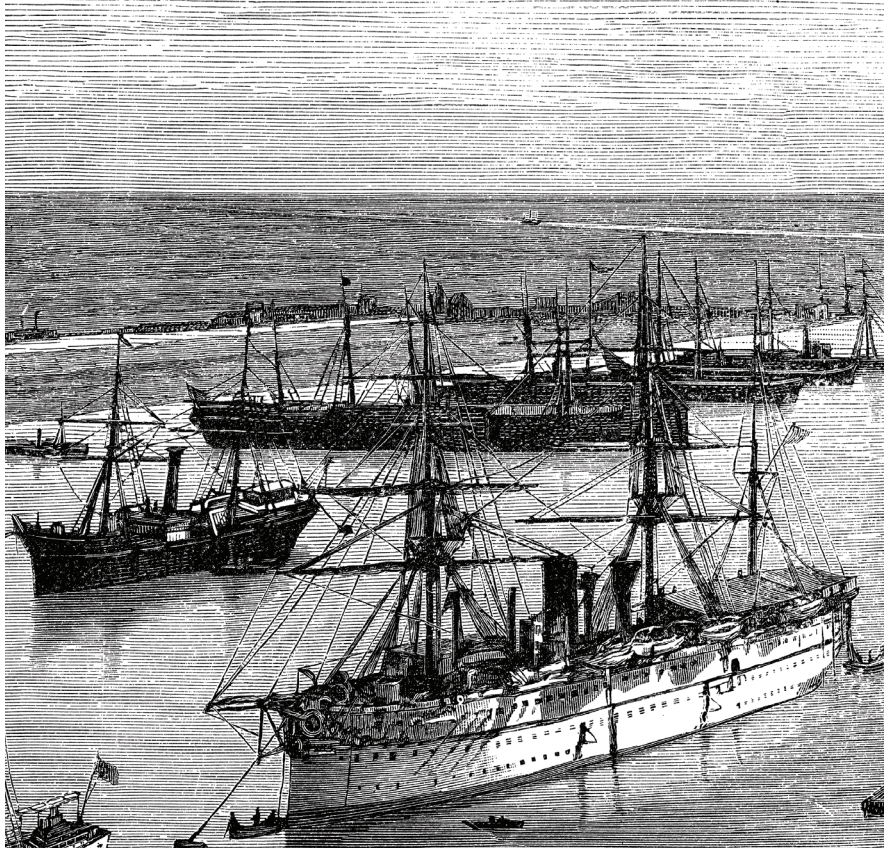
It was opened in 1869.

Before the Suez Canal, ships had to go all the way around Africa to reach India and the Middle East. Now they could go straight through the middle.

Steam and the Suez Canal meant more trade for the British ships.

This meant they needed the Lascars even more.



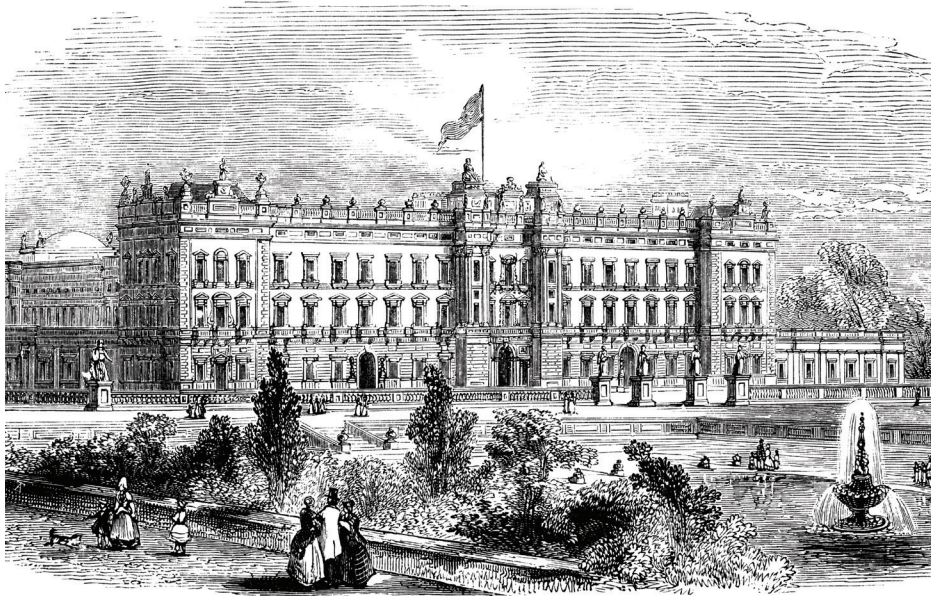


The steam ships needed firemen and people to stoke the furnaces. The British sailors did not want to do this hot and tiring work. So the Lascars did it.

By the end of the 19th century, Lascars made up 17.5% of workers on British ships. Without them, there would simply not have been a shipping industry.

They may have been vital, but Lascars were paid about a fifth of what British sailors were paid.

20th Century



Buckingham Palace.

As the 20th century arrived, Lascars began to stand up for their rights.

In 1907, there is a report that 49 Lascars set out to “pay a ceremonial call at Buckingham Palace to lay their complaint before the king” (King Edward VII). Unfortunately, we don’t know what happened.

But we do know that by the outbreak of the First World War (in 1914), there were over 50,000 Lascars in Britain.

The Lascars fought for Britain and the Allies. They were brave and loyal soldiers.





deficiency in vitamin B1, and is a result of a poor diet. Many Lascars even died. During the same time, not one British sailor died of Beriberi.

By 1921, Lascars made up over a fifth (22.1% to be exact) of the workforce on British ships.

But still the Lascars faced injustice. They were paid much less than the British sailors, and their food was worse.

Less than 100 years ago (in the late 1920s), many Lascars suffered from a disease called Beriberi. This is caused by a

Lascars continued trying to stand up for their rights, as we can see from these reports:

**The Guardian,
9th April 1923
Cargo ship, Clan McGillivray**

Lascars refused to work with an engineer because he had beaten some of their crew. They were charged with disobeying the captain's orders, were sent to prison for six days and fined two days' pay.

**The Scotsman,
16th April 1925
Cargo ship, Clan Macbeth**

Lascar crew refused to sail unless the ship appointed a new captain. They were fined two days' pay.

**The Scotsman,
22nd November 1926
Cargo ship, Clan Macaully**

The crew "marched in a body from the liner" after "three of the officers tried to extort money from them" and being "rudely told to get on with their work" when they appealed to the Captain for protection.

**The Scotsman,
6th September 1930
Cargo ship, City of Roubaix**

Lascars charged with "wilful disobedience" for refusing to work while the ship was docked in the harbour.





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Even while continuing to fight for their rights, 40,000 Lascars were working on British ships by 1939.

Many Lascars fought (and died) for Britain and the Allies during the Second World War.





Over the centuries, many Lascars settled in Britain and married British women. As the British Empire declined in the 1950s, the word “Lascar” fell out of use. Nowadays, we don’t know enough about the history of Lascars. But hopefully this story has helped to change that.

Today, we are proud of how many different people make up our country, and we believe in giving all of us equal chances and in treating everyone fairly.

