

A Wage Bill for Ship Repairs in 1773

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To many of eighteenth-century England's inhabitants the extensive and powerful commercial undertaking known as the Honourable the East India Company incited both awe and wonder. It was synonymous with success, prestige and wealth. It was also, of course, automatically associated with East Indiamen, the impressive leviathans of their day. The only armed English merchantman of the time, they plied to and fro between London, St Helena and the Company's scattered outposts in India, Malaya, China and elsewhere. For much of the Company's eventful life its ships and their construction were linked with Blackwall and Deptford yards. Indeed, Indiamen, Blackwall and Deptford were symbiotic and ship builders' names such as Alexander, Allen, Greville and Wells enjoyed widespread household usage. In making his perambulation to Dover and the Isle of Wight, naturalist Thomas Pennant (1726-98) wrote of the Blackwall Yard as being 'the greatest of any private concern in all Europe',¹ terms that conveyed confidence, power and prosperity, the very hallmarks of the Company. It would be wrong, however, to assume that all Company craft were built on the banks of the Thames. Timber scarcity was forcing the Company to look further afield and thus the eighteenth century in the Company's annals was marked by added provincial ship building to meet increased commitments. Yards were used to build Indiamen in locations as scattered as Durham, Hull and Itchenor in Sussex. In seaboard Hampshire, yards at Bursledon on the river Hamble, Buckler's Hard on the Beaulieu river, and Gosport were also built for the Company. And some of the royal dockyards, most notably those at Plymouth and Portsmouth, undertook repair work of damaged Company craft; identical work was also put out to private yards.²

Occasionally evidence comes to light of costs and wages involved in such building and repair work. One private yard, probably Darley's at Gosport on the west side of Portsmouth harbour, employed about 50 men between 1745 and 1750, including sawyers from several Portsea Island

communities. Some of the timber used here was hauled overland by road from as far away as Egham in Surrey.³ While the launches of local-built Indiamen were festive and colourful occasions, the costs involved in such building activity can, for the most part, only be hinted at. When John and William Wells built the *Mercury* and the *Eagle* on the Thames in 1772 and 1773 respectively, they were paid in instalments. For the *Mercury* the bill totalled £2,061 3s.; for the *Eagle* it was £2,150 16s.⁴ In the case of the latter this amounted to £9 7s. per ton. Over time building costs rose. Whereas the cost per ton of constructing an Indiaman in 1793 was £14, in 1801 the figure stood at £21 15s. 6d.⁵ Rising costs, both explained and aggravated by war, doubtless contributed to driving some of the smaller yards out of this line of business.

The purpose of this paper is to examine a set of wage data for one repair operation in 1773 to one Company vessel in one naval dockyard – that at Portsmouth. While the incident which occasioned the wage bill has been charted elsewhere in some detail,⁶ it is appropriate to rehearse some of the details here. Described in late 1772 as ‘building for the purpose of carrying Advices to St Helena’, the *Eagle* was the 220-ton packet referred to above. Built at Deptford, she emerged from dry dock there on 26 March 1773. She was to serve several purposes. In the first instance, she was to carry messages to St Helena and Madras. Additionally, she was to be sent to the Company’s recently acquired and strategically important outpost at Balambangan, to the north of North Borneo. Between 26 March and 7 April 1773 the ship was readied for her long voyage. Her skipper, the experienced seafarer Edward Wilson, was in his first command position. Her chief, second and third mates were equally experienced. Chief mate, Matthew Wroe, had already voyaged to India six times, while second and third mates Charles Martin Lefort and Benjamin Allen had acquired fourteen years’ maritime experience between them.

On Friday 9 April the *Eagle* weighed anchor and sailed as far as Gravesend, where she remained for most of the month. Cargo, guns, stationery, gunpowder and 22 coils of cordage were carefully stowed away. At 6 a. m. on Saturday 8 May the *Eagle* weighed anchor and set off for the East. One day later, however, she struck the Gilman, a Thames estuary shoal. While Wilson promptly despatched second mate Lefort to the Company’s Court of Directors in London with news of what had befallen the vessel, he took his ship round to the Downs, anchoring within sight of Sandwich and Deal Castles on 11 May. From there he moved again and four days later the vessel had reached Spithead, where she hove to. From 20 May onwards preparations began for taking the *Eagle* into Portsmouth for repairs. A local pilot called Newman worked

the ship into harbour where she was 'Lash'd alongside of the Merlin Sloop of War in Order to Lighten the Ship'. Anchors, booms, cables, chests and lumber were all removed and the damage sustained by the vessel inspected. On the following day the *Eagle's* provisions were removed. On 24 May – a Monday – pilot Newman and nine extra hands took the ship into dock. The damage, identified within a comparatively short time as 'Twenty one feet of the False Keel entirely gone and Seven more Damaged,' was made good within 24 hours. On 29 May the newly repaired *Eagle* dropped anchor at the Motherbank off the Isle of Wight and awaited further orders.⁷

While Captain Wilson had been busy writing to the Company throughout this period of setback, so, too, had agent George Huish. At numerous ports, both in England and abroad, the East India Company appointed agents.⁸ Invariably men of substance and probity, they were to keep a vigilant watch on what was going on in their particular community while also discharging certain commissions for the Company. Huish was no exception to this rule. A leading town official and a man of plentiful contacts and influence, Huish was the typical Company agent – the epitome of responsibility. It was his thoroughness, professionalism and careful account keeping that would provide details of the wage bill for work on the *Eagle*.

Towards mid-June 1773, some while after the *Eagle* had left local waters, Huish wrote to East India Company Secretary Peter Mitchell, explaining why he had forwarded to him the ship's repair bill:

The Reason for my sending You the Account of Workmanship perform'd to the Companys Ship *Eagle* in His Majesty's Dock Yard here was because the Amount of that Work was to be paid to the Artificiers and c. here, and could not be paid to the Treasurer of the Navy in London . . . the men being check'd of their Time in the Yard whilst . . . employed on this ship.⁹

Having paid for the repair work from his own resources, Huish then effectively applied to the Company to be reimbursed. In his meticulous hand he itemised carefully every penny that had been spent on the repair exercise. The sub-totals involved have been re-arranged alphabetically and are set out below:

	£	s.	d.
Beer for Shipwrights	1	2	9
Labourer		2	10
Quarter Boys		6	6½
Scavellmen	6	15	6

Shipwrights	21	1	8½
Shipwrights	1	14	9
Teams of Horses	7	14	2
Total	39	8	3

Having headed his account 'People Employed on Docking the Eagle East India Ship the 24th and 25th May 1773', Huish than named every man involved in the operation. The time spent on the work was also detailed, as were the daily and hourly wage rates involved and each man's final wage bill. A total of 43 shipwrights had worked on the *Eagle* taking their orders from foreman William Bucknall. Quarter boys Joseph Bingle and Richard Pink, labourer John Turner and 33 scavelmen also worked on the vessel. For pumping the dock dry shipwrights Francis Beezley, Nicholas Dyer, Thomas Smith and Richard Wade received a total of £1 14s. 9d.. Teams of horses to work the pumps had been supplied by local gentleman farmer, yard contractor and the MP for Arundel Thomas Fitzherbert, whose connections with the Company were to be extensive.

The net result is an exact picture of what it cost to repair a medium-sized vessel in the early 1770s. The wage bill is set out below, in the hope that it will achieve two aims. In the first instance it will shed additional valuable light on eighteenth-century wages. At the same time, it should extend what is known of maritime working conditions and practices in Georgian England. Daily and hourly rates forming separate columns in the original document, have been subsumed into a statement made at the initial entry for each yard position. Variations are explained in the notes, while workers' names have been rearranged in alphabetical order. The original bill, located in Oriental and India Office Collections E/1/57, Miscellaneous Letters Received 1773, item 112a, is here reproduced by permission of the Controller of H. M. Stationery Office.

**'People Employ'd on Docking the Eagle East India Ship
the 24th and 25th May 1773'**

Shipwrights	Days	Nights	Hours	Wages		
Rate: 3s. 6d./day; 6d./hour.				£	s.	d.
Col. 1						
William Bucknall ¹⁰	2½		5½	14	0	
William Clark	2½		5½	11	6	
Edward Filby	2½		5½	11	6	
Samuel Hervey	2½		5½	11	6	

Thomas Hill ¹¹	2½	5½	12	9
Henry Knight	2½	5½	11	6
William Middleton	2½	5½	11	6
Thomas Shepard	2½	5½	11	6
James Smith	2½	5½	11	6
William Sparshott	2½	5½	11	6
Robert Warner ¹²	2½	5½	7	5½

William Aylin	2	4½	9	3
John Bingle ¹³	2	4½	10	3
Richard Binsteed	2	4½	9	3
Thomas Binsteed	2	4½	9	3
Simon Brown	2	4½	9	3
Isaac Day	2	4½	9	3
Mathew Day ¹⁴	2	4½	6	10
Richard Feltham	2	4½	9	3
William Hambleton	2	4½	9	3
Edward Harriot	2	4½	9	3
Moses Miall	2	4½	9	3
Benjamin Oakshott	2	4½	9	3
William Ranwell	2	4½	9	3
Thomas Rattey	2	4½	9	3
Richard Smith ¹⁵	2	4½	5	1
Peter Tremain	2	4½	9	3
Henry Webb	2	4½	9	3

Col. 2

Mathew Bacon	2	4½	9	3
John Baker	2	4½	9	3
Steven Bingle	2	4½	9	3
Barnard Bush	2	4½	9	3
Thomas Collins	2	4½	9	3
Arthur Davis	2	4½	9	3
William Drew	2	4½	9	3
William Foord	2	4½	9	3
William Fowles	2	4½	9	3
Joseph Hawkey ¹⁶	2	4½	5	1
Thomas Hutchins	2	4½	9	3

William Knight	2	4½	9	3
John Marshall	2	4½	9	3
Samuel Moore	2	4½	9	3
William Purkis	2	4½	9	3
James Smith	2	4½	9	3

Quarter Boy

Rate; 1s. 1d./day; 2d./hour.

Joseph Bingle	2	4½	2	11
Richard Pink	2½	5½	3	7½
Scavermen				
Rate 2s. 6d./day; 4d./hour				
Siggo (?) Ayres	1	1½	3	
John Barnes	1	1½	3	
Leonard Cooper	1	1½	3	
Jeremy Eldridge	2	6½	2	2
Charles Lewis	1	1½	3	
George Marvin	1	1½	3	
James Russell	2	3	6	
Col. 3				
George Adams	1	1½	3	
John Bray	1	1½	3	
John Bridger	1	1½	3	
John Bridges	2	4½	6	6
Thomas Bromfield	1	1½	3	
George Churcher	1	1½	3	
Samuel Clark	1	1½	3	
William Clark	1	1½	3	
Edward Cleverley	1	1½	3	
Isaac Coleson	1	1½	3	
Thomas Couzens	1	1½	3	
William Freeman	1	3	3	6
Thomas Holland	2	3	6	
William Lane	1	3	3	6
John Lewes	2	3	6	
James Lock	1	1½	3	
Andrew Lucy	2	3	6	
Hugh McGinnis	2	4½	6	6
Thomas Mant	1	1½	3	

John Mitchell	1	1½	3	
William Newell	?	6½	2	2
John Parks	1	1½	3	
Henry Ray	?	6½	2	2
Henry Saggase	1	1½	3	
William Spencer	?	6½	2	2
Henry Sturney	?	6½	2	2
Thomas Waterman	1	1½	3	
Edmund Wheeler	1	1½	3	

Col. 4

John Bowyer	1	1½	3	
William Churcher	1	1½	3	
Robert Gamble	1	1½	3	
John Lampard	1	3	3	6
Edward? Richardson	?	6½	2	2

Labourer

Rate: 4d./hour.

John Turner			2	10
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Pumping The Dock

Shipwrights

Rate: 3s. 6d. day; 6d./hour

Francis Beezley	2	1	3	5	
Nicholas Dyer	2	2	4½	16	3
Thomas Smith	2	1	1½	4	3
Richard Wade	2	2	4½	9	3

Mr Fitzherbert

Rate: 12s. 6d./day; 2s. 1d./hour

One Team	5	1	3	4	7
One Team	7	1	4	9	7

Notes

1. T. Pennant, *A Journey from London to the Isle of Wight*, 2 vols (1801), I, p. 26. For Pennant, see *Dictionary of National Biography*, XV, pp. 765–8.
2. Portsmouth yard also fitted out newly-completed Indiamen following their launch from local yards. Launched at Itchenor in May 1787, the *Belvidere*

- was moved to Portsmouth 'for fitting for China'. *Hampshire Chronicle*, 14 May 1787.
3. Public Record Office, C108/286, Gosport shipyard paybook 1745-50.
 4. O[riental and] I[ndia] O[ffice] C[ollections] L/AG/1/1/22, General Ledger M 1769-73, f. 161.
 5. P. Banbury, *Shipbuilders of the Thames and Medway* (Newton Abbot, 1971), p. 43.
 6. See J. H. Thomas, 'The Voyage of the *Eagle*, 1773', *The Mariner's Mirror*, 82, 2 (1996), pp. 165-74.
 7. O. I. O. C. L/MAR/B/537A, Log of the *Eagle*, 26 March 1773-20 April 1776.
 8. For further details of Company Agency work see J. H. Thomas, 'East India Company Agency Work 1650-1815: the Experience of Portsmouth', *Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, 12 (1992), pp. 12-24.
 9. Huish to Mitchell, 13 June 1773: O.I.O.C. E/1/57, Miscellaneous Letters Received 1773, item 112.
 10. As Foreman Bucknall received 4s. 6d. per day and 6d. per hour.
 11. Hill was a Quarterman, a promoted shipwright in charge of a gang of artificers. He received 4s. per day and 6d. per hour.
 12. Warner, paid at 2s. 3d. per day and 4d. per hour, was marked 'st', the meaning of which is unclear.
 13. Like Hill, Bingle was a Quarterman.
 14. For some unexplained reason Mathew Day was paid at 2s. 8d. per day and 4d. per hour.
 15. Smith, marked 'st', was paid at 2s. per day and 3d. per hour.
 16. Hawkey, marked 'st', was paid at the same rate as Smith.