

BF 277-1990

BRITISH SEAMEN'S INSTITUTE

d'Arcy Orders

With the onset of war in 1939 the trials and hardships which seamen have to undergo in the prosecution of their calling was rendered infinitely more arduous. Appreciating this, several members of the British community, interested in providing amenities in Lisbon for British seamen, met in the Royal British Club to discuss the matter.

It was the unanimous feeling of the meeting that every effort should be made to open a club or institution at the earliest possible time. Those present decided to form themselves into a committee and to personally guarantee the initial expenditure and running costs until it could be seen whether the venture would prove a success from the point of view of attendance by seamen.

The decision was greatly facilitated by the offer of a Mr. Alexander Campbell, on behalf of his company, Sociedade Continental de Alimentação (Union Cold Storage Co. Ltd.) to provide suitable premises in their building, rent free, at Rua da Moeda, 5.2.º.*

The committee felt that, as there were so many other demands for War charities on the financial resources of the British community, no public appeal should be made. However, donations were offered by friends of the committee and other members of the community in sufficient quantity for the scheme to go ahead.

* In a letter to the Anglo-Portuguese News of 28th September, 1946 Mr. Douglas Bucknall pointed out that it is on record that a concert was given at the British Free School on 30th March, 1869 "On behalf of the establishment of a Sailors' Reading Room" and later on 16th May, 1873 a Literary and Musical Entertainment was held at the Sailors' Reading Rooms, 28, Occidental da Moeda. The card giving information about these rooms has a diagram indicating that the Rooms were above the Merchant Sailors' Hospital. By a remarkable coincidence the location appeared to Mr. Bucknall to be identical with that of the British Seamen's Institute.



The premises at Rua da Moeda, 5-2º. The entrance was the white door along a passage to the stairway leading up to the first floor.

Statutes were drawn up, application made to the authorities for a licence and the Institute was opened on 17th April, 1940.

The Founders were:

D. W. Alexander	Mrs. W. Neville
A. Campbell	J. Ramsay
R. I. Canby	A. H. Reynolds
H. Cassels	F. E. Etherington Smith
G. Dixon	Mrs. F. E. Etherington Smith
S. Glavina	F. A. G. Tanner
W. McCammond	H. S. Tishaw

The officers elected:

Chairman	J. Ramsay
Honorary Secretary	R. I. Canby
Honorary Treasurer	S. E. Gishford

Shortly afterwards, Gordon White replaced S. E. Gishford as Honorary Treasurer and served in that capacity until the Institute closed.

In addition, a Ladies Committee was formed consisting of: Mesdames Campbell, Connell, Harding, Livingstone, Morris and Etherington Smith and Miss Reynolds.

The premises were open daily from 5 p.m. until midnight except if any shipwrecked seamen arrived then the Institute would be open from 10 a.m. To gain admission, seamen obtained a numbered pass issued by the Consular Shipping Office.

The administration of the Institute was in the hands of the Executive Committee i.e. the Founders, supported by the Ladies Committee which was responsible for provisioning and voluntary assistance. Over one hundred helpers, drawn from the British community, were divided into teams, each undertaking a weekly or fortnightly duty with the result that expenditure on wages was negligible.

Facilities available were billiards, table tennis, darts; a library with magazines and newspapers; a piano, wireless and gramophone and light refreshments. Beers, soft drinks, sandwiches, cigarettes, etc. were available at cost.



F. H. Harding and W. H. Orton in the Billiard Room



The Bar: (l. to r.) W. H. Orton, R. L. Perkins (the Superintendent) and F. H. Harding

Seamen from several torpedoed vessels were entertained at the Institute, some for considerable periods. An appeal for clothing to the British community was most successful and ensured a stock for future use to be kept on hand.

Various excursions were arranged to places of interest, to cinemas, bull-fights and football matches. Cricket and football was played at Carcavelos.

Special entertainment and refreshments were provided on Christmas Eve, Christmas Night and New Year's Eve, with full Christmas fare, mostly donated by Mr. Rugeroni of the Hotel Aviz, and attended by an average of 100 seamen on each occasion.

The success of the venture exceeded the expectations of the Founders and many letters containing expressions of gratitude bore testimony to the fact that the seamen looked upon the Institute as a 'home away from home' due, no doubt, in no small part to the helpers all being volunteers.

It soon became apparent that a similar need existed for allied seamen and, following an approach in November 1940 from HBM Ambassador, the Committee agreed to collaborate, obtained and furnished additional premises in the same building and on 8th January, 1941 seamen of Belgian, Dutch, Greek, Norwegian and Polish nationality were welcomed to the Institute, opening hours being extended to 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 2.30 p.m. to midnight. Soon after, Danish, Finnish and Swedish seamen, sailing in the Allied cause were also allowed to use the facilities.

The Annual General Meeting held on 11th March, 1941 was the first to be held under the Institute's Statutes. These provided for an Executive Committee of from two to seven members elected from amongst the benefactors who were described as "any member of the British colony or other persons who subscribes a minimum of Esc.25\$00 per annum in any one year towards the funds of the Institute or who may have rendered signal services which, in the opinion of the Committee, merit their being classified as such". Each benefactor had the right to one vote at General Meetings held in the year to which his subscription related, but the Founders were considered as Life Benefactors and each enjoyed the right to four votes.

The year 1941 saw a marked increase in the usage of the Institute, the recorded number of visits being 19,508 as compared with 4,160 between 17th April and 31st December, 1940. The support both financial and in voluntary help from the British and Allied communities rendered it unnecessary to accept an offer of financial assistance of £200 from official quarters, and the Institute was able to absorb the cost of a superintendent and cleaners which the increased activity made necessary. During the year a substantial gift of winter clothing from The British War Relief Society of New York, comprising several thousand garments, was received. As such a quantity was surplus to the Institute's foreseeable needs, part of the consignment was sent on to each of Porto, Gibraltar, the Azores and Cape Verde for the use of shipwrecked seamen.

A separate fund set up specifically to aid shipwrecked seamen benefited from a substantial donation from the Women's Relief Work Organisation amounting to Esc.18,504 being one half the proceeds of a Christmas Party held at The Royal British Club in December 1940.

Usage of the Institute again increased in 1942, there being 22,031 visits including a considerable number of survivors of shipwrecked crews, and two 'Ports of Honour' were given by the Institute, one to the officers and crew of the Portuguese warship 'Pedro Nunes' and to the personnel of the Naval Aviation Station in recognition of the rescue of 27 survivors of the *Avila Star*, and another to the captain and crew of twelve men of the Portuguese trawler *Ilha Graciosa* who saved several British survivors of the *Alouette*.

In November 1942 the premises were sold to João Félix da Silva Capucho & Cia. but the new owners confirmed the tenancy on the same terms and continued to grant the storage facilities previously enjoyed by the Institute.

During 1942 the Committee began considering the possibility of establishing a permanent Institute with bedrooms, adequate public areas and staff accommodation. As the one floor then occupied offered no possibility of adaptation it was decided to create a "New Premises Fund" into which substantial non-recurring donations were deposited. By the end of 1942 the Fund had invested £1,000 in British Government Securities.

Usage of the Institute reached its peak in 1943 with 27,813 recorded visits and the serving of over 25,000 meals. Activities continued much

along the lines of previous years. There were fewer survivors of shipwrecked crews but in April the Institute provided hospitality for 128 disabled British Prisoners of War who were being repatriated from prison camps in Italy. Lunch, drinks, cigarettes, chocolates and fruit were supplied and members of the British Community assisted in entertaining them. Later in the year, 134 British merchant seamen who had been prisoners of war in Germany also passed through Lisbon on their way to Great Britain and were looked after by the Institute, some for several months.

In view of the increased demand, the Committee decided to invest in a 'Stott' boiler cum tea-urn. What the tea from this technological breakthrough tasted like is not stated. Also, moving with the times, an electric gramophone with pick-up and amplifying equipment was acquired for use on dance nights.

In spite of the fact that fewer ships docked at Lisbon in 1944, visits to the Institute were only 251 less than in 1943 but 3,500 more meals were served. Obviously, news of the culinary delights of the Institute was spreading throughout merchant navies of the world. Although there was rationing in Portugal, as the authorities "*adopted a comprehending attitude*" a satisfactory solution was always found and supplies were maintained. The Committee, in their annual report were "*pleased to note that no expenditure had been necessary on behalf of shipwrecked seamen*".

The Library, as a result of donations from the British Institute, the Royal British Club, Carcavelos Sports Club, Mrs. Fulford Williams and the Sea War Library Service now totalled well over 1,500 volumes, but as seamen were permitted to take away books to read on board ship, additional supplies were always needed.

During 1944 the Committee decided to remodel the interior of the floor occupied by the Institute. This involved removal of the bar to a more suitable position and the enlargement and improvement of the kitchen space. A writing room was created, shower baths installed and additional room provided for the superintendent. Fortunately, as there were specific donations from Parry & Son Ltd. the Merchant Navy and the Shipping Office, Lisbon, only Esc.5,000 of the cost was needed to be borne by the Institute.

As a result of further donations, by the end of 1944 the New Premises

Fund held investments totalling £3,500 in British Government Securities.

With the cessation of hostilities in 1945, conditions showed a marked change. Fewer visits by seamen were recorded due partly to the discontinuance of wartime convoys and partly to the greatly reduced number of ships calling at Lisbon. Also, voluntary help fell away, mainly because many helpers left Portugal, and donations during the year were less than half the total of 1944.

As a White Paper presented in January 1945 implied that as far as welfare arrangements for seamen in Home ports were concerned, combined action would probably be taken by H. M. Government, the Shipping Industry and representatives of the seamen, the Committee submitted a memorandum based on the White Paper but adapted to the special requirements abroad, setting forth proposals for seamen's welfare arrangements in foreign ports with particular reference to Lisbon.

Although no definite conclusions were reached in London, H. M. Government gave a verbal assurance of their great interest in the continuance of the Institute's activities, and agreed to provide temporary financial assistance to help meet the cost of normal services on a peace-time basis.

Nevertheless, despite this offer of financial help, the Committee decided to re-organise the services of the Institute to make them, as far as possible, independent of Government help.

In the 1945 Annual Report the Committee paid tribute to the successive HBM Consul Generals, A. H. W. King, CBE who took a great interest in the Institute's work and by his efforts stimulated its development, Stanley Gudgeon, CBE who helped the Institute in many practical ways during his comparatively short period in Lisbon, and to Colin Harris who was a great help in placing before the Home Authorities the post-war needs of the Institute.

The social and sporting activities of the Institute were many and varied in 1945; nine dances, the usual Christmas festivities and special events to mark VE and VJ Days. Twenty-four football and two cricket matches were held after which the teams were entertained to a cold supper. There would have been more matches but for the levelling of the ground at Carcavelos in October.

The Seafarers' Welfare Committee (Lisbon) continued to bear the cost of the supply and maintenance of the sports gear, refreshments and suppers of the players and spectators of the Merchant Navy.

1946, the first complete year of the Institute's activities after the cessation of hostilities, showed a substantial decrease in the number of visits by seamen, only just under 10,000 (1945, 21,3732), but the Committee felt that continuation of the Institute was justified. The reasons for the falling off were fewer ships calling at Lisbon and much shorter stays in port.

Wartime voluntary helpers needed to be replaced by paid employees and this, together with a marked reduction in donations, presented the Committee with an acute financial problem. However, pending a decision by H. M. Government and the Shipping Industry to assume responsibility for the welfare of seamen in foreign ports, the Ministry of Transport made a grant of £600 in 1946 which enabled the Institute to show a small surplus.

The resources of the Institute were stretched to the limit by a visit to Portugal of the Home Fleet. Nearly 1,300 sailors visited the Institute, where they consumed 2,600 bottles of beer, 132 kilos of ham and 2,500 eggs, all served by a willing band of volunteers from the British community.

The Portuguese authorities quadrupled the normal bread ration and the Supply Officer of the Fleet, through the kind offices of Lt. W. Bailey (later CBE, GM, DSC), sent extra bread from *HMS Nelson*.

Not unexpectedly, usage of the Institute again fell in 1947 to just over 6,000. As no decision had been made by H. M. Government regarding the welfare of British seamen in foreign ports, the Committee drastically reduced expenses to a level consistent with an adequate service to meet existing needs and ceded part of the premises back to the landlords, Messrs. Capucho, in return for a reduction in rent. The Ministry of Transport's grant again enabled a small surplus to be made.

At the end of 1947, having regard to the fact that shipowners and masters of ships derived considerable indirect benefit from the facilities and services provided by the Institute, the majority of the British Shipping lines whose vessels used the port of Lisbon agreed to the Committee's suggestion of a voluntary charge per vessel using the port.

Although in 1948 expenditure was held to the level of 1947, the grant of £50 per month from the Ministry of Transport ceased at the end of March when the Merchant Navy Welfare Board, despite representations by the Institute's committee, reduced the monthly grant to £25 per month.

Fortunately, revenue from the voluntary scheme initiated at the end of 1947 made good this shortfall and, once again, a small surplus was recorded. Nevertheless, the Committee were aware of a further decrease in attendances, 4,543 (1947, 6,174) which caused concern.

In 1949, grants from the Merchant Navy Welfare Board ceased.

Representations by the Committee during 1949 seeking to establish the Institute on a permanent basis under the aegis of the Merchant Navy Welfare Board were unsuccessful, the Board suggesting the operation of the Institute be delegated to the Mediterranean Mission to Seamen without any guarantee of responsibility for finance.

As this proposal, implying a fundamental change in the administration and resulting in the Institute ceasing to be non-denominational, was not within the authority of the Committee to decide, a full report was made to the Benefactors at an Extra-Ordinary General Meeting held on 14th December, 1949 under the Chairmanship of H.B.M. Ambassador Sir Nigel Ronald, KCMG, CVO. No definite conclusion was reached at the meeting but it was agreed to pursue the following lines of enquiry before making a decision:

1. Endeavour to augment income from private subscribers, shipping companies and the Seamen's Union;
2. Inform the Mediterranean Mission to Seamen the Institute accepts their offer in principle whilst exploring possibilities;
3. Apply to Her Majesty's Government for a grant-in-aid.

Although the Committee realised that the need for such an Institute had decreased since the war and recognising that the existing premises were not ideal, they felt that any reduction in the facilities provided would result in further diminished usage and, ultimately closure.

In the early part of 1950 the Committee launched an appeal for subscriptions, the first since the Institute was formed in 1940. Over one

hundred individuals subscribed and the Shipping Companies increased their contributions either by the capitation charge or by direct donations.

In spite of the curtailment of costs and the increased revenue from subscribers, it became apparent by the middle of 1950 that the gap, caused both by falling attendances and the cessation of grants received prior to 1949, was unlikely to be bridged, nor was there any favourable prospect of any renewal of subsidies from any source.

Faced with the possibilities of drawing on capital to meet current losses, closing down the Institute or drastically reducing staff, the Committee decided to follow the last course although this might result in the lowering of the standard of amenities hitherto offered by the Institute. This, regrettably, involved dispensing with the services of R. L. Perkins, the superintendent, who had served the Institute faithfully since March 1942.

At the end of 1950, the Institute received a grant of £250 from the Merchant Navy Welfare Board and £50 from the National Union of Seamen which, once again, enabled a small surplus to be shown.

In 1951, on the grounds of economy, the Institute vacated the premises, Rua da Moeda, where 122,000 British and allied seamen had been entertained during the war years, moving to Largo Vitorino Damasio, N.º 3-2º dto.

Whether or not because of the move and the reduced facilities provided, attendances fell to a mere 1,153. The substantial decrease in wages, although partly off-set by the increase in rent, plus the continuation by the Merchant Navy Welfare Board of £250 enabled the Institute to break even in 1951.

In 1952 the progressive decline in attendances continued, only 824 being recorded, thereby showing that the demand for the amenities provided had diminished to a level where the useful purpose for which the Institute existed was no longer served. The principal causes appeared to be fewer British cargo vessels docking at Lisbon, shorter stays in port, improved conditions and facilities for seamen on board ship, and the fact that local docking practice had led to the majority of these ships being berthed east of Black Horse Square at St.ª Apolonia or Matinha quay thus making access to the Institute that much more difficult.

Also, there was an alternative attraction for seamen, The Economic Bar, run by Nick the Greek who sold beer at Esc.300, cheaper than at the Institute. Nick could also obtain nylons and other items in short supply in the UK and was always ready to exchange pounds for escudos which, being illegal, the Institute could not do. No doubt, other services not available at the Institute were on offer at the bar!

At the invitation of the Committee, the Secretary of the Merchant Navy Welfare Board was invited to Lisbon to discuss with the Committee the question of seamen's welfare in Lisbon and the situation of the Institute. His recommendation was that the present Institute should be closed and that the welfare of seamen in the Port of Lisbon should be organised on an international and self-supporting basis.

The Committee fully endorsed this opinion and whilst regretting the circumstances which necessitated the decision, called a General Meeting of the Benefactors to seek their agreement.

The meeting was held on the 31st March, 1953 with H. B. M. Ambassador Sir Nigel Ronald KCMG, CVO in the chair and 20 Benefactors present.

After discussion it was unanimously resolved that

1. in view of the continued falling off in visits of seamen to the British Seamen's Institute and following upon the recommendation of the Secretary of the Merchant Navy Welfare Board, the Institute be dissolved and it is hereby declared to be in dissolution.
2. the members of the 1952 Executive Committee of the Institute be and they are hereby empowered to carry out all measures necessary to give effect to the preceding Resolution and to deliver the books and records of the Institute to the Lisbon Historical Association when they have completed their task.
3. a Board of Four Trustees, one of which shall be H. B. M. Consul be appointed to hold and administer the funds of the Institute until such time as the funds can, in the opinion of the said Board of Trustees, be usefully employed for the purpose of the welfare of British Seamen in Lisbon.

Messrs. F. H. Harding, J. Ramsay and G. White were appointed the first Trustees.

The meeting then gave the Trustees the following directives:

1. co-operate in the establishment in Lisbon of an organisation for seamen's welfare on an international basis.
2. to consider merging with the Apostolado do Mar, a Portuguese organisation concerned with the welfare of seamen.

All the Institute's furnishings and equipment were given to the Apostolado do Mar, the committee of which was anxious to establish a separate wing for the use of non-Portuguese seamen.

The Institute, shortly afterwards, on 30th April, 1953 formally closed its doors.

Nothing came of the two directives given to the Trustees. Instead, out of the income from the investments, the Trustees paid annually, Esc.5,000 to the British Hospital and Esc.1,000 to the Apostolado do Mar, both amounts being doubled as from 1970. Over the years, various donations were made to the British Hospital, for example, Esc.100,000 on the occasion of the Hospital's Royal Wedding Appeal. In 1989, the Trustees decided to terminate the Trust and the balance in hand of Esc.1,042,000 was given to the British Hospital.

BRITISH SEAMEN'S INSTITUTE

Officers

Chairman

1940-53 James Ramsay, CMG, OBE

Honorary Treasurer

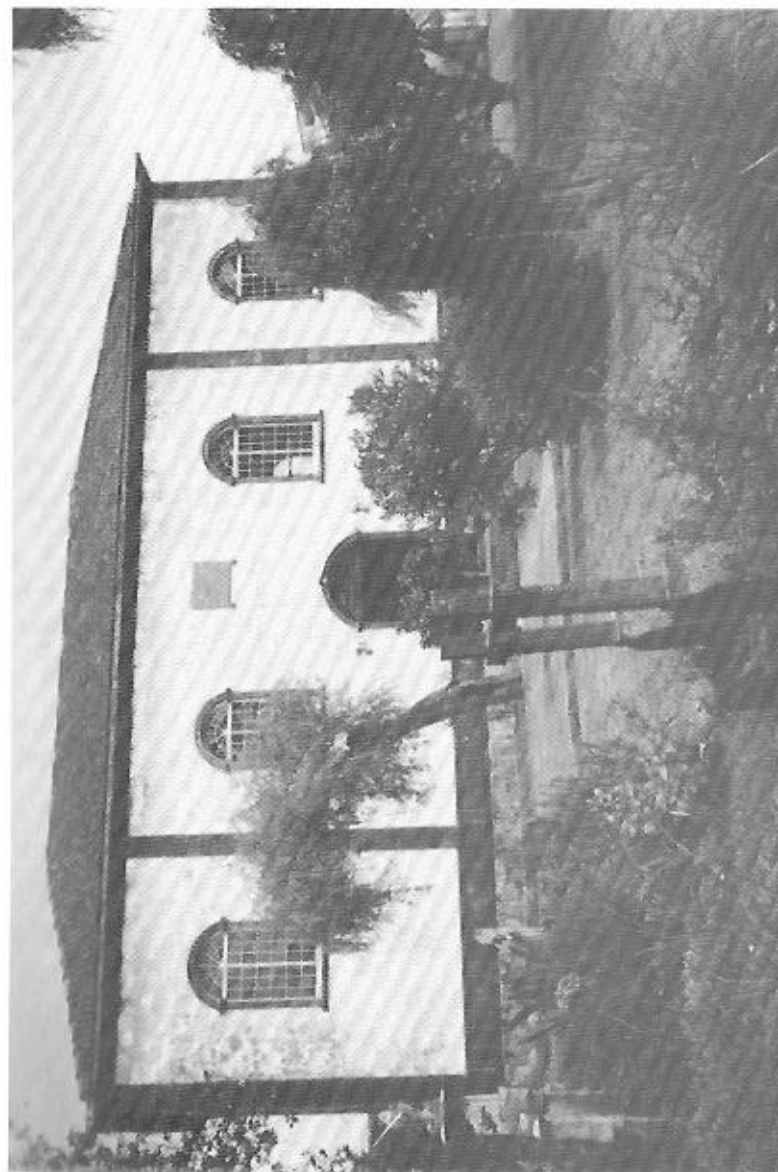
1940 S. E. Gishford

1940-53 G. White, FCA

Honorary Secretary

1940-44 R. I. Canby

1944-53 F. H. Harding



St. George's Anglican Church, Ponta Delgada, São Miguel, Azores.