Merchant Seamen: Discharge Books, Identity certificates and Central Indexes  
1900 to 1939 and beyond.  

This article contains my understanding of how the discharge book and central index system for merchant seamen developed. I have concentrated on the period from 1900 to 1921 but have some information on later periods up to the 1950s. I have had a close look at the CR10 index cards in Southampton Civic Archives while extracting the details of 23,000 Irish born merchant seamen for the website database www.irishmariners.ie.

I have also created several exhibitions for former seafaring communities in Ireland using the CR10 card photographs as a hook to draw people in and give me feedback. In contrast to many historical documents these cards are very close in time to us but their descendants had no idea they existed. Sons and daughters still possess discharge books, RS2 books and discharge certificates and I wanted to use these to get a better understanding of the record system. The photographs had the greatest impact. No one could remember these seamen as young men, but as Father Kit Sheridan said at the Rush exhibition, you could see the ‘visual DNA’ amongst the younger men in the audience.

1.1 Discharge books

Before 1900 an individual Certificate of Discharge would be given to a seaman as he left a ship, but there was no identifying number and individual sheets were easily lost. After 1900 this system appeared to continue, for home trade only, at least until 1939.

The discharge book for merchant seamen, or more formally the ‘Continuous Certificate of Discharge’, was introduced in 1900. It is dark blue, with 26 pages, slightly larger than a modern passport, with a rectangular slot in the front cover, which allows you to read the seaman’s surname. Each book has a unique identifying number (Discharge A number) and contains a seaman’s personal details together with details of foreign voyages and reports on his character. The seaman held the book. It appears that the discharge book was introduced to try and ensure that only men of good character were engaged for foreign voyages. The Discharge A numbers were
originally numbers only rising to seven digits by 1917-18. A letter prefix was added in the mid 1920s to indicate the seaman’s country of origin, while the numerical element started again at 1.

I have a copy of a discharge book, which I suspect was one of the first batch produced. Discharge No was 23938 and the printing information shows that it was one of a batch of 140,000 books printed by Waterlow in July 1900. The first voyage sign on date was 27 Sept 1900.

The design of the book changed between 1915 and 1917. Before the change, voyage details and seaman conduct notes were given on different pages. Afterwards voyage details and conduct notes appear on the same page, which makes it easier to understand. The number of voyages slots was also increased from 42 to 60. The later books have space for a passport type photograph of the seaman on page 26 but the photos that I have seen on this page have World War 2 date stamps.

1.2 Discharge Book printing dates
I have compiled a list of discharge books I have seen, which includes details of their printing dates. This gives an idea of the numbers produced and their likely date of issue.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discharge A Number</th>
<th>Printing date and books produced when known.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23938</td>
<td>July 1900. 140,000 books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>676204</td>
<td>July 1911. 50,000 books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>870042</td>
<td>April 1915. 49,900 books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>911040</td>
<td>Jan 1916. 25,000 books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>975400</td>
<td>July 1917. 60,000 books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1029627</td>
<td>Sept 1918. 10,000 books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1048939</td>
<td>1919?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1139998</td>
<td>1926-27 highest number found.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

New system

| R110133            | 1932?                                       |
| R217460            | April 1940. 30,000 books                    |

Letter prefix refers to UK born seamen with a few Irish additions.
2. Central Index System
A central index system for merchant seamen using the Discharge A number as the identifier was started in 1913. This is usually referred to as the Fourth Register of Seamen and was in operation from 1913 to 1941. The chronological development of the system is outlined below.

2.1 Late1913-Aug 1918. CR1 & CR2 cards introduced

CR1 cards provide personal details only. It appears that from this date they were completed in a port mercantile marine office at the same time that a new discharge book was issued to the seaman or an old one checked.

It appears that discharge books were only required for foreign voyages so the movements of men engaged solely in home trade were not recorded centrally. Figure 2 below appears to support this assumption.

‘Home Trade’ covers all voyages around the British Isles plus voyages to European Atlantic ports from Hamburg in the north to Brest in the south.

CR2 cards provide individual foreign voyage engagement (start) details.

Discharge A number is numerical identifier for both cards.

Card size 4.25 inches x 4 inches.

Most cards were believed to have been destroyed around 1969 but a few remain scattered through the 4 later card indexes.
Figure 1. 1913 CR1 card front. Printed Jan 1913

Figure 2. 1913 CR1 reverse. Comment suggests discharge book was not needed for home trade.
2.2 Aug 1918- Dec 1921. BT350. CR10 card index (The Special Register)

In the spring and summer of 1918 the British Government faced a manpower crisis on the Western Front. The British army had suffered 300,000 casualties, including 40,000 dead, in the German attacks of March and April. Conscription age limits were extended and those who were exempt from conscription like the 270,000 multinational workforce in the British Merchant Marine were subjected to closer scrutiny. This so-called special register was designed to allow the Government to check that the merchant seaman’s exemption from conscription is not abused by men taking an unduly long period ashore between voyages.

The CR10 cards were introduced in August 1918 together, with a new identity and service certificate (RS2 book) to be carried by the seaman. The introduction of the seaman’s passport style photograph is an important feature. It also appears that seamen who were engaged solely in home trade, and who did, therefore, not need a discharge book, were brought into the central index system for the first time. The CR1 card was phased out, but the CR2 card continued in use referenced to the new identity number (RS2 no).

CR10 cards are arranged alphabetically and provide personal, photo, and voyage details with the new id no as numerical identifier. This number is often referred to as the RS2 no. The personal details can be more detailed than found on a CR1 card as they include date of birth rather than just the year, and also next of kin details for perhaps one in eight seamen. The Discharge A number may also be noted. If the seaman already possessed a discharge book then the Board of Trade asked that the id no (RS2 no) should be marked at the top of page 1.

For numbering purposes seamen were placed in one of five groups
Group a ; 5001 to 100,000. Masters and navigating officers.
Group b: 100,001 to 200,000. Engineer Officers, refrigeration engineers and electricians.
Group c; 200,001 to 300,000. Surgeons, purser, apprentices, and wireless operators.
Group d; 300,001 to 800,000. Sailors, firemen and other men and boys of the deck and engine room.
Group e; 800,001 to 999,999. Stewards, cooks and other members of the catering staff.
Figure 3. CR10 card. Personal details side for Christopher Herbert. Note printing date Aug 1918.

Figure 4. CR10 card. Photo & voyages side for Christopher Herbert.
CR2 cards continued to be used to provide foreign voyage start information and were usually discarded after information was transferred to the back of the CR10 card. CR2 Cards were referenced to id no (RS2 no) and not Discharge A numbers between August 1918 and December 1921.

Both CR10 and CR2 Card sizes are 5 inches × 3 inches.

Each seaman has his personal details and foreign voyage start details on one card. Previous system needed 2 cards (CR1 & CR2) to give same information. If the seaman lost his identity book then a new book and number was issued.

It seems that it was initially planned to record ALL voyage patterns both home trade and foreign in the RS2 book and on the matching CR10 card. This needed foreign voyage discharge cards (CR3) and home voyage engagement and discharge cards (CR7 and CR8). This would give the information needed to monitor the time off between voyages. The scheme appears very ambitious.
These plans appear to have been scaled back very quickly possibly even before the Armistice of November 1918. One result of this scaling back is that many seamen who were working in the home trade may have home trade voyages recorded in their RS2 book but no voyages shown on their CR10 card because only CR2 cards were being used to update voyage details.

After 1921 the cards were sometimes updated with information on the death of the seaman.

**Extent of CR10 Card Index**

154 boxes with approx 2000 cards/box giving 308,000 records arranged alphabetically

significant numbers of cards extracted for WW2 Combined file or missing.

**How complete are the CR10 card indexes?**

There were several instances where no CR10 cards were found for individuals although I was sure I had a correct id no from other sources.

I have looked at a number of the crew lists and agreements for individual merchant ships registered in Irish ports in the 1918-21 period. Most of the crew lists have the id no written above the crewman’s name. As a check I selected crew lists for the eight Joseph Fisher owned colliers registered in Newry, Co Down in January 1919. Each ship had a nine-man crew and they were operating in the home trade across the Irish Sea.

On January 1st 1919 there were 67 Irish seamen with id nos detailed on the 8 crew lists. I checked the details against my database and found 47 (70%) there and 20 (30%) missing. 3 men out of the 47 had substituted the town where they were living for their birthplace.

The seamen may be ‘missing’ because the cards have been moved to the Combined Index BT364 if the man served in World War 2, or we did not spot the Irish birthplace, or the man has substituted an out of Ireland home address for an Irish birthplace. It may also be just lost or destroyed.

Of the 47 seamen who do possess CR10 cards, only a handful had this January 1919 home trade voyage recorded on the card.
Adding Extra Information to the Database. The Exhibition Programme

I planned local temporary exhibitions because I thought it was an excellent way to involve the local community. The seaman photographs had tremendous drawing power with the ‘visual DNA’ angle. Errors can be corrected and information added on men who may be still remembered. I tried to place them in a family context. The 1911 census of Ireland is a tremendous tool for locating individuals and families, being so close in time to the 1918-21 period, and all 32 counties are now on line.

The local exhibitions organised to date are


2009. Islandmagee, Co Antrim, 70 seamen out of 290.
   - Newry & Mourne Museum, Newry, Co Down, 60 seamen out of 400.
   - Skerries, Co Dublin, 70 seamen.
   - Clogherhead, Co Louth, 70 seamen.

2010 planned
   - County Museum, Dundalk, Co Louth, 350 seamen.
   - Inishowen Museum, Greencastle, Co Donegal. 100 Inishowen seamen.
   - Islandmagee, Co Antrim 2, with feedback, 80 seamen out of 290.
   - Rush, Co Dublin 2, with feedback, 100 seamen.

Islandmagee Methodist Church hosted the Islandmagee exhibition. One card featured Hugh Donald, whose CR10 card had been issued in early September 1918. His family drew my attention to a memorial tablet in the church for him and another brother. His ship, which had been carrying coal from Cardiff to Archangel for the White Russians, was sunk by a U boat in St Georges Channel at the end of September 1918.

The community knew many of these recent ancestors, their characters and relationships, and what happened next. They were also keen to tell me whom I had left out.

The exhibitions have also highlighted some themes, which have been repeated in different communities, and given me information to work with.

One example
   "The Royal Naval Reserve. Joining seems to have been quite extensive. What were the financial benefits of joining and did the local coastguards act as recruiting agents (for a fee)? Internment in Groningen, Holland."
2.3 1921-1939ish. BT 349 (CR1) & BT 348 (CR2) card indexes

The CR1 card was reintroduced to replace the CR10 card in late 1921 with the photograph being dropped, while the CR2 card was modified to use the Discharge A number as the numerical identifier.

Card size remained at 5 inches x 3 inches.

**CR1 cards** provide personal details only.
arranged alphabetically with Discharge A number as numerical identifier.

**CR2 cards** are arranged numerically by discharge number and provide individual foreign voyage start details. RS2 no reference dropped.

One CR2 Card usually retained/per seaman with all foreign voyage start details. Other CR2 cards discarded after details entered.

It appears there was no recording of Home Trade voyages either centrally or in the Discharge Book. This suggests that seamen who were working in the home trade reverted to a situation where they did not need a discharge book.

Each seaman needs two cards to show his personal and foreign voyage start details.

**Extent of CR1 and CR2 Series Indexes**

**CR1** 123 boxes with approx 3000 cards/box giving 369,000 records
Arranged alphabetically

**CR2** 118 boxes with approx 3000 cards/box giving 354,000 records
Arranged numerically by Discharge A number. Letter prefixes started in mid 1920s with numbers starting again at 1

May cover 400,000 ish seamen

significant numbers of cards extracted for WW2 Combined file
2.4 1939ish-1956ish, BT364. Combined Series Card Index.

These cards contain records for seamen who were active in this period. It appears that early in World War 2 the records of many active merchant seamen with Discharge A numbers, were extracted from the 1918-39 records and grouped together. This file appears to hold seamen who were later judged to be inactive or retired in the 1960s and may have been removed from an active file.

Cards are arranged numerically with Discharge A number as identifier.

A seaman can have CR10, CR1 and CR2 cards plus WW2 photos and voyage details grouped together in this file. This is possibly the reason that pouches were developed.

It also appears that in September 1939 there were plans to monitor a seaman’s time ashore using a similar system to that planned in August 1918.

Extra documents produced included foreign voyage discharge cards (R.S.9) and home voyage engagement and discharge cards (R.S.10 and R.S.11).

This suggests that, as in 1918, seamen engaged in home trade, re-entered the central recording system. It also appears that for this war, home trade service details were entered into the discharge book together with a passport type photograph on page 26.

Figure 6. R.S.9 card converted to R.S.11. printed 9/39

Extent of Combined Series Index

97 boxes with approx 2000 cards/box giving 194,000 records

arranged numerically by Discharge A number.

May only cover 50,000 seamen at 4 records/seaman
Acknowledgements
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Arranged chronologically.
1918-21. CR10 series. BT350
1921-39. CR1 and CR2 series. BT349 and BT348
1939ish-56ish. Combined series. BT364

Secondary Source
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2 Circular 1595. Registration of Seamen. Instructions to Superintendents. Board of Trade, Marine Department, August 1918. National Archives, Kew. ref BT16/19, p1
3 Circular 1595. p4
4 Circular 1595. p2-3.
5 Circular 1595. p10.