

The truth about the Greenwich Pensioners: New source shines light on sailors' lives

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The lives of 18th century naval pensioners in the Greenwich Hospital hold several surprises, according to new research carried out at the university.

Using the Greenwich Hospital records for the first time, Dr Martin Wilcox, of the university's Greenwich Maritime Institute, found that the [sailors](#) admitted provided a colourful image of naval life, and were often far removed from the image of pensioners held today.

Opening in the early [18th century](#), the Greenwich site housed roughly nearly 3000 sailors by 1815, with the majority coming from London. It played a vital role in supporting those unable to remain at sea, often through injury rather than age. Although the average pensioner entered at 56, they ranged from aged 12 to 99. Many of the younger men had lost limbs or been blinded; however, a significant number of pensioners returned to sea, often as ships' cooks (cartoons of the time portray the cooks as having a wooden leg).

The accommodation at the [hospital](#), if basic, was usually far better than the sailor might expect elsewhere. However, the site had its problems. With no families allowed to live in, and some of the men frustrated at being unable to work, bad behaviour broke out, as shown in the list of petitions the records hold. One pensioner was expelled from the site after fathering nine illegitimate children in Greenwich. Another was arrested for stealing the Hospital's clothes, while even the staff had problems; one nurse was expelled for infecting several men on the site

with venereal disease. Complaints from the town about drunkenness in the pensioners were common.

"They could be quite a rough bunch," says Dr Wilcox, who used the Hospital's original records to build up pictures of "the men who manned the wooden walls."

"But in fact not much is known about sailors' lives in this period. The hospital records are a uniquely rich resource that really shows what life was like for them. It's surprising nobody's used them before."

The hospital site today forms the university's Greenwich Campus.

Dr. Wilcox used the records to build up pictures of individual sailors' origins, family lives, careers and reasons for entering the Hospital. His research paper on the records, "The 'Poor Decayed Seamen' of Greenwich Hospital, 1705-1763," is published in the prestigious *International Journal of Maritime History*, the leading publication in the field. He has also co-authored the book *Sustaining the Fleet, 1793-1815*, about the Navy and food, and is currently researching the British fishing industry.

More information: Martin Wilcox, "The 'Poor Decayed Seamen' of Greenwich Hospital, 1705-1763," *International Journal of Maritime History*

Provided by University of Greenwich

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