

THE ARAB BOARDING HOUSE

**A photographic exhibition by Peter Fryer
Text by David Campbell**

When Ali Said opened his South Shields boarding house for Arab seamen in August 1909 he connected the north east of England to colonial networks that ran from Europe through Suez to India and beyond. Over time these lodgings in the Holborn district of the town, down by the river, marked a transformation in the character of the region.

Having settled in the town in 1894, Said and his fellow seamen were part of a growing contingent of Arab seamen working on British steam ships. Originally from Yemen, these seamen were drawn into the British Empire after the annexation of Aden in 1839. As the first colonial possession acquired during the reign of Queen Victoria, the Aden protectorate was established on Yemeni territory to provide a coaling station half way between Bombay and Suez. Run by the authorities in Bombay, Aden doubled in size as the rural population of the Yemen highlands sought work in this new colonial centre.

The work available to these farmers seeking to support the families at home was distant and gruelling. The global growth of merchant shipping in the second half of the 19th century required new labour. 'Tramp steamers' – those ships that plied irregular routes and required crew willing to work for long periods – were unattractive to European sailors. Into this breach Arab workers willingly stepped, taken on as fireman to toil below decks shovelling coal into the furnaces. In the intense heat and noise of the boiler room the fireman had the most arduous of working conditions. By some estimates one in every 200 firemen who started a trip returned certifiably insane.

In the years up to and including the First World War there were several thousand Arab seamen in British ports. Although most were only temporary migrants following work, those that settled made up the first substantial Muslim communities in Britain. As the fourth largest UK port (after London, Cardiff and Liverpool), the Tyne came to host the second largest Arab community in the country.

Barred by law from residing in private lodgings with local families, seamen of all nationalities required larger commercial accommodation and the boarding houses that were established to meet this need were organised along ethnic lines. As centres for their respective diasporas, they were cultural homes, welfare organisations, financial institutions and the hub of the labour network. South Shields in 1920 was home to eight boarding houses hosting between 300 and 600 Arab seamen at any one time. In the post-colonial context of twenty-first century Britain, despite the many transformations to community and industry, and despite their declining population, these boarding houses continue to have an active life in contemporary South Shields.

Residents of the Aden protectorate were British subjects and thus able to be employed. Colonial work, its wages an improvement on the poor rural economy of Yemen, became an attractive option for those seeking financial security for their families. However, with many Yemeni labourers coming from the highlands beyond the protectorate, they had to either bribe local authorities to designate them as residents and hence subjects, or hope that British immigration controls were few and far between. During the First World War the latter turned out to be true, as issues of citizenship were brushed aside in the need to staff the ships supporting the war effort. As a result of their commitment, some 700 Arabs from South Shields lost their lives when their vessels were sunk during the Great War. Being fireman working long hours below decks, escape from a torpedoed vessel was rarely an option.

Despite their valour, the period after the First World War saw new immigration restrictions on the Arab seamen. Re-classified as “coloured aliens,” they were barred from receiving welfare and sometimes deported. With a depressed shipping economy and an expanded labour market – as British service personnel were de-mobilised and returned to the civilian workforce – Arab seamen became the targets of popular hostility. Although South Shields has been known as “the town where colour doesn’t count,” clashes between Arab seamen and “Britishers” in 1919 and 1930 saw labour disputes portrayed in the media as “race riots.”

The North East has historically been identified as a welcoming host with a relative lack of hostility towards others. The region’s mono-cultural status (some 96% of respondents defined themselves as ‘White British’ in the 2001 census, compared to 87% in the rest of England) hides its history of international migration. A major centre for immigrants from Scotland and Ireland in the early twentieth century, as well as a home for people from further a field, by some estimates more than one-third of the 1911 population was born outside of England or the children of immigrants.

Tyneside was unusual in the sense that some significant black migration predated 1945, and central to this was the arrival of the Yemeni sailors in South Shields. Their presence was met at times with popular hostility and their relationships with the wider community produced periodic moral panics. However, despite the decline of the coal and shipping industries for which they came to work, the Yemeni community is neither dead nor invisible. The mosque in the town is one of the oldest in Britain and largely the product of the Arab seamen’s efforts. Today there are still around twenty seamen from the older generation still living in two boarding houses in South Shields (Mohammed Sayyadi’s and Muhammed Mohamed’s). While this number has dwindled over time, their impact on our region’s culture continues to live on in the communities, sometimes generated by marriage with locals, they have helped create. With a number of seamen remaining in South Shields to receive the pensions they are owed so that they can continue to support their families who have remained in Yemen, our region continues to be marked by transnational relations that have colonial origins.

Sources

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Exhibition

<http://www.amber-online.com/exhibitions/the-arab-boarding-house>

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