



The sailor's champion: Samuel Plimsoll

The 'Plimsoll line' is the simplest, yet most extraordinary contributor to maritime safety in the last two centuries.

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Merchant ships have a marking on their hull called the Plimsoll line (the 'international load line'), which clearly marks the maximum safe draught to which she can load to maintain sufficient reserve buoyancy in all conditions. Samuel Plimsoll is credited with this innovation. It is simple, foolproof and visible to any lay observer, and its effect on seafaring safety has been astonishing.

In the early 1800's, hundreds of ships were being sent from England across the Atlantic to the USA, heavily overloaded, critically unsafe, with dozens of crew onboard. Often called 'coffin ships,' these vessels were often insured for grossly inflated sums with scant oversight. It is commonly believed that their shipmerchant owners were quite happy to see the ship sink (with all lives) in order to collect the insurance on the vessel. This led to thousands of deaths of impoverished merchant sailors.

Samuel Plimsoll was a British coal merchant in London - not a very successful one. However, his experience taught him to empathize with the poor and destitute sailors of London's docks, and ultimately take up their cause. In 1867, Samuel Plimsoll was elected to Parliament and endeavoured to pass a Bill dealing with safe loading on ships, with the aim of improving safety for merchant sailors. Plimsoll's Bill was defeated by the powerful ship-owning MPs in Parliament.

In 1872, Plimsoll published literature called 'Our Seamen' with an expository account of life aboard British ships, and a critique of the industry as a whole. The following year, Plimsoll raised a motion in Parliament to appoint a Royal Commission into the state of shipping and safety of seafarers. Plimsoll was rapidly becoming a champion of sailor's wellbeing.

Through his passion, Plimsoll had a reputation for hostility – once erupting in Parliament, shaking his fist at the Speaker's face and calling other Members "villians" where they would not support his cause. There seemed to be common consensus that the interests of powerful merchant shipowners were prevailing over the lowly sailors of Portsmouth's docks.

Despite his colourful enthusiasm for his cause, in 1876 the United Kingdom Merchant Shipping Act was passed. It gave broad powers to the UK Board of Trade to stipulate the maximum draught to which a ship could be loaded. The marking on the hull that indicated that draught became known as 'Plimsoll's Line.' Samuel Plimsoll had finally won his case.

Decades later in 1930, the International Load Line Convention was passed – which demonstrated international agreement on Plimsoll's reforms. Most trading ships around the world now had to carry the Plimsoll mark. Samuel Plimsoll died in Folkestone in 1898, and never saw the full effect of his reforms.

Samuel Plimsoll should be remembered as a saviour to tens of thousands of sailors. His passion and dedication should serve as an inspiration to our modern leaders. May he never be forgotten.

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