

Visiting ancient slave ports like Calabar on ships named after ancient centres of civilisation such as Apapa. Delivering eager missionaries on one-way tickets to developing countries only too recently known as the White Man's Grave.

This was still the working reality in the late 20th century for seafarers on the cargo and passenger/cargo ships operated by Elder Dempster Lines – with nicknames like Elder Gangster and Every Day Labour. For over 150 years, the Liverpool-based shipping company had been so deeply involved in the development of trade on the 3,840km coast from Cape Verde to Mount Cameroon that its slogan was 'We are West Africa'.

Now the spoken stories of those who worked for this trade maker are available for all to hear. Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU), backed by the Heritage Lottery Fund, has set up **Homeward Bound: A Liverpool-West Africa Heritage** – described as a 'people's history' of the company from its heyday in the 1950s and 1960s to its demise in the 1980s.

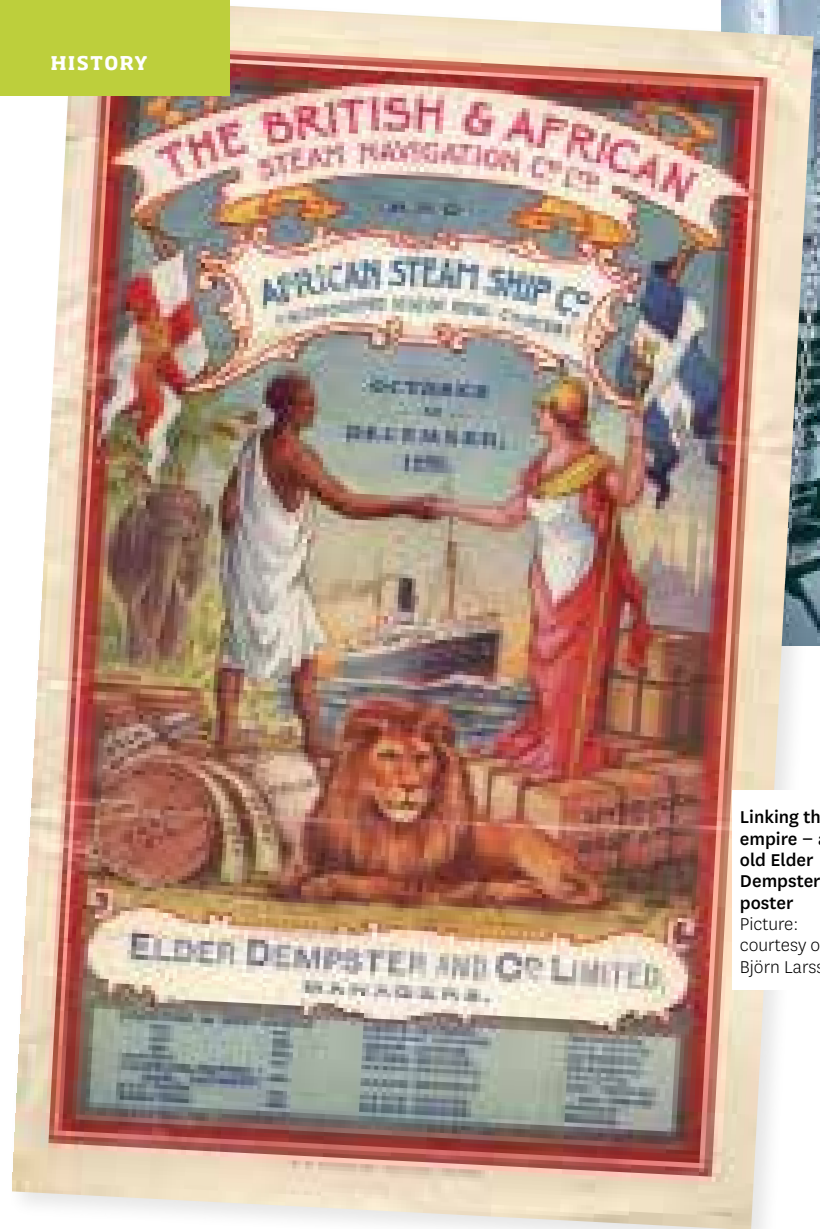
Professor Nick White, an LJMU expert in the history of decolonisation and international business, established the project in 2016. The outcome? 'I'm proud to say that there are 24 interviews available on the internet,' he says. 'Soon the seafarers' artefacts, photographs and surviving correspondence will be digitised and articles about the cumulative knowledge gained will be published. We also plan to have more outreach activities with schools and community groups, as well as exhibitions and events to discuss the project.'

This is an unusual initiative, Prof White notes. 'Most shipping companies' archives are not available online. Seemingly none have so far included spoken memoirs of all levels of seafarers and office workers. So this is a rare step.

'It's one we hope other companies will follow, because there is a rich maritime heritage which could be lost to posterity. The world of break-bulk general cargo shipping was very different to the containerisation we are familiar with today.'

Project contributors have gathered to create a spoken history of the company, the industry and a particular stage in British colonial development and African independence. Even better, four of those putting the questions are themselves former Elders employees. The Elder Dempster Pensioners' Association (known as the Elders of Elders) is among those advising the project about its shape.

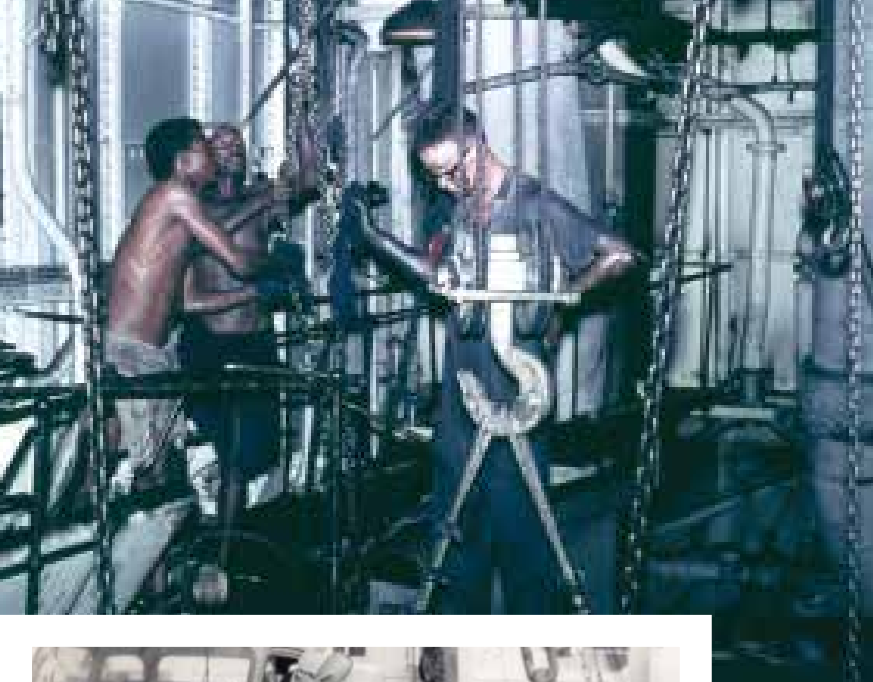
Homeward Bound's participants include captains, pursers, engineers, cadets, mates, wives, a couple of managing directors, plus a ship's printer and a pantryman. Several worked in 'the House of Mirth', or 'the Kremlin', as the headquarters in Liverpool's India Buildings were known. Many lived in West Africa for a time too.



Linking the empire – an old Elder Dempster poster  
Picture: courtesy of Björn Larsson

# LIVING LINKS TO LIVERPOOL LEGENDS

Seafarers and shore staff who served with one of the UK's great shipping companies are recording their stories for posterity in a university project that ties the history of NW England to the coast of western Africa. **JO STANLEY** reports...



▲ Nigerian crew working in an engine room  
Picture courtesy of Mike Ingham

▼ Third Mate Steve New on the deck of Dumbaia, the company's last conventional general cargo vessel, in the early 1960s  
Picture courtesy of Mike Ingham

What was special about sailing with Elders were the ports, cargoes and the crews. 'Sailing to Africa was something completely new to me,' remembers Captain John Goble, who had previously only encountered highly-developed port infrastructure (on his New Zealand runs), not places where cranes were rare, palletisation unheard of, and coal was loaded by men bearing it in bowls on their heads.

As Elders employees in the 1950s, 60s, 70s and 80s, both seafarers and HQ personnel had direct experience of independence struggles. Nigeria's civil war (1967-70) caused much disruption to voyages – and therefore to seafarers' time away.

Visiting the many ports meant seafarers could compare the different directions that the French, British, Portugese, and German ex-colonies were taking, as the 19th century 'Scramble for Africa' was reversed. Purser Jim Forsey witnessed 'the post-independence fragmentation of Africa', with the 1960s hopes giving way to despair at the destructive rise of kleptocracies, as Capt Goble put it.

Accelerated Africanisation, with attendant problems of corruption and violence, added to existing problems of pilfering and negotiating the demanding of 'dash' – the endemic form of bribery besetting every quayside.

Pleasures ranged from sailing the company's yacht, Forerunner, in Lagos yacht club, to playing football with the locals, tourism, and taking the ship's lifeboat ashore to a beach, dragging a net of chilled beer cans. Expat clubs were variously hoity-toity or welcoming.

Deck officers and pursers drawing up lading plans were challenged by carrying some of the trickiest cargoes in the world, including palm oil and liquid latex, which had to be stored in heated waxed holds. Humidity wrecked freight.

Ships were very multicultural – and segregated. But the different groups of personnel got on: British officers; Nigerian catering crew; Sierra Leonean deck and engine ratings; and 'Kru boys' as day labourers in ports.

Any Yoruba and Igbo tribal opposition onboard ship was sorted out by Nigerians themselves, not by the officers. There was the usual ingrained suspicion of the unfamiliar, but not much violent racism.

What kind of company was it, according to these contributors? Elder Dempster had a family feel, even for non-white people. It paid well, not least to attract those who'd prefer more appealing routes. But no overtime money was given.


When it came to welfare, Elder Dempster was humane – for example, flying you home if your spouse had miscarried. Internal communication was good; training was thorough for officers, and crewing was never skeleton-level.

People preferred Elders to other companies because the runs were short (usually four to six weeks). But the company had something of an image problem in comparison to Bibby's Blue Funnel. Bibbys were seen as the gentlemen, Elders the workers, says LJMU project contributor Captain Brian McManus.

Several contributors felt that as time went on, Elder Dempster wasn't managed well by its parent, Blue Funnel/Ocean, especially as trade worsened. 'A ship is a hole you pour money down' became a saying in head office, recalls purser John Edge. Takeovers, including by Blue Funnel/Ocean in 1965, didn't help and the company did not diversify into cruising. Costs rose.

Containerisation brought the end in 1989, with a takeover by Delmas-Vieljeux. Elder Dempster finally wound up in 2000.

Contributors to LJMU's collective remembering of the company's 150-year history hope that their stories will be widely enjoyed, including by people in West Africa who had a different experience of Elders. It's fascinating listening.

And the project is making an important wider contribution to Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) history in the UK. Two of the seafarers and one of the passengers featured in Homeward Bound are BAME people and their stories will be deposited in suitable archives. An interview with third mate Obi Okeke is featured in Black Salt, the first exhibition about black seafarers in Britain, staged by Merseyside Maritime Museum. 

The Homeward Bound project has **24 interviews** from former Elder Dempster employees on its website

Homeward Bound is online at [www.ljmu.ac.uk/microsites/elder-dempster](http://www.ljmu.ac.uk/microsites/elder-dempster). **The project would be pleased to receive life story accounts from other Elder Dempster seafarers. Please contact: Nick White, LJMU, John Foster building, 80-98 Mount Pleasant, Liverpool L3 5UZ or via [N.J.White@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:N.J.White@ljmu.ac.uk)**