

# Women going to sea with Elder Dempster

by Dr Jo Stanley FRHistS, Maritime Historian

Website: [www.jostanley.biz](http://www.jostanley.biz) / Blog: <http://genderedseas.blogspot.com>

**Author of *From Cabin Boys to Captains: 250 years of women at sea*, History Press, £20 pb; £10.04 ebook.**

<https://www.facebook.com/From-Cabin-Boys-to-Captains-250-years-of-women-at-sea-1674785129441025>

Despite the superstitions women were at sea, working mainly as stewardesses, since at least 1821. They faced shipwrecks, weathered storms, and survived uppity passengers.

In Elders, as in other companies, some 'Tabbies' married their shipmates. Some raised children who became Elders' employees.

But women seafarers' history is barely visible. That's why I wrote a book about them : *From Cabin Boys to Captains: 250 years of women at sea*, History Press, 2016.

Elder Dempster stewardess May Quinn was the woman who inspired that book. She was my great aunt and I knew her until I was a teenager.

I don't have many of the souvenirs people brought back from there, such as crocodile skin clutchbags. But I do have her African brass sewing box with its pink satin lining. And no, it doesn't smell of spices.

Hearing the story of May's career (from my mother who, in a cramped Litherland house, had shared a bed with her for years) led me in the 1980s to first start studying these remarkable working-class women.

I was so impressed that they managed to see the world by dusting their way around it. And no-one seemed to know the history of these women, who numbered over a two thousand-odd by the time May sailed.

Clearly someone should. Seemingly that would be me. I began my quest by advertising in the *Liverpool Echo* for stewardesses to tell me their stories.

That's how I came across Julia Andrews. Her family in Everton kindly got in touch with me. (Julia had already passed away). Later I traced more of her story through [ancestry.co.uk](http://ancestry.co.uk).

Recently, for this Elders maritime heritage project, I tried to track down May's story through [ancestry.co.uk](http://ancestry.co.uk). That led to me getting her Board of Trade record.

What a big surprise! For years seafaring men had been assuring me that women only went to sea in order to get husbands.

I knew this to be a fantasy because I've interviewed so many, or their relatives. This had taught me that women went to sea for three main reasons: in order to see the world; because it seemed inevitable (their family worked for the shipping line and could alert them to vacancies); and because they were the main family breadwinner. They needed the money.

But lo and behold! What had May done? The stereotype I'd refuted. Hardly had she begun sailing than she married a shipmate, a steward from *the Apapa*!

The story of May and Julia is the story of stewardesses in many different shipping lines. Seafaring women, like men, switched employers. So hundreds, if not thousands, of women seafarers will have seen West Africa care of Elders. Equally thousands of women passengers will have gone to and from West Africa in the care of such mediating hostesses.

But Julia and May are both typical and special. They went to West Africa at a time when few women could even dream of heading for such a destination. And they worked with Black passengers at a time when most English women back home knew very little about race relations.