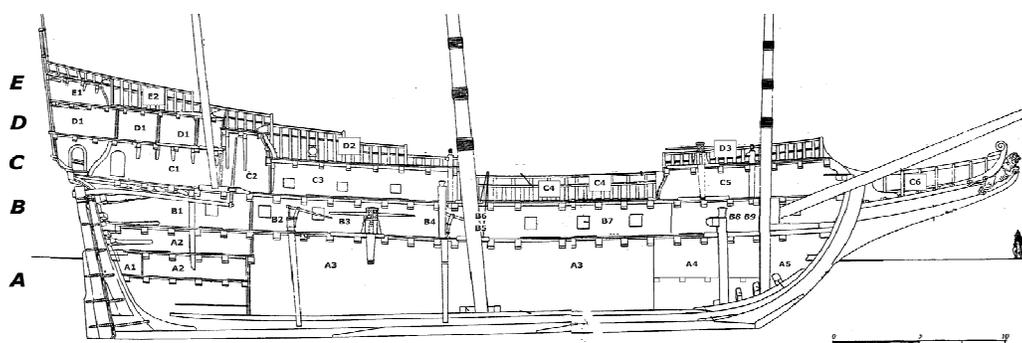




2017-07

Indiamen

Indiamen were the super-tankers of the age of sail. They dwarfed the average merchant ship. Between 1730 and 1780 the average ship displacement increased first to 650 tons and then to 800 tons. That was three or four times larger than most merchant ships. They were also far more expensive to build and outfit.



Indiamen were not fast or overly manoeuvrable. They were designed to travel long distances (from Europe to India and Asia) with a large cargo. Due to the value of the cargo carried, they were highly prized by pirates and enemy naval officers in time of war. As a consequence, Indiamen were armed to protect themselves with some ships carrying enough firepower to equal a frigate. On the ship diagram above you can see gun ports on both the orlop deck (B) and upper decks (C).

Carrying cargo was not the only means by which Indiamen made money. Cabins were found on the upper deck (C deck) and if available in the superstructure (D deck). The furnishing in the cabins on the upper deck were similar to a wealthy home and commanded a premium price.

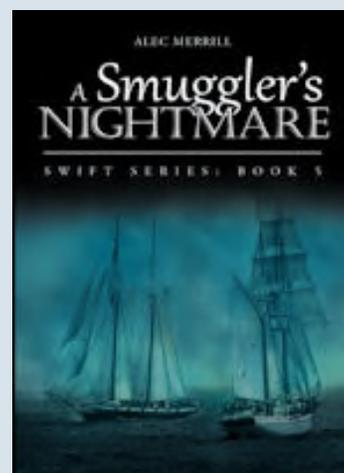
The crew, ranging from 55 to 120 men depending upon the number of guns carried, had their quarters on the orlop deck amongst the guns (B7) and forward of the main mast. Aft of the main mast on the orlop deck were the quarters of the petty officers, the sick bay and the steward's room. The galley was located amidships (B6) and had extra fittings to hold cooking pots and to allow grilling of food. The food on an Indiaman was far superior to other ships, and some Indiamen had chefs to prepare food for the passengers.

When an Indiaman sailed from England to India, she was generally at sea for the better part of six months. Occasionally, the ships stopped at Cape Town in South Africa, but that was only if they had goods to sell or messages to deliver. The ship needed to carry a great deal of water and that water tended to become rank over the duration of the voyage. As a consequence, the ship also carried an abundance of wine and beer for the passenger who were not accustomed to drinking stagnant water.

Officers serving on an Indiaman were generally carefully selected. They needed adequate navigational skills and reasonable seamanship, but also needed good social skills as many of the passengers were from the upper classes and included ladies. Cursing seaman in the presence of such company was inadvisable. In many cases the officers were former naval officers who learned their trade in the navy and were also the sons of wealthy families.



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