# *Conclusion*

Little is known of the personal lives, background or training of English medieval shipmasters; it has to be assumed that they went to sea as ordinary seamen, possibly with familial connections, and learned the trade 'on the job'. There was no system of apprenticeship and, in the fourteenth century, no guild to control their qualifications. Of their professional lives, once they had their own ship, rather more is known from records of their appearances in court, charter-parties and other surviving documents.

Having gained sufficient experience at sea, an ambitious seaman looking to be a shipmaster, had four options: to persuade a shipowner to take him on as a waged employee, to enter a shipowning partnership with merchants or financiers, to charter a ship on his own account, or to buy his own ship. Each option offered advantages and disadvantages, each had its own modus operandi, and in each the shipmaster's position varied under the several available codes of law.

During the period under examination, the differing views on commerce and on the master /servant relationship in common and merchant law, and the competition for business between their courts and the admiralty courts, led to considerable confusion. Although common law was absorbing from the law merchant the concepts of trust, service contract and partnership, there was always some doubt about which law would offer a shipmaster a more sympathetic hearing in cases concerned with a disruptive or non-cooperative partnership, or any commercial dispute.

Having, in some way, acquired a ship and found sufficient cargo to justify the voyage at profitable freight rates, the shipmaster was faced with a considerable amount of bureaucracy. His contract with the shipping merchants was in the form of a charter-party; this could be quite straightforward, even formulaic, but it could also be complex, with the merchant shippers demanding a flexibility of route, an impossible timetable, a mixture of currencies, and a variety of other clauses, all to be negotiated. With his charter-party, the shipmaster then had to arrange credit, without incurring accusations of usury, to fit out and victual the ship and to pay his crew for the outward voyage. He also had to agree with the crew how they were to be paid for the homeward voyage, in cash or by an allotment of cargo space for their own endeavours.

The shipmaster's relationships with the merchant shippers travelling with their cargoes, and with his crew, were largely subject to protocols laid down in two codifications of maritime law. These were the *Lex d'Oleron* and the *Inquisition of Queenborough*, both of which are records of legal decisions, establishing rules

for, *inter alia*, jettison, general average, delays incurred by the merchants or the shipmaster, damage to cargo, anchoring discipline in havens, and other potentially contentious issues. Further, relating to the crew, the two codes laid down rules for the maintenance of discipline, a scale of punishment, payments, and the care of the sick and wounded.

Litigation following infraction of any part of maritime law should, ideally, have been heard before a court specialising in such matters. Throughout the fourteenth century, attempts were made to set up admiralty courts to deal with all maritime misdeeds, except felonies, but after a brief flowering towards the end of the century, the courts suffered from the effects of personal greed and increasing competition from common law courts, and went into decline. By mid-fifteenth century, they were virtually impotent and of little importance.

During the period under examination, the art of navigation advanced to become a science, with the introduction of the magnetic compass and the hour-glass. Before they had access to those instruments, navigators kept close to the coast, relying on landmarks to fix their position, the sun or *Polaris* to indicate north, and a lead-line to warn of shallows and to locate suitable places to anchor. Magnetic compasses considerably improved the efficiency and safety of shipping and contributed to the growth of the industry at the expense of road transport. Tidal times were recorded by reference to compass bearings on the lunar analogue clock and this, together with the hour-glass, meant that shipmasters could take advantage of favourable tides in channels and in havens when planning their passages.

Unlike horticulture, the techniques of medieval seamanship were not recorded in any surviving instruction manual. They can, however, be traced from information in contemporary literature, including alliterative poetry, which is characterised by accurate descriptive detail, from contemporary illustrations, and from information in the surviving sailing directions. From these sources, cargo handling, preparing for departure, sailing, reducing and augmenting sail, and anchoring have all been reconstructed.

The introduction of written sailing directions, with details of hazards, havens and tidal ephemera along trading routes, was a considerable step forward for literate shipmasters, both as *aides memoires* for local passages and also as an introduction to areas new to the shipmaster. Copies of a Low Middle German *Seebuch* and a Middle English rutter have both survived from the mid-fifteenth century with much of the material in them being at least a century older. Analyses of their contents indicate that navigational and ship-handling techniques were broadly similar for Hansa and English seamen.

This book has examined the shipmaster's craft; the legal and commercial background to his work, his options in shipowning and partnership, his responsibilities as a manager ashore and afloat, his knowledge of navigation and meteorology, and his seamanship. He had to know the law, on- and off-shore, and when to disregard it, how to read the weather and calculate his course, and memorise an

atlas of tidal streams as well as tables of astronomical ephemera. He also had to remember the intricacies of harbour entrances, distances and directions between way-points and unseen hazards on his route.

Given the ever-present possibilities of disaster, commercial or maritime, the successful shipmaster had to be physically tough, courageous, commercially astute, and steady and resourceful in crisis; no doubt, caution and robust 'fail-safe' margins were essential ingredients of his commercial transactions and of his navigation. There is no way of knowing how many met that magisterial paradigm, but the evidence of the number of shipmasters who sailed the same ship for years, apparently without catastrophe, indicates that survival was not uncommon. The working life of a medieval shipmaster was difficult and dangerous, but a homeward passage before the wind, across the Bay of Biscay, with the sun on his back, a hold full of wine and not another sail in sight, surely compensated him for all the complexities and hazards of his profession.