**‘My freind who writes for me’:**

**Scribes and Scribal Relationships in the Letters of Seamen, 1793-1815.**

**Note**

In the letters or quotations from letters below, original spelling and punctuation have been retained, with any suspensions or abbreviations expanded in square brackets. Any letters obviously missing have also been added in square brackets, for example, the[y]. Idiosyncratic forms of words requiring standardisation have been inserted into the text in italics within square brackets and any superscript words or letters have been brought down onto the line and have been indicated by being placed within a backward and forward slash: \ /. The end of one page and start of the next is indicated by a forward slash /.

**Introduction**

In 1795, two years after the start of Britain's involvement in the French Revolutionary War, an Act of Parliament was passed, granting concessionary postal rates to men on active service in the Army and Royal Navy and other units.[[1]](#endnote-1) 'Non-commissioned Officers, Seamen, and Privates in the Navy, Army, Militia, Fencible Regiments, Artillery, and Marines', were, after the passing of the Act, permitted to send and receive single letters (letters of a single sheet) for 1d at the time of posting, instead of payment on receipt on a sliding scale according to weight and distance covered, under the regulations current at the time. Letters could be sent at the new rates provided that they were properly addressed to the men, showing the 'Ship, Vessel, Regiment, Troop, Corps, Company, or Detachment', to which they belonged and had been countersigned by the officer then in command. The wording of this Act showed that it was judged 'expedient' to bring in these new rates for this section of society, but what lay behind the expediency mentioned here might well have been the fact that the effect of letters written to and from servicemen was well-known. Whether in the Army or Navy or other service, such letters clearly served as morale-boosters, and when the men were not involved in some great battle, would help to alleviate or keep loneliness and boredom at bay.[[2]](#endnote-2) Although the phrase 'the pen is the tongue of the absent' has perhaps mainly been applied to love letters, it also seems an appropriate way to describe letters sent between servicemen and their families and friends.[[3]](#endnote-3) Those letters which are extant are testimony to the great desire to keep in touch with home common to all servicemen, then and now, for whom absence from home could be lengthy, and distance, in the case of seamen, as far as the other side of the world.

However, it is letters of one particular group of servicemen, seamen in the British Royal Navy serving during the wars with France between 1793 and 1815 on which this article will focus. Knowledge of this effect of letters on such men was particularly brought to the fore in 1797 when, during the mutinies in the Royal Navy, mostly at Spithead and the Nore, one of the measures taken against the mutineers was to ban communication between those on board the ships in mutiny and those on shore, particularly by personal letter.[[4]](#endnote-4) William Pitt the Younger, then Prime Minister, himself made this point clear during the debate which preceded the passing of the bill, saying that:

The men who had been guilty of acts of such aggravated rebellion and treason ought to be completely separated from that country whose cause they had abandoned. If they valued the communication and intercourse with a father, a brother, or a wife, before they could enjoy the sweets of those endearing relations, they must reconcile themselves to their offended country.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Despite the fact that these servicemen were known to correspond with family and friends, letters of seamen below the rank of commissioned officer serving on warships during the French Revolutionary and the Napoleonic Wars, have been found to survive only in small quantities. This discovery applies to letters written both before the Act of 1795 and, surprisingly, afterwards, as it might be assumed that the concessionary rates would have led to a huge increase in the number of letters written and therefore their survival in correspondingly large numbers. It might also be surprising, given that the British Royal Navy was the country's biggest employer during the wars, with manpower in 1811 estimated to account for at least one in forty-eight of the male population of Great Britain.[[6]](#endnote-6) Although as many of the letters of these seamen as could easily be identified have recently been examined in detail, they only number 194 from seamen on warships writing between 1793 and 1815 (including one or two letters known to have been written but now lost) and a further sixty-one, nearly all existing only as copies or copy extracts, written by or sent to seamen on ships in mutiny and intercepted by the government during the mutinies in the Royal Navy in 1797.[[7]](#endnote-7)

**Richard Greenhalgh, British Royal Navy seaman, 1793-1802**

Nevertheless, the letters of one of the former group of seamen in particular have survived as his family's personal archive, and it is on his letters that this article will mostly be based. He was Richard Greenhalgh (or Greenhalf), who volunteered to join the British Royal Navy in January 1793, just before the start of the French Wars, and found himself with a group of other Lancashire lads together on their first ship, HMS *Illustrious*.[[8]](#endnote-8) He was born on 18 March 1770, the son of William Greenhalgh and his wife Ann, of Greenhalgh's Moss, Tottington, near Bury.[[9]](#endnote-9) As a weaver who also had a smallholding, William Greenhalgh was perhaps typical of this upland area where poor conditions for agriculture made it imperative to have another source of income, and the nature of the Tottington area and its inhabitants, owing to surviving sources, particularly those relating to the Poor Law in the early nineteenth century, has been studied in some detail.[[10]](#endnote-10) William's son Richard served as Landsman, then Able Seaman, for nine years from 1793 to his desertion in 1802, which perhaps came as no surprize as it occurred at around the time of the Peace of Amiens, when many may have imagined that the war would be over for good. However, the main cause is likely to have been the fact that Greenhalgh, suffering from homesickness, was unable to return to Lancashire to visit family and friends once in all that time.

While in the Royal Navy, Greenhalgh served on board various ships, mainly 3rd rate warships of 74 or 80 guns: HMS *Illustrious*, 1793; HMS *Ganges*, 1793-1794; HMS *Caesar*, 1794-1795 and then HMS *Powerful*, 1795-1800.[[11]](#endnote-11) The latter ship was mostly deployed off Brittany, in the North Sea and in the Mediterranean, where, in 1799, the ship was detached with another to join the ships under the command of Nelson. While serving on these ships, Greenhalgh took part in some major sea-battles: the Battle of the Glorious First of June, 1794, and the Battle of Camperdown, 1797, as will be further noted below. In 1800, Greenhalgh was then drafted on board smaller vessels, firstly HMS *Volcano*, a bomb ship of 8 guns, in 1800[[12]](#endnote-12) and lastly, HMS *Racoon*, 1800-1802, of 18 guns, the latter mostly serving in the English Channel, but after the ship sailed to Naples, Greenhalgh deserted there on 12 January 1802 with at least two other crew members.[[13]](#endnote-13) He then made his way on board a Scottish merchant ship of Greenock to St Johns, Newfoundland in Canada, by way of Boston in America, and expected that the ship would eventually return to the home port in Scotland via Lisbon, allowing him to return home in the Spring of 1803.[[14]](#endnote-14) It is very likely that he did so, and although nothing definite is known of him after his desertion, he appears to have survived until at least 1806, when his father made a will in which Greenhalgh is mentioned.[[15]](#endnote-15)

**Letters of Richard Greenhalgh**

Greenhalgh was anxious to keep in touch with loved-ones on shore by letter and, fortunately, most of his letters to his parents written during his period of service in the Navy, forty in number, survive, and are now held in the National Museum of the Royal Navy in Portsmouth.[[16]](#endnote-16) His letters are unusual because of their survival as a collection, but doubly so, for reasons relating to one striking feature of the seamen's letters as a whole, that is, that if the sailors could not or did not write for themselves or for other shipmates, their need to communicate led to the use of a scribe: a friend or a more senior shipmate – such as the chaplain of a lieutenant – to write for them. These scribes could perform a very valuable service, as Royal Marine Musician, John Whick, put it, when writing in 1808 from HMS *Victory* to his sister and brother-in-law, showing his fierce determination to keep in touch with home come what may: ‘I never will neglect you as long as I am able to write, and if I am by Chance Disabled as long as I have a tongue I will Get somebody else to write for me’.[[17]](#endnote-17) Samuel Willcock did exactly that in 1798, when he wrote to his brother, then serving in the Nottingham Militia, including in his letter a message for a man in his brother's regiment from his cousin, Willcock's shipmate on board HMS *Mars*.[[18]](#endnote-18) This man had been so badly burned by a stinkpot (a type of explosive device) during a single-ship action between HMS *Mars* and *L'Hercule*, a French warship, that he could not write himself:

Their is a Man the Name of Mathew Longman in Your Regement and he is Own Cousen to a Young Man the Name of Sampson Sailes and he is Burnt So With a Stinck Pot that he is Not Able to Wright to his Mother at Stabblef\ord/ so he Wisht Me to Wright to You and as the Ship is going to Plimouth to Refit, Boot [*both*] You and him Can Direct to Plimouth.

In this regard, Greenhalgh's letters in particular are striking in that although he could write quite well, he preferred to have a fellow sailor to write for him. He struck up a friendship with a shipmate, Thomas Brown, an Irishman born in Dublin around 1768, and who, as shown below, had been living in north Manchester and working with a silk weaver in the town centre before going to Liverpool to join the Royal Navy.[[19]](#endnote-19) It was Brown who wrote most of Greenhalgh’s letters to his parents until they were sent to serve on different ships in 1800. What becomes evident in the letters is not only the relationship between Greenhalgh and Brown, whom he called his 'writer', but also the network of messages passed between ship and shore. It is this aspect of his letters and those of other seamen, the links between sailor and scribe and their addressees, which will be further explored below.

**Subjects covered in Greenhalgh's letters**

After having joined the Navy, Greenhalgh was sent on board his first ship, HMS *Illustrious*, with the first of his letters written almost immediately afterwards. In that initial letter home, Greenhalgh informed his parents that ‘we have plenty of Lancashire lads from Bury & Bolton & all round which makes it like home’[[20]](#endnote-20) and this is telling , as homesickness and a longing to come home are also prevalent in his letters and later in his service, there is a touching passage in which he reassures his parents that he had forgotten neither home and its surroundings nor family and friends:

I have not forgot the names of my Brothers nor yet the Croft nor meadow head, neither do I forget where the big plumb Tree stands, nor do I forget the holins [?holly trees] at the other end of the house. My nearist neighbours names when I left home was Robert Nuttall, my aunt susan [*sic*] and James Collins.[[21]](#endnote-21)

From joining his first ship onwards, Greenhalgh was always anxious to hear news from home and topics covered in his letters range, as might be expected, over family health and events such as births, marriages and deaths, but also show his awareness of current affairs. In 1797, he wished for his family's opinions on whether peace was imminent;[[22]](#endnote-22) in 1798, he wanted to know what was happening in their local area in comparison with supposed unrest in Ireland, writing almost immediately before the outbreak of the Irish Rebellion;[[23]](#endnote-23) in 1799, he reflected on bad times for trade;[[24]](#endnote-24) and in 1800, whether there had been a better harvest than before,[[25]](#endnote-25) considering that the harvest of the previous year had been very poor.[[26]](#endnote-26) These were matters which surely must have given him concern as they might have affected his father and other family members, friends and neighbours. Money or shortage of it was often a great preoccupation and sometimes had to be requested of his parents, but Greenhalgh also sent money home, including what were probably amounts of prize money, some of which appeared to have been invested for him by his parents. In around 1794 or 1795, Greenhalgh sent his father 10 guineas, perhaps pay or prize money,[[27]](#endnote-27) and in March 1795, 5 guineas.[[28]](#endnote-28) Later, in 1797, he was able to make an allotment of half his pay to his mother,[[29]](#endnote-29) and from this and another letter dated in 1797, he also mentioned money set out at interest for him by his parents, so that in 1801, he was confident enough to ask for money out of the interest to be sent to him from home.[[30]](#endnote-30) Such prudence with money is perhaps unusual in these seamen, as the received image of a sailor of the period, or at least in the mid-eighteenth century, has often been portrayed in the past as that of a profligate.[[31]](#endnote-31)

**The literacy of seamen**

This need of Greenhalgh and other sailors to maintain contact with loved ones on shore also tended to overcome any lack of skill in writing, explaining the use of a scribe in some cases. Another closely-allied aspect of the seamen's letters is that they display a wide range of facility of writing and expression on a scale between literacy and illiteracy. When considering the ability of sailors of this period to write and their standard of literacy, it has often been thought in the past that these were quite low – one of the most recent estimates set the standards at 55% literate and 45% illiterate – gained from having examined early 19th century sources principally marriage registers, in which the parties either signed their names or made their mark.[[32]](#endnote-32) A new survey carried out by this author while compiling her edition of letters of seamen used a 10% random sample of surviving wills of British Royal Navy seamen dating from 1797 held in The National Archives, Kew [hereafter TNA], series ADM 48, taken together with undertakings not to mutiny again made after the mutinies in the Royal Navy in 1797, held in TNA, series ADM 1/729, which sailors also signed or made their mark. From these sources, an estimate could be made that just over 62% of those in the sample were literate and between 37% and 38% literate, thereby refining and augmenting Ellison's findings. These figures also correspond roughly to a level of literacy among the adult male population, for instance, calculated to be 65% in 1800,[[33]](#endnote-33) and even more closely to the lower levels of adult male literacy found in rural areas calculated to be 64% over the period 1799–1804.[[34]](#endnote-34) The results also show that the level of literacy among seamen as compared with the civilian population was well above that of labourers and servants, and approximately the same, or just below, tradesmen and artisans, suggesting that those in the sample may apparently not have been drawn from the least-skilled section of society.[[35]](#endnote-35)

**Levels of skill in writing and expression**

The desire on the part of servicemen to join the community of letter-writers appears to bear out the suggestion that, in the eighteenth century, letters began to increase in importance ‘not just to the very literate and the middling sort but also to the less literate, even the illiterate’.[[36]](#endnote-36) This is perhaps also true of some of the Essex poor who took advantage of writing to the Overseers in an attempt to protect their interests, described by Thomas Sokoll as representing ‘the lowest level of literacy, or … of the competence of making yourself understood by putting pen to paper’.[[37]](#endnote-37) A very wide range of levels of skill of expression is found in the letters of seamen, from the very proficient to the barely literate. A few letters, such as that of John Pickering,[[38]](#endnote-38) contain formal language and a rather verbose style, even including some quite literary turns of phrase, and these, if they were not written for the seamen by some better-educated shipmate or officer or the chaplain, suggest that at least some seamen must have been quite well-educated and accustomed to expressing themselves in writing. Pickering began his letter to his brother in these words, with a pessimistic view of the mutiny then in progress and what he considered to be a climate of unrest in the country as a whole:

I hope you will be kind enough not to charge me with neglect for not writing to you this time past but you may be assured it has not proceeded from either indifference of neglect but waiting daily to send you some satisfactory Accounts as we were daily in expectation of Peace, but now that thought is almost vanished and nothing prevails but a perpetual discontent both by Sea and Land which in all probability can terminate in nothing but a Civil War.[[39]](#endnote-39)

It is clear, therefore, that some sailors could express themselves reasonably well, but, others, like John Parr, clearly needed help, asking his mother to send him writing paper and his dictionary.[[40]](#endnote-40) At the other end of the scale, similar to some of those discovered among the undelivered letters of the Hudson’s Bay Company,[[41]](#endnote-41) a few of the letters, such as that of Samuel Willcock (mentioned above) show evidence of what Thomas Sokoll has called, again with reference to Essex pauper letters, ‘oral pieces of writing, produced by people who were quite obviously acting along the boundaries between the spoken and the written word’.[[42]](#endnote-42) Those of Robert Ackrill are a case in point,[[43]](#endnote-43) and appear to be written just as if he were speaking to his father, so that the reader hears his voice, probably with a regional accent, writing from HMS *Sans Pareil*, the ship he was then on board: 'Father, This is to inform you that i am Gaaing onto Be Shipt on Baard [h]is Majesty Ship *Le Pompee* But you shal now be the next',[[44]](#endnote-44) and when attempting to overcome difficulties in gaining payment of his bounty as a Quota man for Lincolnshire, adding a postscript: 'The Capt. Clark [clerk] tould me that my name came came [*sic*] on Board the *Sans Paerill* Named Robt. Ackerdill and that been the Mistacke were the Stifcate [*certificate*] wis left. I Never here Nothing about it'.[[45]](#endnote-45)

This aspect of the letters is further emphasised by Martyn Lyons as the lack of a ‘clear divide between the literate and the illiterate’.[[46]](#endnote-46) Such letters often have to be read out loud to decipher some phonetic spellings indicative of writers struggling to get the words that they might have spoken to their addressees down on paper, for instance, particularly those of Royal Marine William Long. Writing to his mother from Spithead at the time of the Peace of 1814, he describes his hopes and fears relating to his correspondence with her and his own safety in these words:[[47]](#endnote-47)

'der mother I ham ~~happy~~ sorey to think you have for got me now it tis A pese [*peace*]. I have send you 3 lette[r]s ad no Ancer from you I never was dis A pinted [*disappointed*] be fore. I hope you ham not ded. I Expeted to A ben [*have been*] Ded be fore'.

Similarly, William Roberts, a Welshman on board HMS *Director*, one of the ships involved in the mutiny in the Royal Navy at the Nore, writing to his wife during the height of that mutiny: 'I would a rote befor now, but I was send on bord at one [h]ours, notis, and ad no tim to rit before'.[[48]](#endnote-48)

Infrequently, the letters also contain examples of dialect words; Greenhalgh's use of the word 'holins' for 'holly trees' is given above, but an unknown seamen uses what is probably a northern or Scottish term for blackberries, when attempting to describe the nature and taste of pomegranates which he must have tried when his ship was off Cadiz: 'they are the size of Oringes, much about the cullur of Mellow Apples, the Shell or Skin, much about the same thickness as that of Oringes, the inside something like that of Goose Buerreys and tastes much like a Bramble-Buerry (or Bummelcite as you call them)'.[[49]](#endnote-49) William Long had the misfortune to drop one of his mother's letters overboard when he opened it and was 'so vext I Could not no wat to do', begging his mother to write again and let him know what she had said in the letter he had lost.[[50]](#endnote-50) He then went on to say that he would be 'honisey' until he heard from her again; this word does not appear in the *English Dialect Dictionary*, but is clearly used in the sense of 'anxious' or 'tense' here.

**Greenhalgh's use of a scribe**

In the case of Richard Greenhalgh, he was able to write, but obviously did not always feel confident enough to write fluently, as he regularly wrote through someone else. Of his forty surviving letters, only nineteen were written by Greenhalgh himself. Out of the twenty-nine letters written during the period from March 1793 to April 1800, only eight were written by Greenhalgh, but sixteen were written for him by Thomas Brown and five, by others unknown. By contrast, the eleven letters dating from May 1800 after being parted from Brown, to the final letter dated in August 1802, a few months after deserting, were all written by Greenhalgh himself.

Although Greenhalgh's letter of 23 September 1794 to his parents was written by Greenhalgh, with a reminder in a postscript that he could indeed write – ‘Recolect this is my owne hand’ – Greenhalgh introduces his parents to Brown as ‘my freind who writes for me’, giving them a message from Brown to pass on for him:

I have nothing more at presant only that my freind who writes for me, his name is Thomas brown an Irish man left manchester about the time that I did and enterd in Liverpool. He liv’d in Crumpsall and worked with George Layland Silk weaver, resorts at Ellis Rose’s long Millgate opisite Toad lane. He would thank you in case you were to call that way if you would make inquiry after the said Layland and desires that you will remember brown to him his family and you will Oblige him as he Obliges mee.[[51]](#endnote-51)

In this way, Greenhalgh underlines the reciprocal favours being performed here: Brown's writing for Greenhalgh and Greenhalgh's parents passing on a message for Brown.

When Brown writes for Greenhalgh, the difference in hand and style is very clear. For example, in the first letter written by Brown in July 1794, Brown uses very flowery language to describe coming through the Battle of the Glorious First of June, 1794, unhurt:

Dear Father, I am bound to thank the Almighty for the benefits which I rec’d in many shapes with preserving me from any Misfortune Which might befall not only the malitious enemy but the many dangers which I am exposed to which makes me joulas that I am not numbered among the remainder in Your peaceful habitation – as I am destitute of any thing which may reconcile me (your letters excep’d).[[52]](#endnote-52)

By contrast, Greenhalgh's own words written after the Battle of Camperdown in 1797 are much more to the point than Brown's, when Greenhalgh reports on a great British victory over the Dutch with what could be termed great British understatement:

I am very happy to inform you that I got through this action without any damage wich will bee of great satisfaction to you as well as my self.

I do asure you we gave them a great drub[b]ing and took 8 sail from them and sent them in with a sorrowfull story ...[[53]](#endnote-53)

What is really evident in this first group of letters is that Greenhalgh's friendship with Brown allowed him to trust him with writing home about all kinds of matters, including on one occasion, veiled references to what perhaps might have been some romantic entanglement in which Greenhalgh had become involved and was glad to escape.[[54]](#endnote-54) Naturally, there are some subjects on which news was not transmitted home, perhaps for obvious reasons. In late December 1795, two of the crew of HMS *Powerful* were each given a punishment of twelve lashes for theft; one of these was named Thomas Brown, strongly suggesting that Greenhalgh's scribe was involved.[[55]](#endnote-55) If this incident did relate to Brown, then not surprisingly, the letters are silent on the subject. Also, in 1797, after the end of the mutiny in the Royal Navy on board his ship at Plymouth, he shows how much he relied on Brown's facility with words, writing through an unknown shipmate and wishing to give his parents details of events on board, but preferring them to be described by Brown, stating that:

as for any particulars I am sorry I can’t give you on account of my writer’s Indisposition but Cant forget Desiring to be kindly remember’d to you ...[[56]](#endnote-56)

We can also discern the development of the relationship between Greenhalgh’s writer and Greenhalgh’s parents. This relationship may have been a little shaky at first, because the Greenhalghs appear to have made some kind of remarks about Brown, including his Irishness, to which Brown seems to have been careful not to have taken offence.[[57]](#endnote-57) However, afterwards, they clearly performed some services for Brown and sent their good wishes to him in their letters to Greenhalgh.[[58]](#endnote-58) Subsequent messages from Brown to the Greenhalghs show that the relationship become even warmer: shortly after being drafted on board another ship in 1795, Greenhalgh sent a message home about his writer, ‘who thanks my Mother for her love and kindness to him in many of your letters to me’.[[59]](#endnote-59)

We also see a network of messages not only between Greenhalgh and his parents, but also between his parents and his friends on board other ships; for example, in 1793, two of his shipmates asked Greenhalgh's parents to call on a friend near the church at Bury and let her know they were well, similarly, a third shipmate would have been very glad if they would let his mother, also in Bury, know that he too was well.[[60]](#endnote-60) The network extended to Greenhalgh's parents' letters to other friends; for example, on hearing that his friend Absolom Chadwick had enlisted in the Marines, Greenhalgh asked his parents to remember him to Absolom if they wrote to him.[[61]](#endnote-61) Greenhalgh also received messages in the letters of other sailors, as he mentioned a letter sent to another friend, David Coop, serving on a different ship, in which he said 'there was a few lines for me in consequence of which he [David Coop] was pleas'd to send his letter on board'.[[62]](#endnote-62)

In 1800, after seven years serving together on the same ships, Greenhalgh was parted from his friend Stephen Cass and his writer Thomas Brown:

‘Stephen Cass & my old writer Thomas Brown is drafted on board of the Ann arm[ed] ship they was in good health when I parted them. Excuse my bad writing as I have not practicd it much lately but now I have lost my writer and so I belive I shall write myself for the future’.[[63]](#endnote-63)

And that is just what he did, write for himself, and his letters from then onwards are clearly shorter, more stilted in expression and less informative than when Brown or others wrote for him.[[64]](#endnote-64)

**The experience of other seamen**

Greenhalgh was not the only sailor to have others to write for him; of the nine letters written by John Parr between 1803 and 1808, surviving in the National Maritime Museum, only two are thought to be in his hand, the rest by seven other unknown hands, although he appears to have signed at least four of them himself.[[65]](#endnote-65) Similarly, the two letters of Thomas Mackenzie alias Pickering, written in 1805, and of George Emmerson, written in 1812, also surviving in the National Maritime Museum, are each in different hands.[[66]](#endnote-66) Very occasionally, we hear of men who refer to writing for others: John Martindale Powell stated that ‘I have been ready allways to write for the men on board but I have had an escape’, describing how he had almost become involved in a request to forge some marriage lines, which he absolutely refused to do.[[67]](#endnote-67) James Whitworth is also very unusual in that he refers to having a little school on board, which at a guess might possibly have included teaching reading and writing.[[68]](#endnote-68)

**The significance of the letters**

Some sailors, such as John Martindale Powell, awaiting a draft in 1805 from HMS *Zealand* to a frigate, express the joy of receiving a letter.[[69]](#endnote-69) Firstly, he describes how downcast he was at the thought of having missed delivery of a letter from his mother, but afterwards on receiving it eventually, although he complained about its shortness, showed how happy it made him: 'I think it is monstrous unconsionably In you \to/ write \so/ little to me when I send so much to \you/ but I forbear for I suppose if I don't you will not write att all which will make me as completely miserable as your Letter did extremely happy'.[[70]](#endnote-70)

By contrast, if those at home on shore neglected to write, sailors could become very upset and uneasy; John Parr expresses just this sentiment when he had not received a letter from his brother for some time, despite sending home repeatedly:

This is the third time I have written to you, but have recieved no Answer ... which makes me very uneasy, particularly as you could send a Letter to me here as easy as if I was at Yarmouth by directing for me, on Board *H M. Ship* Hero *Yarmouth Roads or elsewhere*'.

Parr may not have heard from his brother for some time, but John Bradish provides an extreme case, not having received a letter in five years or more, but hoping one further request would bring him the happiness of news from home.[[71]](#endnote-71) Greenhalgh, himself writing in 1798, berated his parents for not writing to him, but in doing so gives us a very vivid picture of how he imagined his parents sitting down to compose a letter to him:

‘Its astonising to me that you have not wrote to me as you know perfictly well I am \not/ deficint in writing when opertunity serv’d but perhaps you Immagine my Opertunity is at any time when you at \the/ same time are mistaken. I have no Sundays to sit down, place my knife, Quill, Ink & Paper, before me, and next consider \the/ best manner to Indite my letter to the purpose design’d which may be the case with you at times.[[72]](#endnote-72)

Contrary to what he says, sailors did sometimes have free time on a Sunday for leisure pursuits including letter-writing, but he evidently felt that he was much busier on Sundays than his parents, or at least when off-duty, as John Martindale Powell told his mother, giving time 'to sleep to read write or any thing'.[[73]](#endnote-73) Despite his display of temper, Greenhalgh also realised that if his parents did not hear from him, they too would be unsettled, opening one letter to them via Brown with these words: 'Harbouring an Opinion of your uneasiness of your not hearing from me caus'd me to trouble you with this'.[[74]](#endnote-74)

**Conclusion**

The letters under consideration date from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but a verse and greeting of 1904 found in an early twentieth century album seems to sum up the importance of the letters to both sender and recipient:

When absent far

From those we love,

Is there a charm

The heart can fetter?

Is there a charm?

Oh Yes. A [letter].[[75]](#endnote-75)

At this point in the verse, a small envelope has been pasted into the book, which can be opened, to enable the owner to read the little letter inside bearing its message sending love and good wishes. This verse may appear to be whimsical, but the underlying sentiment seems to be heartfelt. The personal letter is surely seen here as a powerful means of communication, able to narrow separation by distance of the sender and recipient and bind them together with ties of love. This would surely be the case for many sections of society when this verse was written in 1904 as it would be now, if letter-writing were still such a popular means of communication as it was then.

Therefore, the importance of sending and receiving letters to the seamen of this period and how much it meant to them, is clearly evident in their letters, so much so that they would strive to communicate by any means and if unable to write themselves or unsure of doing so, would try and find someone else to write for them. If they used a scribe, then their letters could be said no longer to be strictly personal and private in the sense that they each had one sender and one recipient. From the letters of Richard Greenhalgh in particular, we see that writing and receiving a letter could become a shared activity, with messages passed between multiple senders and multiple recipients. Greenhalgh's letters might not only contain his own news for his family, but also include messages to them from his writer, even when Brown himself was doing the writing. The development of the friendship and trust between Greenhalgh and Brown in writing letters home is also plain to see, as is the development of the relationships between Greenhalgh’s writer and Greenhalgh’s parents. The Greenhalgh family also evidently became a conduit for messages to pass on for Greenhalgh's writer, Brown, and others, and similarly, letters sent to other sailors contained messages to pass on to Greenhalgh. A single letter could therefore relay news between a network of contacts, forming a crucial lifeline in showing the sailors that they were always in the thoughts of those on shore, and informing those at home that their loved ones on board ship were safe and well. The way in which this lifeline strengthened ties between ship and shore is also obvious and that the strong impression received is that the seamen and their friends and families did not only write as a labour of love between individuals, but also between communities. By joining the community of letters, for all involved, the letter was indeed the charm the heart could fetter.

**APPENDIX**

Examples of Greenhalgh's letters: the first written for him by his scribe, Thomas Brown, contrasted with another, written by Greenhalgh himself.

1. Letter of Richard Greenhalgh to his parents, written by Thomas Brown for Greenhalgh, while on board HMS *Caesar*, at Spithead, in July 1794, Brown’s expression contrasts sharply with that of Greenhalgh in the elaborately-worded language he used.[[76]](#endnote-76) Greenhalgh clearly wished to let his parents know that he and other friends had survived the Battle of the Glorious First of June, 1794, and also wanted to hear from his parents that some of those friends or acquaintances were safe. He also hints at the dangers of life at sea during wartime. Another subject touched on is not clear, but may relate to some romantic entanglement of Greenhalgh’s, as noted above. This letter also provides an example of the fact that it was not intended simply for Greenhalgh’s parents alone, but for one of his friends as well.

Honour'd Parents,

I received your letter of the 22nd of June, and am happy to hear that you and all friends, enjoy that sweetness of life which is inestimable and much esteem’d by me and I am Confidant that I receive the benefits of; Dear Father, I am bound to thank the Almighty for the benefits which I rec’d in many shapes with preserving me from any Misfortune Which might befall not only the malitious enemy but the many dangers which I am exposed to which makes me ?joulas that I am not numbered among the remainder in Your peaceful habitation – as I am destitute of any thing which may reconcile me (your letters excep’d). I am Dear parents Content tho at the same [?ti]me I would by far chuse to have the pleasure [?o]f embracing your fond advices were it once more in my power to hear. It Causes me to shudder at the many misfortunes that are daily happening tho at the same time is unknown to you, – I had the pleasure of seeing David Coop the Sunday before I wrote this he retains Very good health ~~and~~ […] The *Tremendious* is not Come from Plymouth yet therefore I can not give you any Information of \A. Chedwick/ and if you can send me word how he is I would take it as a great favour of you – I can not give you any account of the *Thames* Frigate – there are none of our Country men fall’n in our ship as I know of, as for your Wedlock Gentery, for my part I Dare say the[y] have no ocation to wait for me because that Delays are dangerous especily in such a Case as that – with Respect to you making any enquiry after that affair in privacy, It’s a matter Indifferent to me because were I at home my / Self and even the bearer of this, I absolutely would not do her or hers any service was I in any ways for\ce/d to such an affair. Depend on it Dear parents Butnay Bay should be my portian first, there fore I don’t give myself the least concern in the affair, was it not that you remind me of it. Our ship is ready for Sea at a moments warning and if you intend to write me an answer immediately, \I would thank you./ I don’t pay anything for post paid letters but one penny. Stephen Cass retains good health and Sir, I Conclude with my love and best Respects to you, my Hon’d Mother and all Enquiring Friends.

Richard Greenhalgh

*Caesar* July the 24th 1794

Please to shew this letter to James Colins.

2. Letter of Richard Greenhalgh to his parents, written by Greenhalgh himself, while on board HMS *Powerful*, at the Nore, in October 1797.[[77]](#endnote-77) In contrast to the letter written by Brown, Greenhalgh gets straight to the point, so that his letter is notable for its brevity and reliance on stock phrases.

Honoured Parents,

This comes with my kind love to you hopeing it will find you in good health as it leaves mee at present, thanks bee to God for it. I am very happy to inform you that I got through this action with out any damage w[h]ich will bee of great satisfaction to you as well as my self.

I do asure you we gave them a great drub\i/ng and took 8 sail from them and sent them in with a sorrowfull story, but the peticulars of it you \will/hear before you receive this letters and so \I/ have no more to tell you at present, only that I am safe and sound and so is my mess mate Stephen Cass. I did not receive an answer to the last letter yet but I suppose it is in the post office so I will expect it to morrow. Give my best respects to all inquiring Friends. So I remain you affectionate son until Death,

Richard Greenhalgh

1. Postage Act, 1795, 35 Geo. III, c. 35. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Richard Brooks, *The Royal Marines 1664 to the present* (2002), p.117. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example, its use as the title of Chapter 1 of Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford, 1989). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. An Act for more effectually restraining Intercourse with the Crews of certain of His Majesty's Ships now in a State of Mutiny and Rebellion, and for the more effectual Suppression of such Mutiny, 1797, 37 Geo. III, c. 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Cobbett's *Parliamentary History of England*, vol. XXXIII, 1797-8 (1818), col.817. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Bruno Pappalardo, *Tracing Your Naval Ancestors* (Kew, 2002), p.xiv. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Helen Watt with Anne Hawkins, *Letters of Seamen in the Wars with France 1793-1815* (Woodbridge, 2016) [hereafter Watt, *Letters of Seamen*]. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. National Museum of the Royal Navy, Portsmouth [hereafter NMRN], 546/84, Letters and papers of Richard Greenhalgh, 1793-1802; 546/84 (1), letter of 21 Mar. 1793 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.76-7) (All letters are from Richard Greenhalgh to his parents unless otherwise specified). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. *Lancashire OnLine Clerks Project*, Register of Baptisms, St Mary the Virgin, Bury, p.6, entry 20, available at https://www.lan-opc.org.uk/Bury/Bury/stmary/index.html [accessed 13 Oct. 2018]. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Margaret Hanly, Being Poor in Nineteenth-Century Lancashire, *Being Poor in Modern Europe: Historical Perspectives 1800-1940*, ed. Andreas Gestrich, Steven King and Lutz Raphael (Bern, 2006), 69-90. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The National Archives, Kew [hereafter TNA]: ADM 36/11313; ADM 35/693; ADM 35/391; ADM 36/12474. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. TNA: ADM 36/12694. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. TNA: ADM 36/16192. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. NMRN, 546/84 (38), Letter of 29 Aug. 1802 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.186-7). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Lancashire Archives, Preston, WCW 1821. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. NMRN, 546/84, Letters and papers of Richard Greenhalgh, 1793-1802. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Royal Marines Museum Archive, Southsea [hereafter RMM], 2004/75/2, Letter of John Whick to his sister and brother-in-law, 20 Apr. 1808 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.276-7). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. NMRN, 2010/77, Letter of Samuel Willcock to his brother, [shortly after 21 Apr. 1798] (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.142-4). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. NMRN, 546/84 (5), Letter of 23 Sept. 1794 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.96-8). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. NMRN, 546/84 (1), Letter of 21 Mar. 1793 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.76-7). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. NMRN, 546/84 (27), Letter of 11 Apr. 1800 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.173-4). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. NMRN, 546/84 (18 ?*recte* 13), Letter of Mar. 1797 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.123-4). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. NMRN, 546/84 (21), Letter of 4 May 1798 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.144-5). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. NRMN, 546/84 (23), Letter of 21 Jan. 1799 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.163-4). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. NRMN, 546/84 (29), Letter of 1 Sept. 1800 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.175-6). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Jenny Uglow, *In These Times: Living in Britain Through Napoleon's Wars 1793-1815* (2015), pp.245-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. NRMN, 546/84 (39), Letter of [c.1794-1795] (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.98-9). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. NRAM, 546/84 (7), Letter of Richard Greenhalgh to his father, 28 Mar. 1795 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.102-3). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. NMRN, 546/84 (16), Letter of 26 Sept. 1797 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.130-1). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. NMRN, 546/84 (33), Letter of 20 June 1801 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.181-2). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Nicholas A. M. Rodger, *The Wooden World* (London, 1986), p.133. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. *Pressganged: The Letters of George Price of Southwark alias 'George Green': Ordinary Seaman in HM Sloop* Speedy, *1803-1805*, ed. David Ellison (Royston, 1994), pp.64-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Lawrence Stone, Literacy and education in England, 1640-1900 *Past and Present* 42 (1969), 69-139 (Table V, p.120). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. *Ibid*., (Table II, p.104). [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. *Ibid*., (Table IV, p.110). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Clare Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture* (Basingstoke, 2006), p.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. *Essex Pauper Letters 1731-1837*, ed. Thomas Sokoll (Oxford, 2006) [hereafter *Essex Pauper Letters*], p.4. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. TNA: PC 1/38/122, fos.1-2, Letter (extract, copy) of John Pickering to his brother, 29 May 1797 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.408-9). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Royal Museums, Greenwich, National Maritime Museum [hereafter NMM], AGC/P/21, Letter of John Parr to his mother, 15 Nov. 1803 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.192-3). [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Judith H. Beattie and Helen M. Buss, *Undelivered Letters to Hudson's Bay Company Men on the Northwest Coast of America, 1830-57* (Vancouver, 2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. *Essex Pauper Letters*, p.7. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Lincolnshire Archives, Lincoln [hereafter Lincolnshire Archives], LQS/B/11/14/3, fos.2 and 1; LQS/B/11/14/4, Letter of Richard Ackrill to his parents, 17 Oct. 1795, and to his father, 18 Oct. [1795] (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.108-10). [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Lincolnshire Archives, LQS/B/11/14/3, fo.1, Letter of Robert Ackrill to his father, 18 Oct. [1795] (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, p.108). [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Lincolnshire Archives, LQS/B/11/14/4 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.109-10). [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Martyn Lyons, *The Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe, c. 1860-1920* (Cambridge, 2013), p.248. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Warwickshire County Record Office, Warwick [hereafter Warwicks CRO], HR75/46/1-3, Letters of William Long to his mother, 14 Feb. 1814; 13 Apr. 1814; 10 June 1814 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.356-7, 359-62). [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. TNA: PC 1/38/122, fo. 15, Letter (extract, copy) of William Roberts to his wife, 2 June 1797 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, p.439). [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. NMM, ACG/B/26, Letter of Unknown Seaman to his mother, 3 Jan. 1796 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.111-14). [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Warwicks CRO, HR75/46/1, Letter of William Long to his mother, ?14 Feb. 1814 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.356-7). [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. NMRN, 546/84 (5), Letter of 23 Sept. 1794 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.96-8). [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. NMRN, 546/84 (4), Letter of 24 July 1794 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.95-6). [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. NMRN, 546/84 (17), Letter of 17 Oct. 1797 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, p.132, illustrated on p.133). See the Appendix for the full version of this and the preceding letter, which are reproduced in full to highlight the difference in style between Greenhalgh and his scribe. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. NMRN, 546/84 (4), Letter of 24 July 1794 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.95-6). [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. TNA: ADM 51/1106, Part 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. NMRN, 546/84 (14), Letter of 5 July 1797 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, p.128). [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. NMRN, 546/84 (39), Letter of [c. 1794-1795] (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.98-9). [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. NMRN, 546/84 (40), Letter of [Dec. 1794] (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.99-100). [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. NMRN, 546/84 (9), Letter of 29 Sept. 1795 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.106-7). [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. NMRN, 546/84 (3), Letter of 9 Sept. 1793 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.79-80). [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. NMRN, 546/84 (unnumbered), Letter of 13 May 1793 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.77-8). [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. NMRN, 546/84 (10), Letter of [c. 15 June 1796] (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.117-19). [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. NMRN, 546/84 (28), Letter of 20 May 1800 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.174-5). [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. See, for example, NMRN, 546/84 (35) and (36), Letters of 9 Oct. and 17 [Nov.] 1801 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.184-5). [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. NMM, ACG/P/21, Letters and papers of John Parr, 1803-1808. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. NMM, AGC/11/5, Letter of Thomas [?Mackenzie alias] Pickering to his mother, [after 13] Mar. 1805, and AGC/8/14, Letter of Thomas Mackenzie [?alias Pickering] to his mother, 7 May 1805 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.213-16) and AGC/E/6, Letter of George Emmerson to his sister, 1 Oct. 1812, and to his cousin and aunt, 29 Dec. 1812 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.340-2, 351-2). [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. NMM, AGC/P/17, Letter of John Martindale Powell to his mother, 12 June 1805 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.220-4 (p.222)). [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. NMM, WHW/1/12, Letter of James Whitworth to his wife, 7 Nov. 1812 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.344-6 (p.345)). [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. NMM, AGC/P/17, Letter of John Martindale Powell to his mother, 2 June 1805 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.216-20). [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. TNA: ADM 27/16/61, Letter of John Bradish to his mother, [c. 9 May 1806] (found with a bundle of loose documents in this volume) (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.257-8). [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. NMRN, 546/84 (22), Letter of 12 Aug. 1798 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.148-9 (p.148)). [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. NMM, ACG/P/17, Letter of John Martindale Powell to his mother, 12 June 1805 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.220-4). [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. NMRN, 546/84 (12), Letter of 20 Jan. – 14 Feb. 1797 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.121-3). [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. Private collection, Album, 1900-, of Marian Hudson (1887-1973), Nursery, Infants and Primary School Teacher and Headmistress, Lancashire and Westmorland, 1912-50. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. NRMN, 546/84 (4), Letter of 24 July 1794 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, pp.95-6). [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. NMRN, 546/84 (17), Letter of 17 Oct. 1797 (Watt, *Letters of Seamen*, p.132, illustrated on p.133). [↑](#endnote-ref-77)