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Secrets of the Prize Papers: Trade, Loot and Letters

Across more than 4,000 boxes in The National Archives sits a significant collection of letters, papers and artifacts from ships captured by the British between 1652 and 1815.

In this first episode of a three-part series, Chloe Lee meets Oliver Finnegan, a specialist in what is known as the Prize Papers collection. Oliver tells Chloe about some of the most fascinating items in the collection, providing insights into global trade, warfare, and the everyday lives of the people who lived during the Age of Sail.

For more information about the Prize Papers project, visit <https://www.prizepapers.de/>.

Documents from The National Archives used in this episode: [HCA 32/111A](#), [HCA 32/111B](#), [HCA 32/1051/2856](#).

For more information about the records covered in this episode, look at our research guides to [High Court of Admiralty](#). Read our blog on [‘The many misfortunes of an Irish merchant in Tenerife, 1740–1744’](#). For help navigating our catalogue, you can watch our [top-level tips on using Discovery](#).

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Transcript:

Chloe Lee:

When working in an archive, you sometimes encounter collections so immense, that they are hard to comprehend. The Prize Papers is one such collection, consisting of objects and papers confiscated from ships captured by the British between 1652 and 1815.

The Prize Papers collection is so vast that it remained unexamined for years. However, we are now finally making progress on it. The work is expected to take a full team of people 20 years to complete! While we don't have that much time today, we are dedicating three episodes of our podcast to this topic.

I'm Chloe Lee, an Empire and Commonwealth Records Specialist at The National Archives. I also host our podcast, On the Record at The National Archives, where we uncover the past through stories of everyday people.

The contents of the Prize Papers reveal the experiences of everyday people during the age of sail, as well as the conduct of global trade and warfare at sea. In the first episode of our mini-series on the Prize Papers for On the Record, I want to delve into some of the fascinating items. My colleagues here at The National Archives, in collaboration with a team from the University of Oldenburg in Germany, are on a mission to locate, catalogue, and digitise these items. This includes around half a million letters, papers, and artefacts. They have 4,088 boxes to examine, and some of them are right in front of me now!

Chloe:

Yes, I'm standing in a special room at The National Archives next to my colleague Oliver Finnegan, who is a Prize Papers Record Specialist here at The National Archives.

Oliver, look at all of this stuff! Can you talk to me a bit about what we've set out today?

Oliver Finnegan:

I can, hi Chloe. I've been doing some serious digging to find what we've got here.

Chloe:

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Some serious digging. And we've got various papers across the table. They're kind of yellowing papers. I can see handwriting. I can see some seals. And right here in front of me, I have a box. So, am I allowed to open it Oliver?

Oliver:

You are, yeah

Chloe: Okay.

Oliver:

Have an open and see what you find inside.

Chloe:

Okay, listeners, so I'm going to open the box now. Okay, I'm going to put the lid here. Oh, okay, right. So I can smell it. Okay, so it's a little bit mildewy, and I can see, is it like sackcloth on the very top? Yeah, it looks like some kind of characters. Maybe on the front of it, to me, they look like they could be Chinese characters, actually. And then also some little bits of red, kind of crumbly me, I think that there maybe are some type of seal?

Oliver:

It's wax. Yeah, it's wax, red wax. Okay, lift it out and see what you think it is.

Chloe:

Okay, oh, I kind of don't want touch it. Okay, it's gonna get me dusty.

Oliver:

Okay, it's not fragile.

Chloe:

Okay, so it's some kind of sackcloth. I'm gonna just move it around the table, maybe place it down. Okay, so, okay, so I am unfolding it, wow. Okay, so I spread it out on the table. Now, it's probably about the size of an A3 piece of paper. It's kind of brown. You can see where maybe some of it has been exposed to the light. And, yeah, it looks like some kind of okay, so it's not a Chinese

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character. It looks to me like a small crown that has been like a mark on the front, and then maybe a big piece of lettering. Can you? Can you give me any clues Oliver?

Oliver:

So it is, it is just a crown, and then it's got a kind of pen flourish as you go down that somebody's written on it. I'm not quite sure what that signifies, but the outline you can see is where there were papers. They would have been folded like that. What you're actually looking at is a post bag.

Chloe: A post bag.

Oliver:

So this is a post bag from about 1807,

Chloe:

So it would have contained letters, notes,

Oliver:

Yes. So everything else that's in the box that you see was contained within that post bag.

Chloe:

Wow. Okay, so there's a lot of material in this box, folks, I've got a big, almost bound book as well. Again, it's maybe it's about the site, maybe a little bit smaller than the sack. And again, that looks like there's some writing on the front.

Oliver:

Can you read it?

Chloe:

Is it a journal?

Oliver:

It's in Danish, a journal.

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Chloe:

And it says 1807, yeah. 1807 and CO.

Oliver:

I think that's the name of the captain.

Chloe:

And then, 2856, what is this number about?

Oliver:

The number would have been allocated when it after it came into the archive.

Chloe:

So I'm right to assume that this is just one of the over 4000 boxes. Can you tell us a bit more about that collection?

Oliver:

Yeah, so this, you're right, is one of the boxes that we're working with, but this is actually a box that we haven't got to yet, and we haven't worked through, we haven't catalogued, we haven't put into any order. So when you actually look inside, you can see that it's just an enormous explosion of papers.

Chloe:

So it does just look like someone's messy loft box, basically.

Oliver:

Like a drawer, where you shove all of your unwanted correspondence.

Chloe:

That you can't be bothered to sort it exactly, is this box giving you some anxiety Oliver?

Oliver:

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Yeah, I find this box very relatable. But the... so you'll see, when you actually get looking, we're just going to haul it out.

Chloe:

Okay, it's quite weighty.

Oliver:

Yeah, it's heavy because it's a lot of paper.

Oliver:

So it's papers in all different kinds of language. Some of it's in French, some of it's in Danish, some of it's in Spanish. And these all come from the island of St Thomas in the Caribbean.

Chloe:

So they traveled a long way on the ship that was captured by the British,

Oliver:

So they were all in this post bag on a ship. It was coming from the Danish Caribbean at the time. And you see the enormous range of material that we have in the prize papers here, you can see that you have things like log books that we looked at, letters that were sent as post because virtually everything that was in here was in this post bag. It was being sent from the Caribbean.

Chloe:

And you say Danish, Danish Caribbean, because at the time the island that we're talking about was a colony?

Oliver:

Was a colony of Denmark at the time. Yes, exactly. So St Thomas and yes, just a huge range of material. You get a lot that're papers from ships. So you even get things like receipts. And one of the most unusual things about this as a collection is that it's not the normal kinds of papers that would have been survived or would have gone through the process of archival selection.

Chloe:

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I see, so it's kind of unmediated these boxes.

Oliver:

Exactly. Unmediated is a really good word, because it is the papers from a ship that have been scooped up, taken, put into our archive, where they've sat in these boxes for many, many years without really being consulted without really being described in any kind of catalogue as to what they are.

Chloe:

And it's a postbag, so it's containing letters from people just saying hello to friends,

Oliver:

Personal letters of any kind, commercial letters, anything that could be on a ship we can have in this collection, because ships in this period, you know, they were a very different kind of technology. They were a transport. They were a postal system. They were a home, in a way that ships aren't now.

Chloe:

How did they get here?

Oliver:

So the reason that they're here is a quirk of pre-Modern Warfare, effectively. So during wars between the different European powers from about the 16th century through until the mid-19th century, it was very common practice to do something called 'prize-taking'. Could also call it 'commerce raiding', which is when private ships owned by merchants, and also naval ships, would be permitted by different European powers to seize the shipping of enemies. So if Britain and France were at war, British (and they call them privateers) private ships that were licensed by the state to capture enemy shipping or naval vessels would be able to go out and capture French ships. And when they seized them, to determine that the seizure was legal, there would be a court process. So there was a court, which was part of the High Court of Admiralty, that was called a prize court, that adjudicated the captures, that determined if they were legal, they were legitimate.

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Chloe:

And these are all the papers of legal captures then.

Oliver:

So these are evidence in a court case

Chloe:

I see, I see, so that's the provenance of how they got into the archive.

Oliver:

Yeah. So the reason they're in a state archive is because they are part of a court process. But. And they are unusually personal for something that you would get in an archive like ours, which is a state archive. So that's the reason why we have them. Vast amounts were brought in as evidence. So what would happen is, once a ship was captured, say, if it was captured and brought into England during a war in this period, kind of you know, about 1650s to around the mid-19th century, they would be taken off the ship by the captors (the privateers crew) bundled up, and then they would be sent to London, and then there, the court would rule on whether the capture was legal enough.

We don't really know why, but after the case, the court kept the papers because prize courts exist in other European countries as well. We haven't fully investigated it, but a lot of others, they didn't seem to have retained the papers. So it does seem to be a relatively unique set of material.

Chloe:

So how many ships were captured?

Oliver:

We think that, for what we have in our collection, there are papers from about 35,000 ships. So in some periods of warfare, they were capturing hundreds, if not 1000s of ships each year.

Chloe:

Wow.

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Oliver:

So they can come from anywhere in the world as well. That's something that's worth bearing in mind. It's in all different kinds of languages because it's ships that the British seized, the British went to war with a lot of people in the 17th and the 19th centuries.

Chloe:

It really helps us to paint a global picture. I mean, I can see that there are lots of letters here. What else is represented in the collection?

Oliver:

So you can find all sorts of material. You can find, literally, the contents of sailors' pockets. So you can find materials that were being that they were using to just write on do calculations.

Chloe:

So like we can get an understanding of people's leisure time abroad.,

Oliver:

Exactly yes, and then papers that belong to captain's ships, logs, account books, sometimes you find poetry people's laundry lists...

Chloe:

And we're going to be looking at a bit of that now I guess

Okay, so just open something that was a little wrapped bundle, and inside it looks like we have a little key.

Oliver:

It's not really clear what the key is for. We find them sometimes in the collection, but it's just an example of the sort of detritus that was on the ship.

Chloe:

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Objects, not just written, written things. Okay, so I mean, you said that vast number of ships, the vast number of boxes just one, and even in this box, so much material contained. How do we think through a collection that vast?

Oliver:

Well, a good place to start is to think about one capture. So what I suggest, as we start talking about a very particular ship, which is one of my favourites in the collection, which I've worked with a huge amount over the years, it is called the Franciscus of Hamburg.

Chloe:

Tell me the story of the capture of the Franciscus.

Oliver:

So it began in May of 1744, in Tenerife to the Port of La Orotava.

Chloe:

Okay, so we're thinking, barmy.

Oliver:

Yeah, it definitely would be at that time of the year. Okay, beautiful sunshine. And then the ship was gradually being loaded in the harbor of La Orotava by a bunch of sailors who are under the command of a guy called Christian Laurenson.

Chloe:

So it's noisy. I'm assuming that they're loading the ship with foodstuffs as well as it...

Oliver:

It would have been provisions. They would have had food. They would have had alcohol, different kinds. But what they were really loading the ship with, that was the purpose of the voyage, was they were loading wine from the Canary Islands. But they were also loading something called logwood, which comes from the Yucatan Peninsula, predominantly in Mexico, and also dollars, otherwise known as pieces of eight.,

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Chloe:

Why would they be loading currency onto the ship?

Oliver:

It would be used to buy other goods. Okay, so the Spanish currency is this most stable form of currency in the period. Used in the way that American dollars are in financial systems today.

Chloe:

So there's no conversion. You have to take your money with you. You have to take all your silver dollars.

Oliver:

So yes, and there was a huge amount of money that was put on the ship. Mean, the ship itself was about 180 tons.

Huge sails that would have been needed to carry it, it would have been very... it would have had a very large hull to carry cargo, mostly. But it probably wouldn't have had that many sailors on it. So it probably would have had about 10 or 12...

Chloe:

So fairly small group to look after all of that stuff.

Oliver:

I'm sure they'd be able to get rid of a lot of a lot of it. Dip in a bit. Yeah. So, but really, the cargo that the ship had was symbolic of the place of the Canary Islands. So in Tenerife, in particular, within European and American, sort of transatlantic trading systems, which was it was carrying local wine, but it was also carrying a lot of produce that came from the Spanish Empire.

So you've got logwood, which was used to make blue and purple dyes. It's very popular across Europe. And also the money, most of which would have been mined at a single mine in Peru called Potosí, okay, which where the silver itself was mined under horrendous conditions by unfree labourers.

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Chloe:

So these are enslaved people.

Oliver:

Some have been enslaved, other under different... other forms of Indigenous labour systems that were adopted by the Spanish to you, used for the purpose of extracting silver from the mine.

Chloe:

And the Canary Islands is colonized by European power, at this time by the Spanish.

Oliver:

Relatively early prior to the voyage, first voyage first voyage to the Americas.

Chloe:

Okay, so they're loading the ship lots of different kind of stuff aboard a small skeleton crew, and they're making their way out into the open ocean?

Oliver:

So yes, they leave, I think it's on the 20th of May, from Tenerife, and their destination is Hamburg, which is where the ship's originally based. It's got two German merchants who are resident in Hamburg, who are the ship's owners, and it sort of makes its way along the Atlantic, seaboard of Europe, over the next several weeks.

The voyage was a difficult one because it was in the middle of something called The War of Austria in Succession which lasted from roughly 1740 to 1748.

Chloe:

So fairly troubled waters they're navigating

Oliver:

Exactly the ship has a particular problem, which is that it's carrying it's a neutral ship. Hamburg's not involved in the war, but it's carrying goods that belong to people who lived on both sides of that war. So it has goods that are put on boars... Some of the dollars and things like that, and the

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log wood were put on by French merchants, some by Irish merchants, some by German merchants, because Britain and France are at war if they get stopped by French or by British privateers or naval vessels, then they might get seized.

Chloe:

And so that was quite common practice at the time? Our German captain, was he? And was he the rule?

Oliver:

Yeah. So neutral trade is a huge phenomenon. Usually, it's used to get around the trading restrictions between the different countries during the war. So everybody starts trading into the neutral ports.

Chloe:

So you're a bit of a chancer if you're doing that this time?

Oliver:

Yes, and this definitely was because there was that huge risk of being doubly captured. Quite often, a neutral ship will only have investors from one side of war. But this one, they had both, okay, by either side. Yes, it was very valuable ship because it was carrying it was carrying money, which is probably the most about the most valuable cargo you can have.

Chloe:

So at what point do they get captured?

Oliver:

So they actually get captured twice. It's quite an unfortunate, unfortunate episode for them, which is they get to the coast of Brittany in mid June,

Chloe:

So not too far off, no.

Oliver:

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So they're pretty close to getting to Hamburg. They're pretty close. And then they get stopped by an entire French naval Squadron. There's no way they were going to escape or even really argue with it. They weren't going to try and put up a fight, because some people did, but the ship stops them, and the French sailors started rummaging through the papers on the ship, searching for evidence that they were carrying, which is some of the evidence that's in front of us here. But while they were busy doing that, the Admiral of the French fleet got a letter saying that he had to leave and go to the Caribbean immediately. So they gave up the ship. They couldn't be bothered to try and take it. Too much work.

Chloe:

So let the Franciscus go?

Oliver:

They let it go.

Chloe:

With all the things still aboard?

Oliver:

With everything aboard having rummaged through all of the papers.

Chloe:

Bit of a mess.

Oliver:

Huge mess broken open, all the chests, everything else. But it was something like three days later, they were off the coast of Kent, and they got stopped by a British privateer. And when they saw the British Privateer, was about to stop them, they started trying to frantically hide all of the papers that were on the ship that showed that they had anything aboard that was French.

Chloe:

So what are they doing, putting it into... into any spaces available?

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Oliver:

They hid some under the casks of wine. They hid some in bouys that were on the ship. They hid some under a cannon. They really tried to stash it frantically, but it didn't work.

Chloe:

And so the British come aboard, they start rifling through, they find all this evidence. They capture the ship.

Oliver:

Exactly. So they took the ship into Dover, and then the papers were all scooped up and sent into London to the High Court of Admiralty, which is why we now have them, but they're in a huge state of disarray when we found them precisely because nobody really touched them, and they were brought in in a mess.

Chloe:

And they'd been gone through twice, once by the French and then by the British. Okay so that's the kind of story, I guess, of some of the ships and some of the material that we have out in front of us today. Can you talk me through what we've got on the table in front of us now?

Oliver:

What we're looking at here is an example of what we usually call mail in transit, otherwise known as post.

Chloe:

Okay, so things that would have been in that post bag that we looked at earlier, right?

Oliver:

So it would have been exactly in a bag like that. The way that post usually worked in this period was they put up a sack like the one we looked at in a tavern with the destination written on it. And people would pay money and put them, put the letters, slip the letters into the sack.

Chloe:

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Okay, like a kind of mobile post box, exactly, exactly.

Oliver:

Sometimes when you go to the post office today, you see them doing similar things behind the counter, where they're in big sacks, sack hung up with its destination. So yes, there's he has about six bundles of letters in here that were intended for delivery,

Chloe:

Sorry. Where are they going?

Oliver:

So they all come from Tenerife, and they're all intended for Dunkirk, Hamburg and London, because you get them going into other ports, and the letters being going for onward delivery.

Chloe:

So this is a really wide picture of letter writing at the period, going to different destinations. I mean, we have three piles of letters in front of us, I can see here and, you know, the papers are maybe a bit smaller than your A4, maybe kind of slightly bigger than A5. Some of them have folds. Some of them have these red waxy seals with maybe like insignia on or letters, and then really big cursive handwriting. I mean, these people are writing long letters to each other.

Oliver:

And you can see that they've been completely flattened, which is different from their original condition, but they would have been folded up.

Chloe:

Oh, okay, so there's no envelopes in this in this time?

Oliver:

Well, sometimes there are, but you have to make your own. So it's just uses extra paper, so usually you just fold up the letter in a certain way to see it, to make it square, and then you would seal it. And the seal itself will probably be your personal seal.

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This is one example of the sorts of letters that you get in the Franciscus, but also in Prize Papers in general. These are three letters that were sent from a man called William Farrell.

Oliver:

Here we have a really fantastic example of the kinds of letters that you can get in the Prize Papers collection.

Chloe:

So you've cherry-picked this for us today?

Oliver:

Very carefully, yes, from within all of the massive papers. So these are in English. Okay, thankfully, which means that we can sort of look at them relatively easily here.

So all three letters are sent from the same person. So they're sent from a man called William Farrell, who moved to the Canary Islands in 1740, and who he was writing to were his family members who lived in Ireland. So they all lived in and around Waterford. They were a relatively wealthy family. They were landowners. They were a gentry family, but William Farrow had moved. Abroad to the Canary Islands, where He was apprenticed to a merchant.

Chloe: 42:12

So who were these letters to?

Oliver:

So you can see on the back, who they are addressed to. So this one is to actually, it says to her, to a bookkeeper called Morris O'Hearne.

Chloe: For Morris O'Hearne. I can see in really big cursive handwriting, some big fancy H's and M's.

Oliver:

And he was actually his cousin. So this is to William Farrell's cousin. The other two letters are to his are to his mother and to his father and mother together.

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Chloe:

So a really personal, intimate portrait of domestic relationships across a global, global kind of world. At the time.

Oliver:

You would think so, but he's doing a thing that we've all done with our parents at some point in our lives, which he's asking them for money.

Chloe:

OK, William!

Chloe:

So can you give me an example of one of these escapades?

Oliver:

In this letter there's a fantastic example. This is to his cousin, James Wise.

Reader:

I've met with a great many ups and downs, and had considerable losses and disappointments, all of which I received from the hand of God, with the Christian conformity I was capable of, and with great reason for by His Divine Providence, I just escaped being lost on the Barbary Coast [North Africa], and another time from being murdered in the Port Orotava [in Tenerife], by a townsman and pretended relation of ours, one William Hayes, a periwig maker, whom stabbed me maliciously in the street at night with a sword of three files and wounded me in a degree in the left shoulder that I had liked to bleed to death in the same spot

Chloe:

I mean, Poor William, what a story. I can see we've got other letters here. Can you talk me through some of those?

Oliver:

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Yeah, so we're looking at a separate bundle of letters here, actually. They're sent from Tenerife to Catherine Russell, who was studying at a convent near Dunkirk.

Chloe:

So she's the receiver of the letters?

Oliver:

Yes. So she was from an English Catholic family. Because Catholicism was still effectively outlawed in England at the time. So it's there you get English merchants, that are resident in Catholic countries, and they're drawn to places like Tenerife for the same reason that Farrell would have been, which is that it's a kind of it's commercial hub. Where you can find workers, you can find a lot of connections there a real melting pot. So there were some of the English Catholic merchants that were resident there, and she was sent off to be educated. And the letters really are all from all different members of her family. So there's some from her brother, some from her father, some from her mother. And these are something that you would expect to be quite sort of tender, but they're really full of sort of stern admonishments, to study hard, to her, to study carefully. Because I think part of it..

Chloe:

I mean, there's lots of different handwriting I can see represented in these bundles. They're all about the same size, but they're all tied together.

Oliver:

You see there it's written 'Sister Catherine Russell'. So here, there's a section where this one here is from her brother, and it's a really good example of what we're talking about. He doesn't really say, we miss you, we'd like to see you.

Chloe:

There's not any of that intimacy.

Oliver:

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No, it's very much the family's reputation depends upon you studying well here. There are some more, some notes in it, which are more sort of you would expect from a family where they sent her things from the island as presents. They send her lemons, sugar sculptures...

Chloe:

Sugar sculptures? And they survived the journey?

Oliver:

Well, they didn't, because the ship got captured so I don't really know what happened to the sugar sculptures.

Chloe:

So they were kept as evidence. Where they? So what does Peter admonish her for then?

Oliver:

He doesn't really admonish her. This is what he says.

Reader:

Consider what a shame it will be to the hereafter should you neglect [your studies] ... as everyone knows what accomplished ladies have come from thence [the Dunkirk convent] and this ought to be a sufficient motive for you not to give room to be reproached with the hard censure: for that you went to Flanders? ... Therefore, my dear sister, let me entreat you to mind your learning with cheerfulness, your music with spirit, and your dancing with grace and by which, with good behaviour, you may agreeably tell where you were brought up.

Oliver:

This is written in 1744.

Chloe:

It really feels like those gender stereotypes that we see replicated in TV and film really. That kind of educated, pious woman figure that Peter is really encouraging her to be.

Chloe:

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Okay, so we've looked at some of the letters that were meant for Catherine. That maybe never got there. Well, didn't ever get there. What about this letter here? I can see right on top of this pile.

Oliver:

So this letter here is in Spanish, so there are several just like it. You can see it's written in a way that's the lines aren't necessarily straight. It's probably from somebody who is slightly less literate than the people we've just been looking at.

Chloe:

Yes, some of the letters are more standardised. The kind of handwriting is neater, and then this feels a little bit more messy, a little bit more thrown together, and the ink is slightly lighter.

Oliver:

So these are all from a set of nuns that lived in a convent near Santa Cruz in Tenerife. Spanish nuns, although some of them, their names suggest that they were originally born in Ireland, but they're writing in Spanish, and what they're doing in these letters is they're writing to a group of friars in Dunkirk, who were part of the same religious order, so the Dominicans.

Chloe:

So these are like pen pals, exactly.

Oliver:

That's exactly what they're like. So they are sending gifts backwards and forwards. So in this particular letter, in this particular letter here, the nun thanks the friar who sent her presents previously, apparently he'd sent her a new habit, and in return, she sends him boxes, which are apparently from all of the nuns, which contain 34 pounds of fine chocolates.

Chloe:

Wow. Great Gift,

Oliver:

Exactly, and a box full of flowers.

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Chloe:

Okay, lovely.

Chloe:

So, through the prize papers, how can we learn about global trade at the time.

Oliver:

One of the best ways that you can find out about it is that the ships themselves, we've dealt with a lot of personal correspondence, letters that were on the ship, but they also carried a lot of what we call ships papers. So these are administrative paperwork that you had to fill out in ports, or agreements between merchants that were on the ship when they were captured. And they can really show you all kinds of things, how much goods were being moved, from where, who possessed the goods. And there's a lot of interesting sort of physical processes and practices that went on within the trade itself. So if we start over here, we can see, that this here, is something called a bill of lading. You still get these today.

Chloe:

Okay, so what Oliver's passed me now, is like a small bundle, and, yeah, almost it's like little slips of paper. So with these, like receipts, some of it is like printed, and then some of it has, it's like a form.

Oliver:

Exactly. It's a form that you would fill out. And it just simply says, 'I' this person, whoever you are, I put onto this ship, these goods, and they're owned by this person when they arrive, and they're consigned to that person.

Chloe:

So it's like a record of ownership, or exactly as it passes through different people.

Oliver:

So it's a very typical kind of document. We find a lot of them, and you'll see from here, we've got them as blank forms as well, so that you can just that's how they would have been filled out. You would have cut them out.

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Chloe:

And this is all in different languages as well, yeah. So a bit of German here, I think.

Oliver:

Yeah you would fill them out in lots of different languages, depending upon what was the most useful one. So you would they would basically fill out two of these the person who was sending them, the sender would retain one. The second one would go on the ship with the goods, and then the bill of lading would be on the ship with, say, a barrel or set of chests. And the barrels would be marked with what's called a merchant mark, and then that same mark, which you can see here, is put onto the bill of lading.

Chloe:

So for example, if you aborted a ship to capture that ship, you should be able to identify from this paperwork and the mark, who belonged to who, where it was going and where those goods originated.

Oliver:

Exactly. And if you're a sailor who can't necessarily read or write that, well, then perhaps you can match the mark to the barrels yourself when you're unloading it. And then when the ship's unloaded, then the recipient would get the second copy of the bill of lading from the ship, plus the goods, and then both sides have a copy. And it's a practice that goes back into the medieval period, bills of lading. But when you get print, it's much easier to do this, because just in the past, they just had to do a note and write it.

Yeah, so that's so that's one form. The others, you get all kinds of odds and ends like this. Here's just a list of the food that was on the ship. So a lot of meat, a lot of beer that the sailors would have eaten as they went.

Chloe:

And I can see here... so this is kind of broadly, a bit of a table, but without the lines right. And here on the far left of this sheet of, I guess, closest to kind of A4 size, fairly, fairly ragged at the edges. And these are the marks right down?

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Oliver:

Yeah those are for a separate set of cargo. Okay, so those are different packs.

Chloe:

So the marks, the marks like a star here. Almost?

Oliver:

The star is the Star of David. So that would be a Jewish mark.

Chloe:

And then this almost looks like three circles with a little wavy lineup, yeah, like a Club, like, a like, on a card.

Oliver:

They would create their own merchant mark, and it would be unique to you, and it would go on to everything.

Chloe:

And so, this list, beer, what else have we got represented on this list?

Oliver:

These are saying, these are, so that's the provisions on this right-hand side. And on the left-hand side, it simply says, oh, yeah, this person has pack number two, pack number three, pack number six. So this is something that somebody's written out when they were trying to work out what belonged to who probably with reference to the bills of lading.

Chloe:

Okay, so, so moving on what else have we got? Maybe tell us about the people that were making these lists?

Oliver:

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So we get a lot that's in the Prize Papers that comes from sailors themselves or passengers or anybody who happened to be on the ship. So you get letters that happen to be on the ship, you get the paperwork that corresponds to the ship and international trade, and then you get the material that belonged to the seafarers themselves. And that's what we're looking at here. So everything in front of us is odd scraps of paper and notebooks. They were all taken from the chests of the sailors on the ship when it was captured.

Chloe:

So their personal belongings. So I can see it looks like sheet music here, written out with with ink, and then this tiny little kind of bound notebook. And it kind of, well, not a notebook. It's printed, and it says, Alma. Is that an almanac? Almanac?

Oliver:

Yeah. So almanacs would have been released annually. There's something that we don't necessarily have so much nowadays, but they were very common in the past, and they contain all kinds of useful information. You see this one's very small, isn't it?

Chloe:

It's like pocket size. Okay,

Oliver:

It's designed to go in your pocket, and then you can remove it whenever you need so in your waistcoat pocket.

Chloe:

And what about this here? Now, this is a, looks like a leather-bound..

Oliver:

This is a leather-bound notebook. So leather-bound notebook just that people would scribble odds and ends in as they were on the ship.

Chloe:

So that's just notes to themselves, maybe applications and music too.

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Oliver:

So that, yeah, the sheet music you've got is actually quite rare. So there's a piece here. The belong to a passenger who was actually going to London to get married. And you have to imagine that he was sat on the ship writing it out, because it's very rough notation...

Chloe:

So he was composing his first dance?

Oliver:

Not quite, but he was writing out tunes from memory. So they're all quite well known folk tunes, and he must have been kind of playing them, writing them down so he could play while he was on the ship itself. So we have a lot of things that are kind of the product of boredom.

Chloe:

Okay, so we've seen so much from the things that were pulled out of the Franciscus during the capture by the British. What's your favorite thing that you've come across Oliver?

Oliver:

I think my favourite thing from this ship is the poetry that was written by one of the passengers while he was on the ship, because he wrote it out really roughly on a piece, on a small piece of paper.

Chloe:

I mean, we've got it here. Ink splatters plenty. And how does he begin this poem that he's so artfully put together.

Oliver:

He begins with the phrase, 'sweet nymph'. I can probably try and find a passage if we got time. How does it go.. "Sweet nymph, if you would be happy and joyous in heart would prove, come venture out along with me and taste the sweets of love."

Chloe:

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Wow, it's so...

Oliver:

It's terrible

Chloe:

So terrible poetry, but it's still you're favourite, why?

Oliver:

It's because it speaks to this, this collection. It's not about who was a tremendously important person, it's not about who wrote a great work of art, it's not about somebody who someone else has already made a decision for you, that you should be able to see these records hundreds of years later.

Chloe:

Going back to the unmediated nature of the collection.

Oliver:

Exactly, it doesn't have the same level of filter on it, and it means that we can access all of these different lives which otherwise just become completely forgotten. Most of these papers that we see here are not things that people at the time would have thought were particularly valuable, and in the way that we don't think most of the time that one email or one scrap of paper that we retain is valuable, but because we're never going to know what somebody in hundreds of years is actually going to value. That makes a collection like this tremendous in its potential for what you can do with research. It is research on everyday people you know, and how they lived in this period. You get a lot about how the world was connected. You also get a lot about the benefits that people derive from that world, also a lot of the problems that came from a more connected world, a lot of the ways in which people struggled as a result of it.

Chloe:

And I guess there's a bit of an assumption that the world is not connected at this time, but these papers alone show us how vastly enmeshed these different worlds are, these different realities.

Oliver:

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So people, people could travel relatively easily. You got to think it's not that hard to get on a ship and be gone.

Chloe:

And it also shows us, I guess, how trade operated, the marks for people that were illiterate, and also, I guess, the patterns of Empire and the forces moving all of this stuff around the globe.

Oliver:

The way that empires weren't really directed centrally in a very coherent way, is the sense that you get from this collection, which is that the sinews of it were maintained by everyday people who are living their lives, and the whole thing was structured by the incentives of trade.

Chloe:

And those people were writing bad poetry aboard a ship at that time.

Oliver:

They were exactly because they thought that nobody would ever see it.

Chloe:

And here we are looking at them, and I wonder, then, okay, so we're very privileged to be looking at this, these things today, from the collection. And can people outside of The National Archives look at the Prize Papers

Oliver:

They can so gradually we're working through it. The more that we saw, the more we catalogue, the more that we find, and the more becomes available, which is going until 2038 which is when the project will eventually conclude.

Chloe:

And so it's being digitized.

Oliver:

So you can see it here. Part of the project is we are digitising it, so we're making everything accessible online. It's completely open access, so it's free to anybody. So you can go to

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prizepapers.de which is the website maintained by our partners in Oldenburg, and you can start to look at some of the material we've got up already. We've got about 20,000 documents up there already, but obviously it's about half a million documents, so we're just getting started,

Chloe:

And we can also read your reflections in blog posts and things like that can't We?

Oliver:

Yes, I've got a blog which I've written, which recreates the whole story of William Farrell's terrible four years, which you can read about on The National Archives website. There's also a case study of the Franciscus that you can find on the Prize Papers website as well.

Chloe:

That's great. Thank you so much for telling us this amazing story of the Franciscus and giving us such a brilliant overview of this vast collection the Prize Papers. You've hinted a few times at the need for deep expertise in heritage science and conservation in this project, the physical nature of the collection. And I'd like to hear a bit more about that work.

Oliver:

Yeah, I would like to find out more as well about some of the work that goes on with this collection that's more to do with its physical nature, as you say, its materiality. So for this, I think we can talk to two experts that work on the project.

There's Marc Vermeulen who uses scientific techniques to understand more about the items and where they came from.

And Marina Casagrande who is our project conservator who works with every sheet of paper that we go through to make sure it's in the condition to be preserved for the future.

Chloe:

So can I pass the baton to you and our heritage scientists, Marc and Marina, and they can tell us a little bit more about that process within the project.

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That's going to be episode two in this series.

Chloe: And me, I want to find out how the prize papers project can tell us about the global nature of this time, and also colonialism and Empire. That's going to be episode three.

Chloe: Thanks for listening to On The Record from The National Archives. Please rate and review us where you listen, if you can.

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