In 1993 Sir George Earle generously donated his archive of family and business papers to Merseyside Maritime Museum and with the assistance of David Richardson of the University of Hull it was transferred from the Earle family estate in Co. Limerick, Ireland. The archive comprises some seventeen boxes of volumes and documents relating to the family’s business, estate, and personal affairs from the early eighteenth century to the 1930s, when the family dispersed to various locations around the United Kingdom. The archive is particularly important as a source for mercantile and shipping activities in Liverpool during the mid-eighteenth century, the period when Liverpool became a major port heavily involved in the slave trade, and for which relatively few records of that type survive. Notable exceptions to the general scarcity are the papers of William Davenport, at the University of Keele, and the letterbooks of Thomas Leyland and Robert Bostock in the Liverpool Record Office.1 The Earle collection is certainly the largest and most important archive acquired by the Merseyside Maritime Museum relating to this aspect of Liverpool’s maritime history, and this article attempts to demonstrate something of its riches and to illustrate its value to researchers, especially for the slave trade.

By the 1740s Liverpool had overtaken both London and Bristol to become the country’s leading slave port, and remained so until the slave trade came to an end in 1807. During this period, the Earle family was in business as merchants and shipowners in a wide range of commercial ventures, including the wine, tobacco, timber, and slave trades. This gives special importance to the archive, which includes a number of interesting documents concerning the Earles’ slave-trading business. They include letterbooks, a log book for a slaving voyage to Africa, instructions to captains, and bundles of papers relating to the administration of plantations in British Guiana (now Guyana). Before describing the archive in detail it is necessary to know something of the history of its creators, the three generations of a Liverpool merchant family who played a leading part in the city’s commerce and maritime affairs in the eighteenth century.

The Earle family had been resident in south Lancashire for four centuries when John Earle (1674–1749) transferred the family interests from Warrington, leaving behind his father’s trade of brewing to pursue mercantile activities in Liverpool. His sons and their descendants established themselves as one of the city’s leading families. Upon coming to Liverpool in 1688, John Earle joined the house of William Clayton, M.P., a merchant and shipowner of high standing. On 10 December 1700 he married Eleanor Tyrer and began trading as a merchant on his own behalf, primarily in the wine trade, but also in iron, tobacco, sugar, and slaves. In 1709, at the age of thirty-five, he became mayor of Liverpool. At his death in 1749 he was survived by four of his seven children, all from his second marriage to Mary Finch: Ralph (1715–90), Thomas (1719–81), William (1721–88), and Sarah (1717–1809). Both Ralph and Thomas followed their father as mayor, Ralph in 1769 and Thomas in 1787. William was a slave ship captain in his early years before retiring to pursue a career as a merchant.  

John’s eldest son, Ralph Earle (1715–90), operated mainly in the timber trade from property at Salthouse Dock, but he

also held interests in ships trading in various other cargoes, and was listed in the Act of Parliament of 1752 which established the Liverpool company of merchants trading to Africa. In 1766 he was trading beads in partnership with his brothers Thomas and William, together with William Davenport, Peter Holme, Thomas Hodgson, and John Copeland. In the eighteenth century Venice was the main supply centre for beads, especially for English slave-traders, and William Davenport’s bead book, which has been analysed by David Richardson, shows that he sold beads to the value of approximately £39,000 between July 1766 and July 1770, almost all for use in the African trade. Ralph Earle together with his brother William, in partnership with William Davenport, owned the Friendship, a prize taken from the French and used for trading to Old Calabar and America in the 1760s. Old Calabar by 1750 had become one of the major centres of supply for English slave-traders on the African coast, and was the main destination for the Earle brothers’ African-bound vessels. Another of the partners, John Copeland, was the captain of the Calypso, a second vessel used by the partnership for trading to Africa in July 1760, and owned by William Earle and John Copeland. Ralph Earle also owned shares in several other vessels, but unfortunately, except for the Articles of Partnership relating to his trading in beads, nothing else relating to his mercantile affairs survives in the archive.

Ralph’s younger brother, Thomas Earle (1719–81), established a prosperous house of business in Leghorn (Livorno), Italy, dealing in wine, coffee, hides, and marble, and

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3 Cited in Gomer Williams, *History of the Liverpool privateers and letters of marque, with an account of the Liverpool slave trade* (Liverpool, 1897), p. 674.
5 M.M.M., C/EX/L/3/2, Liverpool Statutory Register of British Merchant Ships (Plantation Register), 1755–65, for 1763; *Lloyd’s Register* (1764).
6 M.M.M., C/EX/L/3/2, 1760.
7 Ibid., D/Earle/4/2.
is also credited as the first merchant to import white marble, used for sculpture, into Liverpool. He also engaged in trading ventures with his brothers Ralph and William in Liverpool, including the ownership of the snow Polly, a French prize used by the partnership in the Leghorn trade. Shares in the Polly were also held by Thomas Hodgson with whom Thomas Earle established a branch of business in Genoa and Leghorn, in partnership with Robert Hodgson and John Denham. Many letters from Denham concerning his business and complicated domestic affairs survive in the collection. The Hodgson family of Liverpool were close business and personal friends and partners with the Earles at home and abroad, and many documents relating to them also exist in the archive. They include a family pedigree, and numerous estate papers probably amassed when William Earle’s son William acted as Thomas Hodgson’s executor in 1833. Thomas Hodgson was also cited in Articles of Partnership with Ralph Earle for sugar refining at the Haymarket sugar house, Liverpool, in 1763, and in the partnership with all three Earle brothers and William Davenport trading in beads and arangoes (a type of bead imported from Bombay) in 1766.

After the death of Thomas Earle in 1781 his business was amalgamated with his younger brother William’s, and on William’s death seven years later the family business passed to William’s sons Thomas (1754–1822) and William (1760–1839). Both Thomas and William were already active partners, and operating from premises in Hanover Street, Liverpool, under the name of T. & W. Earle & Company they expanded their business further in partnership with Thomas Molyneux in the iron trade, and also in wine, oil, silk, and sugar. In the 1830s they acquired a plantation in Berbice, British Guiana, as part of a bad debt, and several bundles of

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9 M.M.M., C/EX/L/3/2, 1762.
10 Ibid., D/Earle/3/3–4, Letters from Joseph Denham to his wife Sukey and Thomas Earle, c. 1761–81.
11 Ibid., D/Earle/4/1–2.
12 Ibid., D/Earle/4/4, Articles of Partnership, 20 Aug. 1785.
correspondence and documents relating to its administration, including the use of slaves, and later free black labour, are in the archive.\textsuperscript{13} There is also a letterbook entitled ‘Livorno’ which contains correspondence relating to the Leghorn trading activities of T. & W. Earle & Co., for the period 1801–8, when that branch of the business ceased.\textsuperscript{14}

It has been calculated that during the period 1785–95 the Earles were the tenth largest British slave traders and the second largest at Calabar and the Cameroons.\textsuperscript{15} In a list of slave ships belonging to the port of Liverpool which sailed for Africa between 5 January 1798 and 5 January 1799, T. & W. Earle are listed as the owners of three vessels, the Adriana, sailing from Angola with 424 slaves in April, and the Telegraph and Harlequin, also sailing from Angola in November 1798, with 140 and 275 slaves respectively.\textsuperscript{16} We also know that the Earles held shares in other vessels, mainly in partnership with Robert and Thomas Hodgson.\textsuperscript{17}

It is, however, the records relating to the mercantile and shipping affairs of their father, the first William Earle (1721–88), which are of greatest interest. A key document in the collection is the letter of instructions to him as captain of the Chesterfield for a voyage to Old Calabar in West Africa in May 1751. The letter is a good example of the instructions issued by a managing partner, in this instance Francis Ingram, to a captain. Earle was instructed to proceed to Old Calabar, where he was to barter his cargo for slaves and elephants’ teeth (ivory). He was to leave the river when he had purchased 350 slaves, proceed to Barbados, and apply to Samuel Carter, merchant. The names of a number of alternative merchants at other islands were given to ensure that the desired price of £17 per slave was obtained.\textsuperscript{18}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{13} Ibid., D/Earle/5/1–11, Berbice plantation papers, c. 1823–99.
\bibitem{14} Ibid., D/Earle/2/3.
\bibitem{16} Cited in Williams, Liverpool privateers, p. 681.
\bibitem{17} Robert Craig and Rupert Jarvis, Liverpool registry of merchant ships (Manchester, 1967).
\bibitem{18} M.M.M., D/Earle/1/1.
\end{thebibliography}
By 1757 William Earle had retired from the sea to pursue his mercantile activities in Liverpool, but retained his interest in the *Chesterfield*, for in the accounts of her fitting out for a voyage to Old Calabar in July 1757 he was listed as holding a share of five sixteenths. He was responsible for a substantial investment in the voyage, of £1,436 12s. 2d. out of a total outfitting cost of £4,597 2s. 10d. The invoice book for the *Chesterfield* is believed to have belonged to William Davenport, a partner in the enterprise. Although William Earle’s interest in the *Chesterfield* is disguised by the fact that the vessel’s managing owner was John Williamson, we know that Earle acted as the managing owner of a number of other vessels owned in partnership. In a letter addressed to Messrs Turner, Hilton, and Briscoe, William Earle described himself as the ‘Ships Husband’ for the *Calypso*’s voyage to Bonny in July 1760, a term commonly used to describe the role of the managing partner. It was the responsibility of the ‘ship’s husband’ to organize and manage the slaving venture, from outfitting the ship and arranging the cargoes, to corresponding with the captains, agents, and merchants in England, Africa, and the American colonies. The activities of a managing partner are illuminated by a letterbook of William Earle for the period 23 January 1760 to 23 September 1761, which includes a wealth of information and fascinating insights into the actual process of slave trading.

We already know that Liverpool merchants used factors stationed in the American colonies. From the letterbook we find that William Earle employed various agents in the ports where he traded, including John Sparling and William Bolden in Norfolk, Virginia, and Austin and Lawrence & Co. in the Carolinas. The agents would buy sugar, tobacco, and other local goods before the vessel arrived, and also arranged the sale of the cargoes of slaves. An illustration of this can be found in a letter addressed to Messrs Austin and Lawrence on

30 January 1760, in which William Earle informed them of the ‘arrival of the Industry Capt. William Hindle from the Camaroans with a Cargo of young Slaves which by his Instructions have addressed to you the Quantity will be but small from 100 to 120 as we can Expect he will be Early at market and doubt not their selling at a Good Price & as we intend the Capt. a Larger Ship wou’d be glad to dispose of the vessel at Caralina’. Earle continued with the stipulation that ‘If you do not succeed in the sale of the vessel would have her loaden for Oure accott with Turpentine Rice & pipe staves White Oak if no pipe & Barrel no Indico or skines.”

An insight into the commodities used to purchase slaves in Africa can also be gained from the letterbook. The most important were textiles, guns and gunpowder, spirits, brass, copper, pewter, bar iron, clay pipes, and salt. Cowrie shells were imported from India and together with bar iron, copper, and brass (in the form of manillas or bracelets) were used as currency in West Africa. Beads came from Italy and other European centres. William Earle wrote of the cargo loaded on the Mentor for a voyage to Whydah (now Ouidah, Republic of Benin) in September 1761 as including 2,000 silitias (shells), 20 tons of cowries, and 40 boxes of pipes. There is also a great deal of correspondence dealing with the insurance of cargoes and with payment, including the increasing use of the financial mechanism of bills of exchange. These added an element of flexibility and greatly improved the turn-round time of voyages. An example of their use can be found in the letter of instructions to William Earle as captain of the Chesterfield in 1751, which asked him to ‘contract the earliest and best remittances where you set down . . . agreeing & fixing the Exchange on Bills’, and to ‘try for £17 pounds sterling per head at St Eustatia [Sint Eustatius, Dutch West Indies] with full remittance in good bills at Thirty, Forty or Sixty days but if he were offered above Ninety days must object against them. If these offers were not made to him then he was to proceed to Jamaica and load his ship with the Islands produce.”

21 M.M.M., D/Earle/2/2.
22 Ibid., D/Earle/1/1.
It is apparent from the letterbook that captains of slaving vessels received detailed instructions concerning the Africans they were to buy, which is hardly surprising since the quality of the slaves was directly related to their price at market. There was also the danger of a large number of slaves dying from contagious disease on board. This is illustrated in a letter to Messrs Turner, Hilton, and Briscoe, in which William Earle stressed that ‘the price of the slaves must depend on the Quality’ and referred to the fate of a cargo of slaves sold from the Hazard at Barbados, where 126 slaves out of 426 were buried and the remainder ‘harassed with sickness’. On arrival in the colonies the slaves were sold, and captains, surgeons, and mates (of larger vessels) were granted privilege slaves whom they then usually sold in the Americas for cash or bills of exchange. When captain of the Chesterfield, William Earle was told that he could have for his privilege five slaves, his mate Mr Banks one slave, and his surgeon Mr Black one slave and one boy slave. The surgeon was also to be paid his head money and the captain was to receive ‘your coast commission of a £1 on 10s’. In a letter to Messrs Hutchinson in London on 19 September 1761 Earle referred to an agreement made between Thomas Brown, mariner, and himself, for Brown to act as chief mate on a vessel bound for Africa. Brown was allowed to take goods of £100 to buy ivory and was to be given three privilege slaves. Another letter of great interest is Earle’s reply to an African chief, Duke Abashy, whose two sons were mistakenly taken on board with a cargo of slaves at St Thomas (São Tomé in the Gulf of Guinea). William Earle gave his every assurance that he would try to get them back, describing his love for Calabar and his anxiety to remain Duke Abashy’s friend. The letter is a rare illustration of the close relationship which the Liverpool merchants strove to achieve with their contacts in Africa.

23 Ibid., D/Earle/2/2, 7 July 1760.
24 Ibid., D/Earle/1/1. The coast commission of ‘a £1 on 10s’ is confusing, as it was more usual for coast commissions to be around 2 per cent on purchase of the slaves and 3–4 per cent of the sale value of the slave cargo: Stephen D. Behrendt, ‘The captains in the British slave trade from 1785 to 1807’, *T.H.S.L.C.*, CXL (1991), p. 94.
25 M.M.M., D/Earle/2/2.
Perhaps the most interesting survival in the collection is the log of the *Unity* for a slaving voyage from Liverpool to Holland and across to Calabar in 1769.\(^{27}\) It was kept by the captain, Robert Norris, who several years later as a captain and merchant of some note gave testimony before parliamentary committees investigating the slave trade, describing his voyage on the *Unity*.\(^{28}\) The log provides valuable detail on the activities of a slaving captain and life on board his ship. After collecting a cargo of cowrie shells from ‘Helvoetsburg’ (presumably Hellevoetsluis), Holland, on 8 August, they arrived off the coast of Africa at Cape Coast Castle on 16 November 1769. We can gain an idea of the number of vessels trading at this port from their sighting of eleven other vessels in the river that day. Two days later they arrived at Whydah and, after an unexplained gap of two months, they ‘went up to Abomey, the capital of Dahomey to wait upon the King’, being carried part of the way in hammocks. They departed on 28 April 1770, with 227 slaves on board, and on their arrival at São Tomé, they received a transfer of 200 slaves from the *Society*, bringing the total to 425, with the loss of a male slave, ‘No. 8’.

The voyage was eventful, with many deaths of slaves and insurrections. The first revolt occurred on 6 June 1770, with the entry that ‘the slaves made an Insurrection which was soon quelled . . . with the loss of two woman slaves’, and the deaths of three more women slaves followed. On 22 June it was recorded that ‘the slaves attempted another Insurrection after the death of a girl slave No 13; lost a man of Capt. Henry Fennys purchase who jumped overboard and was drowned. Employed securing the men in chains and gave the women concerned 24 lashes each’. Four days later, on 26 June, we learn that ‘a few of the slaves got off their Handcuffs but were detected in Time’. The following day’s entry states that ‘the Slaves attempted to force up grating in the night with a design to murder the whites or drown themselves but prevented by the watch. In the morning they confessed their intentions and that the women as well as the men were

\(^{27}\) M.M.M., D/Earlc/1/4.

\(^{28}\) Richardson, ‘Accounts of William Davenport’, p. 70.
determined if disappointed of cutting off the whites to jump overboard but in Case of being prevented by their Irons were resolved to burn the ship.' Captain Norris recorded that 'their obstinacy put me under the Necessity of shooting the Ring leader'. The log of the *Unity* is, therefore, a source of great value for research into life on board a slaving vessel, the treatment of the slaves, and the conditions in which they were kept. It was at the time of writing (December 1996) on display in the Transatlantic Slavery Gallery at the Merseyside Maritime Museum, but a microfilm copy is available to researchers.

The Earle papers also provide new information on Liverpool privateering in the eighteenth century. Privateering was a form of private enterprise whereby vessels could attack and seize goods and vessels of foreign subjects whose governments were at war with Britain. Privateers could claim the rights to the property under the law of the sea and within the legal regulations of the Admiralty, and shipowners could apply to the Admiralty for letters of marque or privateer commissions which licensed them to send out private vessels of war. In order to maximize their chances of encountering enemy ships they were instructed to cruise rather than follow a specific course, and the ships used were either adapted from merchantmen or specially built with this purpose in mind. The accounts for the fitting out of the privateer *Enterprise* give details of the requirements, at a cost of £4,083 13s. 8d., in September 1779.29 Thomas and William Earle held a combined share of five sixteenths, but the vessel operated under the name of Francis Ingram & Company. Labour recruitment was difficult in times of war, which was when most commerce raiding took place, and Ingram had to recruit men from Chester and Whitehaven.30 A large crew was essential to fight for the prize and to navigate her to a home port; the crew generally received no wages but were given a predetermined share of the proceeds.

There were two main groups of privateers, the Channel privateers who operated during the war with France on the

29 Liv. R.O., 387 MD 45.
coastal and larger merchantmen, and the deep-sea privateers. The latter hunted for the large and valuable cargoes of colonial produce returning to Europe from the Caribbean, South America, and the East Indies. These deep-water predators often cruised in company with other vessels and always received strict instructions as to their cruising stations. In the letter of instructions written by Ingram to Captain James Hasslam on 16 September 1779, the *Enterprise* was to depart Liverpool for a cruise of six months, by the North Channel if the wind were favourable, 'it being the path less liable to meet with the Enemys Cruisers and having a chance to meet with American vessels, bound to Sweden'. He was to obtain a longitude of 20 degrees west and cross the latitudes to the Azores, and if after three weeks he had met with no success, he was to proceed to the north-west of Cove (Cobh, Ireland). Should the captain be fortunate enough to take a prize or prizes on those stations to the value of £10,000 he was to 'see them safe into some good ports in Ireland'. If the prize was less than that, he was 'to despatch them with a trusty officer taking care not to put too many of the Enemy in purporting [proportion] to your own men on board . . . with caution not to trust many of his own people aloft at a time on any account whatever, as many prizes have been retaken by the prisoners for wont of such precaution'.

The Liverpool historian Gomer Williams described the career of the *Enterprise* in his work *Liverpool privateers*, which also gives much information on other vessels owned by the Earles in the slavery and privateering trades.

Captain Hasslam was 'strictly ordered not to meddle with any neutral vessel unless he was certain that she had taken her loading in North America', and not to pay attention to the 'giddy solicitations' of his crew but to adhere to the printed instructions from the Admiralty. He was to secure every paper relating to a prize and to forward it to Francis Ingram. Upon examining the prisoners to obtain information relating to the

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31 M.M.M., D/Earle/1/5
32 Williams, *Liverpool privateers*, pp. 19–31. The original accounts consulted by Williams were at that time (1897) in possession of a Mr Hampson.
destination of other vessels, he was to communicate anything of national importance to the first Royal Navy ship encountered. The crew were not to plunder the clothes or bedding of the prisoners, who were to 'be used with all tenderness and humanity consistent with your own safety'. The success of the cruise was greatly dependent on the need for the crew to 'be made to do their duty with good temper—as harmony a good look out and a steady attention to the main points are all absolute'. The instructions ended with the routine but extremely necessary proviso that in case of Captain Hasslam's death his first lieutenant was to take command, and concluded with wishes for a successful cruise.

Another document relating to the Earles' interests in privateering is the articles of 28 May 1769 for the fitting out of the privateer Mars, 'against the enemies of Great Britain', for a voyage to Sierra Leone in Africa. The Mars remained in the ownership of Messrs William Earle & Sons, and in 1780 took a Dutch snow during her passage to Africa, laden with French brandy, wine, and corkwood. In January 1782 the Mars was herself captured on her voyage back to Liverpool from St Kitts and taken to Boston, before being later retaken.

Another shipping document found in the collection is a crew list and agreement for the fitting out of the Harlequin of Liverpool, owned by Messrs Earle & Sons and under the command of Joseph Fayrer, for a cruise of five months, dated 2 February 1781. In May, whilst cruising in the Azores, the Harlequin in company with the Caesar of Bristol took a ship from Curaçao. There is also a letter dated 24 July 1781 from Robert Carr, aboard the Harlequin, to a Mrs Susanah Barkley, in which he referred to their taking another prize into Cork.

In August of that year the Harlequin arrived in Liverpool with two more prizes, after which she herself was apparently captured, according to a deed for her release from arrest, dated 26 September 1781. The Harlequin continued to

33 M.M.M., D/Earle/1/6.
34 Williams, Liverpool privateers, p. 279.
35 M.M.M., D/Earle/1/7.
36 Williams, Liverpool privateers, p. 286.
37 M.M.M., D/Earle/1/7b.
operate as a privateer for the next few years, and an article in Williamson’s Advertiser, dated 6 February 1783, referred to the Court of Admiralty’s judgment on the case between the owners of the Patsey and Harlequin of Liverpool and the Caesar of Bristol respecting the right of the first two as joint captors of the ship Eendroght bound from Curaçao to Amsterdam. Over £40,000 was lodged in the Court of Admiralty, the action being judged in favour of the Liverpool vessels.38

An interesting description of the richest prize ever taken by a Liverpool privateer can be found in a letter from Jane Earle, daughter of Thomas Earle, to her aunt, Mrs Hardman Earle on 14 November 1778. The Carnatic, a French East Indiaman with a value of £135,000, was captured by Captain John Dawson of the Mentor on 28 October 1778. The proceeds of the prize were used to construct Carnatic Hall, a mansion at Mossley Hill, Liverpool, and enabled Dawson to become one of the largest British slave traders by the 1780s. Jane Earle gave a detailed description of the cargo, which included saltpetre, fine muslin, raw silk, coffee, tea, and ‘a packet of sundry things supposed to be diamonds’. It was, of course, the diamonds that greatly increased the value of the prize.39 This one letter helps to illustrate the mine of information on shipping and other subjects that exists in the great bulk of family correspondence found in the Earle collection.

One of the most famous privateers, Captain Fortunatus Wright, was the captain of the brigantine Fame which was fitted out and owned by the partnership of Earle and Hodgson, merchants at Leghorn. Wright’s second-in-command was the equally renowned William Hutchinson, who together with Earle and Hodgson purchased and fitted out the Loestoffe, a 20-gun frigate of war, in 1750.40 Hutchinson later became captain of the Liverpool of Liverpool, another vessel owned by the Earle brothers, and one of the finest privateers of the period, carrying 22 guns and 200 men.41 Among the shipping papers there is a release from

38 Cited in Williams, Liverpool privateers, p. 286.
41 Williams, Liverpool privateers, p. 127.
further claim by the owners of the *Eendragt*, a Dutch vessel, against the privateer *Liverpool*. This relates to the seizing of the *Eendragt* whilst on a voyage from Surinam to Amsterdam with a cargo of raw sugars and coffee in 1759. At this time the *Liverpool* was under the command of John Ward, and the case resulted in the claim for compensation being settled at £170.\(^{42}\)

The last document of note among the maritime papers of the collection is a passenger and crew list for the *Speedwell*, under Isaac Strickland as master, for a voyage from Liverpool to Philadelphia, Newfoundland, and Italy in 1769. Newfoundland was where the Earle brothers collected cargoes of fish for trading with Spain and Portugal, in return for wine. Although the document contains details of passengers, they were carried only as a supplement to the cargo, and as such were added to the end of the list of crew members. Surviving passenger lists for this date are extremely rare.\(^{43}\)

The Earle collection is a significant new source for Liverpool’s maritime history, particularly for the slave trade and privateering. The aim of this article has been to draw attention to the many important and varied documents relating only to these subjects, and it has not been possible to describe the wealth of material on the social activities and personal relationships of the Earle family, in the form of their correspondence, diaries, and other papers, all of which would be deserving of an article of their own. Given the variety of documents in the archive, the Earle collection stands alone as a record of the shipowning and mercantile activities of a leading Liverpool family, and also provides an illustration of the importance of Liverpool as a major British port during the latter half of the eighteenth century.

\(^{42}\) M.M.M., D/Earle/1/2.
\(^{43}\) Ibid., D/Earle/1/3.