

The box that shrank the world

How a plain steel box rebuilt world trade and made distance too cheap to notice.

A For most of the history of trade, the expensive part of moving goods by sea was not the sea. A cargo ship of the early 1950s might spend a week or more tied up at each end of its voyage while gangs of dockers carried its load on and off piece by piece: sacks, barrels, crates and bales, each lifted, stacked, counted and stowed by hand. Handling at the quayside, together with the theft and breakage that went with it, accounted for the greater part of the cost of shipping, and a vessel that earned nothing while in port could spend half its working life there.

B The man who changed this was not a shipping man at all. Malcom McLean was a road haulier from North Carolina who had spent his career moving goods by lorry, and who looked at ships from the outside, as a customer looks at them. Metal boxes for cargo already existed, and had for decades. McLean's insight was not the box but the system around it: the idea that a consignment should be sealed at the factory and never handled again until it reached the buyer, with the lorry, the ship and the crane serving merely as stages in a single journey. In 1956 he put the idea to sea, sailing a converted tanker, the Ideal X, from Newark to Houston with 58 boxes on its deck.

C What followed was less glamorous than the maiden voyage, and it mattered more. Through the early 1960s rival firms carried boxes of competing sizes, and a container that fitted one company's ships and cranes was useless to another's. The breakthrough came in committee rooms, where international standards were agreed fixing containers at lengths of 20 and 40 feet, with identical corner fittings, so that any crane in any port could lift any box. It was dull work, and without it the invention would have remained a private convenience rather than a public system.

D The effects on ports were sudden and severe. Loading costs fell, by some estimates, to a few per cent of what they had been, and a ship's stay in port shrank from a week to a matter of hours. The old harbours, built into

the hearts of cities, could not adapt: they offered finger piers and crowded warehouses where the new trade needed open land for cranes, stacking yards and lorries. London's upstream docks and the piers of Manhattan fell quiet within a decade, while purpose-built terminals rose in places few travellers had heard of, chosen for deep water and empty space rather than for history.

E The people who paid most directly were the dockers. Work that had employed tens of thousands of men in every major port was replaced, within a generation, by a small number of crane operators, and the unions that resisted the change could delay it but not stop it. Economists would later describe the pattern as a familiar one: a cost paid heavily and locally, by identifiable communities, in exchange for a benefit spread thinly, invisibly and worldwide.

F That benefit was very large. Once freight became cheap enough, it stopped being a consideration at all, and the geography of manufacturing rearranged itself accordingly. Components could now be made wherever they were cheapest and cross an ocean, or several, before final assembly. Some economists have argued that the container did more to expand world trade in the late twentieth century than every tariff reduction of the period combined, which is a remarkable claim to make for a plain steel box.

G Perhaps the strangest thing about the container is how little anyone notices it. It is boring by design: a box that draws attention to itself is a box that is failing. The system's triumph is precisely its invisibility, in ports that most travellers never see and on motorways where the boxes pass uncounted. The world shrank in the second half of the twentieth century not because ships became much faster, for they barely did, but because cargo stopped waiting.

ANSWER THE QUESTIONS

Questions 1–5 · True / False / Not Given

Do the following statements agree with the information in the passage? Write True, False, or Not Given.

- 1 Before containerisation, the sea crossing itself accounted for most of the cost of shipping goods.
- 2 Malcom McLean came to shipping from the road haulage industry.
- 3 Metal cargo boxes were in use before McLean's 1956 voyage.
- 4 The international standards of the 1960s fixed the height of every container.
- 5 The new container terminals were generally built on the sites of the old city harbours.

Questions 6–9 · Multiple choice

Choose the correct answer, A, B, C or D.

- 6 According to the writer, McLean's most important contribution was
 - A the invention of the metal cargo box
 - B the idea that cargo should not be handled between seller and buyer
 - C the conversion of tankers into container ships
 - D the choice of Newark and Houston as ports
- 7 The writer suggests that the standardisation work of the 1960s
 - A delayed the spread of the container
 - B was mainly concerned with safety at sea
 - C mattered more than the maiden voyage
 - D was resisted by every shipping firm
- 8 Which problem did the old city harbours face?
 - A Their dockers refused to operate the new cranes.
 - B They lacked the open land the new trade required.
 - C Their water was too shallow for any cargo ship.
 - D They were too far from the factories they served.
- 9 The writer describes the cost to the dockers as one that was
 - A quickly reversed as world trade expanded
 - B exaggerated by the unions at the time
 - C paid locally in exchange for a benefit spread worldwide
 - D shared evenly among the world's ports

Questions 10–11 · Sentence completion

Complete each sentence using no more than two words from the passage.

- 10 The agreed standards fixed containers at lengths of 20 and feet, with identical corner fittings.
- 11 In McLean's system, the lorry, the ship and the crane are merely stages in a single

Questions 12–14 · Matching information

The passage has seven paragraphs, A–G. Which paragraph contains the following information? Choose the correct letter.

- 12 a comparison between the container's effect on trade and that of tariff reductions
- 13 examples of city ports that declined after the container arrived
- 14 an explanation of why the container attracts so little attention

ANSWER KEY

1. FALSE
2. TRUE
3. TRUE
4. NOT GIVEN
5. FALSE
6. B
7. C
8. B
9. C
10. 40
11. journey
12. F
13. D
14. G