Any attempt to provide an overview of the emergence of Japanese deep-sea ports needs to take account of a number of factors. These include the special topography of the archipelago, its unique history and the difficulties encountered when it was decided that its era of seclusion had to end. This essay will therefore survey these aspects to provide some perspective on the establishment and initial growth of what was to become the port of Yokohama. It will rely to a great extent on a case study of Aspinall, Cornes and Company, a pioneer expatriate mercantile firm in the city.1

Japan consists of four main islands – Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu – which extend for over 2000 kilometres. This variation in latitude results in considerable climatic differences, so that while northern Hokkaido is sub-arctic, southern Kyushu is nearly tropical. The total land mass is approximately fifty percent more than the UK, although only about one-fifth of the land can be farmed, with wet-rice being the most important crop by far. The limited amount of flat area has also had the effect of concentrating the population into a coastal strip which runs from the Kantō Plain, around Tokyo, through to the Kansai Plain, which includes the cities of Osaka, Kobe and Kyoto.2 As a result of these factors, it was predictable that when deep-water harbours were required they would be situated mainly in this region.

Although some claim that the first emperor of Japan was a descendent of the Sun Goddess and ruled in 600 BC, it was not until the seventh century that the head of the Yamato clan adopted the title. Subsequent emperors exercised both political and religious authority in the central regions of Japan, but as their military powers declined, others found it convenient to rule in their name. This process came to a head in 1185 and thereafter Japan had a dual system, with the reigning emperor based in Kyoto and a shogun, who exercised real power, located elsewhere.3

The ensuing four centuries were marked by a series of power struggles and civil wars between conflicting hans, or extended families, and it was not until late in the
sixteenth century that the country was finally pacified. By then power had fallen into the hands of Tokugawa Ieyasu, who with his son Hidetada developed a system which kept authority in the family for the next 250 years. As they originated from the Kantō area, their military administration (bakufu) was established at Edo (later Tokyo), which served as the capital. At the same time, successive emperors continued to reside in Kyoto, where they enjoyed great respect but played no role in running what was now a unified country.

Japan was in contact with Europe for a brief period in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and a tiny trade began to grow with Dutch, English, Spanish and, especially, Portuguese merchants. One aspect of these links was the introduction of firearms, which were quickly taken up by the various hans. Another was the arrival of Jesuit missionaries, who at first were well received, particularly in Kyushu. Although the Jesuits were opposed by many Buddhist groups, they gained much favour with the local daimyo (lords), for Portuguese merchants tended to bring their vessels to places where they felt welcome. This development was further strengthened when one of these minor daimyo, with the aid of the Portuguese, was able to transform the fishing village of Nagasaki into what was to become the major port for foreign trade. By 1578, when one of the most important of the Kyushu daimyo was converted, more than 150,000 Japanese had become Christians, a figure that was to double by 1610.

The Tokugawas had no objection to the new religion but became increasingly distrustful of a sect which appeared to owe political allegiance elsewhere. They were also mindful that the growth of Christianity was coinciding with a rising European interest in the area; indeed, some feared that the missionaries might be the precursors of attempts to control or colonize the islands. Accordingly, they decided to ban all missionaries from Japan, but no action was taken until 1597, when arguments between the Portuguese Jesuits and the recently-arrived Spanish Franciscans led to a number of executions. This policy was then reversed for a while because the Tokugawas came to value trade with Europe. But the subsequent settlement of Dutch and English merchants, who showed no concern for proselytizing, demonstrated that trade could be pursued without religious constraints. The policy of persecution was later renewed with considerable vigour. This eventually led to a revolt by the Christian peasantry of Kyushu, which was put down with great slaughter in 1638. The bakufu then took a series of measures which effectively isolated Japan from the outside world.

The decrees from Edo prohibited Japanese nationals from travelling overseas and stopped those already living abroad from returning. As large Japanese communities had developed in many parts of Southeast Asia, this was a severe blow, especially since it was enforced by the threat of the death penalty. The decrees of 1638 also included provision for the expulsion of the Portuguese (the English had already left and the Spanish had been expelled in 1624). Moreover, the construction of sea-going vessels was totally forbidden. In spite of these draconian regulations the “era of seclusion” was never characterized by complete isolation. The bakufu authorized the retention of a single station on the island of Deshima in Nagasaki harbour, which was to be visited by a carefully controlled number of Dutch vessels each year. In addition, small groups of Chinese merchants were allowed to trade in Nagasaki from time to time. While these contacts were limited and very much at the pleasure of the state, the situation was ameliorated somewhat by large-scale smuggling from both China and Korea for much of this long period.