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Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY SAILOR H165



This model represents an ordinary sailor in the Royal Navy during the late eighteenth century. At this date there was no official uniform and clothing colour varied with the whim of each ship's captain. In the reign of Queen Anne (1702-14) for instance, seamen tended to be dressed in red and grey, but by the middle of the eighteenth century blue had become the commonest colour.

During the French Revolutionary wars from 1778 to 1815, commanding officers began to pay more attention to their crew's clothing requirements. By 1800 it was common for ships companies to be mustered 'all in blue' or 'all in white' . There was still plenty of room for variations. For example, the captain of HMS *Blazer* ordered his men to wear blue and white striped Guernsey's (jumpers) while the captain of HMS *Trincomalee* decided on red shirts and 'fancy' hats. Most eccentric of all was Captain Wilmott of HMS *Harlequin* who, in 1853, paid for his boat's crew to be dressed as harlequins! In practice, the clothes of all sailors would have been worn and stained.

The slang name for a sailor was a 'Jack Tar'. There are several possible explanations for this name:
1. Sailors frequently wore coats and hats made from a waterproof fabric called tarpaulin. This may have been shortened to 'tar' at some point.
2. It was common for seamen to plait their long hair into a pigtail and smear it with high grade tar to prevent it getting caught in the ship's equipment. This is the case with the pig tail on this model.
3. A ship's rigging was rope made of hemp, which would rot quickly in such a damp environment. To avoid this, the ropes and cables were soaked in tar. A sailors hands would soon be stained with tar, which would quickly spread to the rest of his body and clothes.

Apart from a tarry pigtail the other common feature of sailors was their bell bottom trousers. These were practical garments for men who worked sailing ships since they could be rolled up securely to clear the feet and ankles when working the rigging. Most men worked barefoot aboard ship, for extra grip on the ropes while aloft.

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In 1799 the artist Thomas Rowlandson painted a series of pictures showing the various ranks in the British Navy. They can be seen below and on the next page. They give us an invaluable glimpse of the skilled and varied crew that were essential to complete a successful voyage. The average ship of the line of 74-guns during Nelson's day carried 650 men, all of whom had particular jobs at sea and in battle.



Admiral (left) Fleets were usually divided into three squadrons which formed the van (forward), the centre and the rear. The rear was commanded by a rear-admiral who was subordinate to the vice-admiral commanding the van. The admiral commanded the centre squadron and had overall command of the whole fleet. The rear- and vice-admirals reported to him. The ship of an admiral was recognised by flags and thus known as a flagship.



Captain (right) The captain was responsible for fitting out his ship for sea and had 'to use his best endeavours to get the ship manned', by fair means or foul which usually meant the press gang. At sea he was responsible for the ship and for all on board. The powers of the captain were so great that some behaved like tyrants thus inciting their men to mutiny. However, many, such as Nelson, were very popular and their men would follow them from ship to ship.



Lieutenant (left) Midshipmen had to pass an examination to be promoted to the rank of lieutenant and were usually about nineteen years old. Lieutenants were in charge of deck watches, and in action commanded a battery of guns. They were also often despatched on shore in charge of press gangs.



Midshipman (right) Midshipmen were usually the sons of wealthy or aristocratic families training to become commissioned officers. They usually joined the Navy at the age of 12 to 14 and could be identified by the white patch on the collar of their uniform. They were taught navigation, astronomy and trigonometry by the ship's schoolmaster as well as undertaking watches on deck when school hours were over.

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Purser (right) To become a purser, a man had to have served at least one year as a captain's clerk, helping the captain with his correspondence and records. The purser was in charge of the stores and accounts on board ship.



Bosun's Mate (left) Bosun's mates were petty officers promoted from within the ranks by the ship's captain. They were responsible to the ship's boatswain for the supervision of the seamen in their everyday duties about the ship and practical seamanship. They were also responsible for the punishment of the men in the form of flogging.



Cook (right) Ships' cooks were sometimes disabled seamen and were ranked as warrant officers. They were not appointed for their culinary skills, but produced the seaman's standard diet of boiled beef or pork and the ubiquitous ship's biscuit. This cook is wearing the typical cook's dress of the Royal Navy.



Carpenter (left) The ship's carpenter was one of the most important warrant officers on board and had to pass an examination at Shipwright's Hall before he could go to sea. His duties included inspecting the ship for defective timbers and examining the state of the masts. After battle, he repaired any shot holes and other damage.



Sailor (right) Sailors were assigned to various jobs according to their skill. There were topmen who worked on the masts, forecastle men who looked after the anchors and gunner's crews. At the end of one voyage they might be drafted straight away to another ship and were often at sea for several years.



Cabin Boy (**left**) Ship's boys were usually aged between 12 and 16 years. Some came from poor families, others who had been convicted of petty crimes or vagrancy were recommended by magistrates. They were at the bottom of the naval hierarchy and were tasked with such menial duties as cleaning the pigsties and hen coops.

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A Sailor's Life

In peacetime, the navy recruited all its men as volunteers. Many of them were boys, often helped by charities such as the Marine Society, which funded careers at sea for street boys from major cities. As professional sailors required years to master their craft, it was as well to start early. Boys commonly began at the age of 10 or 12, and there was plenty of work for small, nimble seafarers, both on deck and in the rigging.



Four Royal Marines below deck on HMS Pallas eating bowls of pease pottage.

By 16, most boys would be competent seamen, able to work aloft, reef sails, knot and splice ropes and steer the ship. At the same time, their bodies took on a characteristic broad-shouldered, barrel-chested physique the result of heavy hauling and lifting and often being bent double over the sails while the constant roll of the ship gave them a peculiar rolling gait.

On board, the sailors were divided into 'watches', usually two, which shared the work over 24 hours, and into 'messes' of 8 to 10 individuals, for catering. Each mess was a self-assembled group of like-minded men, usually with the same skills and rank. They shared the domestic chores of preparing food, collecting cooked dishes and washing up.

What did the sailors eat? Naval food is often thought to have consisted entirely of ship's biscuit, salted meat and lots of alcohol. These things did form a large part of the eighteenth century sailor's diet, but were not by any means the whole of it.

The official weekly scale of provisions to be supplied is set out in the table below:

	Biscuits (lb)	Beer (Gallons)	Beef (lb)	Pork (lb)	Pease (Pint)	Oatm'l (Pint)	Butter (oz)	Cheese (oz)
Sunday	1	1		1	½			
Monday	1	1				1	2	4
Tuesday	1	1	2					
Wednesday	1	1			½	1	2	4
Thursday	1	1		1	½			
Friday	1	1			½	1	2	4
Saturday	1	1	2					
Total	7	7	4	2	2	3	6	12

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The idea that sailors in the Royal Navy were fed poorly is probably far from the truth. During the Seven Years' War (1756-63), less than 1% of provisions were condemned as being unfit to eat. Naval food of the eighteenth century also has to be seen in the context of its times: 200 years ago, meat was too expensive for the average labourer to eat regularly and the cost of fuel meant that it had to be sent to the baker's to be cooked. The seafarer who received a hot meal daily, with meat four times a week, was eating well compared with many people ashore. Scurvy was a problem, but as the use of citrus fruits as a cure became more widespread, so it declined in prevalence.

During war, sailors could earn far more serving in merchant ships, which could increase pay to attract them. Naval pay remained constant, but the state had a legal right to compel the services of mariners in wartime. This allowed the navy to 'impress' trained sailors from merchant ships or the shore - that is, the navy could compel them to serve using armed 'press gangs'.

Desperate press gangs often roamed far inland in search of likely men. Their presence is recorded several times in Reading. Running battles were frequently fought between the press gang and locals, often trying to retrieve a man captured by the gang. In the twentieth century the armed forces relied on compulsory conscription in time of war, which could be said to be slightly more civilised but, in effect, little different from the press gang system.

Eighteenth century society was rough and brutal, with almost all crimes being punishable by some form of physical chastisement. The navy had no better system than the rest of society and nowhere to imprison offenders. Instead, they were flogged and returned to duty, their punishment being witnessed by all. Most punishable offences at sea concerned the safety of the ship and the discipline of the crew. Men were punished for refusing orders, falling asleep on watch, being too drunk to work or failing to keep themselves and their clothes clean. The number of lashes administered tended to reflect the severity of the offence and the sailor's previous record. Thieves were punished by the crew themselves, who made them run the gauntlet.



Onshore sailors tended to escape from the tensions and hardship of shipboard life in drunkenness and lewd behaviour (right).