

Information sheet no 027

Figureheads

The origins of the ship's figurehead lie in the early days of seafaring. They were used as religious symbols to protect the ship and to express the sailors' belief that the ship was a living thing. There was also the belief that a ship needed to find its own way, and could only do this if it had eyes. The ancient Egyptians used figureheads to provide both protection and vision, by mounting figures of holy birds on the prows. Phoenicians used the heads of horses to symbolise vision and swiftness. The ancient Greeks had a boar's head to represent vision and ferocity. Roman ships often carried a carving of a centurion to signify their elite fighting ability.

In northern Europe, the favourite decoration for the longship was a serpent, although some Danish ships had dolphins, bulls or dragons. All were meant to strike fear into the enemy and scare away their enemy's guardian spirits. By the 13th century, one of the favourite figureheads was the swan, renowned for its grace and mobility on the water. All these figureheads were mounted on or carved directly onto the stem of the ship. With the development of forecastles built above and beyond the ships' stem in the 16th and 17th centuries, the position of the figurehead was changed to the bowsprit.

During the 17th century, the lion remained the favourite figurehead for warships of most nations, although more important ships had more elaborate designs - for example Prince Royal (1610) had St. George slaying the dragon. The French preferred figures representing fame, victory and glory. The Revolution in France led to some different figureheads - frigate *Carmagnole* had a guillotine as its figurehead. The lion went out of fashion in the latter part of the 18th century and was replaced by carvings to represent the name of the ship; these were mainly classical or mythological figures. The pictorial representation of the ship was a means of identification in the days when many sailors could not read. Female figureheads were popular, usually baring one or both breasts. This represented the superstitions of the seamen. Women on board ship were thought to be unlucky, but a naked woman was supposed to be able to calm a storm at sea. Merchant ships also followed this naval practice.

The size of some figureheads created weight problems especially as they were made from hard woods; in the 17th century, they were made predominantly from elm. This was changed in the early and mid-eighteenth to oak. After an order by the Navy Board in 1742, figureheads were made from soft woods, such as pine. However, deal and teak were also used and these proved to be more resistant to wood-boring insects and decay.

The technological development of ships in the 19th century, from sail to steam and wood to iron, led to the gradual end of the naval figurehead. Figureheads for larger warships were finally abolished in Britain in 1894, but some smaller ships kept them until WWI (1914-1918). Later, ships had a medallion or shield with figures supporting them at either side. The loss of the bowsprit, under which the figurehead was traditionally placed, was the main reason for the disappearance of the figurehead. The last ship to have a figurehead in the Royal Navy was HMS *Espeigle*. This ship was broken up in 1923, but the figurehead can be seen in the NMRN at Portsmouth.