

The History of Officer Uniforms

(from an article by Commander David Hobbs MBE RN which appeared in Broadsheet 1996/97)

There is a popular misconception that our uniforms have "always looked the way they do" so why change them? The truth is that uniforms have changed over the years and our people present a very different image now to that of a generation or two ago.

Our uniform has been evolving in a piece-meal fashion for hundreds of years. The present range of uniforms, with separate numbering systems for officers and ratings, dates back from about 1890, and is full of anomalies and no longer reflects adequately what is worn on a daily basis. The recent Review of Clothing sought to recognise what is central and traditional in our dress and produce a single system applicable to officers and ratings, which will be easily understood, practical and suitable for the many years to come.

Officers

Uniform Regulations for officers were first issued in 1748 by Lord Anson to overcome 'the inconveniences arising from the want of an establishment of rank and precedence between His Majesty's Sea and Land Officers as well as from the want of a due distinction among the Sea Officers themselves'. These regulations remained unchanged for nearly twenty years. Both were worn by all officers including Midshipmen.

Best Uniforms

The best uniform comprised a knee length embroidered blue coat with white facings. It was known as a 'frock' and was worn unbuttoned with white breeches and stockings. Differences in rank were shown by the shape and cut of the lapels and cuffs. The working rig was simpler with less embroidery and thus cheaper to buy.

Working Rig

In 1767 the working rig was adopted as the best uniform and a new undress version was introduced that was simpler still - a procedure and time scale that have often been repeated to the present day. By 1795 the exigencies of wartime service caused the introduction of a plain blue frock coat for everyday wear. Facings on the dress uniform were changed from white to blue.

The Prince Regent's Birthday Regulations of 1812 restored the traditional white facings which continued in use, except for a period between 1830 and 1843 when they were altered to red by order of King William IV. The vestiges of white facings still survive in the collars of Admirals' ceremonial day coats and Midshipmen's patches.

Regulations

Regulations appeared in book form for the first time when a circular dated 1825 sanctioned a round jacket worn buttoned up at sea and unbuttoned ashore. Elaborate lapels disappeared and pantaloons or 'trousers' replaced the white breeches. The option of wearing white trousers with uniform in the UK was generally discontinued in 1856 although the practice continued in training establishments and on overseas Stations such as the West Indies and China (where it was known as the Wei-Wei Rig) until 1939.

Fashion

The late Victorian era was a time of great confidence and improvement. Officers' uniforms changed frequently to remain abreast of the fashions worn by gentlemen ashore. Uniforms were authorised by the Admiralty but were not regulated. Outfitters gave the paying customer what he wanted and, since it was a simple matter to make minor fashionable alterations, uniforms were not, in fact, uniform but somewhere near the Admiralty's authorised appearance. While we tend to view uniform as a classic design based on tradition, our forbears felt it should reflect the latest civilian fashion; they were content to pay for the frequent changes necessary to keep it so.

Buttons

At first, buttons consisted of white metal, usually with a rose in the centre. In 1774 a foul anchor surrounded by rope edging took the place of the rose and in 1787 the same device with the addition of a wreath of laurel leaves was adopted for Admirals. When the Merchant Navy started to use the foul anchor device, a crown was added for all naval officers in 1812. The same basic design remains in use today.

The foul anchor device itself was first recorded in use in the seal of the Lord High Admiral of Scotland in 1402. It was subsequently adopted in the Admiralty seal and by a large number of navies throughout the world. The rope 'fouling' has no specific twist and may be deemed to be correct however it fits around the anchor. Whatever variation we see today is likely to have at least one manifestation in the past 500 years.

Tropical Uniform

The white tropical uniform, first introduced in 1877, comprised a tunic and white trousers. The former, familiarly known as the 'ice-cream' jacket was based on the design of a blue working dress jacket in service at the time but subsequently displaced by the 1891 Review. A new tropical rig was introduced in 1938 comprising a white shirt and shorts. Rank was displayed by the same shoulder boards as on the tunic.