

The History of Rating Uniforms

A uniform rig for ratings was first set down by the Admiralty as recently as 1857. This did not differentiate between senior and junior ratings except in the badges worn on the left sleeve since all those dressed as seamen were to wear square rig. 'Idlers', defined as those incapable of manning the guns, masts and yards to fight the ship, were not deemed worthy of square rig and were dressed in a rudimentary form of fore and aft rig.

Slops

Before 1857, it had been the practice to sell 'slop' or ready made clothing to seamen on board HM Ships. This clothing lacked uniformity and its fashion and colour varied with the period and whim of the contractor. In the reign of Queen Anne 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.

This came about as only indigo based dyes offered a reasonable degree of colour fastness to sunlight and wear at a time when the range of available dyes was limited and when adequate means of assessing colour fastness did not exist. Now, indigo, which is extracted from a tropical plant, appeared in the UK as trade with India expanded in the eighteenth century and it is no coincidence that this is when blue uniforms became the most common - replacing a motley collection of colours and shades in use before then.

During the French Revolutionary wars from 1778 to 1815, commanding officers began to pay more attention to their men's clothing requirements and by 1800 it was common for ships companies to be mustered at divisions 'all in blue' or 'all in white' so giving a fair degree of uniformity between ships as the men made their clothes from the 'standard' blue, white or 'fancy' cloth sold by the Pusser. (The latter might be tartan, check, gingham etc. and all have been worn at sea at some stage).

There was still plenty of room for variations, however, and in the 1830s the captain of HMS VERNON ordered his seamen to wear red serge frocks and comforters. After some time in commission the stock ran out and red garments were then allocated to the port watch, the starboard wearing blue (not green which was significantly more difficult and thus expensive to dye). The captain of HMS BLAZER ordered his men to wear blue and white striped Guernsey's and the captain of HMS TRINCOMALEE followed with red shirts and 'fancy' hats. Most eccentric of all was Captain Wilmott of HMS HARLEQUIN who, as recently as 1853, paid for his boat's crew to be dressed as harlequins. This attracted ribald comments from the press and, no doubt, his boat's crew and may have prompted the Admiralty to issue its circular on ratings uniform in 1857.

Sailor's Collar

The sailor's collar deserves a special mention. Tarred pig tails disappeared rapidly after 1815 and the last is recorded as having been seen at sea in 1827. On the other hand, the first broad collars were worn after 1830. Contrary to popular belief, therefore, the two were never worn together. The first collars were not cut square but were round and closely resembled items that were fashionable ashore. The three rows of white tape were probably added for ornament at first, surviving records mention some discussion about whether there should be two rows or three. The more familiar square collar developed as it was easier for the men to cut and sew themselves than the round variety.

Bell Bottomed Trousers

Bell bottomed trousers were another 'icon' of the square rig uniform. 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. In common with all other items of a sailor's kit, trousers were kept folded ready for use in a kit bag. Kept inside out to avoid fluff on the outer surface and to avoid 'shine' by ironing, they were folded horizontally at about a hand's width and taped into a rectangular 'block'. When worn, this produced inverted vertical creases down the side of the leg and five or seven, depending on the height of the wearer, horizontal creases down the leg. In time these were accepted as the thing to have and were pressed firmly into place from the early years of the century. Since the First World War bell bottoms were purchased for tradition rather than any practical use but were replaced by flared trousers in 1977.

Jackets

Since 1859 the sailor's uniform has undergone a number of changes, perhaps the most surprising being the removal of the blue jacket, which had given rise to the nickname 'bluejacket' for a sailor, in 1890. At the same time the 'frock', which used to be tucked into the trousers, gave way to the 'jumper' which was not. CPOs and first-class Pos moved into fore and aft rig from 1859 onwards. In 1956 it was decided that all ratings other than artificer apprentices and Locally Entered Personnel (LEP) should be dressed as seamen and their rig was changed accordingly. In 1995/95, trials with a female version of the square rig uniform proved extremely successful and in 1996 all female junior ratings changed into the new rig. By the end of 1997 the last LEP's will go and new square rig will be introduced to all artificer and technician apprentices.

Uniformity - At Last!

Thus, in 1977, for the first time since the Admiralty Circular of 1857, all ratings will wear the same ceremonial uniforms with the enormous benefits that this brings in terms of corporate appearance and the provision of manpower for ceremonial occasions.