

Clothing the Royal Navy Sailor, 1765 to 1775

Matthew Brenckle

Our vision of the Royal Navy seaman in the third quarter of the eighteenth century has been shaped and distorted by a number of popular sources. Modern authors have perpetrated the tenacious idea that sailors in the Royal Navy wore whatever they wished, and this idea seems to have been reinforced by historian's reliance on caricatures and other less trustworthy visual resources. The following guidelines will clarify some of this contradictory evidence and provide a baseline for some of the latest thinking and research into the clothing of the Royal Navy. As always, research is ongoing, and there is always room to alter our conclusions as new information appears.

In general, the crew of any King's ship would have presented a fairly uniform appearance, especially after the ship had been in commission for a few months. While enlisted men's clothing was not officially delineated in printed uniform regulations until 1857, the supply system designed to provide the men with uniform clothing had been in place since at least 1627.¹ This ready-made clothing (almost always referred to in the period as "slop cloathing") was made to approved patterns. These "slops" were available for purchase aboard nearly every ship in the fleet.

Prior to 1758, individual contractors' agents supplied clothing to the Navy. When a ship outfitted for sea, the vessel's purser bought the items required from these purveyors. The clothing, wrapped in bundles and shipped in casks, was stowed in the "slop room," a compartment usually located at the after end of the orlop deck. When a sailor needed or wanted

¹ G.E. Manwaring, "The Dress of British Seamen- II," *Mariners' Mirror*, 9.6 (1923),167-169.

new clothes, the purser charged the items against the man's pay and the contractors themselves drew the money from the Navy's Pay Office. As one might expect, this system was vulnerable to all manner of dishonest transactions: it was easy to cheat the men, the government, or both. After 1758 the Navy Board (through the Navy Slop Office, located in a former house in Hart St., Crutched Friars, London) itself assumed the job of contracting for and distributing slop clothing. Contractors had to supply goods of an acceptable quality at a pre-set price. The Navy Board also began charging a standard price for the items. No longer could pursers (in collusion with contractors) charge their captive customers exorbitant prices for substandard garments. Relegated to the role of shopkeeper in this matter, pursers had to content themselves with a profit of £5 per every £100 worth of slop clothing sold. In addition, a purser could not sell a single man more than 5s worth of slops per month. An exception to this rule was allowed when a man entered a ship for the first time- he could then purchase clothing worth two months' pay. During the 1770s a seaman's pay amounted to 24s per lunar month, before deductions. After deductions for Greenwich Hospital, the Chatham Chest, the surgeon, and the chaplain, a seaman netted £14.2.6 per annum.

Supplying the Navy with slop clothing was big business and involved a large amount of capital. James Wadham, a "linen draper" in Southwark, held many of the Navy's clothing contracts in the 1770s and 1780s. In 1780-82 he supplied the Slop Office with 612,914 individual garments and grossed £79,000. A London hosier named John Yerbury, who supplied grey worsted stockings, was able to produce 10,000 pairs in less than five months.

All of the slop clothing was made by a few contractors producing garments to match a "sealed pattern." Therefore, it all looked the same. Seamen who voluntarily entered a ship might have sufficient clothing left over from a previous cruise, but many of the "Lord Mayor's Men," the sweepings of jails and drunk tanks, runaways, and pressed men probably did not. Most captain's required these men to purchase suitable clothing as soon as their names were on the

books. Even those men who were sufficiently clothed at the beginning of a commission would have required replacements after several months at sea. Unless granted leave and given an advance on his pay, a man would have no choice but to purchase clothing from the purser. Occasionally, the man could buy cloth and make his own garments if skilled in that department. Yet again, all of the fabric, whether wool, hemp, or linen, was identical in color and weave. Therefore, aboard government vessels after the first few months of a commission, all of the men were dressed in nearly identical slops purchased from the purser.

Lt. Gabriel Bray's superlative drawings made from life on board the frigate *Pallas* during a cruise to the coast of Africa and the West Indies in 1774 and 1775 provide an idea of what this would have looked like in practice (see the Royal Navy Clothing album in the group's page). All the men in his pictures wear hip-length, double-breasted blue jackets with slashed cuffs. Most wear white trousers, although some are depicted in blue woolen breeches. The Navy Board regularly purchased all these items. We see the same details in the works of William Hodge, who accompanied Captain James Cook on his second voyage to the Pacific (1772-75), and John Webber, who sailed on Cook's third voyage (1776-1780). Thus, if we were to witness a crew mustered at divisions of a Sunday morning, we would be confronted by a sea of blue and white. The garments would exhibit various states of wear (and probably cleanliness, even though the men were ordered to wear their best clothes for the occasion), yet to even the casual viewer the crew would appear "uniform."

Hats and Caps

If the pictorial record may be relied on, the small cocked hat favored by seamen for much of the 18th century had largely fallen out of favor by the later 1760s. In its place, the simple wool felt round hat graced the head of most Royal Navy seamen. To date, no contract information or dimensions have been discovered, but contemporary images suggest sailors' hats had round



crowns and small brims. The brims of most hats are shown to curl up peculiarly all around. This may be a function of the hats' poor quality, or it may be another widespread sailor affectation.



Slop lists and contracts also regularly mention a variety of knit caps. In 1765-1766 a Mr. Rickards provided the Navy with "Dutch caps,"¹ while in 1771-1772, Thomas Plestow produced at least 12,000 "double worsted caps."² Lt. Bray's drawings show seamen wearing the same style of knit caps (even on the coast of Senegal!) that feature a button at the top of the crown and a loop on the brim- virtually identical to a surviving Monmouth cap at the Monmouth Museum in Wales, and another recovered from convict barracks in Australia. Most of the seamen in Bray's drawings wear the caps with the brims turned upwards.

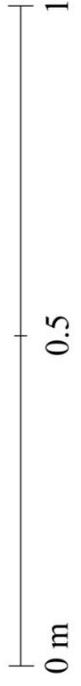
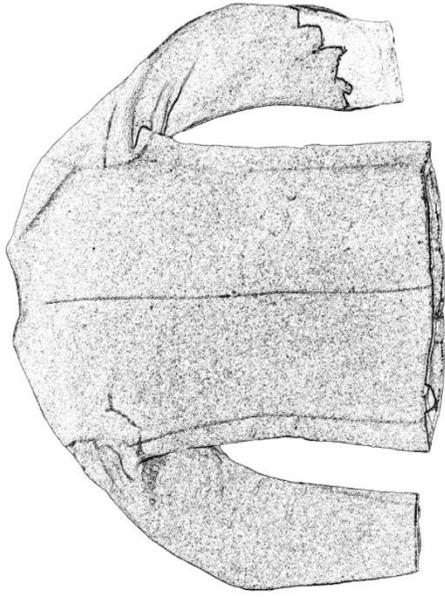
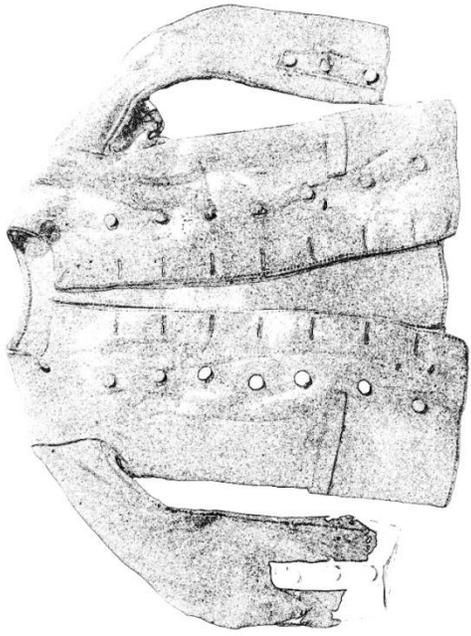
Jackets



During the 1740s and 1750s, seamen's slop jackets were long, single-breasted skirted garments (measuring 36 inches down the center back). By the mid 1760s, the Royal Navy pattern was altered to a relatively short, double-breasted jacket with slashed cuffs and welt pockets. These were usually made of stout kersey, and lined with white baize (although there are some orders for unlined jackets). Jackets of this style are much in evidence in drawings made from life from the late 1760s onwards.

Construction details: Much of what we know about the construction of these jackets must be extrapolated from archaeologically recovered examples. The well-preserved jacket from the *General Carleton of Whitby* wreck, though dating to 1785, probably displays many similar construction techniques. Perhaps most significant is the single piece back. The *Carleton* jacket was constructed this way, but later slit up the center back and the two

sides overlapped, probably to improve the fit. The *Carleton* jacket also features mariner's cuffs with a separate pointed placket. These may have been used on Royal Navy slop jackets, but the pictorial evidence, along with ease of construction, suggests a simpler slash (without placket) that followed the sleeve's under seam and fastened with three buttons. Horn or dyed bone buttons seem to have been most common.



Trousers and Breeches

The Navy regularly advertised for and purchased large quantities of linen or canvas trousers and woolen breeches during the period. Details are somewhat obscure in the documentary record, but by examining period art, we may reasonably recreate these garments.



Clothier William Tod provided most of the Navy's trousers in the late 1760s. These were made of either linen canvas or "Russia" duck. Lt. Bray's drawings depict garments that fall to the ankle and have moderately wide legs. Pockets are set in the side seam (if there was one- see below). The waistband fastened with two buttons, and two additional buttons secured the fall. In 1793, an assistant of slop contractor Edward Darby described the Navy's slop trousers: "they are very uncommon dimensions in the trade; here is another remarkable thing, they have two seems (sic) in the legs, which seamen, in general object to, but we are obliged to make them so for government..." Sailors preferred trousers made without an outseam. A pair of woolen trousers from the *General Carleton* was made this way, and this was a feature of slop trousers in the early 19th century as well. It is possible the slop trousers of the previous decades were made the same way. On the

other hand, they may have continued to follow the construction called for in the 1740 slop lists: "Trowsers of Brown Osnaburgh Canvas, cut out of whole Cloth [ie, no piecing], Breeches Fashion [which suggest both an inseam and outseam], Two Buttons to the Waistband, and Four others."

Shirts and Neckcloths



Slop shirts were made like any coarse man's shirt of the period. White, striped, and blue and white checked shirts all appear in contemporary images, but the checked variety seems to have been given preference in the slop contracts. The June 21, 1759 edition of the *Public Advertiser* (London) carried an advertisement soliciting proposals for slop shirts: "The Principal officers and Commissioners of his Majesty's Navy give Notice...they will be ready to treat with such Persons as are willing to contract for the following Particulars...viz. shirts of good 7/8ths checquer'd Linen, Drawers of Cotton Check. Patterns of which may be viewed in the Slop Office in Crutched Friars, by such Persons as are willing to undertake the same." In 1766, and for some years

afterwards, a Mr. Charles James held the contract for checked shirts.³

The 1740 slop lists give the following description of the shirts: “Shirts of Blue & White chequer’d Linnen, the Sleeve Twenty Inches Long, & Eight inches broad [when made], with Four Buttons substantially sewed.” The shirts were 40 inches long when made.

Neck handkerchiefs were universally worn by seamen. The slop issue handkerchiefs were typically black silk, but contemporary images depict a wide range of colored silk or cotton examples.

Stockings

Slop stockings were made of grey worsted yarn, and during this period were frame knit. A Mr. Pope and John Yerbury (Lombard St, London), hosiers, held the contract for grey worsted stocking in this period. They were capable of supplying 10,000 pairs in five months.⁴

Shoes

Few details of the Navy’s shoes during this period have been uncovered. Like all other slop clothing, they were made according to a sealed pattern. The Jan. 4, 1764 edition of the *Public Advertiser* (London) advised that the Navy Office was “ready to treat with such Persons as are willing to supply the Seamen serving in his Majesty’s Navy with shoes on a standing Contract, to be delivered at the Slop Office in Crutched Fryars, bringing Patterns with them.”



Shoes recovered from the wreck of HMS *Invincible* (1758) feature moderately pointed toes and low quarters. Most retained their latches for buckles, but some had been modified to fasten with laces.

Buckles were brass with iron tongues.

¹ ADM 106/1144/77

² ADM 106/1209/62

³ ADM 106/1144/148

⁴ ADM 106/1144/77; ADM 106/1197/24