

## Sea and Learn – Resources: History of Ship Figureheads

The origins of the figurehead and other forms of ornament lie in prehistoric times. The decoration and carving of vessels was common among the seafaring civilisations of the ancient world with evidence of Egyptian examples dating from before 3,000 BC. The precise reasons for the painting of an eye or the mounting of a carved head in human or animal form, near the bow of a boat are uncertain. Clearly these images had strong magical or religious significance and related to the need for a ship to 'see' its way safely through the water. In Europe, the tradition was maintained by the Greeks and Romans, and further developed on the longboats of Viking mariners. Dragon- and beast-heads are visible on some of the French and English craft depicted in the Bayeaux tapestry.



*Shield figurehead from the Royal Yacht.*

Changes in the design of ships have always affected the size, shape, and position of a figurehead. The construction of fore and after castles in the fourteenth century left no obvious site for the figurehead and they were replaced with heraldic designs and painted decoration on larger vessels.



*Example of a dragon figurehead. Other animals were also depicted in this form.*



*Figurehead of HMS Tamar.*

From the second half of the fifteenth century onwards, further technical innovation permitted the return of the figurehead. Its purpose was often to indicate the name of the ship in a non-literate society, albeit in a sometimes very convoluted manner, and always (in the case of naval ships) to demonstrate the wealth and might of the owner.

The decoration on the warships of the expanding European navies became increasingly elaborate during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. At the height of the Baroque period ships' figureheads could grow to perfectly absurd sizes, in the case of first-rate ships of the line twinned port and starboard, larger-than-life equestrian sculptures of the reigning monarch riding roughshod over sundry enemies with attendant cherubs and nymphs were not unheard of, several tons of zero-utility carved-work all told.

## Sea and Learn – Resources: History of Ship Figureheads (2)

A large figurehead, being carved from a massive block of wood and perched on the very foremost tip of the hull, adversely affected the sailing qualities of the ship. This, and cost considerations, led to figureheads being made dramatically smaller during the 1700s.

The carving on lower-ranking warships was curtailed, but dispensations were sought for first- and second-rate vessels and even lesser ships could still be fitted with fine figureheads. The design of the stern was simplified and became more functional. In the meantime, the often-seen lion began to be replaced by a more individual form of figurehead that often reflected the name of the ship, for example, that of HMS Raleigh.

Bow carving was again limited at the beginning of the nineteenth century as the Admiralty imposed new restrictions and as further changes in warship design curtailed the scope for decoration, a large number of ships, however honoured Queen Victoria by bearing figureheads of her.

The increasing pace of technical innovation, particularly in the construction of larger ships, soon made the figurehead all but redundant.

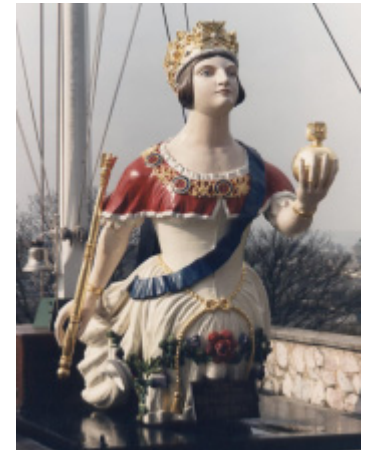
The early ironclads were given figureheads but later classes and the new all-steel vessels had no obvious place for such ornament beyond a simple shield, although some stern decoration was maintained. Figureheads for larger warships were abolished in 1894. Decorative carving on smaller naval craft lasted a little longer and sloops built as late as 1901 were still fitted with a figurehead; these survived until the First World War.

The disappearance of the figurehead meant that ships had to find a new way of uniquely identifying themselves and soon badges filled that void. The design of badges is now controlled by the Admiralty, and takes account of the meaning of the name and history of the ship.

Many of the technical innovations that confronted the navy affected carving on commercial vessels, but there were none of the prohibitive orders to limit the amount and style of decoration beyond the question of cost.



*Figurehead from HMS Raleigh, now displayed at HMS Raleigh near Torpoint in Cornwall.*



*Figurehead from HMS Victoria.*

## Sea and Learn – Resources: History of Ship Figureheads (3)

In general, merchant ships had followed the trends that dictated navy design until the first half of the nineteenth century. The advent of the more graceful clipper ships allowed the fitting of a full-length figure at the bow, but these were relatively small and light. These figures were often in the form of a woman, as can be seen on ships such as the Cutty Sark.

Figureheads and other carving continued to adorn wooden sailing vessels until they disappeared with the gradual introduction of modern steam-powered steel ships.



*Unknown figurehead of a clipper-style ship.*

### Further research suggestions:

Coasta, Giancarlo, Figureheads: Carving on ships from ancient times to twentieth century (Lymington: Nautical, 1981).

Laughton, L. G. Carr, Old Ship Figure-heads and Sterns (London: Halton & Truscott Smith, 1925)

Norton, Peter, Ships' Figureheads (London: David & Charles, 1976)

Taylor, David, Figureheads (London: National Maritime Museum, 1992)

*All pictures of figureheads are courtesy of 'The Hunter Archive' and are subject to copyright.*