



Out to Dry - Clothing and Laundry on Ships

In the 1700s, wealthy people wore elaborate and expensive clothes. The aristocracy wore clothes that were completely impractical to show they did not do any hard work. Their clothing usually consisted of an embroidered coat, knee breeches, and white silk stockings. The fashion style of the 18th century was also a reflection of the morals of the time. Most people dressed conservatively. Women showed very little skin, but accentuated their figures with corsets.

Seamen were normally expected to provide their own clothes, and usually wore the clothes they had when they joined the ship. Most sailors could mend their own clothing, and even did some decorative work. Sailors wore clothing, which was very functional for shipboard life, but still contained elements of the fashion of the time. There was no official uniform for sailors, instead, clothing depended on rank – for example a cabin boy was not allowed to wear the same clothes as an officer. A sailor typically wore a jacket, waistcoat and shirt, with a handkerchief tied round the neck. They also wore gold earrings, which were thought to improve eyesight. Jackets were usually short, with buttoned cuffs so that the sleeves could be rolled up. Long jackets called Magellan jackets were worn in cold weather. Waistcoats were spotted or striped. Sailors wore plain, striped or checked shirts with long sleeves. The colours of these shirts were limited to black, brown, green and red, as cheap dyes were not invented until the end of the 19th century. Slops or 'slop hose' (wide-kneed breeches) were worn. These were often striped, although red was a favourite colour. Sailing was one of the few occupations where wearing trousers was acceptable. Their acceptance by the majority of men did not come until the early 19th century. Trousers, like slops, were often striped. They were loose with wide bottoms, which meant they were easy to put on and take off, and could be rolled up to the knee to be kept dry, or to make kneeling easier. They were kept in place by a belt that held a knife, or by a silk handkerchief knotted around the waist.

The three cornered hat (tricorne) was the almost universal headgear of the 18th century man and so was adopted by sailors, although the brims were smaller to prevent the hats blowing away. They also wore woollen caps to keep their ears warm. Seamen liked to wear their hair long, either loose or braided into a plait and they were usually clean-shaven. Officers usually wore wigs, however some wore their own hair dressed in fashionable styles. On board, sailors often went barefoot, although they usually owned a pair of shoes for the shore.

Captain Cook is famous for his contribution to the health of men at sea. Part of his strategy included fresh air, ventilation and cleanliness in the crew's quarters, regular washing of clothes and the sailors themselves, and protective clothing when it was cold and damp. Doing the laundry and taking a bath was no simple matter at sea. Fresh water was limited, so salt water was used to clean clothing, which was then sometimes towed behind the ship to dry. But clothes washed this way never completely dried, because the salt absorbed moisture and kept the clothes damp. So rainwater was sometimes collected for washing clothes. The crew was made to wash themselves at least once a week, which the sailors thought was very strange – they much preferred to keep 'the body's natural oils', which they believed were essential for protection. They used buckets of water and sponges to bathe themselves, and there was no soap – it wasn't introduced until 1796. Cook believed in airflow in the sleeping areas and ordered the ship to be regularly fumigated using fires lit in the ship's bowels. This was done to stir out the stuffiness and damp. It is now known that damp environments lead to the growth of many varieties of mould, and this is thought to be a major contributing factor to asthma and allergies. Sailors would come off their watches with wet clothes, which brought moisture into their living areas. In an attempt to curb this problem, Cook issued his men with warm Magellan jackets and trousers (made of thick woollen fabric) and waterproof Fearnoughts (made of thick canvas) during particularly cold and wet conditions.