



The Life of a Boy on a Ship

The crew of a ship was made up mainly of males, although a few females did travel and work alongside males throughout the centuries (see *Women On Board* support notes). During the 18th century, it was considered normal for a ten or twelve year old boy from the lower classes to commence their working life. Boys in rural communities worked on farms, while coastal boys went to sea with the Royal Navy or on merchant ships. Boys joined ships for various reasons, ranging from seeking adventure, escaping the law, training to become officers or because they were press-ganged (ie rounded up from orphanages and the streets and forced onto a ship). While on board, they served apprenticeships, learnt seafaring skills and worked as general servants for the captains and officers (including boatswain, gunner, carpenter and cooks). Once they had worked for around five years, they were considered able seamen and were entitled to a wage and prize money from plundered enemy ships. They could become 'master mariners' by the age of 21, even captain a ship.

In the Navy, boys who aimed at being officers often went to sea at only 11 or 12 years of age, with some education. However, their duties at sea were generally the same as those boys who were less educated and simply press-ganged into service. The Marine Society was established in 1756 to recruit orphans and pauper boys to the Royal Navy by offering clothes and other personal possessions. The boys were also fed and housed and taught to read and write. Some seamanship was taught to the boys, although most of their sea faring education was obtained on the ships. Most Marine Society trained boys went into the merchant service and then the Navy when heavy recruitment was needed for the Seven Years' War between 1756–63. By the end of the war in 1763, over 10 000 boys and men had been recruited for the Navy by the Marine Society. The worldwide war was fought in Europe, North America, and India between France, Austria, Russia, Saxony, Sweden, and (after 1762) Spain on the one side and Prussia, Great Britain, and Hanover on the other.

Boys who wished to become officers in the Navy went to sea from 11 years old and the captain of the ship was responsible for their general education as well as their sea training. Often however, the rest of the ship's crew felt the need to take on a fatherly role and attempt to educate the boys (even though most ordinary seamen could not read or write and did not progress further than petty officer status). In the Georgian Navy, boys shared quarters with older sailors, but were separated in later years.

Duties performed by a boy on a ship ranged from being a general servant to a fully active sailor on the ship. They were often taught to draw and knot yarns, make spun yarn, foxes, sennit and slushing masts. They would also sweep and scrub decks, hold the log reel, coil up rigging, loose and furl the light sail and stand watch. Sometimes on smaller ships, they were even allowed to take the wheel and steer the ship. On larger ships however, they tended to perform the more menial tasks which required less strength and skill.

Boys were often used as powder monkeys to provide gunpowder for the cannons on Royal Navy ships. This placed them in the line of fire and many boys were killed or maimed during battle. They were also used to climb the masts to help with the sails or watch for other ships and land. Falling from the mast to the water or deck below usually resulted in death.

Merchant navy ships rarely used punishment, while the Royal Navy used a range of punishments regularly – even flogging. Boys in the Royal Navy may have been punished by 'holding' or 'mastheading'. Holding involved lowering the boy into the dark, smelly hold of the ship. Sometimes a lantern was lowered with the boy so he could see the rats and general filth. Mastheading involved forcing the boy to the highest part of a ship's mast, (particularly during poor weather) to frighten him.

