

# The Boatswain



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*Boatswain circa 1829 by Christian Symons*

The origins of the rank of boatswain can be traced back to the time of King Edward the Confessor, and was recently the oldest rank in the Royal Navy until the Royal navy's last official boatswain, Commander E.W. Andrew OBE, retired in 1990.

When the five English ports began supplying warships to King Edward the Confessor (reigned 1042 to 1066) in exchange for certain privileges, they also supplied crews with the officers corresponding to master, boatswain, carpenter and cook.

By the time of Nelson's navy, boatswains were appointed by the Admiralty and were responsible to the Navy Board from whom warrants were issued. Other warrant officers were the master, surgeon, purser, carpenter and gunner, and all were heads of specialist technical branches of the ship's company reporting directly to the captain.

It was usual for the boatswain to have risen from the ranks of seamen, and the regulations were that he should have served at least one year as a petty officer in the navy. As with all warrant officers, he had to be literate, but beyond that needed no special qualification. Although less educated than the more senior warrant officers, he needed to keep accounts, and the sailmaker and boatswain mate were under his command.

The boatswain was responsible for rigging, cables, anchors, sails and boats. When a ship was first fitted out he would oversee the cutting of the rigging line, and after that would perform a daily inspection of the rigging 'to discover as soon as possible any part which may be chafed, or likely to give way, that it may be repaired without loss of time' (as quoted in the Admiralty Regulations and Instructions). It was also his job to ensure that anchors, boats and booms were well secured, and to be 'very frequently upon deck in the day, and at all times both day and night, when any duty shall require all hands being employed. He is, with his mates, to see that the men go quickly to deck when called, and that, when there, they perform their duty with alacrity and without noise and confusion.'

If necessary, to ensure that commands were properly obeyed, a boatswain and his mates made use of a rope's end called a starter.

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