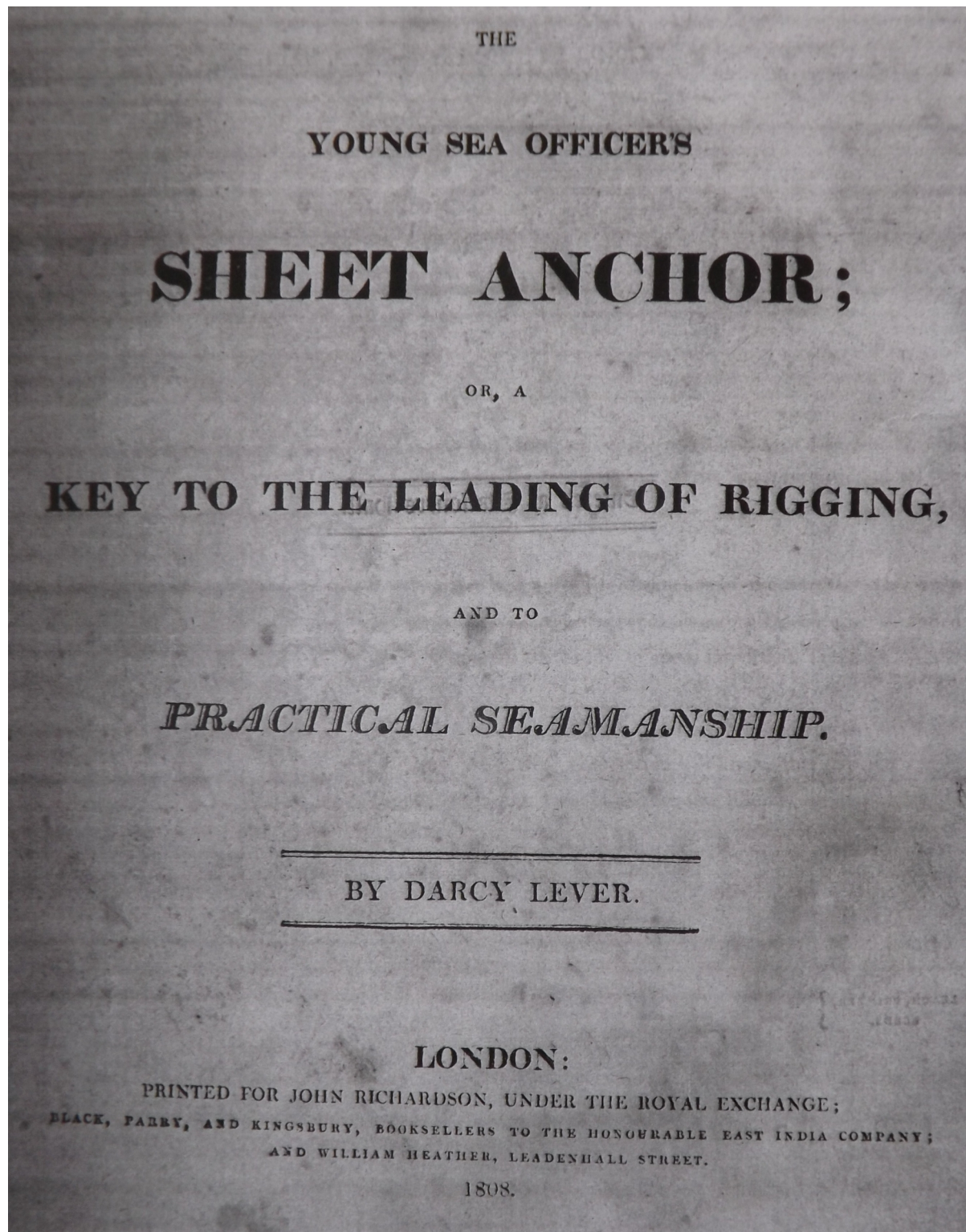


Sheet Anchor



“Sheet Anchor”



My father Stanley Spencer Noble was appointed Captain Superintendent of the Training Ship Foudroyant when he retired from the Royal Navy. His final RN posting was as Captain of HMS Victory where he had been very involved in the consideration and implementation of extensive restoration of its hull and rigging. Starting life as a boatswain and progressing through postings at higher levels in this specialism including a spell as Master Rigger of Plymouth Naval Dockyard he had an enduring passion for any task needing rope! When he died in 1973 it was no surprise that one of his treasured possessions was "Sheet Anchor" arguably the leading textbook in the era of sail on "Rigging and Practical Seamanship for Young Sea Officers."

First printed in 1808 it became the "must have" standard training manual across the world. My father's copy is a first edition. A few pages were added in a second edition in 1809 and since then this inspirational manual has been published in many languages in its original form right through to the end of the era of sail in the early 20th Century. It is still available in paperback at modest prices today for "model" shipbuilders and full scale restorations of historic vessels. Recently, I have searched the internet to find out more about the author, why it became a universal maritime textbook and how it may have links to the history of HMS Trincomalee.

"Sheet Anchor" was conceived by Darcy Lever who was born the son of a Clergyman about 1760 in Alkington near Manchester. As a young man he joined the Honourable East India Company spending many years in India where he earned a comfortable living. Although he never worked on board sailing ships he was fascinated by the complex nature of their rigging and sails, and the seamanship training of the officers who directed sail handling and navigation.

Based in Bombay he would have been close to the commercial shipping of the East India Company and the long established shipyards run by the Wadia dynasty of Parsee origin. The Wadia yards built 170 "war vessels" for the East India Company and 34 for the Royal Navy, including HMS Trincomalee. It was an amazing early example of outsourcing as result of lack of capacity in British shipyards, especially during the Napoleonic Wars, and the availability of locally sourced teak. Thus he would have been able to meet and talk extensively with both mariners and shipbuilders as he compiled "Sheet Anchor's" clear narratives and detailed engravings that complement them.

It was an amazing feat for someone who had little direct experience under sail. His understanding and observation of what was required would have been put together through many hours spent talking and listening to experienced shipbuilders and sailors at all levels on board vessels in the course of construction or as working East India Company and other ships. The meticulous preparation of the text and superb engravings is evident of his commitment to "Sheet Anchor" the only book he would write.

Its first edition was published in 1808 just 9 years before HMS Trincomalee was launched in 1817 in a Wadia family shipyard. It is possible that Darcy Lever may have witnessed its construction but it would have been almost certain that some of the Officers that sailed it back to England and later on its World voyages in the 1840's would have used "Sheet Anchor" in training for their sea going careers.

On his return to England Darcy Lever settled first in Leeds and later Pontefract. At the end of the Napoleonic Wars he served as Adjutant to the North Battalion of the Leeds Volunteers. He died in Edinburgh in 1837.

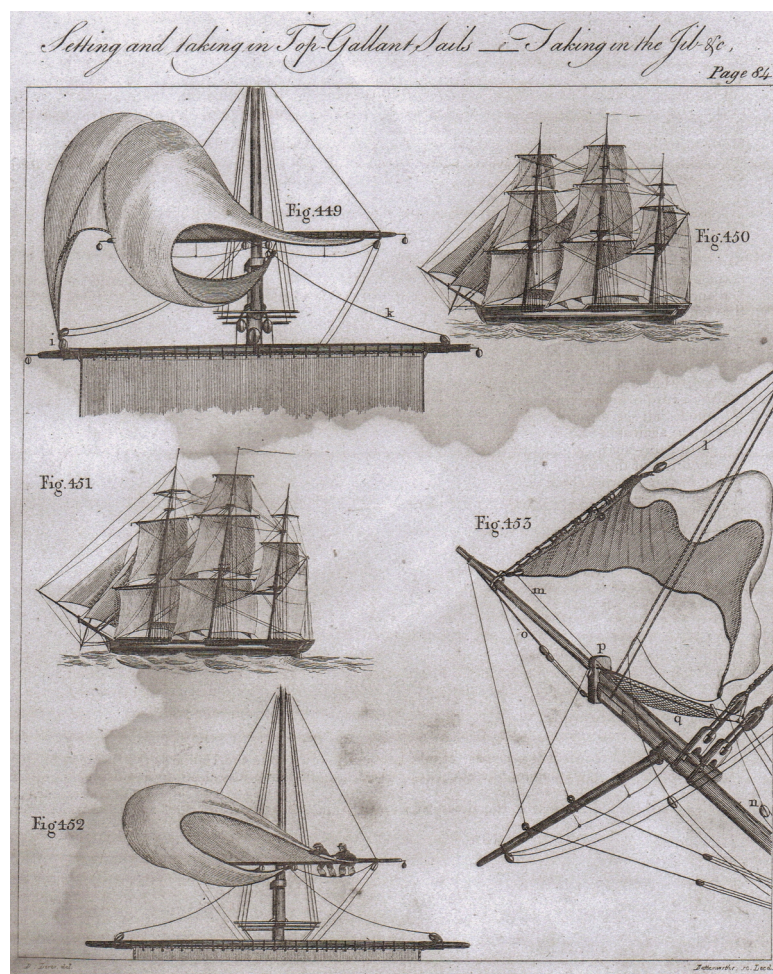
An interesting aside is that the first owner of the book my father bought signed his name, John Davies, against a title of Master RN. Up to the 1880's a Master RN was a key officer on sailing ships of the Royal Navy managing everything to do with the fabric of the vessel; sails, rigging

*John C Davies
Master
R.N.*

etc. He had his own cabin close to the senior Deck Officers from where he would clearly oversee most of what he was responsible for. The internet identifies several John Davies, Master RN all of whom sailed vessels from ports in Cardigan Bay and South Wales. That is about as close as I can get to the one who first owned my father's copy of "Sheet Anchor."

Peter Noble

Extract from "Sheet Anchor"



Page 84 from Sheet Anchor

“When a ship gripes or carries her Helm too much to windward, it is commonly the rule to haul up the Mizzen, and if that be not sufficient, to take in the Mizzen Staysail also; but it should be well considered, what is the occasion of her requiring so much Weather Helm, otherwise the taking in of these Sails, instead of remedying, may greatly increase the defect; for a Ship is as likely to gripe by having too much sail set forward as abaft, the consequence of which is, that she meets with great lateral resistance against the Bows to leeward, for the Head Sails may press her down forward, and raise her proportionately abaft, and then the Rudder loses a deal of its power to make her ware, by being lifted so much out of the water. Thus the Ship is in the same situation as if she were trimmed by the Head, which is well known to be much against either sailing or steerage. Therefore when the Ship gripes from this cause, instead of the Mizzen and Mizzen Staysail being taken in, the Fore Top Gallant Sail is handed, Fig. 451, which eases her forward: she then slackens her Helm, consequently makes her way better through the water, by not having the flat part of the Rudder to drag after her

... As many vessels in the Coasting Trade have no Buntlines to their Top Gallant sails, it would be well if the necessity of carrying them were strongly enforced. When it blows fresh, these Sails (generally left to the management of boys) are very heavy to hand, and if there be no Buntlines to spill them, the result may be fatal to those on the lee Yard Arm, by the Sail's blowing over to leeward, as may be seen by Fig. 452. Surely the saving of a few Fathoms of small Rope should not be put in competition with the life of a fellow-creature!”

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