

Ships' Figureheads



What is a figurehead?

In 1780 William Falconer produced his “Universal Dictionary of the Marine”, in this a figurehead was defined as *“an ornamental figure erected on the continuation of a ship's stern, as being expressive of her name, and emblematical of war, commerce, et cetera.”*

This definition is fine for those figureheads produced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when a figurehead had no function except to represent or symbolise the name of the ship, and had a strong decorative rôle, however in prehistory the figurehead had a more spiritual rôle to play.

Rock carvings of boats have been found in Northern Europe which show boats with animal heads, thought to depict skin-covered vessels dating from the Mesolithic period, 8,000 to 6,000 BC. One thought is that the origin of figureheads is a mixture of religious symbolism and the treatment of the ship as a living thing. There was also the belief that a ship needed to find its own way, and it could only do this if it had eyes.

The ancient Egyptians mounted figures of holy birds on the prows to provide both protection and vision to their vessels. Similarly the Phoenicians used the heads of horses to symbolise vision and swiftness.

A mention of figureheads is made in the bible, Acts Chapter 28 verse 11 refers to Paul's departure from Malta:

After three months we set sail in a ship which had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria, with the Twin Brothers as figurehead.” In other words, Castor and Pollux.

In Northern Europe the favourite decoration for the Viking long-ship was a serpent, although some Danish ships had a boar's head to represent vision and ferocity. All were meant to strike fear into the enemy and scare away their enemy's guardian spirits.



Part of the Bayeux Tapestry

On the Bayeux tapestry of the 11th century double figurehead ships are depicted. The decoration of the ships of William the Conqueror, unlike that of his Norse ancestors, reflected the spread of Christianity in their content.

Originally these figureheads were mounted on, or carved directly onto the stern of the ship. In the 16th and 17th centuries, with the development of forecastles built above and beyond the ship's stern, the position of the figurehead was changed to the bow-spit.

During the 17th century the lion was the favoured figurehead for warships of most nations. The lion went out of fashion in the latter part of the 18th century and was then replaced with carvings representing the name of the ship, this being in keeping with William Falconer's dictionary's definition of a figurehead in 1780. Figureheads now had the added practical function of helping to identify the ship. Most people then were illiterate, signs or symbols being used to convey vital information as reflected in shop and inn signs.

Female figureheads were popular, usually baring one or both breasts. Women on board ship were thought to be unlucky, but a naked woman was supposed to be able to calm a storm at sea.

Most of the figureheads that survive today date from the mid to late 19th century. Figureheads come in many shapes and sizes. One carver in the 19th century advertised "off the peg" figureheads ranging from a simple head, or a bust with the shoulders, to waist height (a demi-figurehead), to three-quarter length down to the calves, to full length down to the feet.

The last ship in the Royal Navy to be fitted with a figurehead was HMS Espiegle, a steam sloop of 10 guns launched in 1900 and broken up in 1923.



Figurehead of HMS Espiegle at Portsmouth Naval Dockyard

**QD060: Originally appeared in the “Quarterdeck” magazine
Ref: 2017 Issue 2 (Summer) pages 39 to 42**