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Publisher: Routledge
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UK

The Mariner's Mirror

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rmir20>

MEDIAEVAL SHIPS

H. H. Brindley

Published online: 22 Mar 2013.

To cite this article: H. H. Brindley (1912) MEDIAEVAL SHIPS, *The Mariner's Mirror*, 2:5, 129-134, DOI: [10.1080/00253359.1912.10654595](https://doi.org/10.1080/00253359.1912.10654595)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00253359.1912.10654595>

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The MARINER'S MIRROR

THE JOURNAL OF

The Society for Nautical Research.

Antiquities.	Bibliography.	Folklore.	Organisation.
Architecture.	Biography.	History.	Technology.
Art.	Equipment.	Laws and Customs.	&c., &c.

Vol. II., No. 5.

May, 1912.

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MEDIÆVAL SHIPS.

NO. VI.—REEFING GEAR.

BY H. H. BRINDLEY.

IN a paper, read before the Cambridge Antiquarian Society, last year, and published in the *Proceedings*, Vol. XV., 1910, p. 26, I called attention to the slight knowledge which we possess, and the great uncertainty which exists as to how the reefing of sails was done previously to the sixteenth century. The main points advanced were :—

(i.) That in the absence of works on seamanship (for Wagenhaer's *Speculum Nauticum*, the earliest known book which can be called a work on seamanship, did not appear till 1584), our information is derived only from pictorial representations of ships on painted glass, seals and miniatures, scattered allusions in poems, and certain inventories preserved at the Record Office. Thus difficulties arise in more than one direction ; where pictures are available, we have small means of judging how far they are conventional, certainly very many artists and seal engravers of the middle ages had little knowledge of the craft they illustrated ; and when we have documents referring to ships, the information conveyed does not seem to allow of the reconstruction of the vessels.

(ii.) From the information at our disposal, it seems certain that two methods of reducing or adding sail were in use in the middle ages, viz. :—

(a.) The " bonnet," a strip of canvas which could be laced to the foot of a sail ; in Tudor times it was common to have two bonnets, the lower one being known as a " drabber." The earliest mention of a bonnet I know is in the inventories of certain ships of the Navy of King Edward III., preserved at the Record Office. These are dated 1338. Bonnets were in use in the Royal Navy as late as 1720, and they survive still in certain local small craft.

(b.) Reefing by means of reef points, *i.e.*, short pieces of rope sewn into the sail on either side, by means of which a portion of the sail could be furled and secured. According to the position of the reef-points, this reduction of canvas was effected either at the foot of the sail or at its head ; in the latter case the reef points of the two sides of the sail were tied together over the yard. For the use of reef points in the Middle Ages, we have to rely entirely on pictorial representations, the earliest of which that I have been able to find is the twelfth century seal of La Rochelle (Fig. 1).

(iii.) It is not possible to decide, at least in the majority of cases, whether a mediæval writer is speaking of bonnets or reef points when he describes the proceedings of shortening or increasing sail : the word " reef " on etymological grounds seems to have borne both meanings and this conclusion is fortified by the context.

(iv.) No original representation of reef points later than 1528 has been found, and there is no statement by Wagenhaer, Raleigh, Smith, Boteler, or other writers of the late sixteenth

FIG. 5.—SHIP IN THE ST. CHRISTOPHER WINDOW, THAXTED CHURCH, FROM A TRACING (from *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society*, XV., 1910), reproduced by permission of the Council of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society.

and early seventeenth centuries which warrant a belief that sails were reduced by reef points in their time. On the other hand it is quite clear that bonnets were then in use.

(v.) Reef points reappear in pictures at the time of the Second Dutch War, and continue to the present day.

(vi.) It is unquestionably a puzzle that so convenient a method of shortening sail as reefing by reef points should have lapsed for more than a century, and yet it seems impossible that if reef points were fitted to sails from 1530 to 1665 we should not find them in pictures of the time, especially as engraving was by then an everyday art and the number of pictures of all kinds was so much greater than those of the preceding age. Thus it is desirable to place on record the early instances in which reef points are represented.

At the time of writing my first paper, I had been able to find only six cases of what may fairly be regarded as reef points, with one doubtful case. These were in the seals of La Rochelle (Fig. 1), Hastings (Fig. 2), Rye (Fig. 4), and painted glass in Thaxted Church, Essex (Fig. 5), and the churches of Villequier and Vatteville on the lower Seine. The doubtful instance is some of the drawings of ships in the Life of Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick (Brit. Mus., Cottonian MS., Julius E., iv., Art. 6), in which it is possible that reef points may be represented in one or two cases, but what is depicted is perhaps really the lacing of a bonnet. All the above cases, of which a tabular summary is given later on, fall between the twelfth century and the first quarter of the sixteenth century. Since publishing the article in which these cases were described, I have been able to find five or six more representations of ships with reef points, all of which are works dating from the century 1391 to 1493. In chronological order these are :—

(i.) Seal of Edward Plantagenet, Earl of Rutland, Admiral of the North and West in 1391. The British Museum preserves two different seals of this Admiral, both of which bear ships. In one seal (No. lxxxix., 49), the ship's sail bears his coat of arms, but in the other, which is attached to a document (Additional Charters, No. 40665), the sail has reef points. These are distributed throughout the sail, as in the three examples mentioned above. This seal is illustrated in Fig. 3. The impression is a fragment, and it appears to be the only one extant, but fortunately the whole of the ship is preserved, though there are some cracks in the sail. These do not, however, obscure the reef-points, which stand out distinctly. They are in three

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rows, and do not all hang alike. They are the earliest instance I have found of what may be called for convenience double reef-points. It will be seen that some of them, most clearly those on the port side nearest the head of the sail, are in two pieces, as though they were sewn in on the bight. This feature will be seen again in later representations.

Incidentally, it is worth noting that the document to which this seal is appended has reference to Dunwich in the days when it possessed a harbour: for it is an exemplification in Latin of a suit before John Aslah and John, his brother, Attorneys General for Edward, Earl of Rutland, Admiral of the North and West, in the Court of Admiralty against Peter Elmoth and others of Dunwich for trespass at the entrance of Dunwich Port. The accused were acquitted. The document is dated December 3rd, 1392 (Brit. Mus., Cat. of Additional Charters, Vol. XVI.)

(ii.) Harleian MS., No. 1319, is French and is ascribed to the year 1399. The latest description of it is by Sir E. Maunde Thompson (*Burlington Magazine*, V., 1904, pp. 160-172 and 267-270), under the title, "A Contemporary Account of the Fall of Richard II." He states that the authorship is shown by a copy in the Bibliothèque Nationale at Paris (No. 275 Fonds St. Victor); it was the work of Jehan Creton, *varlet de chambre* to Charles VI. Three of the beautifully executed miniatures show ships, and in two of them the sails have reef points. In the other the ships are much the same in general features, but they lie at anchor with their sails furled: they are the ships which brought stores from Dublin to the harassed English Army in Ireland. The miniature on fol. 14 shows John de Montacute, Earl of Salisbury, bringing his ships into Conway. He had Jehan Creton on board with him ("pour rire et chanter"), so perhaps we may regard the drawings of ships in this MS. as having more than usual authority. Fig. 6 is a photograph of the miniature, and it will be seen that the reef-points, which in the original are carefully sketched in brown pigment on the white sails, are double, as in the Earl of Rutland's seal of the same decade. The lines across the sail from which the reef-points depend suggest that the artist had reef-bands in mind. Each double reef-point is attached to the sail by what seems to be a knot, an arrangement to be considered later on.

The miniature on fol. 18 is reproduced in Fig. 7. The subject is King Richard II., sailing from Ireland to Milford. Here we see four ships running before a strong breeze: that

bearing the King is distinguished by a heraldic sun-in-splendour on her sail, the reef-points which the sails of the other ships carry being omitted. These reef-points are just like those in the other miniature, but nothing suggesting reef-bands is seen. In King Richard's voyage we are shown the fore sides of the sails, while in the Conway scene the sails are seen from aft ; we have thus some evidence that the reef-points of the time were sewn in on both sides, as at the present day. It is difficult to believe that they were ever in the Middle Ages fitted to one side of a sail only, but I think the suggestion has been made. From a technical standpoint the sails are the best part of the ships in the two miniatures of Harl. MS., 1319, for what rigging is shown is unconvincing and certainly important ropes are omitted or drawn incorrectly. An apparent confusion between fore-stays and shrouds is revealed by comparing the ships of King Richard's fleet. Jehan Creton, or the artist who drew his miniatures, seems to have sought to express " the way of a ship in the sea " well : in this he succeeded, for in both miniatures the ships and sea have much life ; perhaps more care was bestowed on the sails and the broken sea than on hulls and rigging. Such inconsistency for art's sake is quite possible : in these miniatures, as in so many others of the Middle Ages, we find extreme neglect of proportion between the sizes of the vessels and their passengers.