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Colonel Cyril Field Royal Marine Light Infantry (Rtd.)

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CONCERNING FIGURE-HEADS.

By COLONEL CYRIL FIELD, Royal Marine Light Infantry (Rtd.).

THE hull of a modern man-of-war is as bare of ornamentation as the khaki fighting jacket of "Thomas Atkins"; her bow is as plain as the edge of a chisel. Both are solely intended for use—not to be looked at. But it was not always so. There were times, not so very long ago, if we consider the age of this old world of ours, when the most elaborate decoration was the order of the day. The sterns of the battleships of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries were often masses of carving and gilding; along their bulwarks ran a series of gilded trophies of arms, flags, &c., generally on a red or blue ground, while certainly more important than all in the eyes of the seamen of those days, was the figure-head, the final and finishing touch to the bow decorations.

The figure-head was the characteristic emblem of the vessel—the personification of her identity.

"In some ships," wrote Captain Basil Hall, eighty years ago—when the iron-clad with her smoking funnels and naked masts had not been born or thought of—"the sailors pride themselves especially on the beauty of their figure-heads; and many a time I have seen the captain of the forecastle employed for hours in painting the eyes, hair and drapery of his favourite idol. I suppose few commanding officers will allow of this liberty; for it must be owned that as Jack's taste in female beauty, and in the disposition and colours of dress, are borrowed from a very questionable source, where the naked truth, as it is called, predominates sadly over the beau-ideal, his labours in adorning the figure-head are apt to produce strange monsters: I once heard of a captain who indulged his boatswain in this whim of representing his absent love as far as the king's allowance of paint could carry the art; and it must be owned, that as the original *Dulcinea* owed her roses to the same source, the representation 'came very close aboard of the original,' as the delighted boatswain expressed it. This very proximity in colouring, scantiness of drapery, and so forth, which formed the boatswain's pride, perplexed the worthy captain, who had given his sanction to the work, for he could never cross the bows of his own ship with a party of friends, without raising a laugh at the expense of his taste in figures. The whole crew, however, soon fell as much in love with the damsel as the boatswain had done before them; and it would have been cruel to have sent the painter to daub her ladyship all over with one uniform colour, according to the general fashion. The considerate commander took a different line.

" 'You seem proud of your head, Mr. Clearpipe, I shall gild her for you!' In a few days the sparkling eyes *and* blushing cheeks of Mrs. Boatswain, like Danaë, had yielded up their charms to the golden shower. The glittering figure-head soon became the delight of the ship's company, and on one occasion furnished the captain with rather an odd means of calling out their energies. The ship was sailing in company with several others of the same class, and when they all came to reef top-sails together, she was beat on the first occasion. As they were setting about a second trial of activity, the captain called out to the people aloft, 'Now, I tell you what it is, my lads, unless you are off the yards and the sails are hoisted up again before any other ship in the squadron, by the Lord Harry, I'll paint your figure-head black!' From that time forward she beat every ship in the fleet." Who can deny that on this occasion, at least, ornament proved of practical use? It is only those unsentimental dry-as-dust reformers whose acquaintance with our sailors and soldiers is generally confined to official returns and reports, who would like to deprive them of all the little distinctive badges and decorations that they prize so highly and reduce them to one dead-level of paper "efficiency"!

As we travel further back along the avenue of years we find that the seaman not only prized the figure-head of his floating home, but may almost be said to have venerated it as well. In a letter written in 1779, it is stated:—"The French and Spanish Fleets came before Plymouth and might have destroyed it; for there was nobody to hinder them. The *British Fleet fled before the enemy*, and the seamen hung their hammocks before the 'Victory's' head that she might not see such days!"

Much the same thing happened in 1797, when, in obedience to orders from the Admiralty, Sir Charles Hardy was reluctantly obliged to decline an engagement with the French. When the British Fleet crowding on all sail bore away from their opponents, a boatswain's mate on board the "Royal George" was seen busily lashing a double hammock round the head of the king. "What are you doing there?" says a lieutenant on the forecastle. "Only securing his peepers," says Jack. "Peepers! what do you mean?" exclaims the officer. "Why," replied the man, "we ar'nt ordered to break the old boy's heart, are we? I'm sure if the king once gets a sight of this here day's work, and knows that we have run away like cowardly lubbers, it will be the death of him, poor soul!"

A mishap to the figure-head was naturally regarded as an ill-omen. On one occasion, at any rate, the seamen's gloomy forebodings proved justified in the event. At the beginning of 1782, the "Atlas," of 90 guns, was launched at Chatham; when they came to ship her bowsprit the figure stood so high, that it was necessary to cut away part of the globe upon his shoulders; and that part happened to be North America. Some mishaps, however, might be repaired. Thus, for instance, during the battle of "The Glorious First of June" (1794) the fine laced cocked hat which adorned the bust of the duke, which formed the "Brunswick's" figure-head, was carried away by a cannon

ball. The crew of the "Brunswick," thinking it would be a degradation for a prince of the reigning house to remain uncovered in the face of the enemy, sent a deputation to the quarter-deck to request that the captain would be pleased to order his servant to give them his laced cocked hat to repair the loss. The captain good-humouredly complied. The carpenter nailed it on, and there it remained till the close of the engagement.

It is not easy to trace the origin of figure-heads. They were certainly in use in the ships of the ancient Egyptians and Phœnicians, though whether regarded in the same way as by the seamen of more modern times it is impossible to say. With the Phœnicians they seem at one time to have distinguished special classes of ships. From the fact that a figure-head representing a horse was found on a wreck on the East African coast about 112 B.C., it has been deduced that the Phœnicians had succeeded in doubling the Cape, since this type of head belonged particularly to a numerous class of their ships known as "Hippi." As for Egyptian figure-heads, the visitor to the British Museum may see them carved in dozens on the big sarcophagus on his left-hand as he enters the Egyptian Gallery. But most of these have two heads, one at the bow the other at the stern, and are probably in some way connected with funeral ceremonies.

Roman and Grecian ships appear to have had figure-heads, but they are rather overshadowed by other ornaments of a somewhat similar kind. At the bow rose the head and neck of a swan, or similar high curving decoration, at the stern was a feather or fan-shaped ornament called the "aplustre," and on the poop a figure of the tutelary deity of the ship. Neither of these was the "parsemon" or figure-head proper, which was placed between the ram and the bow ornament—sometimes on the stem of the ship, sometimes duplicated on either bow, as in modern days. The "parsemon" had a *general* reference to the ship's name, but not a *particular* one as had the figure-heads of modern history. If the ship was named after a river, there was a crocodile—after a mountain, a Phrygian lion, and so on. The figure at the poop more nearly represented the particular ship. Occasionally a human head was carved at the top of the bow ornament or "chemiscus." This may or may not have been emblematical of the ship's name.

The navies of the Greek and Roman empires passed away with the empires to which they belonged. Their scheme of bow and stern ornamentation went with them. But the Vikings, the "Men of the fiords"—the fierce sea-rovers of the North—inaugurated a new system of ship decoration, in which the figure-head was pre-eminent. Their "Dreadnoughts" were termed "drakkers" or "dragon-ships," their "cruisers" "esnekkers" or "long serpents." Like the "snake-boats" of the modern Burmese, the whole vessel was contrived to bear the semblance of a dragon or snake when afloat. The bows were formed in the similitude of the monster's head, the stern was fashioned like his tail, while the rest of the boat played the part of his body.

Sooner or later these were augmented or replaced by a special figure-head, and when King Sweyn descended on the Norfolk coast in 1004, it is stated that though the king's own ship was like those we have described "in the form of a dragon"—a very ancient emblem of sovereignty it may be observed—the prows of the other ships with him were ornamented with figures of lions, bulls, dolphins or men, made of gilded copper. It is, however, to be noted, that old historians were apparently sometimes rather confused between the words "stem" and "stern," and it is at least as likely that these figures were at the stern as represented in William the Conqueror's ships in the Bayeux tapestry. Most of these have two "heads," one at the bow and the other at the stern, but both looking ahead, and not in opposite directions, as in the pictures of double "headed" Egyptian vessels previously referred to. It may be noted, however, that according to a very old chronicle, the golden boy blowing an ivory horn and pointing towards England, which appears on the "Mora," the Conqueror's own ship, was placed at the *prow* and not astern, as it appears in the tapestry. The double head is very much in evidence in certain very ancient carvings in Sweden representing ships of this period. All these have double dragon or snake heads facing forward, possibly on the principle of a double-barrelled gun, for the figure-head in the Viking days had a real and formidable significance. This was due to an extraordinary superstition.

The head of a victim offered in sacrifice was lifted up to a god with an invocation to bring evil upon all enemies of the person making the sacrifice, in return for the pleasure the spectacle was supposed to afford the deity. The head, so exalted, was known as a "nith-stang." Its effect or range of action surpassed that of our very latest big guns, since it is said an Icelandic chief put a curse upon the King and Queen of Norway by placing a "nith-stang," made of a horse's head on a pole, on his own mountain-side. Its fixed regard was supposed to put all the guardian spirits of the land to flight. The figure-head proper was at this time probably evolved from "nith-stangs" of some kind or another set up above the dragon or snake bow of a vessel. In an old Saxon MS. a human head is shown set upon a pole in this position. Anyway, figure-heads became regarded as possessing the baleful potentialities of these gruesome emblems, and by an old Icelandic law vessels were forbidden to come within sight of the island without first removing their figure-heads, lest they should scare away its guardian spirits. It is evident therefore that they were removable and not a part and portion of the ship, as the dragon bow is sometimes considered to have been. To announce that they had "unshipped" the dreaded bogie, the crew ran up a shield to the masthead.

After the Norman Conquest the progress of naval architecture practically abolished the figure-head for some centuries. The tubby sailing ship—the round ship—replaced the long serpents and their kind, except for the galleys of the Mediterranean. The "round ships," when equipped for fighting, as they nearly always had to be

at a time when every man's hand was against every other—at sea—had fighting stages built right out over the bow and stern. There was no room or place for a figure-head, though later on, in the 15th century, there were sometimes coats of arms at the bow below the forecastle, or perhaps a little rudimentary worm trying to look like a dragon. There were probably exceptions. For instance, the "Good Pace of the Tower" had a large golden eagle with a crown in its mouth *on* the bowsprit. This was in 1400, at which time the figures of their patron saints were made for several ships, though where they were placed is not known. Eighty-nine years later, what seems to be an actual figure-head appears in the picture of the wreck of a Hanseatic ship given by some survivor to the Marienkirche at Lubeck. It is an upright figure of a knight in armour, with spear, pennon, and shield. In the really formidable navy of Henry VIII., the figure-head made a tardy reappearance. The famous "Henri-Grace-a-Dieu" had a mild-looking squatting lion at her bow, while an inoffensive and diminutive unicorn and salamander perched themselves on the protruding "beaks" of the ships bearing the names of these mythical animals. These two, by the way, were French-built ships, given to the King of Scotland and captured off Leith in 1544. The French, however, seem to have gone in for more imposing bow ornaments at this period, since their "Grande Françoise," launched in 1527—the biggest ship that had ever been built in France—had a figure-head consisting of the image of St. Francis, her patron saint, placed over the "Salamander," the royal badge of Francis I. It is very interesting to note that this saintly figure-head is still to be seen in the church of St. Francis at Havre. Although we have the figure-heads of the "Shannon" and "Chesapeake," and dozens of less famous ones preserved in this country, we have nothing to compare with this French specimen as regards antiquity. The figure-head did not attain any very remarkable prominence, beauty or proportions, during the Tudor period, but with the advent of the Stuarts appeared the equestrian type. The figure on horseback, which our principal men-of-war then bore at their bows, was often brought into combination with several other figures. Thus the figure-head of the magnificent "Sovereign of the Seas" represented King Edgar riding over seven less powerful kings. When the Commonwealth Government built the "Naseby," they followed suit by giving her an equestrian figure of the Protector trampling upon the representatives of six nations. This was plagiarism with a vengeance! Strange to say it was in this very ship that Charles II. returned to England upon his Restoration, in honour whereof she was re-named the "Royal Charles." Of course, "Old Noll" was not allowed to remain, and his wooden effigies were therefore removed and burnt, as Pepys says, "with so much insulting folly as I never heard of," the head being cut off and hung on a specially constructed gibbet, with "the trayned bands of Rochester to witness the solemnity." But what annoyed Pepys about it more than anything else was the waste of money, as it was going to cost the king £100 to have a new figure-head made in the form of "a Neptune." As it turned out Oliver might just as well have been

left where he was, since four years later the "Royal Charles" was captured by the Dutch in the Medway and taken over to Holland.

The disappearance of the "beak-head" rendered the big equestrian figure-heads impossible, and at the beginning of the 18th century, possibly with a view to economy, an order was issued that all new ships were to have a lion as figure-head. This order was probably as much honoured in the breach as in the observance, for in 1770 fanciful patterns were as numerous as ever, and a naval officer, writing to the *St. James' Chronicle* in that year, expresses his surprise in seeing at the head of the new 90-gun ship "Queen" not, as he expected, "an elegant personification of Charlotte of Mecklenburg, but a ferocious looking lion, whose extended jaws seemed to hunger for blood and slaughter." Another objection to the "lion" head was its very constant use by both the French and Dutch Navies. Admiral Winter's flagship, the "Vrykeid," at Camperdown, wore one of these. Another attempt was made by Admiralty bureaucrats to deprive men-of-war of their individuality by the introduction of a uniform bow ornament. They proposed to abolish the figure-head altogether and replace it by a "scroll"—very appropriate from an office desk point of view. This was towards the end of 1796, but barely a year passed before they abandoned the ill-advised attempt altogether and ordered that "ships of war shall be ornamented with carved work at their heads and sterns, as formerly."

From this time forth our men-of-war revelled in busts and full-length figures of "Jupiter," "Agamemnon," "Bellerophon," and other Greek and Roman demi-gods and heroes interspersed with those of members of the Royal Family, and successful naval and military commanders. There were, of course, exceptions. Nelson's "Victory," for instance, had as figure-head the Royal Arms with a blue-jacket and marine as supporters, who were afterwards transmogrified into a pair of cherubs dressed in the "altogether."¹

Many of the single figures were of colossal size, 15, 17, and even 21 feet in height. A great number—over 150 in all—are still to be seen at the Royal Dockyards at Chatham, Sheerness, Portsmouth and Plymouth, to say nothing of many others scattered about the country. One of the old lion heads is said to be doing duty as a public-house sign at Martlesham, near Ipswich, and has become so scarlet—probably with shame at the base use to which he has declined—that, "As red as Martlesham Lion" is a common saying over that countryside. Some small comfort may be taken from the fact that he

¹ The figure-head with the seaman and marine supporters was the one she wore at Trafalgar. But in earlier days she had a most pompous and elaborate one. The bust of George III. stood on an arch over the Royal Cypher on a shield. Two figures of Britannia formed supporters, one crowned by an allegorical representation of "Victory" and the other by a similar representation of "Fame." The Royal Arms also formed part of the design together with figures representing Asia and Africa. This would seem to be enough for any figure-head, but in this case there was an additional figure of a boy with a globe and compasses, symbolical of the dominion of the seas.

is said to be a Dutch lion from a ship of that nation once wrecked on the Suffolk coast.

For the first half of the 19th century the figure-head well held its own, but in the latter half it received its *coup-de-grace* in the advent of the ironclad. Although the first seagoing armourclad, the French "La Gloire," had no bow ornament at all, the "Warrior" and the "Black Prince," with which we replied to her, and which had "swan" bows, carried two of the finest and handsomest figure-heads ever turned out. But as the ram bow became more and more universal it was found difficult, if not impossible, to put a regular figure-head in position. Some attempts were made even so late as 1887, when the "Howe" and the "Rodney" were given threequarter length heads representing the famous Admirals whose names they bore, but they had to be removed, as they got in the way when the torpedo-net defence was rigged out. The usual type of bow ornament worn by our earlier battleships was an escutcheon sometimes bearing the Royal Arms, and in other cases devices appropriate to the ship's name, with a more or less elaborate scroll-work design on either side of it. One of the most remarkable of these decorations was that of the "Warspite" (1886). The "gingerbread-work" on either bow represented a lady brandishing a sword and torch—possibly a prototype of a suffragette asking for votes—with a background of flags, arms and conventional foliage, while the escutcheon which bore the Royal Arms, opened like a pair of folding doors to allow a Hotchkiss Q.F.-gun to be fired dead ahead. The French Navy was the first to drop the bow ornament altogether, though a few of her armourclads, notably the "Brennus" (1891)—which with her huge fighting masts looked like one of Gustave Doré's romantic castles gone afloat—had really fine figure-heads. Our own Navy gave them up rather more reluctantly, while strange to say, the Germans, whose Navy is but a child in years compared to those of France and England, clung to them longer than either. The "Wittelsbach" (1900) and the "Deutschland" (1904), for instance—both first-class armourclads—had very fine figure-heads, while most of the smaller ships and cruisers of that period had an elaborate and handsome bow decoration.

But though now coming into line with other nations in this respect, the latest German battleships having nothing but a diminutive shield or badge on either bow, the Germans are a sentimental nation and still hanker after the figure-head, so much so, that their magnificent new Atlantic liner "Imperator," has at her bow a large carved Imperial eagle standing on the Globe, with the motto "Mein Feld ist die Welt." We might characterize this device as being "a little bit previous." The figure-head in our own liners has been dead these many decades. There are indications that the ram bow in warships which brought about the downfall of the figure-head, may have had its day. The newest Japanese men-of-war are already built with an overhanging bow. Should this type of bow become more universal, shall we see the figure-head "come to its own again"? It is much to be feared that our modern ideas would not sanction an

expenditure on what would be called "useless frippery." It is, however, quite possible that these "modern ideas" may be erroneous and short-sighted ones. In the United States Navy some years ago the place of the figure-head was taken, in a few ships, by a bronze figure or group emblematical of the vessel's name, which was placed between the guns on the fore-turret. It seems a pity that this idea has not spread and developed. Such a fine and enduring mark of individuality is open to none of the objections made to the figure-head and would become an heirloom in ships of the same name. Uniformity is doubtless a fine thing in many ways, but individuality is worth accentuating in ships and regiments, for in them it spells *esprit-de-corps*, and *esprit-de-corps*, not infrequently, spells—"Victory!"

Bow Ornament. Circa. 1500 (Arms of Brittany)
From a Book of Hours, belonging to Anne of
Brittany.—Bib. Nat.

Human and Crocodile Heads on Roman Galley, '
From Coin of Marcus Antonius.

Dragon Figure Head. From MS. of about 1000 A.D.

Figure Head of a Hanseatic Ship of 1489.
From "ex-voto" picture of its wreck in the
Marienkirche, Lubeck.

Head of H.M.S. "Unicorn." 1544.

Head of H.M.S. "Salamander," 1544.

Head of the "Victoria," the Ship in which Magellan sailed round the World. From Hulsius

H.M.S. "Enterprise."

H.M.S. "Orion."

H.M.S. "Edinboro."

H.M.S. "Queen" (1794).

H.M.S. "Duke of Wellington."

"La Bretagne," 1855.

H.M.S. "Calcutta,"

"Star of India."
Bow Ornament in the old Indian Troopships.

H.M.S. "Gibraltar"
(Key of the Mediterranean).

Bow of German Liner "Imperator."

Bow Ornamentation "Kaiser Wilhelm II."

Figure-Head of the "Te-Avawa," one of the two big War Canoes in which the Maoris are said to have first arrived in New Zealand—(600-700 years ago.)

Figure-Head of South Sea Island War Canoe.
The author has seen such a head with eyes made from the glasses of a missionary who had been eaten.