

# The Rise of the Fouled Anchor: The Visual Codification of the Royal Navy during the 1700s

*Lily Style*

---

The Royal Navy at the start of the Georgian era in 1714 looked nothing like its glamorous Nelson-era counterpart at the century's end. Lacking designated uniforms, officers were viewed as 'base, coarse and unrefined'.<sup>1</sup> However, less than a century later, Royal Navy officers were resplendent in blue and white uniforms emblazoned with gilt buttons sporting the fouled (rope-strewn) anchor motif, which is still in use today. What caused the navy to change from ill-reputed mufti to uniformed respectability, and from whence, out of the blue, did the iconic fouled anchor arise?

Naval use of the anchor motif, albeit unfouled, can be traced back to the Lord Admirals of Scotland in 1515. The first record of its use by the English Admiralty comes forty-three years later in the reign of Queen Mary. The fouled version first appears in the seal of the Earl of Nottingham, Lord High Admiral, in 1601. In 1619, Nottingham's successor Buckingham, was granted 'an Ensigne with ye Ld Admiralls Badge & Motto'. This appears to have been the fouled anchor because he adopted it as his emblem.<sup>2</sup> The fouled anchor, according to the *Oxford Companion to Ships and the Sea*, is 'an abomination to seamen when it occurs in practice, as the seal of the highest office of maritime administration is purely on the grounds of its decorative effect, the rope cable around the shank of the anchor giving a pleasing finish to the stark design of an anchor on its own'.<sup>3</sup>

The first English language naval dictionary, entitled *A Naval Expositor*, was produced circa 1732 by Thomas Blanckley, Clerk of the Survey for Portsmouth Dock. His dictionary, 'SHEWING all the Words and Terms of Art belonging to the Parts, Qualities, Proportions of Building, Rigging, Furnishing and Fitting a Ship for Sea', includes meticulously hand-drawn illustrations, the first of which is of an anchor. Blanckley's definitions gift the modern reader with a fascinating window to the inner workings of the early Georgian navy, and bear traces of his intellectual struggle to codify naval hardware into concise, accurate phrases. His definition of 'board' is three-plied:

Elm: Is used for several Services about the Yard, on board ships, & repairing Boats &c

Firr: For sheathing ships bottoms, flooring their cabbins, & masking moulds &c

Wainscot: For building Barges, Pinnaces, & Wherrys & other uses relating to the Joyner

A humiliating Royal Navy defeat to the French and Spanish at Toulon in 1744 was offset by the heroic return of Commodore George Anson. He, and the 188 men who returned with him, had survived marooning in the Pacific to capture a Spanish Manila galleon carrying a fortune in cargo. Anson earned £91,000 prize money from the haul, and a pathway into the Board of Admiralty. One of the Board's senior officers, Vice-Admiral Edward Vernon, was actively determined to reform the sluggish, ineffective navy.

Anson, later elevated to the peerage as Lord Anson, and Admiral of the Fleet, Vice-admiral of Great Britain, and First Lord Commissioner of the Admiralty<sup>4</sup>, was equally keen to reform the navy, and joined forces with Vernon. Of these, one reform, instigated in 1748, was the ruling that all commissioned officers must wear a uniform. This would serve to unite officers as a proud brotherhood clearly distinguished from the coarse hoi polloi of non-commissioned crew.<sup>5</sup> Confusingly, however, no pattern was at first decreed.<sup>6</sup> The introduction of naval uniform mirrored the impact of Thomas Blanckley's illustrated dictionary as a revolutionary step in visually codifying the navy.

Anson's biographer Sir John Barrow wrote in 1839 that blue and white was chosen for the Royal Navy's uniform on the whim of George II, who had been impressed by the appearance of the Duke of Bedford's wife riding in those colours. However, the author concedes, the story may be nothing more than colourful rumour.<sup>7</sup>

Thomas Blanckley died in Portsmouth on the morning of 29 December 1747 aged sixty-nine. His eldest son, Thomas Riley, who had already taken his position of Clerk of the Survey, inherited his *Naval Expositor* manuscript. Quick off the mark, he commissioned an esteemed London-based Huguenot printmaker, Paul Fourdriniers, to produce copperplate engravings of his father's illustrations, and recruited subscribers to finance mass printing. He was evidently supported by Anson, as the subscribers' list is headed by 'RIGHT Honourable the Lords of the Admiralty (as a board)'. Also named is the Duke of Bedford (whose wife's attire was rumoured to have inspired the uniform's colours) and Joseph Allin: Surveyor of His Majesty's Navy (and, by the way,

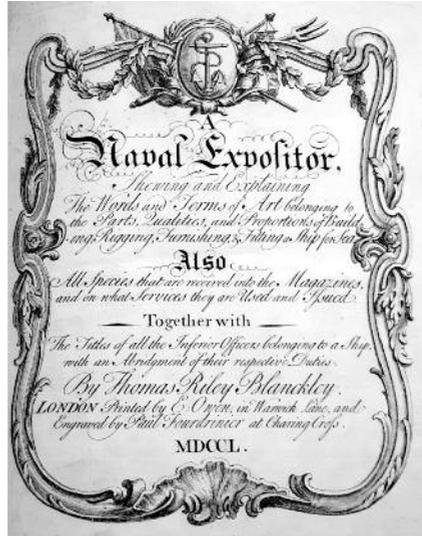
his father-in-law). The printed version of the *Naval Expositor*, released in 1750, comprises an elaborate frontispiece surmounted by a fouled anchor. This appears to be the first instance of the motif being used to represent the navy, rather than the Admiralty only. Beneath the fouled anchor, the words ‘by Thomas Riley Blanckley’ are prominently emblazoned. It is unclear, however, whether he deliberately set out to fool posterity into believing he created the *Naval Expositor*, because he acknowledges the true authorship in his will (proved 23 May 1753):

Also I give and bequeath all the manuscripts of my late father ...  
 Also I give and bequeath the copper plates and blank books of the *Naval Expositor* composed by my late father and lately by me published ...

In the latter part of the decade, in 1758 (the birth year of Horatio Nelson), buttons bearing the fouled anchor were produced for officers’ uniforms. This, however, pre-dated their formal introduction by sixteen years.<sup>8</sup> The fouled anchor was now, for the first time, associated with Royal Navy officers.

News in 1772 – the year after Horatio Nelson joined the navy – that the fouled anchor was being formally added to Royal Navy buttons was lamented as a downslide into the capricious following of fashion; and that the anchor motif was fit only for servants, not the great heroes of the British navy. The anchor, it was argued, had, since Old Testament times, symbolised hope, and should not therefore be purloined. If given choice over the design of their personal buttons, as huntsmen did, officers could signal their personal disposition, knowledge and taste by choosing ‘a Variety of marginal engravings, full as entertaining and as useful as those which illustrate Blankley’s *Naval Expositor*’.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, anchor buttons were introduced two years later. *The Hampshire Chronicle* reported on 13 June 1774:

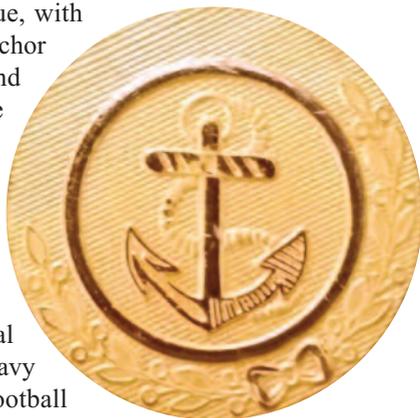
We are informed that the Captains uniform of the navy is going to be



The frontispiece for the *Naval Expositor* published in 1790.

altered, and that Sir Richard Bickerton will appear in the new dresses at the sea-ports when Lord Sandwich is there, for the approbation of the corps, the old coat is to have the addition of a row of lace round the pockets and sleeves, with anchor buttons; and the undress frock is to be lapelled with blue, with button-hole, worked with gold thread, anchor buttons, plain white waistcoat and breeches. After the approbation of the corps is obtained, it will be shewn to his Majesty for his concurrence.<sup>10</sup>

The introduction of uniforms was so successful that it extended to include midshipmen and standing warrant officers in 1787.<sup>11</sup> This ongoing process of visual codification enabled people to picture the navy in their minds' eyes. Like modern day football clubs, the navy now had its own colours and an emblem (the fouled anchor) to cheer on. Thus branded, a pictorial snowballing effect ensued as artists and cartoonists translated all things naval into mass-produced prints,<sup>12</sup> graphically imprinting team Royal Navy into public consciousness. The momentum of this visual snowballing effect was so great, and its glamour so strong that Louis XVI of France decreed the use of blue and white with anchor buttons for his own navy. An unspecified English gentleman in Paris wrote in the summer of 1786:



Royal Navy button with fouled anchor, introduced 1772.

I was highly pleased to see, in consequence of the new Order from the King for regulating the Marine uniform, that it is entirely formed upon that worn by the British naval Commanders. Even the *Anchor* upon the Button has been introduced in preference for the *Fleur de Lys*. In short, English Fashions now prevail here as much as French did with us formerly.<sup>13</sup>

However, the anglicisation of the French navy was abruptly curtailed by the revolution, which began in May 1789. No longer aspiring to mimic, the French now sought to impose their republican government on Britain. So began the revolutionary wars, from which the aspiring young naval captain Horatio Nelson stepped forth into glory. Having cut his teeth defeating Napoleon's forces at Capo Noli in 1795, his resounding victory at the Nile

on 1 August 1798 cast him as the superhero protector of all who resisted the encroaching republican yoke. Women in Britain wore ‘gold anchors that celebrated their hero’,<sup>14</sup> and, in Naples, Emma, Lady Hamilton, who was at this time the fashion-setter of Europe, as well as bosom friend of Queen Maria Carolina (sister of the ill-fated Marie Antoinette), wrote to him adoringly on 3 September:

My dress from head to foot is alla Nelson ... Even my shawl is in blue with gold anchors all over. My earrings are Nelson’s anchors; in short, we are be-Nelsoned all over.<sup>15</sup>

The naval use of the fouled anchor rose so rapidly through the latter half of the eighteenth century, that it had evidently transmogrified to symbolise not just the Royal Navy, but its new, international hero: Horatio Nelson. In dashing blue and white, festooned with gold fouled anchors and medals of valour, Nelson epitomised the rebranded navy. Exultant and adoring, the Hamiltons commissioned a lavish dinner service sporting enormous, gilt fouled anchors for his fortieth birthday on 29 September 1798.<sup>16</sup>

Use of the motif as the ubiquitous symbol for the navy through its emblazonment on uniform buttons continued to rise. Surgeons were issued their own uniform in the fateful year of 1805; masters and pursers two years after this, although common seamen had to wait until 1857.<sup>17</sup>

The fouled anchor motif can, therefore, be charted to have first been used by Scottish admirals in the 1500s and by the English a century later. It came to symbolise the British navy as a whole during the latter years of the 1700s, and went on to represent the pre-revolutionary French navy. Throughout much of



The dinner service celebrating Nelson's fortieth birthday, 29 September 1798. It is of English manufacture, probably Coalport, and decorated in Naples.



Master Chief Petty Officer collar button, US Navy.

Right: Grave marker in the Old Cemetery in Cobh, Ireland, shows an example of the fouled anchor. The marker pays tribute to the eleven men who died in a gun battery accident on HMS *Mars* in 1902 when the ship was off the west coast of Ireland.



the world it became a ubiquitous symbol of the traditions, adventures, and perils of life at sea.

The US navy followed suit in 1905 by issuing fouled anchor insignia to chief petty officers.<sup>18</sup> The letters U, S, and N were added to the symbol not, as is commonly assumed, to signify ‘United States Navy’, but for ‘Unity’, ‘Service’, and ‘Navigation’.<sup>19</sup> Back in Britain, the fouled anchor has remained a symbol of the Lord High Admiral, who is currently Prince Philip.<sup>20</sup>

Detail showing buttons with fouled anchor; see colour plate 6