

Information sheet no 060

A brief history of the Royal Navy

No navy or fleet existed in any shape or form in England until the reign of King Alfred (871-901). His first seaborne engagement was in 882 against four Danish ships in the Stour estuary, and in 895-7 Alfred built longships to his own design and defeated the Danes off Essex and in the Thames estuary. It is for this reason that King Alfred is often claimed to be the founder of the British navy.

During the reign of Edward the Confessor (1004-1066), the maritime institution of the Cinque Ports was established. This was composed of five ports, Dover, Hastings, Romney, Hythe and Sandwich, later Rye and Winchelsea were added. Its purpose was for the prompt mobilisation of merchant vessels into a navy to fight against pirates and enemy attacks.

In 1190 Richard I introduced the Laws of Oleron into England. These were a code of maritime law originally enacted by his mother Eleanor of Aquitaine. The laws dealt with the rights and responsibilities of ships' captains in relation to discipline, mutiny, pay, cargoes, sickness on board, pilotage and the like.

In 1340 the Battle of Sluys was the first naval battle fought in ships, although the fleet was made up of mainly commandeered merchant vessels. This is deemed to be the first time a naval dispatch had been sent, when the King wrote to his son, the Prince of Wales. The English fleet being commanded by Edward III. Edward III became known as the 'king of the seas'. In 1391 Earl of Rutland was appointed as the first Lord High Admiral.

In 1415, the Henry V's English invasion force was carried across the channel by 1500 ships and boats, to fight in Agincourt. Henry V built the *Jesus*, the first ship of 1000 tons, followed by the *Grace Dieu* of 1400 tons.

The Tudor period was the great age of discovery and the beginning of world expansion. In 1495 Henry VII built the first dry dock at Portsmouth. Henry VIII inherited seven warships from his father, which he increased to twenty-four in the early part of his reign.

Henry VIII had ships built which had improved sea-worthiness and armaments, and in 1514 the *Henry Grace a Dieu* the largest warship in the world was launched. It was the first ship with heavy guns, and this led to an end of archers firing on ships and hand to hand fighting, and so developed a new technique of sea warfare. In the same year Trinity House was inaugurated to develop navigational aids such as lighthouses, buoys and beacons, the latter being used to signal the invasion of the Spanish Armada in 1588. In 1540 Henry built the first naval dock in Britain at Portsmouth, in 1546 he established the Navy Board, which remained almost unchanged for 300 years, created the Office of Admiralty, and set up the administrative machinery for the control of the fleet. For his achievements Henry VIII was known as the father of the English navy. From the Tudor period, England produced many eminent naval officers.

The British navy became the Royal Navy after the restoration of the monarchy under Charles II in 1660. In 1661 Sir William Penn and Samuel Pepys established the Naval Discipline Act which included the articles of war and founded



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the Royal Navy by statute. In 1664 the Royal Marines were set up. Charles II founded the Royal Society of London to encourage scientific knowledge of astronomy, biology, geographical exploration, navigation and seamanship.

During the eighteenth century, in 1714 the Board of Longitude was created and offered a prize for solution to discovering longitude at sea. The problem was solved by John Harrison's chronometers in the latter part of the century. In 1751 warships began to be rated by being divided into six divisions depending on the number of their guns e.g. a first rate having over 100 guns and sixth rate having under 32 guns. In 1782 signalling with twenty-eight flags using a numbered code was introduced by Admirals Howe, Kempenfelt and Knowles. This was further developed in 1796 by the introduction of semaphore by Sir Home Popham and Rev. Lord George Murray. Fifteen semaphore stations were installed from London to Deal, and its success led to a further ten stations being set up between London and Portsmouth. 1795 saw the compulsory introduction of lemon juice to prevent scurvy on board ships. In the same year the Admiralty's Hydrographic Department was established and the first Admiralty chart was issued by Alexander Dalrymple in 1801. From 1819, the Admiralty was given permission to sell its charts to the Merchant Marine and since then the world has been navigated almost entirely on British Admiralty charts.

The nineteenth century saw the beginning of Arctic exploration. In 1822, the first steam vessels, HMSs *Comet* and *Monkey*, were brought into use for towing ships of the line out of harbour when the wind was unfavourable. The Admiralty became the single organisation responsible for every aspect of the navy in 1832 when the Navy Board was merged into it. In 1853, continuous service in the navy was introduced under which seamen could make service in the navy a career and earn a pension at the end of it. This meant the end of impressment as a means of recruitment. HMS *Warrior*, the first ironclad warship, was built in 1860.

At the turn of the twentieth century the submarine was developed. By World War I 74 had been built. In 1906, the first all big-gun battleship HMS *Dreadnought* was built, becoming the most powerful ship in the world at the time and making all other ships obsolete. In 1912, the Royal Naval Air Service was formed, and in 1918, HMS *Argus* was the first ship built to enable aircraft to take off and land with an unobstructed deck over the whole length of the ship. In 1923, HMS *Hermes* was the first purpose built aircraft carrier and the Fleet Air Arm came into existence a year later. The latter part of the century has seen the development of nuclear submarines and missiles.

Today the Royal Navy is the third strongest maritime force in the world after the USA and Russia.