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FROM JONAH TO JACK TAR: THE INTEGRATION OF WHALEBOATS INTO THE BRITISH ROYAL NAVY

Morgan BREENE

Abstract

One of the most distinctive technologies associated with the 19th century whaling industry is the whaleboat. A fast, manoeuvrable craft, the whaleboat was adopted by the Royal Navy as a ship's boat, however, the precise date and rationale for this adoption is unknown due to a lack of engagement with the ways in which technologies were transmitted between commercial and naval fleets. Interactions between the whaling and naval fleet in the 18th and 19th centuries can be used to facilitate a discussion on the means by which the whaleboat transitioned from commercial craft to widely deployed naval ship's boat.

Keywords

British Royal Navy, ship's boats, technology transfer, whaleboat

Résumé

La technologie la plus emblématique de l'industrie baleinière du XIX^e siècle est sans nul doute la baleinière. Embarcation rapide et maniable, la baleinière a été adoptée par la marine royale britannique comme canot embarqué sur ses navires. Cependant, la date précise et la justification de cette adoption demeurent inconnues en raison de notre méconnaissance des modes de transmission technologiques entre les flottes commerciales et les flottes de guerre. Ce sont ces interactions entre la flotte baleinière et la flotte de guerre aux XVIII^e et XIX^e siècles qui peuvent nous permettre d'ouvrir une réflexion sur les moyens par lesquels la baleinière a évolué du statut d'embarcation commerciale à celui de canot le plus employé par la marine royale britannique.

Mots clés

Marine royale britannique, canots, transfert de technologie, baleinière

Maritime historians have shown a sustained interest in the technology of the British Royal Navy with a traditional focus on large-scale ship construction, armament, and navigation. Ship's boats, however, while an essential piece of onboard technology, have not warranted the same level of detailed attention. The only major work conducted on ship's boats is W.E. May's 1978 book *The Boats of Men of War* (May 1999), but the potential for these craft to serve as a significant inroad into the motives and means by which new technology was adopted into the navy is great. The integration of the whaleboat will be used here as an example of the ways in which the process of technological adoption by the navy can be illuminated and interpreted.

1. HISTORY AND DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS

Whaleboats were originally designed specifically for hunting and killing whales. While the ancestral form of the whaleboat likely dates to the Basque whalers of the 13th century, by the mid-18th century they appear consistently in a clearly recognisable form (Ansel 2014, p. 8). Commercial whaleboats of the early 19th century were double ended, allowing them to move quickly both forwards and backwards; laterally strong, to survive being towed by whales and hurried lowering and raising; relatively cheap to build, ensuring that when the boats were inevitably damaged or broken up by a whale, replacement costs were minimal; and capable of travelling under oar or sail for long distances in both calm and heavy seas and surf (Chapman 1768, plate L item 10; Scoresby 1820, p. 221-23; Steel 1812, p. 182) (fig. 1).

A whaleboat in the British whale fishery in the early 19th century was a fast, manoeuvrable double-ended craft, designed to solve many of the problems faced by the offshore whaling industry. Many of these scenarios resembled those faced by the Royal Navy, which lacked a manoeuvrable ship's boat that could survive high surf and dangerous landing conditions. The appearance and use of whaleboats in the whaling industry does not, however, explain or justify their adoption into the navy, and no satisfactory explanations for this phenomenon exist. In his work on Royal Navy ship's boats, May notes only that whaleboats "became popular" as a ship's boat during the Napoleonic Wars, were used with increasing frequency over the course of the century, and reached the point of near-ubiquity after the adoption of the Montagu rig in 1907 (May 1999, p. 52, 73).

This explanation of the timing of adoption is poorly supported by available evidence, including that presented in May's own book, and leaves much to be desired (May 1999, p. 63). Prior work on the transfer of technologies, both in a naval context and more generally, argues for nuanced interpretations and robust utilisation of supporting evidence. Richard Harding has argued that approaches to technological evolution in the Royal Navy that incorporate social and cultural contexts are needed, rather than relying on rational arguments focused on utility (Harding 2016, p. 113). Pfaffenberger (1992, p. 499) made a similar argument, stating that rather than being based on some underlying logic, technological choices are governed by culture, aesthetic interest, and mere preference. Furthermore, Misa (1994, p. 127) has also stressed the need to avoid seeing rationality in historical actors, and confusing outcomes with motivations. It is not sufficient to justify the integration of

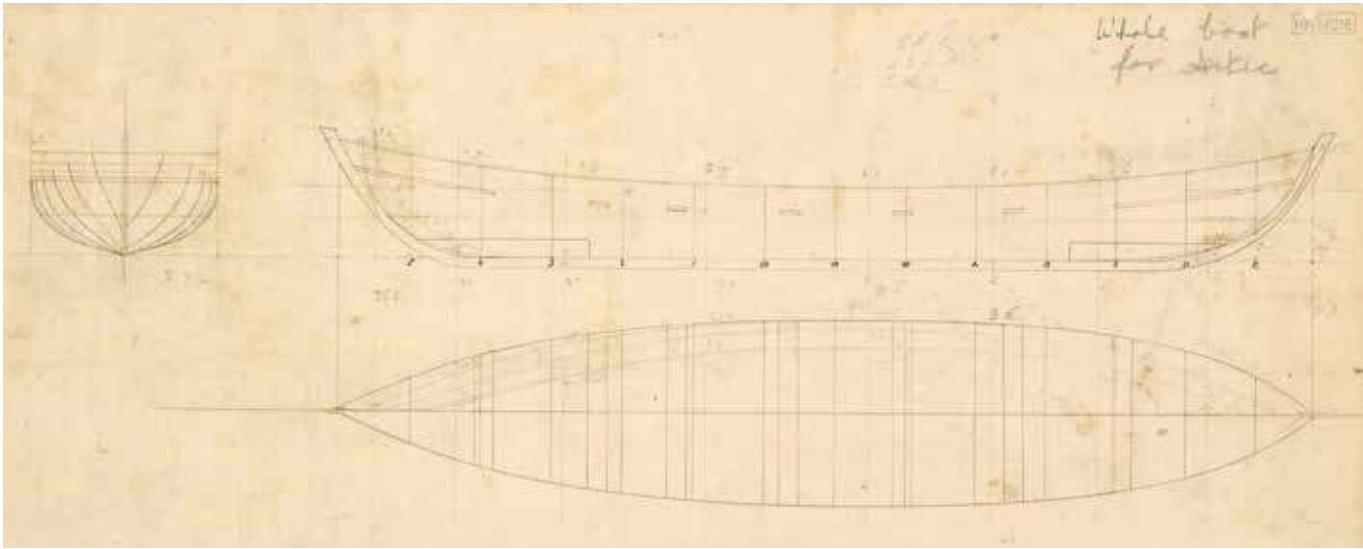


Fig. 1: Lines plan of a 19th-century whaleboat (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, HIL 0229).

whaleboats because of the recognition of their ‘usefulness’ by some faceless rational historical entity. Evidence of exposure between the naval and whaling fleets, the perception of particular, overlapping needs, and gradual institutional integration will be used to make a suggestion as to when and how whaleboats were introduced into the naval fleet.

2. NAVAL EXPOSURE TO WHALEBOATS

Whaleboats played an important role in the maritime element of colonial-era conflicts in North America. During the American Revolution, small boat operations were used to harry British supply centres and attack British ships in Boston and New York harbours. At the same time, the Royal Navy also used whaleboats to carry out similar operations against the Americans (Chapelle 1951; Gardner 1976, p. 59-63). Whaleboats used in the revolution were purchased or commandeered instead of being specially made for a military purpose, and their use is an example of exposure to the technology and its potential applications.

Additionally, much of the Nantucket whaling fleet was seized and impressed into the Royal Navy, as was nearly half of the Whitby fleet. Impressed whalers were deployed on naval vessels, and whaling ships were used as transports, suggesting extensive opportunities for naval exposure to the particular expertise gained and technology used in the whaling fleet (Ashley 1938, p. 60; Barrow 2001, p. 31). After the revolution, Samuel Enderby, head of a prominent whaling family, urged the Board of Trade to offer incentives to Nantucket whalers to move to Britain with their families, arguing that it was important to have a “Nursery of Seamen” from which to draw expertise in time of war, and to deprive the Americans of the same (TNA, BT 6/93/2).

In the Napoleonic Wars, members of the two fleets interacted again. In April 1808, Captain Philip Broke was sent to Greenland to protect the British whaling fleet, which had been attacked by the French the previous season. Broke contended that his ship went further north than any naval vessel since the 1770s and encountered ice (Clark, McArthur 1815, p. 9).

Whaling crews were again withdrawn to man naval vessels in the British Channel squadron during the later years of the Napoleonic Wars (Enderby 1848, p. 14). The earliest evidence of a whaleboat on a naval vessel comes from this period in the form of a model of an 18-gun, Cruiser-class brig, and dates to *circa* 1810. These vessels were typically used for blockading, carrying dispatches, and convoying trade, meaning that this model likely represents a vessel from the Channel fleet (fig. 2). The whaleboat on board may be representative of the influence of whalers on that station, and perhaps the behest of a certain captain. This model is not sufficient evidence, however, to suggest institutional adoption.

3. EVIDENCE OF INSTITUTIONAL ADOPTION

In 1840, the *Nautical Magazine and Naval Chronicle* published an anonymous editorial on steam navigation, in which the writer tangentially expressed his surprise at the fact that men-of-war did not carry whaleboats, citing their proficiency at travelling through surf, and the navy’s lack of any other class of ship’s boat that could do the same (Mercator 1840, p. 433). While a technically sound assertion, the author may not have been completely correct in assuming the Royal Navy had not begun using whaleboats. Specialised adaptation instead appears to have begun two decades earlier, if not widespread use. Mentions of whaleboats as ship’s boats fall into three categories over the period from 1818-1870: Arctic exploration, the West Africa Squadron, and Pacific exploration.

3.1. ARCTIC EXPLORATION

English attempts to find the Northwest Passage began as early as the Elizabethan period, however, interest quickly waned in favour of other trading routes until the middle of the 18th century, when an expedition under Constantine Phipps was attempted in 1773 (Phipps 1774). Successive wars distracted the navy from further attempts until that made by John Ross in 1818, which sparked decades of Arctic missions.



Fig. 2: Model of an 18-gun brig of the Cruiser class, showing a whaleboat on the starboard side, 1810 (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, SLR 0348).

The Arctic is an area in which it seems adoption of the whaleboat happened early, perhaps a result of Captain Broke's experience guarding the Greenland whaling fleet in 1808. Ross's orders from the Admiralty specifically mention the importance of relying on the expertise of whalers:

"And, as the navigation among ice may be considered as an art to be acquired only by practice, we have directed that there be appointed to each of the ships under your orders, a master and a mate of whale-fishing vessels, well experienced in those seas, from whose knowledge and skill you may derive material assistance" (Ross 1819, p. 2).

In addition to employing whalers, Ross also included five whaleboats and supplies for repairing and building additional boats on his list of supplies (Ross 1819, p. xi).

It is less clear whether John Franklin carried whaleboats on his first two Arctic expeditions in 1819 and 1824. Instructions for the fitting out of his 1824 voyage held in the British National Archives include provisions for building four boats especially for the voyage, but the class of vessel was not mentioned (TNA, CO 6/16/9). Whaleboats were included on his doomed 1845 expedition: the plans of the *Erebus* dated 1839 clearly show whaleboats stowed on the upper deck (fig. 3). Subsequent rescue missions over the course of the 1850s all carried whaleboats as well, and whaleboats remained a staple of Arctic expeditions into the 20th century (Ansel 1981; Pullen 1982, p. 444; Captain Austin's Arctic Expedition, 1850, p. 400).

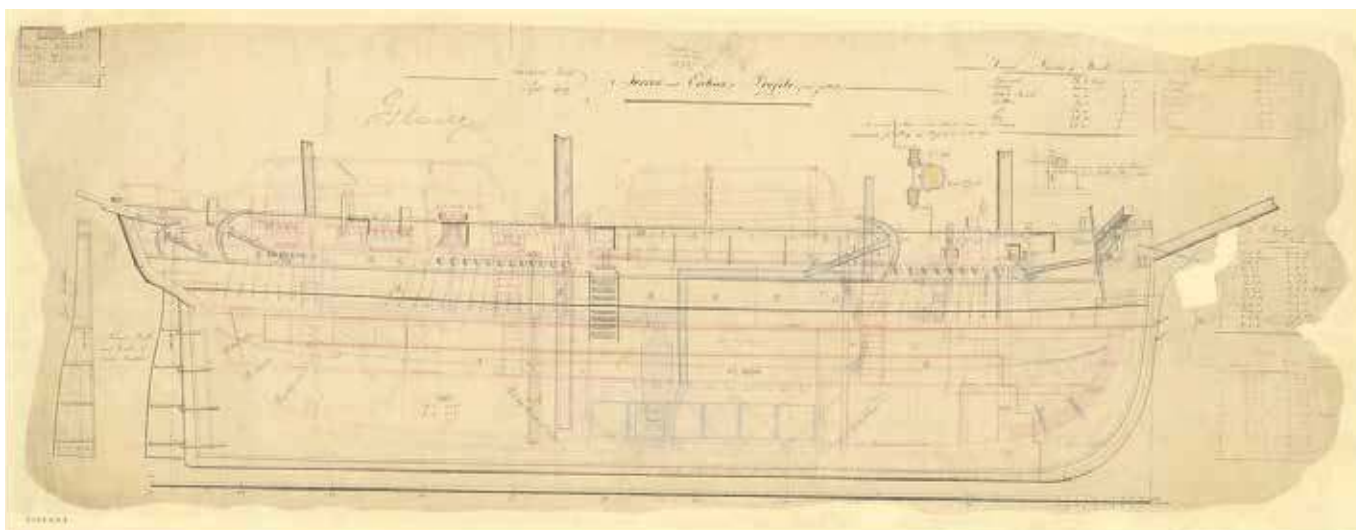


Fig. 3: Plan of the *Erebus*, 1839, showing a whaleboat stowed on the aft upper deck (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, ZAZ 5673).

3.2. WEST AFRICA SQUADRON

In 1807, Britain outlawed the slave trade, and in 1808 established the West Africa Squadron for monitoring the slaving coast. The squadron had no real success until the 1840s, when new treaties gave it further latitude, its size was increased to 25 vessels, and landing and destroying barracoons, or slave depots, was declared legal (Rose 1936, p. 60). May suggests that whaleboats were used extensively in the suppression of the slave trade due to their effectiveness as surfboats, which would explain why the earliest mentions of whaleboats on the West Africa Squadron come from the 1840s: it is not until the Squadron had to contend with dangerous surf that a class of boat well-suited to rough landing conditions would be required (May 1999, p. 73).

The earliest mention of a whaleboat on the West Africa Squadron is from 1845, when it was reported that HMS *Pantaloon* captured a pirate slaver and sent a cutter and two whaleboats to board and take the vessel (Dispatches from Africa, *The Nautical Magazine and Naval Chronicle* 1845, p. 611). When the King of Lagos refused to cease trading slaves in 1852, a contingent landed and proceeded upriver in a flotilla of whaleboats, pinnaces, cutters, and paddle-box boats as a show of strength (Rose 1936, p. 162). In 1853, the boats of HMS *Linnet* captured the brigantine *Paulina*, and in an illustration by the *Linnet's* captain, Henry Need, a whaleboat can be seen in the foreground (fig. 4). As late as 1866, vessels bound for West Africa were specially fitted with whaleboats. In the ship's book for HMS *Reindeer*, instructions were included for the installation of an additional pair of davits before the main mast to carry an extra 27-foot whaleboat if the ship was ordered for the west coast of Africa (TNA, ADM 135/393).

3.3. PACIFIC EXPLORATION

Following James Cook's first voyage in 1768, Britain sent successive expeditions of exploration and conquest into the Pacific. A south sea whaling fleet was established shortly after the colonisation of Australia, and through the first half of the 19th century leading families in the British whaling industry advocated for strengthening the fishery in order to compete

with the American fleet (Jackson 2005, p. 126; Pearson 1983; TNA, BT 6/93/2).

Whaleboats are mentioned regularly in accounts in the *Nautical Magazine* of exploratory expeditions to the Pacific. In April of 1831, a Lieutenant Preston was wrecked in a whaleboat in the estuary of Nornalup in Australia, while in 1838, the port regulations for Tahiti and Moorea included a punishment for deserters that consisted of cutting and carrying four whaleboats' worth of wood to a specified location (Nairne 1842, p. 448; Port Regulations for Tahiti and Moorea, *The Nautical Magazine and Naval Chronicle*, 1838, p. 418). HMS *Beagle* carried whaleboats when it set out for the south Pacific in 1840, where they were used for scouting and exploration of bays and rivers (Voyage of HMS *Beagle*, *The Nautical Magazine*, 1840, p. 708-711). There are also various allusions to the use of whaleboats by natives. In 1849 in the Pitcairn Islands, natives came out to a Royal Navy ship in a whaleboat because the surf was too high for a ship's boat to land and it could not be achieved without a local pilot (Nautical Notices, *The Nautical Magazine and Naval Chronicle*, December 1849, p. 160). In an account of the "Sandalwood Voyage" to Australia in 1850, Captain Woodin recounted how the chief Angulla moved two whaleboats of the *Vanguard* out of sight of the crew and out of musket range, refusing to give them back (Woodin 1850, p. 299).

4. CONCLUSION

Exposure between the naval and whaling fleets occurred at least as early as the wars in North America in the mid-18th century, however, adoption of the whaleboat as a naval craft does not appear to have occurred until much later. Eighteenth century use of whaleboats in North America as raiding, smuggling, and transport craft differs significantly from the use of the whaleboat as a ship's boat in the 19th century. Mentions of whaleboats as a ship's boat fall into three main categories and are clustered from the 1840s to 1860s, with some limited examples from 1818 through the 1830s. The use of whaleboats in the Arctic, West Africa and the Pacific all suggest that whaleboats were first utilised on specialised expeditions into existing whaling grounds. The numerous examples of whaleboats in these locales suggest that the introduction of whaleboats was



Fig. 4: Illustration of the capture of the brigantine *Paulina* by the boats of HMS *Linnet*, sketched by Captain Henry Need, 1853. The boat in the foreground clearly lacks a transom, a key marker of a whaleboat (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, ART/10/1).

gradual, and developed as an extension of the traditional geographical bounds of the whaleboat as a commercial craft. The explicit recognition by the Admiralty of the knowledge held by whalers prior to Ross's 1818 expedition lends credence to this hypothesis, as does Mercator's call for the use of whaleboats in the West Africa Squadron. The mirroring of naval use to commercial use shows that there is no flooding of the naval fleet with whaleboats at the end of the Napoleonic Wars based on a rational acceptance of universal utility, but rather a slow adoption based on the expertise of whalers in certain regions of the world.

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