

BRIGANTINES AND SCHOONERS

Their Origin and Development

Extracts from a paper read by

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THIS paper has been written in an attempt to plot out the essential differences between the two-masted vessels known as snows, brigantines, brigs, brig-schooners, schooners and hermaphrodites, and at the same time to throw some light on their evolution and inter-relationship.

In the course of reading various works on maritime subjects and also viewing the many reproductions of original prints, &c., contained therein, one is struck by the number of apparent anomalies. Vessels that appear to be snows are described as brigs, brigs as brigantines, both brigs and brigantines as schooners, while the word hermaphrodite is used as the title of vessels which, on first inspection, appear as brigs, brigantines and even schooners.

Consultation of such authorities as Steel, Falconer and Kipping is not very helpful, except that their definitions clearly prove that in the course of years the meaning and application of the words has varied very considerably. If a clear picture be obtained, the only method is to trace each of the types as far back as possible and then to attempt to follow its development and observe the various modifications that association with the others has had upon it.

CONSIDERABLE ANTIQUITY

First of all it is necessary to clear up one major source of confusion. The words brig and brigantine are one and the same, the former being merely a contraction of the latter and first came into use about the middle of the 18th century.

The term brigantine, sometimes brigandine, was first applied to small, swift Mediterranean craft of the galley type, which were propelled principally by oars; later it was used by the Northern nations to describe a small handy vessel carrying two masts. That its use by the seamen of this country has considerable antiquity is confirmed by a mention in Vol. 1, page 470 of "The Royal Navy, a History," by Wm. Laird Clowes, that in 1551 "a squadron of six ships with four pinnaces and a brigantine was sent on a preventive cruise."

Exactly how the first brigantines were rigged it is extremely difficult to say, but in 1690 they appear to have been ship-rigged on the foremast, while on the mainmast they carried either buss-sails, which were high narrow square sails, not furling aloft, or alternatively a large leg-of-mutton sail and no other canvas. There is also some evidence that the mainmast was given a sharp rake and, from 1700 on, the buss-sail vanishes.

It is very questionable whether the brigantine ever carried the lateen mizzen yard of a ship; if it did it

can only have been for a very short period during the first part of the 18th century, since the gaff mizzen had already been introduced before 1750, and after the brigantine's first "marriage" with the snow there is no instance of it.

Before, however, discussing this exchange of rig, it is advisable to obtain an idea of the early snow. Here again is a two-masted vessel, contemporary with the brigantine, but rigged similar to a ship's fore and main masts; that is to say, without any fore-and-aft canvas whatsoever. With regard to size, there was little to differentiate the two types, though both were quite small vessels.

FIRST EXCHANGE OF RIG

An interesting plate depicting the brigantine of this period is reproduced in Frank C. Bowen's "The Sea, its History and Romance," Vol. 2, page 57. This is taken from the Macpherson Collection and is entitled "A South-East View of Bpston in New England," and was published about 1750.

It shows a brigantine in the foreground; she is ship-rigged on the foremast and carries no sail above her topsail; on the mainmast, which is built schooner fashion, there is only a large fore-and-aft mainsail, fitted with boom and gaff. The bowsprit is highly stived and a sprit-sail yard is crossed. She is quite a small vessel.

About the middle of the 18th century the first exchange of rig took place between the brigantine and the snow. The former had been increasing in size for some time past, and the necessity for additional canvas had become imperative. To meet this the brigantine adopted the main topsail of the snow, but not its square mainsail.

The main or crossjack yard of a brigantine was bare because the jaws of the gaff would interfere with the old seaman's practice of lowering the mainyard, "a-port-last," in bad weather.

In return the snow took the fore-and-aft mainsail of the brigantine, but in order to overcome the difficulty mentioned above, this was not fixed directly to the mast, but to a small subsidiary spar, known as the trysail mast immediately abaft it; this, to quote Steel's definition, "is fixed in a step of wood on deck, and the head is fixed by an iron clamp to the aft side of the maintop." From this time, too, the corruption brig began to be used in place of the longer term brigantine.

The above paragraphs, in a very brief form, carry the development of the brigantine and snow into the second half of the 18th century, but, before going any further, the history of the schooner must be considered.

It is impossible to say when the first ships of this enormous class were built. In a line engraving by an unknown Dutch artist, entitled

the "Capture of Cadiz, 1596," in which an Anglo-Dutch squadron took part, there appears a small two-masted craft with a high stern and fitted with leeboards; she is equipped with two leg-of-mutton sails and a jib on a high stived bowsprit.

This print is reproduced in E. K. Chatterton's "Old Ship Prints," page 64, and in the text he writes: "She is one of the earliest two-masted schooners to be shown by the engravers." Be this as it may, the type does not seem to have been popular, for during the next 100 years few illustrations are to be found, and it is not until the beginning of the 18th century, and in America, that the real development of the class began.

The origin of the word is in considerable doubt and there is no mention of it in any 17th century dictionary. Of all the nations, the Dutch were the foremost development of fore-and-aft rig and the fact that the word "schooner" has a very Dutch ring about it prompts the speculation that it was first introduced by the Dutch colonists of New York.

There is an old story that in 1715, when the first schooner was being launched at Gloucester, Mass., someone remarked as she was leaving the stocks, "Oh, how she schoons," "Very well, then," answered her proud builder, "a schooner let her be."

While this fable can be completely discredited as far as its reference to the "first schooner" is concerned, it still offers a plausible explanation for the origin of the name.

GOLDEN AGE

All these early schooners carried fore-and-aft sail only, but as existing illustrations refer to very small craft, it is impossible to say when the larger vessels began to carry square sail, though by 1775 the practice was developing.

The next 50 years, from 1775 to 1825, are undoubtedly the most interesting in the history of these two-masted rigs, and may be regarded as their Golden Age, for it was during this period that they reached a development that has never been attained since.

The reasons for this are simple: throughout the period the cry in America was for fast vessels to carry on the large contraband trade that existed, while during both the Revolutionary War and in that of 1812 the demand for privateers was paramount.

In each case speed was the prime necessity, nor was large size of great importance; in fact, a small vessel was a definite advantage. As it happened the right type of hull was available in the "Baltimore clipper" model, a graceful and extremely interesting design, far in advance of the general carrier of the day.

Their main features were sharp waterlines, clean run, fairly high

ratio of beam to length, large dead-rise and sloping stem and stern post. The present, however, is not the time to discuss this fascinating model.

There remain two types that have still to be described, the hermaphrodite and the brig-schooner, and it was during the above period that these words came into use.

SPEED AND WEATHERLINESS

In reality they are interchangeable and perhaps the dictionary definition of the former gives the best description of them—"hermaphrodite, a hybrid." To clarify the reasons for their introduction some digression is again necessary.

If an examination is made of the navies of Great Britain, France and the United States during this period, it will be found that in the two former few schooners are included, while in that of the United States, the proportion was even less; this was because the inability of a schooner to move astern was often a great disadvantage in a naval action.

In the case of the privateer, slaver or smuggler the position was very different; here speed and weatherliness to enable them to show a clean pair of heels to the enemy or to overtake the hapless merchantman, were the chief requirements.

These requirements the schooner type could supply, but, even so, the benefits of square sail when running before the wind could not be overlooked, and so the tendency to add more and more square sail to the schooner rig became accentuated until little difference remained between it and the brig.

Early during the period under review square topsails on both masts were carried by schooners, and, as the end of the century drew nearer, the rig approached that of the brig so closely that some additional points of identification are necessary if the two classes are to be distinguished.

Unfortunately, no hard and fast rule can be laid down, but the following details should be noted:—

1. The schooner's gaff foresail instead of the brig's main staysail.
2. A fore staysail was not part of a brig's working canvas.
3. The flying jib of a schooner set up to the topmast head and not to the t'gallant mast head as in a brig.
4. A schooner did not carry a fidded main t'gallant mast, though the foremast may have been so fitted.

To show how difficult it is to differentiate between the two classes the case of H.M. brig Gloucester may be instanced. This vessel was built on Lake Ontario in 1812, and a reproduction of her, after a coloured aquatint, is given in "Sailing Ships of War, 1800-1860," plate 16.

VERY ELABORATE

Her rig shows a very strong schooner influence, for she possesses all the first three above-mentioned identification points for schooners. She does, however, carry separate fore and main t'gallant masts, though these cannot be said to be fitted, since they set up abaft the topmast heads with their heels resting on the lower mast caps.

As the 19th century began, the rig of American schooners, particularly those belonging to the "slaver" and "privateer" classes, tended to become very elaborate and, by 1812, t'gallant sails were by no means unusual, and even royals were sometimes fitted.

An instance of this is the privateer schooner Prince of Neufchatel, described in H. I. Chapelle's "History of American Sailing Ships," 1936.

The sail plan of this vessel, built at New York about 1812-13, shows that she carried a fore t'gallant mast with course, topsail, t'gallant and royal sails, while on the mainmast, which was built schooner fashion, a fore-and-aft topsail, together with a small square t'gallant above it on the same pole.

Another example, also illustrated in the "History of American Sailing Ships," is a vessel described as a "French hermaphrodite La Gazelle, designed by Marestier."

This plate shows a two-masted vessel carrying the head sails and foremast of a brig, together with a gaff foresail, while the mainmast is schooner fashion but carries above its large gaff mainsail a square topsail and t'gallant.

Before moving forward again, one further case must be quoted; this time the illustration is taken from a piece of Liverpool pottery and shows a brig with the caption: "Success to the John Bull, Captain Wright." No date is given, but from the fact that she carries a sprit topsail it can probably be placed around 1795.

Here the particular interest centres on the after rigging. The ringtail boom has been run out and from below it is set a water sail, in shape somewhat similar to the "Jimmy Green" of 50 years later.

While this sail is not exceptionally uncommon in British privateers of the period, the other after sail is in quite a different category; this consists in no less than a pure lateen, seized to a yard along on the ensign staff.

While it is known that a similar sail was carried by the American frigate Hancock, launched in 1776, the writer has not succeeded in discovering any other British ship that was so fitted.

NAVAL BRIGS

The start of the 19th century also witnessed the final absorption of the snow by the brig. From

1800 on, all British and American naval brigs were so rigged that, 25 years earlier, they would have been classed as snows. The barren mainyard, the essential characteristic of the brig, was abandoned and a main course was carried.

Since its increased size and weight had caused the old custom of lowering the main yard to the deck in bad weather to be discarded, the trysail mast was no longer fitted and the foreleech of the mainsail was seized to hoops on the mast itself.

It must be noted, though, that the snow still lingered in the Merchant Navy, the last British example being the Commerce, of Newhaven, which was built as late as 1862 and lasted until 1909.

About 1825 the term brigantine began to be applied to two-masted vessels carrying ship rigged foremasts, while their mainmasts were fore-and-aft rigged schooner fashion. A quarter of a century earlier they would have been classed as hermaphrodites.

It would be interesting to speculate whether this term was introduced as a diminutive for brig, in the same way as barquentine was later and erroneously adopted as a diminutive for barque, or whether it was deliberately chosen to represent a vessel which resembled the original brigantine, far more nearly than the craft that the brig had grown into.

After the war of 1812, the Baltimore clipper type tended to become very extreme and finally vanished with the suppression of the slave trade, since their very limited cargo capacity could not compete with the true "clipper" ships.

By 1850 the fore and main topsail schooner had also vanished, and a few years later, following ship practice, double topsails were introduced in both schooners and brigs.

Apart from the above, there have been few modifications in the brig rig, except for adoption of a "spencer" on the foremast in place of a main staysail, a change which is first noted during the 'thirties.

Operating costs have gradually caused the type to give way to the schooners with their smaller crews, and it is these alone that, fitted with a motor, may be said to have survived to the present day. Unhappily, they, too, are quickly passing.

In a brief account such as this, a very great deal has had to be left out. Mention of the early Dutch two-masted "sloopes," the Geordie brigs, the schooner yachts of the 19th century, the Gloucester fishing schooners of the Great Banks, all have had to be omitted, but the essential relationships between the different types have been fairly clearly depicted, and, if it helps to stimulate some additional interest in these fascinating two-masted craft, the labour will have been more than worth while.