

MY BRITISH NAVAL CUTLASSES

By John Carter

The origin of the name cutlass is obscure – The Oxford Dictionary gives “Curtleax” as the earliest form (1579) and “Coutelace” in (1594).

Cutlass was the name applied essentially to a cheap cutting weapon supplied by the Admiralty for the use of seamen.

The Board of Ordnance used the term “Sword for Sea Service” while later the Admiralty described them as “Sword Naval”

The oldest manuscript reference in the British National Museum occurs in lists of weapons returned During 1645 – 1649.



In an establishment of stores dated 11 October 1677 a ship of the line (1st rate between 60 & 100 guns) was allowed 50 Swords and 70 Hangers. (not sure which of these would be cutlasses, probably the swords) This establishment works out to about one sword/hanger for every 5 or 6 men. Swords were stowed in locked racks, being unlocked when the ship cleared for action. Some are marked with their rack number on a disc attached to the hilt.

One of mine is marked “Q.D.9” on a copper disc, meaning quarterdeck No9.

Prior to 1800 the cutlass hilt was in the form of a figure of eight or double disc, the grip was a cylinder of wrapped steel, the blade plain and straight, (mine is grooved) and stamped with a ‘Fleur de lis’ mark, probably (T Hollier 1720-1740) length varied, but around 28 to 29 inches (71-74cm)

(a)



(a)



In 1804 the Board of Ordnance ordered 10,000 swords for sea service to a new pattern suggested by Henry Osborn. The hilt was still in the form of a figure of eight but the grip was now cast iron with both vertical and horizontal grooves, for a better grip. The blade was flat and plain and 29 inches (74cm) in length, The blade well marked with George III Cypher, my cutlass has a straight blade, (b) but I have seen others with curved blades. (this one fitted with a cutlass knot, so you don't lose it in battle)

(b)

[This was the first official pattern of cutlass.](#)



On 30th September 1808 a further order of 20,000 cutlasses was approved. The price 4/10d each without scabbard. In January 1814 the cost was reduced to 4/6d each.

In 1840 a complaint was made that the hilt gave insufficient protection to the hand, so all available swords were to be sent to the Tower for modification, but before little more than a 1000 had been modified and issued, a fire at the Tower destroyed large numbers and left the Navy seriously short of weapons.

10,000 new cutlasses were ordered in December 1841 to a new pattern approved by the Admiralty. However there was a shortage of Sword Smiths who could make the blades. Mr Lovell, the former storekeeper at Enfield, and now the Inspector of Small Arms, proposed that as there were 12,000 old Heavy Cavalry swords in stores the blades from these could be fitted to new hilts. The Admiralty asked for a selection of these converted swords to be tested and the outcome was that they were too brittle. However the blades were later used as a stop gap.(g) this is a Heavy Cavalry sword in my collection with the blade cut down to cutlass length (24 inches)



(g)



The requirement for cutlasses to the Navy was now 40,000 but the contractors wanted more than 4/6d each. They wanted 5/6d. They eventually settled on 5 shillings.

The next pattern, 1845 was with a sheet steel half basket hilt, ribbed iron grip and a slightly curved plain blade of 29.5 inch (75cm) (c) This one also has a disc riveted to the guard for the rack number, but left blank.

(c)

Modification to the 1845 pattern in 1858 consisted of shortening and straightening the blade to 26 inches (66cm) turning down the back edge of the hilt and adding a strengthening washer at the base of the grip (d)



(d)



(e)

In 1889 another change to the previous pattern saw the blade straight and flat and an increase in length to 28 inches (71cm). The half basket hilt had all edges turned over to prevent damage to the uniform and the grip had its shape changed slightly (e).

[The final official pattern](#) was developed in 1900 and the major change was that the grip was made of diced leather held in place by five rivets and the blade was now grooved on each side (f).



(f)

Blades marked B.O. were made before the abolition of the Board of Ordnance in 1854 and there after the letters W.D. were used instead standing for War Department.



Some interesting variations

Apart from the cut down pattern 1796 Heavy Cavalry Sword made by Thomas Gill, and used by the Royal Navy as a makeshift cutlass during the shortage in 1840. (g)

I have an unusual 1845 pattern cutlass with a reduced size hilt. Made by John Heighington, and marked on the back of the blade, it has the 29 inch (74cm) curved blade and the usual ribbed grip. (h) .

Another in my collection has a normal full hilt but the 29 inch (74cm) straight blade is Double Edged (i)



- (i)
- (h)
- (g)
- (j)



The Army Pioneer sword of 1856 pattern has a brass stirrup hilt, brass ribbed grips and a 22.5 inch (57cm) Saw Back blade. These were issued to the Royal Navy for use as a cutlass between 1894-1914 They also had black leather scabbards with brass fittings (j)

Yet another variety of cutlass style Lead Cutters

I have two very large swords similar in shape to the naval cutlass, which other knowledgeable persons refer to as “Gymnasium Swords” and don’t associate them particularly to the navy. I’ve always known of them as Lead Cutters No 1 & No 2. Sure they were used in gymnasiums, and were used as an excise to strengthen the arms and wrists for sword fighting. A lump of lead in the shape of a leg of mutton was suspended from the rafters and swinging cuts were made from different angles,

No 2



No 1



Compare the bottom normal size naval cutlass to the ones above..

Lead Cutter No 1

The blade of which is 31 inches (79cm) long and 1.75 inches (4.5cm) wide and weighs about 3.5 lb (1.6 kilo). The blade is marked with a crown over B25 (proof mark) also an X and the makers name Mole with a broad arrow over. The other side with 00 indicating that it was refurbished in 1900. The brass mounted black leather scabbard is also proof marked with a crown over B25.

Lead Cutter No 2

The top blade is larger still being 33.5 inches (85cm) long and over 2 inches wide (5.3cm) but not marked in any way. The weight of this sword is almost 4 lb (1.8 kilo) The grips are made of wood, and held in place by six rivets. The brass mounted black leather scabbard is also unmarked.

CUTLASSES TODAY

Today whenever the Queens Colour is paraded the Chief Petty Officer of the Colour party stands directly behind the Colour escort and is armed with a drawn cutlass, sometimes chromed for ceremonial use

Chief Petty Officer Derek Thorpe is the Colour Chief during the Queen's Royal Visit to New Zealand in March 1970

She presented the new Queens Colour to the Royal New Zealand Navy which is the new flag with the stars of the Southern Cross with her Royal Cypher in the centre (note leather tips on bayonets to protect the colours)



Reference :-

Swords for Sea Service Vol I By Commander W.E.May RN & P.G.W.Annis

Pages 78 – 92 “The Cutlass”

Naval swords & Dirks Vol 1 by Sim Comfort

[Some cutlasses were developed as bayonets but that's another story !](#)