

Sailors Hornpipe

(Time 2/4)

In the days of the Apprentice Guilds, many trades danced their Hornpipes to steps, which depicted actions characteristic of that trade.

There are many steps in the hornpipe (about 40) but only 5 are required to form a dance. All those steps depict actions in the normal daily routine of a seaman - climbing rigging, hoisting sail etc.

The dance is performed moving forward and backward, an advancing step always being followed by a retiring one. The arms are folded with palms down towards the ground, the idea of the Sailor's hands being dirty, and therefore the hands are not placed on the sleeve. This illusion is further carried out by the folded arms being kept well away from the body.

The first advancing steps indicate the motion of the ship rolling slightly from side to side, while at anchor. This is followed by a retiring step.

Climbing and rigging shows the raised hands grasping a rope which is brought down, while the legs execute and retire.

When advancing with hitching, the dancer slacks the back of the hands both in front and behind. The hands are then placed on the waist-line, again indicating that the palms are dirty.

Hoisting sails must always be danced as a finishing step, being the last thing done before setting sail. In this step the movement of the hands is one directly above the other, and raised hands closing on the rope pulling downwards.

Sea shanties were not sung during working hours in the Royal Navy but it was usual custom for the fiddler seated on the Capstan, to be accompanied by a seaman dancing the Sailors Hornpipe.

This dance depicts a jolly Jack Tar dancing through his daily duties - hauling ropes, pumping, acting as a look-out or pulling in the anchor. Probably, in their leisure time, the sailors would sit around watching one of their number going through his steps; barefoot and slapping his feet on the deck while the music was supplied by a harmonica, a tin whistle or a squeeze-box. There would not have been much opportunity to do much else on board a sailing ship for months at a time. The sailor's uniform has many traditional features; The seven folds in the pants are said to represent the seven seas. The trousers are bell-bottomed to allow the wearer to roll them up when necessary for his work on a wet deck. Formerly sailors wore their hair in a pig-tail, which they tarred to keep it in place while they worked in all weathers. Tar was easily obtainable because it was used to chalk the ship's seams.

The large dark square collar protected their clothes from the tar. Incidentally this is probably where the nickname "Jack Tar" originated. The three white stripes on the collar are said to represent three of Admiral Lord Nelson's famous battles.

The Battle of the Nile - 1798

The Battle of Copenhagen - 1801

The Battle of Trafalgar - 1805 (where Nelson was killed)

The black bow worn under the collar has been said to be a sweat band, which was tied under the collar until required.