October 4, 2026

Music and Dancing on Royal Navy Ships in the Age of Sail

Excerpted from Global Maritime History website (globalmaritimehistory.com) with a few additions and minor edits by Blair Mackenzie

The connection between sailing ships, music and dancing is a long-standing one.

The brilliant seaman, explorer and navigator Captain James Cook (1728–1779) was known as a popular and considerate commander, unusually obsessed with preserving the health of his crew. He is credited with leading the first long-distance sea voyages without any deaths from scurvy. Less well known, however, is his preoccupation with daily exercise. In his late twenties, Cook had served as a junior warrant officer on H.M.S. *Eagle* in Admiral Edward Boscawen's (1711–1761) fleet, where he astutely observed the positive health impacts of a daily routine of dancing to the music of the fiddle, fife (an instrument resembling a piccolo), and drum. Those life lessons ultimately shaped his leadership style. One contemporaneous writer said this:

"Captain Cook wisely thought that dancing was of special use to sailors. This famous navigator, wishing to counteract disease on board his vessels as much as possible, took particular care, in calm weather, to have his sailors and marines dance to the sound of a violin, and it was to this practice that he mainly ascribed the sound health which his crew enjoyed during voyages of several years' continuance."

When we think of life on board a naval ship in the age of sail, it is tempting to think epic sea battles. But the reality was that a great deal of shipboard life was monotonous. Ships could go nowhere if the wind failed. A ship caught in windless conditions in the tropics could broil in the sun for a long time. Ships could not go straight into the wind; a voyage westward across the Atlantic could take many weeks. If your ship were tasked with helping to enforce a blockade, you might have to sail for months on end with little to break the boredom. Keeping up morale under these conditions was serious business for the senior officers.

Shipboard dancing - as recreation or entertainment, to reinvigorate listless sailors on long voyages, to calm nerves before battle, or as an early fitness routine - had a long history in the British Navy. The practice dates back to at least 1585, when John Davis (Davys; ca. 1550–1605), the English navigator famous for his search for the Northwest Passage, had his crew dance to music, both on board and in cultural exchanges with the Inuit inhabitants of Greenland's east coast. Dance as a vehicle of intercultural communication was also successfully deployed by Cook on his voyages to the Pacific. Ship captains of the day were counseled when on voyages of discovery to approach an unknown indigenous community not with trumpets, but with a gentle, slow air. Exhibitions of dancing would follow as a sign of peaceful intent.

Music may have played a small part in the mutiny on board the *Bounty*, commanded by Lieut. William Bligh. Bligh had learned the value of music and dancing from Capt. Cook, and he sought to replicate that on *Bounty*. However, being the extreme disciplinarian that he was, he did not *encourage* dancing; he *ordered* it. And if the men declined to dance, their rations were reduced. This was one of the complaints of the mutineers.

During the Georgian era (ca. 1714-1837), dancing during the "dog watch," once the day's work had been completed, became popular both above and below deck—among officers and sailors alike. The traditional announcement was 'all on deck to dance and skylark'. Admiral Edward Pellew (1757–1833) even had an enslaved (and accomplished) violinist of African origin abducted in Lisbon "to furnish music for the sailors' dancing in their evening leisure, a recreation highly favourable to the preservation of their good spirits and contentment." The most accomplished dancers among the crew were held in high esteem in the informal shipboard hierarchy. They would often be the ones who climbed the rigging to the highest sails.

As we all know, dancing offers benefits to both body and mind, firing off neurons in the brain and, hence, boosting morale and wellbeing. Regular dance practice supports the development of one's agility, spatial awareness, joint and muscular tone and flexibility, balance, and endurance—strengthening core muscles and bones through anaerobic exercise while also improving one's heart resilience and lung capacity. Naval captains knew this too.

This does not mean that sailors could spontaneously break into song and dance, as Hollywood might sometimes suggest. There was a rigid distinction between on-duty work and off-duty recreation. Except during authorized breaks, Royal Navy sailors worked as far as they could in silence. This strongly enforced rule was required in order that crew members could hear and implement orders from officers. The greater the danger, the greater the need for 'silence fore and aft'. Even during repetitive labour like turning the capstan to weigh anchor, singing sea shanties and the like was forbidden. Instead, a musical instrument provided a steady pulse.

Historically, almost all British Navy ships included musicians among their crews—sailors who could play the fiddle, flute, fife, trumpet, or drum—although they were hardly ever registered as such on muster lists. On his first voyage to the Pacific (1768–1771), Cook's crew included the drummer and fiddler Thomas Rossiter (1750–1788). Later voyages often included official musicians, enough to form a band of French horns, flutes, violins, "hautboys" (oboes), highland pipes (bagpipes), trumpets, and drums. Some large ships even had choirs. Officers encouraged singing, especially the singing of patriotic songs such as 'Rule, Britannia' Shipboard culture was closely tied to the popular culture of the day and songs popular ashore soon migrated onboard.

The hornpipe, above all other dances, became the dance of choice for sailors. One writer proposed that the hornpipe aligned with some desirable traits of the sailor at work, including "a serious countenance, steps confined to a small space owing to the inadequacy of the deck space, the movements of the body, arms and feet showing vigour and precision and the whole performance presented in a nautical manner." It was easy to dance the hornpipe alone or in groups, at a tempo that was in tune with the daily rhythm of shipboard life. The hornpipe was not just a shipboard dance. Sailors often continued the practice on a run ashore, not least to attract female attention or simply for reasons of alcohol-fuelled bravado. By the end of the age of sail, one would have been hard-pressed to find any sailor who was unfamiliar with it. After all, "a sailor who could not dance a hornpipe was no sailor at all." Indeed, "the sailor's hornpipe [became] one of the glories of the English Navy."