

The Boatswain's Call



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It is known that a flute or whistle similar to the boatswain's call was used to make the galley slaves of Rome and Greece keep stroke. The high pitched notes could be heard above the sound of howling winds and lashing waves, whereas a shouted order may not have been heard.

In the thirteenth century, during the crusades, it was first used on English ships, and for years it was worn in English ships as a badge of rank, being associated with the passing of orders. In about 1670 the whistle became known as 'The Call' when the Lord High Admiral of the Navy wore a gold whistle, the 'Whistle of Honour', as a badge of rank, and thereafter the whistle generally became known as the boatswain's call.

The ordinary whistle was issued in silver, and often each officer has his own call decorated with ship's anchors and rope designs. Each section of the boatswain's call has a nautical name. The ball is the buoy; the mouthpiece is the gun; the ring is called the shackle and the leaf is called the keel. The call is tuned by scraping away and enlarging the wind edge of the hole in the buoy until it will sound when the gun is held directly into a moderate wind.

There are two main notes, the low and the high, with three tones, the plain, the warble and the trill. The use of the call is known as piping and the orders passed are 'pipes'. The expression 'to pipe' means to make the sound of the boatswain call and give the spoken order which may qualify it; however many pipes are complete without the need for any spoken words. The most basic of the calls used was the 'Haul'. Crews of warships were not allowed to sing work songs or shanties, so the pipe co-ordinated the sailors. The low note was for the pause and prepare to pull, and the high note for pulling on the line.



Decorated Silver Call

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