

# 18th CENTURY SHIPBUILDING

*Remarks on the Navies  
of the English & the Dutch*

*by Blaise Ollivier (1737)*

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In 1737 **Blaise Ollivier**, Master Shipwright at Brest, was ordered by Maurepas, the French Minister of the Navy, to go to England and Holland in order to find out everything possible about how ships were built there, and what France might usefully imitate. Ollivier's secret mission lasted nearly five months, during which time he visited all the major naval dockyards of both countries except Plymouth. At the conclusion he wrote a 360-page report entitled *Remarks on the Navies of the English and the Dutch*, discussing everything he had seen in meticulous detail, evaluating English and Dutch practices and comparing them with techniques used in France, illustrating his findings with 13 sheets of drawings and plans.

Blaise Ollivier's report provides a remarkable insight into shipbuilding practice in the 1730's, a period about which relatively little is known (it is generally regarded as a time of conservatism and stagnation). While published writings – in any case few in number – tend to concentrate on theory, Ollivier's manuscript is intensely practical, and confounds many long-held beliefs. It highlights not only national differences, but also differences in practice between individual dockyards; it demonstrates that shipbuilding in England, far from being frozen in the practices of an earlier age and strangled by the detailed regulations imposed by the 1719 Establishment, was undergoing a continual process of change in the search for better solutions. Likewise, in Holland, Ollivier reports on the highly innovative shipbuilding techniques being applied by Paulus van Zwijndregt and Hendrik Raas. His report gives the lie to the commonly held belief that French ships were in every respect superior to their English or Dutch counterparts. And Ollivier makes some startling observations: compass-timber was not a prerequisite for framing ships in England; some Dutch ships were deliberately sunk in order to preserve their timbers; Dutch ships laid up in Ordinary were covered with a tiled roof; iron knees were already in use in English ships – to name but a few.

**Blaise Ollivier** was the most distinguished French shipwright of his age: he designed the first "true" frigate, which was imitated by the Navies of all the maritime powers, and he was responsible for a series of extremely successful other ships. Although all his work was done in peacetime, he laid the foundations for the technically formidable French fleet of the Seven Years' War. Were it not for his untimely death (he died less than ten years after his return, at the age of 46), he would undoubtedly have outshone Sané and even rivalled Chapman as the pre-eminent European shipwright of the 18th century. His *Remarks* carry the weight therefore of a keenly enquiring mind and a wealth of experience. There is no trace of chauvinism in his evaluation of foreign methods, and many of the practices which he admired were incorporated into ships built by him in the years following his return to Brest. Travelling almost certainly incognito, and charged with a mission of what today would be called "industrial espionage", Ollivier reports in the minutest detail on shipbuilding of the 1730's: timbering; steaming of plank; construction of dock gates; the abilities of the shipwrights he met; the quality of the carved-work; the rations of the crews; the English 1719 Establishment and the experimental ships built in accordance with Newton's "solid of least resistance", the difference between the techniques of the English shipwright Bentham in Amsterdam and those of Paulus van Zwijndregt and Hendrik Raas. Nothing escapes his eye.

Never before published, Ollivier's *Remarks* have lain dormant for 250 years and survive as a unique documentary account of 18th century shipbuilding, invaluable to student, historian, and modelmaker alike. Ollivier is no arcane theoretician, and it is no exaggeration to say that his manuscript ranks with the best published works of the age, and as a description of contemporary practice it outweighs even the works of Steel, Stalkart or Duhamel du Monceau.

This book contains the full text of the *Remarks* in both the original French and in translation, fully annotated and with a lengthy explanatory Introduction. It is lavishly illustrated with nearly 100 contemporary engravings, plans, ships' draughts and other iconographic material. Also included is a 20-page translation of part of Ollivier's remarkable manuscript Dictionary of Shipbuilding Terms, in many ways the counterpart of the *Remarks* for contemporary practice in the French Navy. These two manuscripts constitute a unique eyewitness account which is essential reading for anyone with an interest in how ships were built by three of Europe's most powerful Navies on the eve of the Seven Years' War.

