

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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SHIPS' LIGHTNING-RODS

Soon after lightning-rods were first installed on buildings attempts were made to afford similar protection to ships. In the year 1762 Dr. William Watson in England, devised a form of lightning-rod for use in the Royal Navy. It consisted of long strips of copper, jointed at intervals of a few feet, and lashed to a rope, which was meant to be hung from a metal spike at the top of each mast and allowed to dangle thence into the sea. Conductors of this pattern were supplied to all British naval vessels, but they were so difficult to keep in place during a storm and so much in the way of the seamen that, in most cases, they were stowed away in a locker below-decks and never used.

The urgent need of lightning-rods on the old-time wooden ships, however, was made evident when W. Snow Harris compiled a list of more than 250 naval vessels that had been damaged by lightning between 1793 and 1832. Many of the ships were set on fire, some were destroyed, and about 200 seamen were killed or severely injured. Harris devised a more practical conductor than Watson's, consisting of a double set of copper plates attached directly to the masts. These were adopted by the Royal Navy and proved entirely successful, but they ceased to be needed with the advent of modern steel men-of-war, which, with their metal rigging, are self-protected from lightning.

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