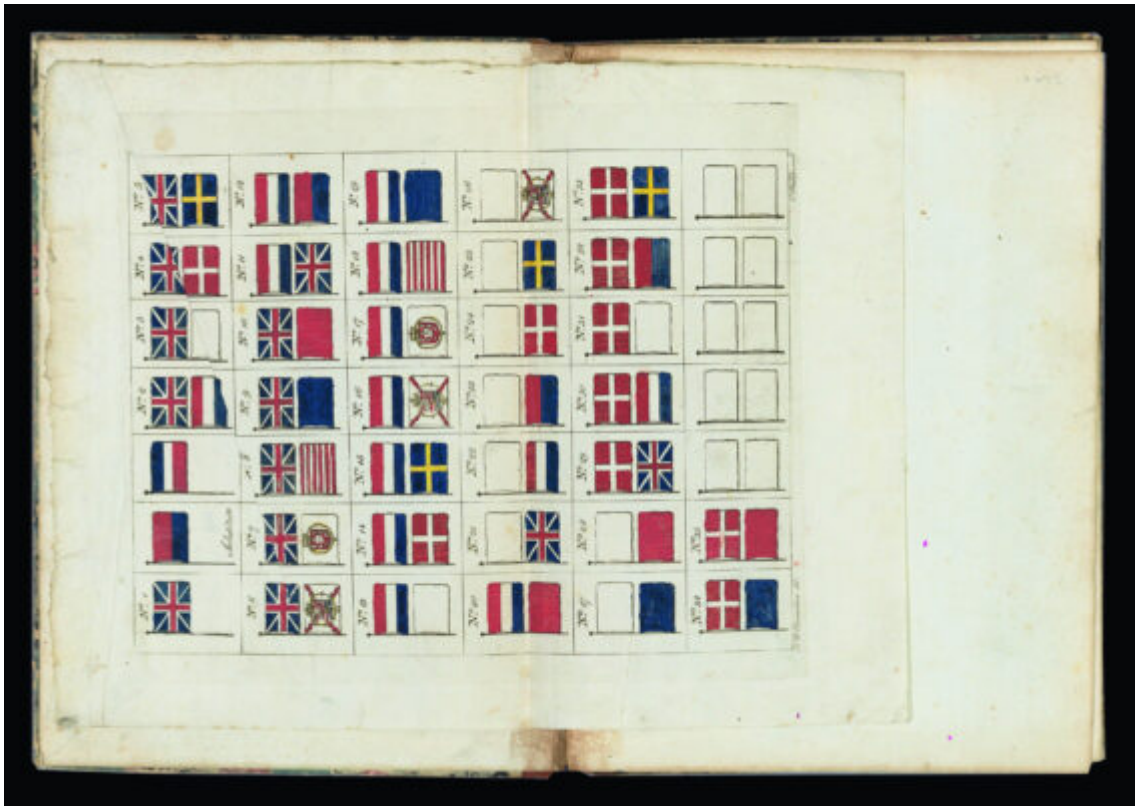

Quarto (270 by 200mm), title, 30pp., hand-coloured engraved plate depicting 35 flags tipped inside upper cover, loosely inserted eighteenth century manuscript sheet of expenditures (slates, lamp oil, seeds, et.), contemporary morocco-backed marbled boards, printed label, on upper cover with ink annotation, rubbed and scuffed.

UNRECORDED SIGNAL BOOK FOR USE BY EAST INDIA COMPANY SHIPS

A collection of Signals for the Use of the Ships in the Service of the United East India Company.

Author
[EAST INDIA COMPANY]

Publication date
1790

Publisher

Publication place
London,

Physical description
Quarto (270 by 200mm), title, 30pp., hand-coloured engraved plate depicting 35 flags tipped inside upper cover, loosely inserted eighteenth century manuscript sheet of expenditures (slates, lamp oil, seeds, et.), contemporary morocco-backed marbled boards, printed label, on upper cover with ink annotation, rubbed and scuffed.

Dimensions

Notes

An unrecorded edition of a ships signal book for use aboard East India Company ships.
Although British shipping both naval and merchant used signals throughout the eighteenth century, the majority of signal books before the 1780s were manuscript, drawn up by captains, and officers as an aide-memoire, even though the practice was deemed illegal by the Admiralty, which feared the codes could easily fall into enemy hands. However, by end of the eighteenth century both the navy and merchant shipping published signal books for their officers.
The work provides sailing instructions by day, in fog, and by night, and how to proceed if the convoy encounters such things as: strange ships, one springs a leak, or who should be the first to lead the sail.
During the daytime these instructions and others were to be communicated by the use of ten flags, in tandem, to give a total of 100 different signals. The work suggests the carrying of an eleventh substitute flag for when two flags of the same order are called for. A table provides the various combinations, with the subsequent pages listing what the combinations mean. Only the first 26 numbers contain instructions, with the subsequent 74 left blank. In the case of sailing through fog the use of canon is advise, with the lead vessel setting offer her guns to denote the order and the other ships replying in turn once the order has been executed. Finally, a combination of both gun and lamp light are to be used at night, the numbers in the table corresponding to the Day Flag list.
At the beginning of the work an engraved plate is tipped in depicting flag combinations, which correspond broadly with the signal table on page five (though it omits combinations 27, 28, and 36, 37, and 38).
It is unclear whether or not these particular set of instructions were ever issued to East India Company ships, as a manuscript note on the upper cover's paste-on, states: 'To be sent to the Secretary', i.e. of the East India Company. This together with the fact that there are are no manuscript additions to the flag tables, suggests that it was not used aboard ship. The only other institutional example we could trace, dated 1783, and housed in the National Maritime Museum, was also never issued to East India Ships. This would certainly explain why the work is so rare.
The National Maritime Museum holds one of the largest collections of seventeenth and eighteenth century sailing and fighting instructions; of the 153 volumes only two deal with merchant shipping (both are on the East India Company) : the aforementioned work, and a manuscript volume of signals issued by Captain Alexander Montgomerie to the fleet under his command, St Helena to England, in 1794.
We are unaware of another example of the work appearing on the market since the Second World War.

Bibliography
NMM SIG; GB 0064.

Provenance

Price:

Inventory reference: 18432

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