



## Characters with beards

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# Characters with beards

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*Forum* 29 featured Mark Evans's interpretations in stone of Breton boat numerals.

**Yoan De Roeck** has been investigating this vernacular tradition of *chiffres à barbes*\* for ten years and presents some of his conclusions.

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In the middle of the nineteenth century, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte's Ministry of the Navy ordered fishermen to register their boats with the local authorities. This 1852 law was the latest in a long succession of maritime regulations governing the diverse seafaring community of fishermen, fleet owners, the military, and soon amateur sailors.

The French had not long been liberated from the rigid social class structure of the pre-Revolutionary period; régimes had then come and gone in rapid succession until 1848. New laws came thick and fast: prefectorial decrees, circulars and sundry dispensations were posted in harbours every day.

Rules were in fashion: the martial political climate in Europe, and the prosperity promised by a new, competitive industrial era, created an environment which fostered regulation – and a mentality which favoured the letter over the spirit of the law.

The sea fishing community sailed between rights and obligations, between guarantees of protection and threats of sanctions. Its long-held privileges were replaced by new constraints. Tighter restrictions on the fishing season and catch size, inspection of equipment, and a requirement to keep a log of the crew, were some of the many new vexations imposed on these people who had to find fish first and foremost, and on Sundays pray to St Peter to save them from perishing at sea.

Fishing boats were now required to sport a clearly visible number on the bows and sails, in order to help the *gendarmes* identify them. The registration number was made up of an initial letter representing the home port of the boat, then a series of numbers allocated in chronological order of registration.

Along the Breton coast, as elsewhere, the boundaries between districts and sub-districts shifted over time, some ports becoming autonomous while others were merged. Thus, in Finistère, the letter for boats from Guilvinec, Douarnenez or Audierne was Q at first, for the town of Quimper, before becoming the more iconic G, D or A, familiar from postcards of the early twentieth century.

Every man to his paintbrush (see photograph on front cover)! The front hull now had to be branded by the book: characters 25 centimetres high with strokes 4 centimetres thick, positioned 10 centimetres below the gunwale. All well and good...

The decree was certainly clear in two respects – the requirement that the characters be legible, and the amount of the fine for non-compliance – as for the rest, there was room for interpretation. You didn't have to be a printer, typographer or letter painter to see these were pretty loose restrictions.

\* *Chiffres à barbes* can be translated as 'bearded numerals', referring to the sweeping bifurcated terminations of some of them.



Fig 1, breakwater, Douarnenez, c1885.

Photographer unknown, Neurdein/Roger-Viollet.

Fig 2, careening a boat on the quay, c1900.

Photo Fonds Villar, Archives départementales du Finistère.

And yet, photographs from the years following the imposition of the law testify to a homogeneous system on the Breton coast (Fig 1). One can see carefully oil-painted white inscriptions on the black coal tar of the hulls, with regular dimensions, generous spacing, superbly crafted in an easily identifiable style.

With all due respect to the Didot dynasty, one must confess that the so-called 'Modern' types are rarely prized for their clarity in signage. And although the letters were common currency, this wasn't the case for numerals – the poor relations of typographic design. More or less absent from type foundries' catalogues, they often appeared only in small sizes within a text and, what's more, most of the time in 'Old Style' forms! A surprising choice of model to brand a boat with.

What's more, as sailors regularly cleaned, careened and



caulked their boats, engraving the number into the wood soon became customary, to avoid having to paint it again from scratch every two months. In the images, you can often see the grooves of numbers on a hull that hasn't yet been repainted (2), or you can make out the trace of a former registration number under the new one when a boat changes owners (3). Once again, one would have thought the difficulty of engraving freehand with the tip of a knife on a convex surface would naturally have suggested using a low-contrast sans-serif or a solid slab-serif rather than the refined twists and turns of a Didot. A rather masochistic choice of model, it has to be said.

Nonetheless, these early registration numbers are modelled on descendants of the first Moderns, which French type founders and printers christened *Classiques*, *Initiales ordinaires*, *Engravers*. The photographs show characters with extreme contrast of stroke thickness, and a cap height/stem width ratio in perfect compliance with the decree.

Whether or not the style was expressly imposed by the authorities, one thing is for sure: up until the early 1890s, there was consistency in western Brittany. We can talk of a standardised system, albeit a hand-crafted one.

From then on, things shifted. Blackletter initials (heresy!) (4) popped up on boat hulls here and there; as did ornaments (squares or diamonds); round letters opened up so much that they became unrecognisable, ending in protuberant ball terminals, and even more spectacular, bifurcations ('barbes') appeared at the feet of vertical stems (5).

The austere Didot style no longer seemed so intimidating. Romantic literature, industrial advertising or the working-class press provided hunting grounds for those seeking fashionable graphics. As palaeographer Malcolm B Parkes rightly said, 'Changes in the signs are the sign of change'.

In less than one generation, with the final return of the Republic (from 1870 onwards), the country made up for lost time and embraced modernity at top speed: Victor Hugo entered the Panthéon, the railway arrived in Finistère, painters settled in Pont-Aven, the picture postcard business flourished, the Eiffel Tower went up, sardine fishing was good and Sarah Bernhardt played Phèdre at the theatre!

The French were creating a new, brasher visual landscape, and our sailors were also in on the act: there was the 'official' way of doing things, granted, but there were more fashionable alternatives which were more exotic, popular, scandalous. As they weren't forbidden, why not make the most of them?

The numerous photos from the following decade (around 1900) suggest that these unexpected, extravagant forms are more than mere individual customisations by fishermen keen to make their own vessels stand out. In fact, differences tend to be between flotillas, rather than between boats from the same port. Each harbour stretches the rules in its own way, reappropriating the inscriptions to feed the strong sense of collective identity and belonging among its fishermen; the styles distinguish one port from the next – with whom competition at sea was fierce and relations often hostile.

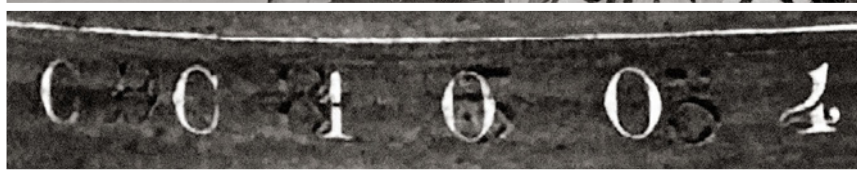
According to some of the old fishermen, the 'barbed'

alphabet style was invented to make the figures 'favourable for fishing'. In other words, to present a curvaceous shape to the waves (as with 0, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8 and 9) that didn't offend the spirit of the sea and brought good fortune. There are tales of some fishermen going as far as taking an option on a supposedly lucky number at the maritime administration office before the boat was even launched! But another witness – seaman-engraver himself – rejected this superstitious idea and suggested a purely aesthetic motive. Far from being incompatible, these points of view shed light on the complex ways of thinking at the time and our contradictory impressions of these people (uncouth but well-travelled, practically illiterate yet bilingual, regionalist at heart but fervently patriotic, royalist by condition and communist by conviction, piously religious and yet believers in pagan remedies to ward off the evil eye...). So were these graphic forms an assertion of identity, or was their purpose artistic, or was it propitiatory?

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Fig 3, drying nets at Concarneau, 1913, and close-up of registration figures showing the ghost of a previous number. Photo Agence Roi, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Fig 4, in Douarnenez port, c1904, showing a gothic D. Photo Charles Géniaux, Collection musée de Bretagne, Rennes.





If the answers to ‘why?’ are many and complex, let us try to answer ‘how?’. As we have seen, the inscriptions were engraved, not merely painted, in keeping with a tradition common to all seafaring people: always a knife in one’s pocket and skill at woodwork worthy of the best craftsmen. Surviving artefacts – shaving kits (6), net identification tags (7) – attest to this generalised ability to carve lettering with a simple blade.

However, these letterforms did not fall from the sky. With its forked endings, the ‘bearded’ alphabet invented by the fishermen of Douarnenez joins the loosely knit family of characters descended from the Roman inscriptions of Filocalus, with the addition of a medial ornamentation and exaggeration of the curves of thin strokes.

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Alphabets more or less matching this description were in vogue with type founders and wood type manufacturers, but they were often relegated to the end of the catalogue and were given fanciful names: *Toscane perlée*, *Guillochées noires*, *Italiennes éclairées*, *Napolitaines*, *Noires fleuries*, *Vénitiennes*... Nicolette Gray (in *Nineteenth Century Ornamented Type(face)s*, 1938 & 1976) holds that the first Tuscans were built on the model of the English Vernacular letterform (see also Alan Bartram) with square proportions. Rob Roy Kelly (in *American Wood Type, 1828 – 1900*), sees three basic structures – Antique, Gothic, Roman – within which these characters would have evolved following the appearance of ornamental branched serifs.

So are we dealing with a Tuscan mutation applied to a Modern exemplar, such as a Didot? (10, 11)

There are also technical, rather than aesthetic, factors which might help to explain the genesis of these ‘barbed’ figures: the advantages of uniform width and the convenience of stencils.

As referred to above, the decree only specified height and weight. The results, as seen on photographs before 1890, were predictable: the narrow 1 character obviously posed letter-spacing problems. It was at once too far from the following figure – creating a gap – and too close when doubled in a

sequence such as 11, creating real difficulties of legibility from a distance. As type designers know well, the solution is a simple one: widen the glyph with ornamental (non-structural) serifs to give it a more standard width. Thus these ‘bearded’ extensions also had a practical function, whether intentional or not. The few written records confirm this: the regular inter-letter space is measured from stem to stem of the glyphs and not from edge to edge. We could describe them as fixed-width characters, but with optical spacing. Of course the ‘em-square’ used to contain these figures is a square of 25 by 25 cm (9).

Whether as a cause or consequence, this suggests the use of a tool to facilitate the creation and repetition of characters. We can’t expand here on the differences between stencils and templates (see Eric Kindel in *Typography Papers* 9, 2013), but when you observe this vast corpus of inscriptions – several hundred – on boat hulls in the same bay at the same time, you will notice that although it is particularly homogeneous, the system allows for a number of variations in detail.

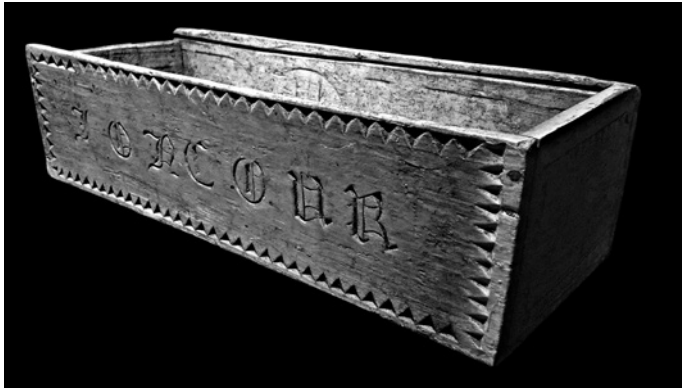
Last summer in a beginners’ workshop I conducted an exercise: I asked them to draw a number with a felt tip pen on a piece of paper where the thick parts of the character were already traced. Each person was free to link up the modules as they pleased. The results were remarkable (12). All the numbers seemed to belong to the same family, given a structure by the pre-existing stems, yet they were all different due to each person’s treatment of the thins and – most of the time – the addition of ornaments.

This experiment may not have been scientific, but it demonstrated how anyone equipped with a tool that combines templates (basic spatial instructions: the em-square and its median lines) and stencils (some immutable elements that make the character recognisable whatever happens) can

Fig 5, sailors preparing their boats on the beach at Douarnenez, showing the ‘bearded’ terminations of some of the characters, c1911. Photo Musée Nicéphore Niépce, Ville de Chalon-sur-Saône.







achieve a standardised *and* unique result! There are two pieces of evidence to support this hypothesis: an oral account and a photograph.

An old seadog, who was only a ship's boy at the time, remembered a famous engraver in the 1950s and told me, 'he used wooden templates to define the spacing and square of each figure. I don't remember seeing him use a stencil to draw the numbers; he drew them free hand, with the help of some kind of wooden sticks.' On the phone he added, 'It was an honour for the engravers to mark the boats with their knives. Don't imagine they were paid for this.'

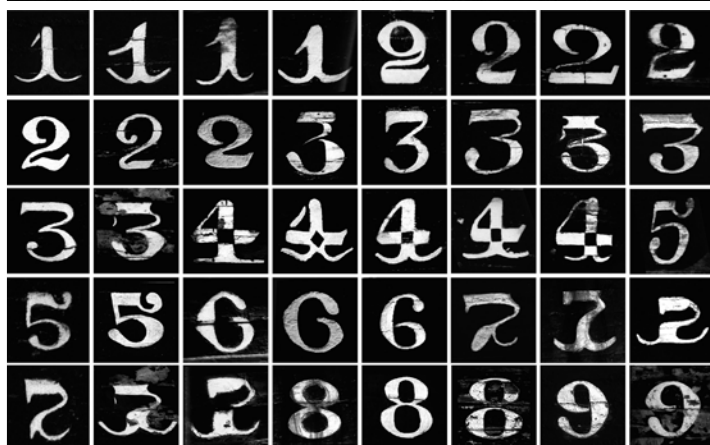
Philippe Tassiers' wonderful photograph (8) is worth a thousand words: a plank damaged at sea is replaced by a new one which is not yet 'branded' (the damage is recent) and only a thin line can be seen to indicate the height and width of the figure to be carved. The straightness of the parallels and the slight wobble visible in the top curve leave no room for doubt: someone has just traced (with a chalk?) the outline of a solid form or the inline of a stencil. This suggests two things: first, the existence (at least in 1909) of some kind of aid to drawing – possibly a hollowed-out stencil, or more likely a template to trace around; second, only the stem is traced at first and the interpretation of the delicate thins (here the tail of the 1) was up to the engraver.

This article attempts to summarise the current state of my research which until now has been informal, started ten years ago outside any academic framework. It suffers from lack of rigour – I don't have a historian's methodology – and lack of knowledge in some areas, but I hope intuition and motivation have made up for these. Each new piece of evidence tends to find its place in a pattern.

Why have I, a Breton exiled in Paris for twenty years, chosen to publish at this point, when all I have is a mish-mash of scattered clues rather than the outcome of exhaustive research? And why in a British magazine? As I started looking into these 'bearded' figures, I came across only three

Above: Fig 6, box for personal effects, probably 1930s. Photo Port-musée, Douarnenez, Y de Roeck.  
Fig 7, markezen, net tags. Photo private collection, Y De Roeck.

Below: Fig 8, cleaning the boat, c1911-12, showing drafted outline of figure on repaired part of hull.  
Photo Philippe Tassiers, collection musée de Bretagne, Rennes.  
Fig 9, D1993, number of *An Eostig*, replica of a sardine boat, Douarnenez, probably by Édouard Ansquer.  
Photo Y De Roeck.  
Fig 10, selection of figures from a range of times and places.  
Fig 11, selection of letters, drawn by Fañch Le Hénaff.



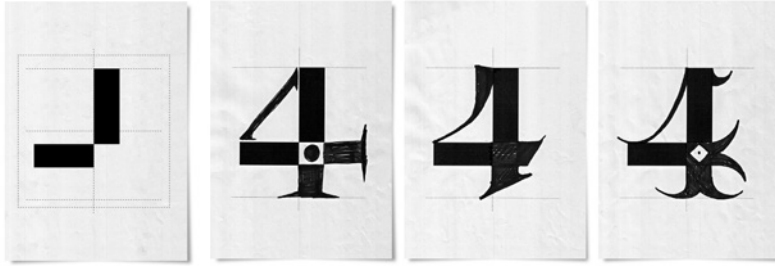


Fig 12, experiment during a workshop by the author at Douarnenez in 2019. On the left were basic elements of a 4 given to participants, who were then free to add the remaining strokes. Photos Y De Roeck.

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accounts by people who had found any interest in vernacular inscriptions in Brittany: Barbara Jones ('Fishing figures', in *Typographica* 12, December 1965, with photographs by Herbert Spencer), Phil Baines & Catherine Dixon (*Signs: Lettering in the Environment*, 2008) and Mark Evans ('Hieroglyphs of the sea', in *Forum* 29, March 2015). It seems that topics of little interest to people on this side of the Channel hold more attraction for my

colleagues over the sea! And publishing this article in *Forum* is an opportunity for me to call out for contributions – or corrections – to assist in this continuing project. *Kenavo!*

**Yoan De Roeck** is a graphic designer and teacher originally from Brittany, who the last twenty years has lived in Paris. See [yoanderoeck.com/Chiffres-a-Barbules](http://yoanderoeck.com/Chiffres-a-Barbules) for a talk (in French) on the subject of this article.

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