

*Twentieth Century Dockyards: what next?*

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I feel most honoured today to have been asked to speak at the launch of *20<sup>th</sup> Century Naval Dockyards. Devonport and Portsmouth Characterisation Report*. Unlike most of you, I have the advantage of having been given an advance copy. ‘Report’, with its slightly bureaucratic connotations, does not do justice to this important and valuable document. The small team responsible for all the research and writing – Ann Coats, David Davies, Ray Riley, David Evans and David Jenkins – have produced a masterly survey, identifying and evaluating numerous buildings whose original or subsequent purposes and importance have not always been self-evident. They have set these in the wider twentieth century contexts of technological advances ashore and afloat involving radical new weapons, introduction of electronics and new warship propulsion systems. Together with these have gone changes to working practices and the introduction of ‘just-in-time’ supply chains, lessening the need for extensive dockyard storage. Strategic needs, changing political imperatives and increasing peacetime financial constraints all continue to re-shape these great industrial enterprises.

It is a salutary reflection as we gather in this Georgian naval storehouse, within sight of Nelson’s flagship, that extensive research over the last 40 years means that much more is known about how these shore bases supported the Georgian and Victorian navies than is known about their operations in the last century. This report is a hugely valuable start to redressing this balance. The legacy of Victorian and earlier modernisation schemes meant that the Royal Navy entered the First World War with the largest and best equipped dockyards in Europe. This basic framework and facilities survived comparatively little altered into the 1960s when the need for substantial new engineering works was becoming apparent. The 1970s saw completion of the massive frigate repair complex at Devonport while here at Portsmouth Workshop Building 1 in the late 1970s and the distinguished Ove-Arup Dauntless building of 1984 provided important additions to the dockyard. At Chatham and Devonport, and in Scotland at Faslane and Coulport, nuclear submarines were the spur to major investment. I suspect that when the history of all these nuclear installations, particularly the Clyde bases, comes to be assessed they will be viewed in the same way that we admire the planning and foresight of the Georgian and Victorian dockyard builders. I also suspect that a similar characterisation report on the Scottish naval bases is not high on the First Minister’s ‘to do list’.

Over the last quarter of a century much time has been spent by conservation bodies and individuals defining the purpose of a characterisation report. As is so often the case, the earliest and simplest definitions are frequently the clearest and best. In essence, any consideration of an

historic structure needs to look beyond the structure itself to include its relationship to former uses, its contribution to the overall character of an area and its place in an individual's memory or a society's culture. The authors of this report very helpfully include towards its beginning a substantial section on the history and evolution of Characterisation which is an invaluable prelude to the main part of their survey.

*20<sup>th</sup> Century Naval Dockyards* is fully-referenced, written with considerable clarity and comes with over 650 illustrations. In short, it is going to be a hugely valuable resource for Historic England, the MoD, planning authorities, and indeed everyone concerned with the conservation and sympathetic use of this country's naval estate. The authors have produced a fine work on which historians, industrial archaeologists and others will be able to build. And, moreover, something dear to my heart, it is a good read – so there is no excuse for any of you not acquiring a copy and learning from the riches within it.

Ann Coats' kind invitation some months ago to speak here today naturally came with a request for a title for this brief talk. *'Twentieth Century Dockyards: what next?'* was my spur of the moment response that I hoped would later give me room for manoeuvre when I came to sorting out a suitable topic. Somewhat to my surprise, it is almost exactly 50 years since I first came to Portsmouth as a very new and young Assistant Inspector of Ancient Monuments in the Ministry of Public Building and Works, charged with visiting all the operational home bases to find out what buildings of historic interest survived. I was lucky to see these on the cusp of significant changes. This building was still a naval storehouse, if I remember correctly, with canvas bags of various sizes and shapes lying in heaps. The dockyard itself still catered for a largely steam-powered fleet and had its operational satellites – the Royal Naval barracks, victualling at the Royal Clarence Yard, ordnance at Gun Wharf and Priddy's Hard. The Royal Marines were still based at Eastney, the Royal Naval Hospital at Haslar was fully operational. Similar facilities surrounded Devonport Dockyard and to a lesser extent Chatham. However, this is not the occasion for a general retrospection. Rather I think it would be more useful to look briefly at what lessons can be learnt from half a century of conservation legislation being applied to the operational naval bases.

The first, most important and most obvious requirement is the need to know and understand the history and significance of the building, engineering work or area under discussion. Our knowledge has advanced enormously in the last half century and is about to make another leap forward with the dissemination of this report. Such information is absolutely fundamental for informed decision-making on a building's or area's future.

Secondly, the best way of preserving an historic building is to keep it in use. Scheduling and listing is not a kiss of death for the MoD (or for anyone else for that matter). ‘We can’t touch the building – it’s listed (or scheduled)’ used to be a very common MoD response. Fortunately, this misapprehension has largely vanished after years of proselytizing by English Heritage and its successor, Historic England. But the MoD is also fortunate in the quality and durability of the majority of its Georgian and Victorian estate and, I suspect, that of the best of the twentieth century additions. Buildings in eighteenth and nineteenth century naval bases were not constructed with a ‘design life’ – this phrase with its connotations of rapid built-in obsolescence had yet to be invented. Naval buildings and engineering works were generally durably constructed for the future with the best-affordable materials. ‘Plain, strong and convenient’ was a phrase much used by Georgian dockyard officers when proposing new buildings. They and their successors’ foresight is to our advantage in that sensitive conversion of robust naval historic buildings to sympathetic new uses is usually possible, as this storehouse demonstrates. Other good examples in this base are the former Steam Factory alongside 2 Basin and the Iron and Brass foundry, while at Devonport the huge Victorian Quadrangle factory in North Yard also has a new lease of life. On a much smaller scale, nearby in Morice Yard the Hydrographers have their modern headquarters in a former ordnance storehouse overlooking the Hamoaze.

Of course not all redundant buildings of historic interest can quickly be found new and sympathetic uses. They need to be kept wind and weathertight until such purposes materialise. These may come from an entirely unexpected quarter and will almost certainly take time – the prime example of this happening here is Boathouse 4, a very rare example of a twentieth century between-the-wars dockyard building and all the more important because of that. It is a real pleasure to see it again being so appropriately re-used.

Next golden rule: Don’t rely on official organisations always to make the right ‘heritage’ decisions – local planning authorities, county councils and Historic England are increasingly hard-pressed and short staffed. Now that planning applications are usually available on local authority websites, individuals and specialist groups are much more easily able to monitor developments and to comment and to contribute historic information that may be unknown to planners and others. Be pro-active – the Naval Dockyard Society has an enviable record of making pertinent and well-argued observations on planning applications for naval buildings in, among other places, Sheerness, Deptford, Gibraltar and Bermuda. As a codicil to this recommendation, it is also vital to keep an eye on planning applications involving multi-storey buildings adjacent to historic naval bases - nothing destroys the sense of place more quickly and irreversibly than an ill-sited tower block dominating an historic enclave.

Finally, where there is something worth fighting for, the example of Chatham some 30 years ago remains instructive. Following the 1982 announcement of the closure of the naval base, the Ancient Monuments Board (forerunner of the Commissioners for Historic England and then with the Directors of the British Museum and the National Maritime Museum as board members) rapidly produced a report on the historic significance of the old heart of Chatham Naval Base and joined forces with Kent County Council, the local authority, the Society for Nautical Research, the Victorian Society, the Georgian Group and other amenity organisations successfully to press the case for it being endowed and passed to a Trust. Thirty years on, there are over 100 businesses and other organisations leasing property in the historic dockyard, generating around 500 jobs and some £16m annually for the local economy. Perhaps most surprisingly, for none of us could be certain in 1982 that a naval dockyard would be a successful heritage attractive - and the Kent yard does not have the iconic warships that are such a draw here - nevertheless, Chatham now draws in around 170,000 visitors annually. Such visitors, both here at Portsmouth and at Chatham, one likes to think, come away with a much better understanding of the key roles the Royal Navy and the Royal Dockyards have played in Britain's history over the last 300 years and of their on-going importance to an island nation.