Evaluate, conserve, adapt: a future for the historic bases of the Royal Navy

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Abstract
This paper aims to give a brief overview of the historic importance of the surviving buildings and engineering works, concentrating on the Royal Navy's home bases in the UK, and at the work of conservation, adaptation and re-use that has been undertaken since the late 1950s. Most of the historic information in this article comes from Coad, 1989 and Evans 2004. Both these publications are fully referenced.

Introduction
Forty years ago, little was known about the architectural and engineering history of the Royal Navy's principal UK bases. The Cold War was at its height, security was very tight, access to the dockyards was extremely difficult and cameras were banned. As a result, a significant sector of naval, architectural and industrial history had never been examined by building historians and consequently did not figure in any publications on historic buildings. Defence ministries had little interest in conservation, even if they had been aware of the historic value of much of their estate. In fairness, this whole segment of naval architecture remained un-researched and largely unknown. In the twenty years after the end of the Second World War redundant dockyards were either demolished or redeveloped with a tragic lack of awareness of their history. One only has to look at Woolwich, Deptford, Pembroke or Sheerness to appreciate the scale of the loss, but much of this loss up to the 1960s stemmed from ignorance, dis-interest and lack of financial resources following closure. We should also remind ourselves that buildings of similar age outside the naval estate did not necessarily survive any better – the destruction of segments of Georgian London proceeded on a grand scale well into the late 1960s. Virtually none of the dockyard buildings were protected by any conservation legislation. However, there were bright spots, the result of individual initiatives. By the early 1960s, the great double ropehouse of 1770 at Portsmouth, disused for its original purpose for a century, was in a parlous state. It could have been demolished; instead its interior was gutted and it was turned into a successful storehouse. We may quibble about the detail, but the carcass of this great building still stands.

The Royal Dockyards: a brief history
The Royal Navy's dockyards in Great Britain differ from commercial ports in that for most of their existence they have been major industrial enterprises, building and maintaining the warships and stockpiling materials and equipment needed by the fleet in peace and war. As they have always been government owned and financed, they have been largely immune from normal commercial pressures.

The Tudor monarchs, Henry VII and Henry VIII, created a permanent Royal Navy at the time when technological developments in armaments were having a profound impact on ship design. The introduction of heavy guns on board coupled with the invention of tiers of gun-ports, and the concomitant need to replace clinker hulls with those of carvel construction, as exemplified perhaps most famously by the Mary Rose, meant that ships intended for sea battles now had to be specially designed for fighting. It was no longer realistic for states simply to rely on hiring merchant vessels for the purpose. As a direct result, the main Royal Dockyards were established from the late fifteenth century onwards to cater for these specialist warships.

Portsmouth Dockyard was founded in 1485, followed closely by Deptford and Woolwich on the Thames down-river from London. Chatham followed in 1547, Harwich and Sheerness were established in the mid-seventeenth century and Plymouth Dockyard, now Devonport, was laid out in the 1690s. All these yards were in southern England, strategically placed to meet threats from across the Channel. Plymouth dockyard's construction marks official recognition that the Royal Navy's operational centre of gravity was shifting from the North Sea and the Channel to the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. After Plymouth, only two more home dockyards were constructed – Rosyth on the east coast of Scotland in the early twentieth century to meet the threat of Imperial Germany and Pembroke a hundred years earlier as a ship building yard in south Wales. In the eighteenth century the only new dockyards were those established overseas, following the growth of trade and empire. In order of date, but not necessarily of importance, these were at Gibraltar, Menorca, Antigua, Jamaica, Halifax ([Nova Scotia), Malta, Bermuda and Simonstown on the southern tip of Africa. In the latter part of the eighteenth century, huge sums were also expended modernising and enlarging the principal home yards, including Plymouth Dockyard. This sustained investment in the Royal navy's shore facilities matched the growth of the fleet from around 176 ships in 1700 to 335 by 1814 (Rodger, 2004: 608). These bald figures mask the increasing size of individual warships over this century. Over the same period, employees in the royal yards rose from around 6,500 to 17,500 (Coad, 1989,3). In a very real sense, in Georgian England the royal dockyards were the industrial centres of the country well before the Industrial Revolution. Indeed, it has been claimed by a distinguished naval historian that by 1750, the Royal Navy was the greatest industrial organisation in the western world (Rodger in Coad 1989, ix).

The royal dockyards themselves can be broadly divided into three categories. All the yards had warehouses for stores to fit out and replenish warships for sea. They were also expected to be able to repair damaged vessels, although in the case of the smaller overseas yards such repairs might be of a temporary nature, sufficient to allow a warship to be able to sail to a home dockyard. All the home dockyards – but not in general the overseas yards – also built warships. Chatham, Portsmouth
and Plymouth had the further and important distinction of being fleet bases, a result of their strategic locations, combined with safe and spacious anchorages, the latter also allowing warships to be ‘put in ordinary’ the term then used for laying-up warships in reserve. This distinction was not just reflected in their scale – more and larger dry-docks and building slips, workshops and storehouses – but also in the associated establishments that grew up around them: the ordnance yards and powder magazines, the victualling yards, naval hospitals and at the end of the nineteenth century the naval barracks, all originally run by their separate boards.

The only overseas yards that ever rivalled the size of the main home dockyards were Malta and Bermuda by the latter part of the nineteenth century, Gibraltar by about 1905 and Singapore between the two world wars. The primary function of all these overseas bases was the repair of damaged warships and the provision of supplies.

The earliest surviving dockyard buildings and engineering works date from the last decade of the seventeenth century. In the latter part of the eighteenth century the main dockyards underwent major expansion and modernisation schemes that gave the Royal Navy the best-equipped dockyards in Europe by the time of the Napoleonic Wars (Coad 1989: 17-20). In the mid-nineteenth century, new steam yards were grafted on to the main dockyards, together with limited works at the main overseas bases, while coaling stations were established around the world for the new steam warships (Schurman 126-50). There were to be further massive investments in larger dry-docks, coaling facilities and engineering workshops during the naval arms race with Germany in the twenty or so years before the First World War (Evans, 182-205).

Conservation and re-use

While there was much official indifference and a general lack of knowledge of the historic importance of the dockyards in the UK until the late 1960s, the pioneer attempt to conserve and adapt a former Royal Navy base by then was well under way in the Caribbean. In 1948 a former naval officer had set out from England in his yacht to emigrate with his family to New Zealand. At Antigua they berthed at English Harbour alongside the small Georgian dockyard closed by the Royal Navy in 1889. So struck were they with this derelict dockyard in the midst of long-abandoned Georgian fortifications that the Nicholson family got no further and instead set about seeing what could be done to save the buildings. In 1951 the Friends of English Harbour was launched, the first such conservation organisation devoted to the preservation of naval buildings as distinct from warships. Since then, very considerable progress has been made, repairing the dockyard and bringing it back to income-generating use. In this, English Harbour is helped by its location and by the growth of Caribbean tourism and yachting. Naval Officers’ houses were readily adaptable for holiday lets while the great storehouse was sympathetically converted to holiday apartments. The small galley or cook-house, used to feed naval crews while their ships were careened, found a new and appropriate use as a snack-bar. Other buildings became yacht stores. The Royal Canadian Navy lent a hand and installed new windlasses on the careening wharf. Much even now remains to be done, but nearly 60 years after the setting up of the Friends, their pioneer efforts should be saluted (Blackburne).

Some thirty years later in the 1970s, a similar operation was begun by volunteers in Bermuda to conserve the principal buildings of Bermuda Dockyard and their surrounding bastioned defences. The dockyard, located on Ireland Island in 1809, had been closed by the Royal Navy in 1955 and left derelict. The Bermuda Maritime Trust took over the former Ordnance Yard and the Commissioner’s House. The ordnance

Figure 1: Stonehouse, Devon. The Royal William Yard, the finest surviving victualling yard, built in between 1825 and 1834. To the left is the mill and bakery. Beyond the basin is the brewery. The complex of buildings are slowly being adapted for residential and commercial use. Photo: Jonathan Coad.

Figure 2: Stonehouse, Devon. The former Royal Naval Hospital. Built between 1758 and 1762 to hold 600 patients, its design was acclaimed by Revolutionary France. The hospital is now used as housing and as a school. Photo: Jonathan Coad.

Figure 3: Antigua, English Harbour. The dockyard founded here in the late 1720s retains many of its eighteenth century buildings. The former Copper and Lumber Store was carefully converted in the 1970s into holiday apartments. Photo: Jonathan Coad.
yard magazines became a maritime museum and were followed by the recent and spectacular restoration of the Commissioner’s House. The rest of the dockyard buildings are gradually being conserved by the Development Corporation and converted for light industrial use and as a series of retail units aimed at the cruise market. Some of the houses built for the officers of the Victualling Yard are currently being carefully renovated to be rented. Conservation work has also begun very recently on the bastioned defences and associated barracks and there is every hope that by the time of the bicentenary of the founding of this base most of the buildings will have found new and sympathetic uses.

In the UK in the mid-1960s, the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments began to evaluate the three remaining operational fleet bases in England. These were Chatham, Portsmouth and Devonport. It was soon apparent that the older parts of these three royal dockyards contained many structures of outstanding historic importance. As a direct and immediate consequence, large numbers were classed as Ancient Monuments. Technically, this conservation legislation was not binding on government departments, but in practice the Ministry of Defence was expected to follow the same rules as everyone else. One important consequence was that the Ancient Monuments legislation was administered by a central government body, the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments (since 1984 subsumed within English Heritage) rather than by diverse local authorities as happens with the majority of UK listed buildings. This allowed for a national overview and unity of approach to the treatment of historic structures in the three naval bases. Crucially, this went hand in hand with research in the archives. This latter work was absolutely essential as it identified a number of buildings that were historically highly significant, but sometimes architecturally undistinguished. This was to have important conservation consequences when the closure of Chatham Naval Base was announced in 1982. By then, the outstanding historic importance of this Medway yard had been established. It was the only virtually intact Georgian and early Victorian dockyard of the sailing navy and ministers accepted the case for a major preservation Trust to take over the whole of the old part of the dockyard, an area of around 75 acres. Similarly at Portsmouth a Trust was established to care for a number of important and little altered historic buildings that would not readily adapt to further dockyard use. These are now occupied in part by the Portsmouth Royal Naval Museum and the Mary Rose Trust.

Of more immediate importance in the late 1960s was the need to ensure that those in charge of naval bases were aware of the importance of the buildings and engineering works and were given guidance in appropriate ways of conserving their fabric. Planning staff were encouraged to make use of empty historic buildings and not simply to build something new on another site. It has long been accepted that the best way of preserving buildings and engineering works is to undertake sympathetic maintenance and keep them in use, where possible for their original purposes. Where the latter are no longer feasible, alternative but sympathetic uses have to be found that have minimal or no impact on the building’s historic integrity. Regular meetings were established with the naval base planning teams and with maintenance staff. The former allowed conservation input at very early stages in any planning proposals, usually making it possible to mitigate or eliminate conflicts of interest between the navy and conservation. Regular liaison with the maintenance staff coupled with practical conservation advice and an insistence on agreeing maintenance specifications led to substantial improvements in the care of historic buildings, perhaps most obviously in the use of appropriate mortars for repointing and the elimination of the use of plastic or metal window frames to replace what were usually pretty sound Georgian or Victorian timber frames. Apart from endeavouring to ensure that historic fabric was cared for using appropriate materials, attention has also been given to preserving the dockyards’ wider and important ‘sense of place’. Comparatively minor alterations can make a significant difference to the latter. One obvious example is in the use of appropriate internal lighting. After dark, few things are more damaging to the appearance of historic buildings than rows of fluorescent strip lights shining through their windows. Replacing such lights with a combination of desk lights, uplighters and low-energy bulbs in traditional shades makes a very positive contribution to a building’s historic identity and from experience is almost invariably welcomed by the occupants.

The arrangements in force at present have evolved from these early beginning in the late 1960s and 1970s. In English Heritage itself a small team called the Government Historic Estates Unit is dedicated to advising on the care and maintenance of historic buildings owned by the government. This team includes historic buildings architects, surveyors and inspectors of ancient monuments/ historic buildings.
All British government departments (and, by extension, their subject agencies) are signatories to a 10-point protocol which specifies a system of care for historic buildings and sites, including obligations to employ suitably experienced and qualified specialists to undertake four-yearly (quadrennial) inspections and reports, and to keep comprehensive “log book” records of works. English Heritage itself publishes a handbook describing the recommended system of care in detail and illustrating many of the historic buildings/estates. This was last issued in 1998. The British Ministry of Defence (MoD) owns around 700 protected buildings and sites throughout the UK. MoD publishes their own guidance on care of their historic estate, the current version of which is MoD Conservation Manual (Bradley et al). MoD also employs two Historic Buildings Advisors in the Environmental Support Team of Defence Estates, the Agency that manages the military estate. For a number of years, English Heritage has maintained a register of ‘Buildings at Risk’—important buildings whose future is considered to be at serious risk from neglect and indifference by their owners. This list is published annually; such public ‘naming and shaming’ can and does encourage owners, especially government departments, to take conservation more seriously and is a useful tool of last resort.

In the case of the majority of historic dockyard buildings, their sheer scale and solid construction helps in finding new uses where the old ones are no longer needed. Houses and storehouse can reasonably readily convert to office use; Victorian machine shops and foundries can easily accommodate the much smaller machine tools now in use. Where buildings have no immediate or foreseeable use, the Ministry of Defence is expected to maintain them to a minimal standard to keep them weatherproof. With evolving defence requirements, a building with no use now may very well be seen as a valuable asset in five or ten years’ time. This is ongoing work and there remain a number of problem buildings and areas. However, it is worth recording that in the 40 years since Ancient Monuments’ legislation was applied to buildings and engineering works in the operational naval bases, not one of these structures has been demolished, while in the case of Brunel’s famous Block Mills at Portsmouth, the Ministry of Defence has just completed in 2008 major and exemplary conservation work on the shell of the building (Coad, 2005).

Those buildings that remain part of the Defence estate naturally have their maintenance and repairs paid for by the Defence budget and have to take their turn in the general priorities for finance. When the government in 1983 set up the Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust it was given an endowment of just over £11 million. This should be seen in the context of basic infrastructure repairs then estimated at around £20 million. Since then, very substantial further repair grants have come from English Heritage, the County Council and the Local Authority. However, the biggest contributor by far has been the Heritage Lottery Fund that has proved crucial in allowing the Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust to tackle a very substantial backlog of maintenance and repairs. The Trust generates an increasing proportion of its running costs from visitors and special events, but underpinning all this is the income it receives from its tenants. The Trust selects these latter with care to ensure that they will fit into the dockyard and that their activities will be compatible with the Trust’s main conservation aims. To date, around £35 million has been spent on capital works in the historic dockyard, conserving buildings and the infrastructure. This work is almost at an end. The Heritage

Figure 6: Devonport Dockyard. A recent photograph of the interior of part of the former foundry in the centre of the Steam Factory. An extensive programme of refurbishment in the early 1990s, including insulating the roofs, modern heating and lighting, has given a new life to this building. Photo: Jonathan Coad.

Figure 7: Chatham Historic Dockyard. Looking down the 1140 foot length of the great Double Ropehouse, built between 1786 and 1793. This still produces cordage using machinery that in part dates back to 1811. It was one of four roperies once operated by the Navy Board in the home dockyards. It is one of the few buildings in Chatham Historic Dockyard still in use for its original purpose. Photo: Jonathan Coad.

Figure 8: Chatham Historic Dockyard. Slips 3-7 photographed in 2007 after conservation. The nearest timber slip No 3 was constructed in 1837. The all-metal 4-6 followed in the 1840s and No 7 in 1852. Their roofs have been completely re-clad in materials that match the originals in type and form. 3 Slip roof is covered in zinc, the remainder in corrugated iron. 7 slip has had its river end slightly modified with electrically-operated gates and doors replacing the manual system used by the navy and is again in use. Slips 3 to 6, disused as ship-building slips by the 1880s, house a variety of exhibitions and workshops. Repairs to this magnificent range were largely funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Photo: Jonathan Coad.

15
Lottery Fund has also contributed to the repair costs of the historic warships on display in the three dry-docks and which serve to emphasise the central purpose of a naval dockyard. There is a similar tale, but on a lesser scale at Portsmouth where the Historic Trust occupies a far smaller enclave and has to look after fewer buildings.

In the last thirty years, the Ministry of Defence has closed the great Royal William Victualling Yard at Stonehouse, near Devonport, and the Royal Clarence Victualling Yard at Gosport opposite Portsmouth. The Royal William Yard remained much as completed by the early 1830s; the contemporary Royal Clarence Yard had suffered losses from bombing in the Second World War. The industrial scale of the majority of the buildings in both of these yards is allowing their gradual conversion to a variety of residential and commercial uses that largely respect the historic fabric and sense of place. Similarly, the mid-eighteenth century naval hospital at Stonehouse with its formal layout of blocks of wards was readily adapted to residential and educational uses after its closure in the early 1990s. A greater conservation challenge lies ahead with the huge mid-eighteenth century naval hospital at Haslar on the Gosport peninsula. This was the first purpose-built and navy-run hospital to be constructed in England. Begun in 1746 and completed in 1761, its 84 wards held some 2100 patients by 1778. Vacated by the Royal Navy in early 2007, its future has yet to be decided. Unlike Stonehouse hospital with its separate blocks of wards, Haslar is a monolithic building arranged around three sides of a courtyard. Its extensive grounds are a prime location for new housing and it remains to be seen whether English Heritage and the local authority will be able to agree redevelopment and conservation proposals that will respect the main historic buildings and their all-important setting. The nearby former Ordnance Yard at Priddy’s Hard, set in a sea of new housing pressing hard against the foot of the ramparts is not an encouraging precedent.

Inevitably, adaptations and conversions bring about changes. Carefully handled, in time these in turn can become valued parts of a site’s history. But preservation at its best is not just about caring for the physical aspects – the buildings, engineering works and machinery. For future generations to gain a real feel for some of these remarkable naval enclaves, their sense of place has to be respected and carefully nurtured. The following paragraph appeared in an article written in 1993; it remains relevant today when looking at conservation in its totality rather than just considering the physical preservation of buildings and engineering works:

“Setting aside the ever-present financial constraints, what potential pitfalls are there for Trusts which have charge of historic naval establishments? For visitors to gain a fuller appreciation of these remarkable enclaves, it is not just a question of preserving the physical evidence in the form of the buildings and engineering works; it is all too easy to damage or destroy the fragile atmosphere of these places. Naval architecture is a mixture, at its best robust and functional, focussed on the serious business of serving the fleet. Preservation of this purposeful feel is as important as preserving the buildings; here, minor details matter. At one end of the spectrum, ill-considered signs and, for example, badly-sited burglar alarms, a rash of bunting, troupes of entertainers masquerading as Jolly Jack Tars, the flotsam and jetsam of the Heritage Industry, can usually only detract. At the other, a sea of Heritage Good Taste, epitomised by the sudden appearance of acres of York stone paving, cannon-shaped bollards and reproduction gas lamps can be equally inimical. Dockyards especially were working places where money for maintenance was often short. Tar stains, tarmac, oily water, fading paintwork, piles of lumber, grass in corners, a trace of dereliction, were part and parcel of the scene; if these are all sanitised away, we are left with chocolate-box dockyards such as never existed (Coad 1993, 12).

Conservation work on naval bases in Britain has benefited over the last thirty or so years by a remarkable growth in public interest. The history of naval shore establishments, their architecture and engineering works, how they related to the fleet, how they were managed, and particularly the lives of those who lived and worked in them is attracting increasing attention. There is now a flourishing Naval Dockyards’ Society in the UK with a world-wide membership. The dockyards themselves are very much seen as an intrinsic part of a shared heritage rather than the secretive unknown establishments of half a century ago.

Bibliography

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