



A Brief History of
Devonport
Naval Base





Introduction

For over three centuries the lower reaches of the River Tamar have provided a safe haven for the ships and men of the Royal Navy. This stretch of water, known as the Hamoaze, derives its name from the term “Ham Ooze” used on early maps to indicate the large mud flats formed at the confluence of the Ham Brook and the main river at Weston Mill Creek.

Three miles distant from Plymouth, the eastern shore of the Hamoaze remained a green field site until the late 17th century. In just a few short years it was transformed into a thriving dockyard at the forefront of technology and a position that Devonport has never relinquished. Through the age of sail, the rise of steam, the development of ironclad battleships to the present day use of nuclear power, the dockyard has always remained at the cutting edge of industrial development. Today Devonport is still the largest naval base in Europe where sailors of the Royal Navy continue to join their

ships, as they have done for generations, to sail off to war or participate in peace-keeping operations. Through times of war and peace countless thousands of local people have laboured in the yard to build, equip and maintain the Navy's ships. Alongside major civil engineering triumphs such as the building of the Keyham Extension and most recently No. 9 Dock, there have been catastrophes, explosions, huge fires and the significant loss of life and devastation caused by the bombing of the last war.

Given the constraints of space this short guide cannot hope to provide a definitive account of the dockyard's history and its transformation into a modern naval base, equipped to service the naval vessels of the 21st century. Instead, its purpose is to give the reader an understanding of Devonport's rich tradition of providing support to the Fleet, past, present and into the future and its continuing importance to the Royal Navy.

Early Beginnings

Plymouth has been linked to naval warfare since the Middle Ages and came to prominence in Elizabethan times through events like the defeat of the Spanish Armada and the exploits of seafaring heroes such as Sir Francis Drake, Sir John Hawkins and Sir Walter Raleigh. Despite these associations, there was no formal naval interest in the port until the late 17th century, with matters such as the supply of victuals and hire of ship repair facilities being handled through appointed agents. During the reign of Charles 1, there were plans to build a Government dock at Saltash, but these had to be shelved in the face of strenuous local objections and from 1652 to 1672 all naval attention was centred on fighting wars against the Dutch.

However everything changed in 1688 with the landing of the Protestant William of Orange at Torbay and the subsequent flight of the Catholic King James II to France. This was the catalyst for the series of seven Anglo-French Wars that was to occupy 67 of the 127 years between 1689 and 1815.

At the time all English dockyards were concentrated in the east of the country and there were no western ports capable of repairing first and second rate ships of the line. The prevailing westerly winds meant it was easy for ships to become bottlenecked in the English Channel, whilst the French preferred to operate further to the west from their bases at Brest, Rochefort, Bordeaux, Nantes and Lorient. In May 1689 the French managed to land troops in Ireland and fought off a British cruising squadron

in Bantry Bay, which then had to return all the way back to Portsmouth for repairs. A new dockyard was urgently required in the West of England to counter the French menace and in September 1689, Edward Dummer, the Assistant Surveyor of the Navy, was instructed to survey possible sites for the building of a single dry dock. Dartmouth was dismissed as a possibility due to the narrowness of its harbour and initially Dummer's preferred choice was the Cattewater in Plymouth. However the requirement was progressively widened by the King and the Admiralty, first from a stone dock with a basin in front, to a fully fledged dockyard by July 1692.

The site chosen by Dummer was a small inlet at Point Froward on the Hamoaze. Situated in open countryside it had the benefit of being cheap compared with the cramped, existing port areas located around Sutton Pool and the Cattewater in Plymouth. In earlier times Sir Walter Raleigh had recommended the Hamoaze as a site for a naval dockyard. Admiral Killigrew had also used it successfully in 1690 to shelter his warships from the French under Tourville, siting guns for defence on Drake's Island and at the narrow Cremyll passage entrance to the Tamar. As a harbour the Hamoaze could safely take 150 line of sail, whilst the high rise and fall of tide, up to 19 ft on spring tides, made the docking of ships easier. Being some three miles away from Plymouth there was also less opportunity for valuable stores to be pilfered from any future dockyard.





Plymouth Dock, 1698

An Act of Parliament enabled 35 acres of land to be obtained from Sir Nicholas Morice and a Mr Doidge and on 18 January 1691 the yard's first Master Shipwright, Elias Waffe, was engaged. Construction of the dry dock began the same year with the principal contractor being Robert Walters, a Portsmouth mason. His initial tender was just £8,909, but costs rapidly spiralled as the scale of the envisaged dockyard increased. The completed dry dock, measuring 40 ft 6 ins x 170 ft, was built of stone and superior to anything else in the country at the time. It stood on the

site of the present No. 1 Dock and was connected to the main river by a wet basin, 256 ft x 200 ft, that could be filled and emptied by means of tidal movement using two sets of 50 ft wide dock gates.

The new dockyard was known as Plymouth Dock and by 1698 the first phase of construction was complete. Besides the dock complex, there was a large central storehouse, or "Magazine", two storeys high and 60 ft square, a variety of stores and workshops and a rope house 1,056 ft long that ran along an east - west axis. Dominating the skyline was a line of houses



The Terrace in all its glory before WW2. The original 1696 occupants were the Chirurgeon (senior medical officer), Master Caulker, Shipwright's Assistant, Clerk of the Survey, Master Attendant (Commissioner's secretary), Master Shipwright, The Commissioner, Clerk of the Cheque (cashier), Storekeeper, Clerk of the Ropeyards (master rigger), Master Rope Maker, Master Boat Builder and Boatswain of the Yard.



Bonaventure (left) and Flotilla Houses both date from 1696.

known as the "Terrace", which provided accommodation for the thirteen principal officers of the dockyard. These houses, stood untouched for 245 years, but were virtually destroyed during bombing raids on the night of 22/23 April 1941. Only two of the original 13 houses, Bonaventure House and Flotilla House, were left largely unscathed and these two buildings are now the oldest surviving examples of dockyard architecture anywhere in the country.



The bombed-out Terrace.