

CHAPTER 2

THE BUILDING OF THE ROYAL NAVAL BARRACKS

BUILDING work on the Barracks was finally commenced only after many years of proposals and counter proposals, negotiations and committees of inquiry. Plans for a naval barracks at Portsmouth were drawn up as early as 1862, when it was proposed to provide accommodation for 4,000 men on a site that has since been included in extensions to the Dockyard. The scheme was postponed, presumably on account of pressure on the Works Vote caused by plans for extending the Dockyard, and the matter remained in abeyance for a further fourteen years. It was revived in a Minute by the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Alexander Milne, in January, 1876; but nothing further was done until 1879, when a plan was approved for a barracks accommodating 4,000 men to be built on ground where bricks were then being made for the Dockyard extension works. The barracks was intended to replace the hulks forming the General Depot and also to accommodate the officers and men of the Gunnery and Torpedo ships "Excellent" and "Vernon." Work on the foundations was actually started, but the Board of Admiralty decided shortly afterwards to give up the idea for the time being and no further progress was made.

The question was raised again in 1884: in December, when replying to an inquiry from the Director of Works as to the amount of barracks accommodation needed at Portsmouth, the Commander-in-Chief stated that provision should be made for 3,000 men of the Depot and the Gunnery and Torpedo ships, preferably on a site near the Convict Prison. The Director of Works observed that there was no

site in that position nearly large enough for such a number of men.

About the same time a survey was made by the Superintending Civil Engineer, and his report recommended three main sites: that of the Anglesey* Barracks at Portsea, which was already occupied by the Army, Whale Island, and a site at Tipnor. The Board of Admiralty, believing that with only slight alterations the buildings could be modified to accommodate 800 officers and men, and that extensions could be made later to increase the total to 4,000, decided that the army barracks was the most suitable, if it could be purchased from the War Office. The First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir A. Hood, was decidedly in favour of it and—according to a Minute dated October 28th, 1885—considered that both Whale Island and Tipnor were very objectional locations for a naval barracks. Two of the other Sea Lords favoured replacing the old hulks by obsolete iron ships; and differences of opinion of this nature undoubtedly delayed progress for many years.

By the end of 1890 a gunnery establishment accommodating 40 officers and 800 men had been completed on Whale Island, but still no progress had been made in finding a site for the larger general barracks. Unofficial inquiries had suggested that the War Office could spare neither the Anglesey Barracks nor the military barracks at Gosport, which had also been considered as a site; and this led, in March, 1891, to an Admiralty decision that a barracks for one thousand officers and men, but capable of extension to provide for four thousand, should be constructed in the Dockyard. It was proposed to take over the Convict Prison and remodel its buildings for this purpose.

During the nineteenth century the prison had housed the convicts employed on the reclamation work that had as its result No. 3 Basin and all the northern end of the Dockyard (the spoil from the excavations had been

* It is thought that the military barracks derived its name from General the Marquis of Anglesey, 7th Hussars, Captain of Cowes Castle and Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland (Army List, 1828). For this reason the spelling "Anglesey" has been adopted, although "Anglesea" is frequently used elsewhere.

dumped on Whale Island and produced the island of today, some eight or ten times the size of the original mudbank). The extension of the Dockyard was due to be finished within the year and the Admiralty did not contemplate any further work on which convict labour could suitably be employed. But when approached about releasing the Convict Prison, the Home Office was unable to hold out any immediate possibility; so, in the circumstances, the Board of Admiralty decided to defer work on the barracks at Portsmouth and to commence building at Chatham instead. The Convict Prison, which stands near the main generating station, is now used as an electrical store and machine shop. The careful observer can deduce its origin from the four rows of small windows now bricked up but still discernable among the larger windows in use at present.

In reaching their decision the Board of Admiralty was of the opinion that: "The arrangements made for accommodating the seamen at Portsmouth in the old hulks alongside the Dockyard will probably answer the purpose for some years to come." But as Sir John Fisher, then a Rear-Admiral and Third Sea Lord, pointed out:

"The Superintendents of the Yards complain of the growing difficulty of providing for the berthing of ships. This difficulty will be greatly lessened when the Naval Barracks at Chatham and Portsmouth are provided as most valuable and considerable space is now occupied by the depot ships at these two places. . . . It is an extravagant employment of Dockyard accommodation to use it in berthing hulks."

The main problem at Portsmouth, as the foregoing paragraphs indicate, was to find a site for the proposed barracks, and for a time no other plan seemed feasible except the conversion of the Convict Prison. The Home Office was not the only opponent of that scheme however: the Dockyard itself was becoming increasingly congested and was looking to the prison as a site for expansion. As the Admiral Superintendent of the Dockyard, Admiral Charles G. Fane, put it at the time: "Our requirements are daily increasing, and no other suitable land

can ever be obtained to replace any now taken away." Furthermore, it was doubted by some whether a large enough naval barracks could be built on the site of the prison. The Convict Prison buildings could not house more than a thousand men, and the Commander-in-Chief, Admiral the Earl of Clanwilliam, foresaw difficulties. He reminded the Admiralty that the original intention had been to provide barracks' accommodation for 4,000 and asked whether the Board intended to adhere to this plan.

As a result he was requested by the Admiralty in May, 1893, to conduct an inquiry into the alternative possibilities of either converting the prison, as it stood, into a small barracks, or using its site for a barracks capable of housing 4,000 men. He appointed a small local committee of three Captains. In their report they agreed that it was impossible to devise a suitable scheme for using the existing prison buildings as a complete, though small, naval barracks; and that, though a larger barracks could be built on the site, if it was to accommodate 4,000 men there would be no room to spare and the parade ground would be small. The committee was also of the opinion that the land might be better employed for Dockyard purposes and questioned the wisdom of using it for a barracks at all. As an alternative it suggested the Anglesey Barracks once more and emphasised its advantages. Shortly afterwards the prison buildings were acquired by the Dockyard.

In January, 1894, the Board of Admiralty discussed the report submitted by the Commander-in-Chief and decided on a fresh approach to the War Office with a view to obtaining the Anglesey Barracks. In the subsequent negotiations the War Office pointed out that alternative quarters would have to be found for the regiment in garrison at Portsea, involving an expenditure of at least £165,000, and this figure eventually came to be taken as the sum for which the War Office would be willing to transfer the Anglesey Barracks to the Admiralty.

Before accepting these terms, however, the Admiralty appointed yet another committee, this time under Rear-Admiral Ernest Rice, who had just reported on the

barracks at Chatham, to inquire into all the possible sites for the proposed barracks. The Rice Committee, like its predecessor, favoured the Anglesey Barracks and stated further: "There is indeed no other site which can be spared from Dockyard purposes, and which can be obtained without an Act of Parliament and a very large expenditure." It recommended that the existing buildings should be entirely removed because the area was barely sufficient, even with very careful planning, to hold the buildings necessary for a large naval barracks: as it was, "the arrangement of the existing buildings absolutely prevents such economical planning." In the event, the construction of the Officers' Block on the opposite side of Edinburgh Road solved the problem of finding sufficient space and, as we shall see, some old buildings were retained.

The Board of Admiralty was fortunate in its acquisition, for the site of the Anglesey Barracks, so close to the Dockyard, had been preserved from urban development only by a turn of history closely linked to the very origin of the town of Portsea. By the close of the seventeenth century the old town of Portsmouth, its expansion prevented by the fortifications that encircled it, had become very overcrowded owing to the growth of the Dockyard during the Dutch Wars and the War of the Spanish Succession. The burgesses of the town, among their many privileges, controlled the use of the common fields lying between the Dockyard and the Mill Pond, a large tidal inlet alongside which stood a water mill that ground corn for the naval bakery; but by the early years of Queen Anne's reign the congestion in Portsmouth had become so acute that some of the shipwrights and other Dockyard workers built small houses on the Common close to the Dockyard gates. The Lieutenant-Governor, General Sir John Gibson, threatened to demolish these dwellings on the grounds that they were infringing established rights to the Common. Fortunately for the shipwrights the crisis coincided with a visit to Portsmouth from the Queen herself, accompanied by her consort Prince George of Denmark. They appealed to Her Majesty;

Prince George is said to have interceded on their behalf; and Queen Anne overcame the Lieutenant-Governor's opposition. In gratitude the inhabitants of the new town of Portsea called the first street they built Prince George Street, and their main thoroughfare Queen (Anne) Street.

Throughout the eighteenth century, with war the rule rather than the exception, the Navy expanded, Dockyard activity increased and Portsea prospered. Unlike Portsmouth, Portsea was free to expand because it was unfortified, and it quickly surpassed its parent town both in size and population (the first census taken shows that in 1801 the population of Portsea was 24,327 against Portsmouth's 7,839). In 1750 the authorities decided that the Dockyard was insufficiently protected and a scheme was prepared for the fortification of Portsea; but, as it happened, nothing practical was done for another twenty years. Work on the new fortifications was commenced in 1770, and it continued for over thirty years until massive defence works—bastions and demi-bastions, redoubts, ravelins, ramparts and moats—extending from the Mill Pond to the Sluice Battery, completely surrounded the new town.

Though the fortifications were not unsightly (the ramparts were thickly studded with trees and were pierced by two ornamental gateways, the Lion Gate and the Unicorn Gate) the policy of building fortifications on such a large scale may be questioned. The expense was great and the money might have been spent to better advantage by increasing the strength of the Fleet. There was, however, one good and lasting result: the fortifications prevented houses from spreading over the site now occupied by the Royal Naval Barracks and the Victoria Park opposite.

Henry Slight, writing in his "Royal Port, Garrison, Dockyard and Borough of Portsmouth" in the first half of the nineteenth century, states in describing the new defence works:

"The various bastions are much larger than those of Portsmouth, and in the internal angles are extensive paddocks of pasture land and a parade ground."

And it was on one of these open spaces, between York Place and the Duke of York's Bastion, that the Anglesey Barracks had been built by the War Office in 1848-9 to accommodate 1,000 officers and men. The main buildings of the barracks were the Soldiers' Barracks and the Officers' Quarters, the former being divided into fifty-three barrack rooms. Each room was originally intended for eighteen men, but this complement was reduced by the Military Committee of 1858. On the whole the Committee was favourably impressed with the design of the Anglesey Barracks, but in their report they mention certain inconveniences that throw some light on Service living standards of the day:

"There is no day room and no baths belonging to the barracks. The kitchens have boilers but no means of roasting meat. The ablution rooms are good but there are no wooden gratings for the men to stand on, and the floors being asphalted are usually damp and wet. The lower floors of the barracks have likewise floors of asphalt and are also open to objection."

The completion of the Hilsea Lines rendered the fortifications of Portsmouth and Portsea redundant; and between 1870 and 1876 the ramparts and other defence works were levelled, the earth and stone of which they were composed being used to fill up the moats and also the Mill Pond. The United Services sports grounds now occupy the site of the latter. Fortunately the Lion Gate and the Unicorn Gate were preserved and stand to this day, though not in their original positions.

The Lion Gate had been erected in 1777 across the end of Queen Street close to where the present main gate of the Barracks now stands. When the fortifications of Portsea were dismantled it was re-erected as the main gate of the Anglesey Barracks, and it served as such for several years before being replaced by the present less ornate but wider entrance. The stones of the gate then lay neglected for some years in the Dockyard, and a proposal to re-erect them as the entrance to Victoria Park was rejected by

the City Council in 1921. It was eventually decided eight years later to incorporate the gate into the new Semaphore Tower building in the Dockyard. The Unicorn Gate, which was built in 1778-9, stood originally between the Provost Prison and the Unicorn Ravelin. It was re-erected in Flat-house Road as a Dockyard gate with its front and back portions cemented together. Originally they were separated by thirty feet of earth and rubble rampart.

Once the purchase of the Anglesey Barracks had been completed, the Admiralty acquired several other buildings to extend the site. The ground now occupied by the Ward-room, garden and tennis courts was formerly the site of a military hospital, which had been built in the open space in the internal angle of the Townshend Bastion and extended later when the defence works were removed. The Admiralty agreed to provide a site and to pay for the building of a new hospital in return for the land, and this was eventually done after the turn of the century at a cost of £99,500. The Drill Shed of the Barracks originally belonged to the 3rd Volunteer Battalion of the Hampshire Regiment, and that regiment's crest is still to be seen carved in the stonework over one of the windows of the present Dental Department. £17,000 was paid for this property and two pieces of Admiralty land on opposite sides of Stanhope Road were also transferred to the Hampshire Regiment, the new Connaught Drill Hall subsequently being built on one of them.

The site of the Office Block was obtained from the Corporation for the replacement value of the buildings then on it (£2,500) plus a piece of land, which the Admiralty purchased from the War Office to hand over to the Corporation, on which the headquarters of the city's sewerage and street cleaning organisation were established. Later Holy Trinity Church was transferred to the Admiralty, with the consent of the Lord Bishop of Winchester, on payment of £5,000, the money being distributed among the necessitous churches of the city. Anchor Gate House, built for the Governor of the Convict Prison, is now the Commodore's House; and lastly, Old Anglesey Road, which ran from the present Wicket Gate of the

Barracks in a curved line to the North Gate, was closed with the consent of the Corporation.

Nine firms were invited by the Admiralty to submit tenders for the construction of the new barracks. The contract was won by Messrs. Lovett of Wolverhampton; building work commenced in October, 1899; and by September, 1903, the blocks, offices and other buildings were ready for occupation. The Officers' Quarters of the old military barracks were demolished, but the Soldiers' Barracks remain. They were badly damaged by bombing during the Second World War, the southern third being completely destroyed. The original School was also retained and, with the Schoolmasters' Room made into extra classrooms, performed the same function until very recently. The "piazza" along the front of the Soldiers' Barracks was demolished almost without trace of its former existence; that along the rear, however, is still in use. The most southerly of the covered ways leading from the Soldiers' Quarters to the Ablution Room and cookhouses was destroyed in the blitz, but the other two are still there. Most of the various small buildings along the western and southern walls of the old barracks are still used: the Stables have been converted into an Engineers' Workshop; the old Workshops and Orderly Room form part of the present Sick Bay; one of the old cookhouses is now a Boat Store; and coal is still stored in the original Coal Yard.

In design there is a strong likeness between one and another of the naval barracks of the three Home Ports, for those at Portsmouth and Chatham were modelled on the one at Devonport, on which work started in 1879. Local conditions, of course, caused modifications. At Portsmouth, for example, all the buildings could not be enclosed within one boundary and the Wardroom is separated by a public thoroughfare, Edinburgh Road, from the remainder of the establishment. There was also the Drill Hall, already in existence, to be incorporated in the plan.

There was no official ceremony to mark the opening of the new General Depot. It was placed under the command of Captain H. D. Barry and on September 30th, 1903, some 4,000 officers and ratings left the hulks and marched out of the Dockyard to take possession of their new quarters. The scene was described by the "Hampshire Telegraph" (3/10/03) at some length:

"Taking possession of the new Naval Barracks by the Seamen, Marines and Stokers of the Portsmouth Naval Depot on Wednesday had something like the appearance of a triumphal procession. Immense crowds lined the route from the Dockyard to the main gates in Edinburgh Road, and the Bluejackets were cheered loudly as they passed along.

"The hulks were vacated with no ceremony or regret as they were unpleasant and miserable quarters. There had been two rehearsals for the 4,000 men of taking possession of the Barracks. All furniture and mess traps had been got in previously. On Wednesday there was no drill on the Depot Ground, all hands clearing up. After dinner the men mustered in four companies—Chief Petty Officers, Seamen, Stokers and Marines. There were four bands present from the Naval Barracks, H.M.S. Excellent, H.M.S. St. Vincent and the Marines. At half past two the bugle sounded to go and the men marched off. There were immense crowds of spectators and difficulty was experienced by the Mounted Borough Police in keeping the road clear. Once inside, the gates were shut and the crowd besieged the railings to see what was to follow. The men were formed in a huge hollow square. Commander Stileman gave a few orders and closed with an intimation that there would be general leave that evening, an announcement which called forth a cheer. Then, to some lively tunes, the men marched off to their quarters.

"Each block is divided into two sections under a Warrant Officer, and the entire block is under a Lieutenant. When seen with the men sitting at the

mess tables, the long rooms (each holds 125 men) had the appearance of the decks of an old-fashioned line-of-battle ship. The men are to sleep in hammocks, of which there will be four rows extending the full length of the room. As compared with the old "Duke" and the "Marlborough" the quarters are a perfect palace with electric light, lavatories on each floor and water taps in every room, which are lofty and well lighted. The Chief Petty Officers occupy a block to themselves, and the Warrant Officers have a block looking into a large drill hall."

The building of the Barracks was indeed a major improvement in the conditions of naval service in Portsmouth, and as the "Portsmouth Evening News" (30/9/03) commented on the exodus from the hulks at the time: "It is remarkable that so many hundreds of men should have been compelled to live in such undesirable quarters for so long." Even the "perfect palace" of the early twentieth century would not, however, be tolerated today. This was made perfectly clear by the comments of the onlookers when a tableau depicting conditions on the mess decks of 1903 appeared at the celebrations marking the golden jubilee of the Barracks fifty years later!

After an initial settling in period, the new barracks was ready in February, 1904, for inspection by King Edward VII. According to the "Hampshire Telegraph" (27/2/04): "At a quarter past three the Royal train drew into the station. Inside the Barracks a guard of honour of a hundred men of the Royal Marine Light Infantry was drawn up, while facing the entrance was a large body of sailors. His Majesty, after acknowledging the salute, entered the men's recreation rooms. With characteristic thoughtfulness, King Edward dismissed the parade as it was by this time raining hard. He spent some time in the recreation rooms, and then crossed over to the Stokers' block. Entering the subsidiary block on the ground floor, he visited the bathrooms etc., and then going upstairs he went into the clean cheerful cooking room, and saw the school-



[Photo: Gale & Polden Ltd.]

H.R.H. the Duchess of Kent presenting the Queen's Colour to the Officer of the Royal Guard during the Ceremony of Dedication at the Royal Naval Barracks, Portsmouth, on May 22nd, 1952



[Photo: Gale & Polden Ltd.]

The Royal Naval Band leading the parade at the Trooping of the Queen's Colour in the Royal Naval Barracks, Portsmouth

room and other divisions of the block. Crossing over to the living block His Majesty went into one of the Stokers' long rooms, and saw for himself the conditions under which the sailors live when in Barracks. The men's kits and everything connected with their arrangements were laid out for his inspection.

"The Officers' quarters were then visited. By direction of the King, his carriage was opened so that everyone should be able to see him. For in spite of all efforts to keep strict privacy, the fact that the King was in the Naval Barracks had spread far and wide."

This visit was followed in March by one from the Prince of Wales, who next returned as King George V in July, 1910. In the last month of 1903 the first issue of the "Victory" cap ribbons took place; but it was not until April, 1905, that all hands were transferred from the books of the Commander-in-Chief's yacht "Firequeen" to those of the "Victory" and the transition from the hulks to the Royal Naval Barracks was finally completed.