

LEYDENE

Mountbatten Block is a milestone in the history of the Signal School. Perhaps this would be an appropriate moment to remember what has gone before. Much of the following was written in the first issue of this Magazine for Easter, 1947.

The Main House, though started in 1914, was not finished until 1924. The owner, Countess Peel, was still in residence, when Leydene House was requisitioned by the Admiralty in 1941.

For some years prior to the last war, the necessity for H.M. Signal School to be a separate establishment had become apparent. Until then it had been a part of the Royal Naval Barracks, Portsmouth. Plans were all prepared for erecting an imposing structure where the A.D. & D.C. School now stands. The war, however, caused this project to be shelved.

When air attacks started on a large scale in 1940, it became essential to move as many Establishments as possible from the Portsmouth area. The Signal School in common with other parts of the R.N. Barracks had received damage.

The experimental section of the Signal School was transferred to Lythe Hill House, Haslemere, now occupied by the Commodore, Naval Drafting and his staff. In June 1941 Captain G. H. Warner, then Captain of the Signal School, visited Leydene and decided it was suitable for the new home of the Branch.

Shortly afterwards, an advance party under the direction of Lieutenant A. E. Cullimore was sent to prepare the way. Lieutenant Commander the Hon. R. Napier supervised the planning and Commander J. H. C. Willoughby was later appointed as Executive Officer.

During the period of preparation a land mine was dropped roughly where the .303 rifle range now stands. This severely shook the building. Happily, this was the last sign of enemy activity in the immediate vicinity.

On August 16th, 1941, the Signal School started to function on its new site and was commissioned as H.M.S. *Mercury*.

In the Editorial of the Easter 1948 issue, it is recorded that the pagan god Mercury was the god of "eloquence, theft, merchandise and trade". This seems most appropriate. Eloquence for skill with the microphone, theft, we hope, being confined to stealing signals out of the air and those who have seen the activity in the First Lieutenant's Office in selling plants, flowers and logs, apart from the success of the pig farm with the hundreds of pounds it has made for the Welfare Fund, cannot doubt the blessing conferred by the last two attributes of the god.

His Caduceus—the winged staff entwined by two serpents—is a symbol of happy understanding as when Mercury plunged his staff between two fighting snakes they entwined themselves lovingly around it and each other.

Mercury was, of course, the very ready messenger of the greater gods. His name has also been given to the bright planet nearest to the sun and to the most fluid of metallic elements. He is the synthesis of beauty with duty, grace with efficiency and speed with readiness to serve. What name could be better?

He also led the souls of the dead to the underworld. This need not worry the New Entries as it is well known that the souls of mariners change into sea gulls and squawk for gash on the lower booms of ships.

The first contingent of ratings numbered about 300. They slept in tents in what is now East Camp and they fed in the space that is now the Wardroom Mess. The summer was very wet but the luxury of nissen huts arrived before the winter with *only* 24 accommodated in each.

The numbers in the camp increased rapidly and at peak periods it reached 1,200. There was little to offer in the field of entertainment, sport or even comfort. Nissen huts seemed to be the fate of Communicators wherever they went, though these poor conditions were accepted as the necessity was understood.

The theatre was completed in July 1943, and was the first major amenity provided. Since that day it has done noble service.

The real turning point in the history of Leydene was its purchase by the Admiralty in 1950. At last we had a permanent home and building could start. First, the nissen accommodation where many froze in the winter and baked in the summer gave way to modern blocks. Now, the last real horror of the past—the messdecks and galley—has been replaced. There is still much to be done but no one can deny that the worst is over.

While this building was going on, enormous progress was being made in providing sports grounds. Jo's Meadow and Hyden Wood were carved out of forest and undergrowth by bull dozers and the First Lieutenant's working parties. St. James' was also made into a soccer pitch and work still proceeds. Unfortunately, Hyden Wood ground has run into drainage problems but a most generous grant from the Admiralty will put this to rights, though it may be out of action next year.

Mountbatten Block has, at last, provided a vital need. In this fine new building there are now spacious and well heated dining halls, lounges, television rooms and N.A.A.F.I. bars and restaurants. In some ways it seems that we have gone from one extreme to another. From the depth of squalor to the height of luxury, but it would seem a just reward for the uncomplaining acceptance for so long of what the war left.

Some idea of this new addition, to those who have not seen it, can be gauged from the photographs in this issue. You will not be disappointed when you return to *Mercury*.

The new Instructional Block should start this year, but after the permanent accommodation none will be appreciated as much as this new Mess and Recreation Block.