Digital map Chatham Contagious diseases Act from Lucy’s Journey

Chatham

By the nineteenth century the town of Chatham, strategically located on the River Medway, had established itself as a major naval and military base, most notably represented by the presence of H.M Dockyard Chatham and the Headquarters of the Corps of Royal Engineers.

During the course of the industrial revolution from the mid 18th century, the [Chatham Dockyard](/19c/19c-chatham-dockyard) became, quite literally, a powerhouse driving progress in mechanisation, engineering, manufacturing and training. Although the Dockyard had a 300 year long history of building wooden wall warships, including HMS Victory in 1765, the gradual silting of the Medway led to a concentration on ship repair and refitting. The onset of the industrial revolution, however, provided the dockyard with the opportunity to dredge, reclaim and expand, so that by the mid 19th century the dockyard once again emerged as a major warship builder, at a time when the Royal Navy was introducing modern, steam driven, ironclad and armoured vessels. The dockyard built warships from scratch, employing the latest industrial techniques, and using raw materials shipped by river and rail. Imperial expansion during the period of Pax Britannica (1815-1914) meant that the yard thrived, employing thousands of skilled workers and housing thousands of sailors and their families. Chatham division was one of 3 Naval Divisions (the others being at Portsmouth and Devonport) to which Royal Navy ships and their crews were attached.

Whilst much of the physical work carried out in the 19th century expansion was provided by convict labour, the Dockyard’s neighbours at the Corps of Royal Engineers provided design and engineering expertise. Indeed, the relationship between the Royal Navy at Chatham and the Corps of Royal Engineers developed to such an extent that, in 1886, an army engineer, Major Pilkington, was appointed to the Dockyard as Superintendent Engineer.

**Contagious Diseases Act and Lock Hospitals**

Following public concern over an increase in prostitution and venereal disease, reflecting the rapid rise in population, urban living and increased mobility, Parliament passed the Contagious Diseases Act in 1864. The act was specifically targeted at ports and garrison towns with, unsurprisingly, Chatham qualifying as both. The objective of the Act was to reduce venereal disease that, in addition to its implications for personal and social health, was also affecting the efficiency of the armed services. The Act empowered policemen to arrest suspected prostitutes and take them to police stations, where they were subjected to what was often a forcible examination. These examinations, exclusively carried out by male physicians, had to determine whether or not venereal disease was present. If this was shown to be the case, then the legislation permitted the unfortunate woman to be taken to a Lock Hospital – so called because the patients were locked up - where she would be detained until cured, a process that could take months. Many women who were arrested and subjected to a painful examination were not prostitutes, and this Act therefore put innocent women at risk of public humiliation and disgrace.

Chatham’s purpose built Lock hospital was constructed in 1869, and was used to treat those arrested under the Act from Chatham, Gravesend, Maidstone and Sheerness. The use of the Lock Hospital reduced prostitution in these towns, although this reduction coincided with increased police observation of suspected brothels.

The Act, which had no provision for sanctions against men who used prostitutes, was seen as discriminatory towards women by campaigners such as Josephine Butler, although Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, the first English female physician agreed with the Act as a means of protecting women and children. The Act did not last long, however, and was finally repealed in 1886.

Article written by Martin Watts