**Chatham Dockyard**

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The 19th century saw Chatham Dockyard rise to a pre-eminent position among naval dockyards, with its prime location and key participation in the industrial revolution. Sheltered and with easy access to London, the docks in Chatham were considerably larger than those in the capital such as Blackwall and Deptford, and were therefore able to keep pace with the increasing size of warship required by the Royal Navy. A visit to the Dockyard today will show the transformation from the trade skills, timber and canvas of sailing ships to the heavy manufacturing skills, iron hull and steam engine driven warships. HMS *Gannet*, on display at the yard, is a fine example of the way in which manufacture and materials were transformed in the mid 19th century.

Two components of the industrial revolution transformed Chatham. Firstly, management was modernised with two levels of supervisor being replaced by foremen in 1822 and, inn 1832 the Superintendents Act enabled the dockyard to appoint, a serving Admiral specially recruited to run the dockyard. The Act allowed the Admiral to maintain his naval rank and seniority, thereby opening the position to more career minded naval officers. By contrast, the preceding system had seen the superintendent’s position being used to accommodate passed over officers who had reached the end of their career. Secondly, the dockyard was physically developed to incorporate its own furnaces, boiler making facilities and extended workshops. It was this expansion, incorporating covered building slips that enabled all weather construction, that led to Chatham becoming a key industrial centre; what would be known today as a military and industrial complex .

Whilst women had previously only been employed in the colour loft, making and repairing flags for the fleet, the mechanised Ropery introduced ‘outside women’ in 1864, employed at lower pay than men. They were called ‘outside’ because the ‘inside’ women in the loft, who enjoyed enhanced status and respect, were solely recruited from the widows and daughters of sailors lost at sea. Such respect was not granted to ‘outside’ women however, and to preserve dignity, their hours of work differed from those of the men, thus avoiding congestion of the sexes when entering and leaving the yard.

The last major work at Chatham was the reclaiming and building of St. Mary’s Island, between 1862 and 1885, which quadrupled the size of the dockyard. This was the largest civil engineering project ion South East England until the building of the Channel tunnel. On completion of this project Chatham became the naval dockyard of choice for the building of an y new class of battleship, but this pre-eminence only lasted for 20 years. This was due to the arrival of Admiral John ‘Jackie’ Fisher as First Sea Lord, and he preferred Portsmouth for the construction of HMS Dreadnought, the first of a revolutionary class of all big gun capital ship. Afterwards, Chatham was used to construct smaller warships and submarines and developed an extensive repair operation during the First World War.

**Bibliography**

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