

CHAPTER 7

BETWEEN THE WARS

EVEN though the number of men within the Barracks had been much reduced from its war-time record level through demobilisation, problems of accommodation still remained in the immediate post-war years. The Warrant Officers' Mess, now largely the present Dental Department, had become too small because of increasing numbers, and some Warrant Officers had to be housed in small and relatively uncomfortable cubicles on the top floors of A, M and V blocks. In January, 1923, work was started on a new seventy-cabin Warrant Officers' Block along the northern side of the parade ground, and it was completed and first occupied in December, 1926. Additional accommodation also had to be provided at this time in the Chief Petty Officers' Mess to receive the Chief Stokers, who joined in June, 1924.

It is interesting, in the light of the previous history of the site of the Barracks, that when the piles were being driven prior to laying the foundations of the Warrant Officers' Block, traces of an old water channel were discovered just in front of what is now the main entrance. The channel once formed part of the moat that encircled the ramparts of Portsea and forked to surround the Duke of York's bastion at this spot. When preparatory work was recently being carried out on the foundations of the new Chief Petty Officers' Block, which was opened in July, 1960, difficulties connected with the old defence works were encountered again. Some of the piles went down less than ten feet and others over forty feet, depending upon whether they struck the remains of the old walls or went down into the moat, and pumping was necessary for a long period to keep the workings free of water.

On Tuesday, June 29th, 1926, the presentation of a

King's Colour to Portsmouth Command opened a new phase in naval ceremonial. Previously whenever the Navy and the Army provided joint guards of honour, for the Monarch or on other special occasions, the naval guard appeared to the onlookers to be at somewhat of a disadvantage in respect of the trappings of ceremony because the military guard carried Regimental or King's Colours, whereas the Navy had none. The Navy's lack of a Colour was also open to criticism on the grounds that it appeared to the uninitiated on these occasions that the Senior Service was paying marks of respect to the other Service, although in reality the salute was given not to the body of troops concerned but to their Colour.

In order to overcome this apparent anomaly, His Majesty graciously approved the introduction of King's Colours for the Royal Navy. They are used only on special occasions and are accorded the same marks of respect as King's Colours or Regimental Colours in the Army. The first presentation ceremony took place on the parade ground of the Barracks and was followed later by the presentation of Colours at Chatham and Devonport. A battalion of ratings from various establishments in the Command formed the parade and when

"The Commander-in-Chief (Admiral Sir Osmond de B. Brock) took up his position in front of the piled drums . . . the battalion on parade immediately came to the salute. The King's Colour, which was encased, was then borne on to the parade ground by Chief Petty Officer Griffiths, accompanied by an armed escort. Upon arriving before the Commander-in-Chief the Colour was handed to Lieutenant-Commander C. H. Ringrose, who uncased and unfurled it and laid it on the drums. The Colour Officer (Lieut. K. S. Lyle) and the escort then approached the drums, Lieut. Lyle kneeling before the Commander-in-Chief, who removed the Colour from the drums, and placed it in the Colour stock. Bearing the Colour, Lieut. Lyle rose and faced the battalion, which gave the Colour the Royal Salute. The Colour party afterwards joined the battalion, which marched past the Com-

mander-in-Chief in columns of company in line." (Hampshire Telegraph, 27/7/26.)

Afterwards the Colour was carried to the Wardroom for safe keeping.

The Invergordon mutiny in 1931, with its widespread repercussions, was the next major naval event to affect, though indirectly, the normal course of life of the Barracks. Some of the men concerned in the disturbances were accommodated in the Barracks for a short time, pending draft to new ships. But more important proved to be the fact that the inquiries held into the incidents by the Commanders-in-Chief of the Home Ports revealed that one of the grievances of the ratings was the high rents for houses they were forced to pay at their home bases. In November, 1931, the Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth, asked the Portsmouth Corporation in a speech delivered at an official banquet whether anything could be done to provide suitable accommodation at economical rents for the lower paid ratings. Like the Navy, however, the City Council itself was in the process of taking a series of economy measures at this time and was unable to help directly.

The problem was then taken up by the Portsmouth Port Committee of the Royal Naval Benevolent Trust and a plan was formulated for the Trust to put up £5,000 to form the capital of a Naval Housing Association. The Port Committee recommended this plan to the Central Committee of the Trust, stating that Portsmouth would favour similar action in Devonport and Chatham when the representatives of those ports thought fit; but both the Chatham and Devonport representatives opposed any such scheme and the Portsmouth proposal was rejected.

At this stage the Canteen Committee of the Barracks intervened, and in June, 1932, decided to undertake the housing scheme. Early in 1933 the Admiralty was approached about a plot of land at Tipnor that was joint Admiralty and War Office property, and it was obtained for a nominal sum on the Admiralty stipulation that a Public Utility Society should be formed to carry out building operations, membership of the Society being restricted

to ex-Naval officers and ratings, with the Commodore of the Royal Naval Barracks as the *ex officio* Chairman.

The Canteen Committee loaned the society (the "Victory" Housing Society (Portsmouth) Ltd. as it was called) £6,000 free of interest, and £34,000 repayable at current rates of interest was borrowed from the Public Works Loans Board through the Portsmouth Corporation. 132 low rental houses together with a shop and a post office were built at Tipnor with this capital.

Immediately after the conclusion of the Second World War, when the need for cheap housing was again most urgent, the "Victory" Housing Society formed another similar society to build houses in Gosport. Once again the site was bought and initial operations commenced with a loan from the Canteen Committee of the Barracks, though this time the amount had to be increased to £10,000. A further loan from the Public Works Board of £32,000 enabled 278 semi-detached houses to be built on the Bridgemary site.

As the "Victory" housing scheme got under way, other plans to help the sailor in his private life were on foot in the Barracks. One result was that in the autumn of 1935 a Welfare Organisation was set up in a couple of offices in the Commodore's Block to help with the personal problems of all Portsmouth based ratings. The first Family Welfare Officer was Paymaster Captain Burkinshaw, a retired officer, who had under him a small staff of civilians, one of whom, Mrs. Langdon, gave many years of devoted service. Shortly after the formation of the Portsmouth Welfare Organisation, Devonport and Chatham followed suit. From its small beginnings welfare work has grown to such an extent that the offices, now located in the Canteen Block, house a staff of over twenty.

Vocational training, in the form of bricklayer's and handyman's courses for those about to leave the Service on pension, was another innovation, and one tangible result was a show villa built on a plot of Admiralty land adjoining Pitt Street Recreation Ground by men taking the courses. It was opened for inspection by the public in

February, 1935. The formation of the Interport Naval Tailors' Association must also be mentioned, resulting as it did from a series of meetings between representatives from the Barracks, and other near-by establishments, and the local tailors over the question of debts and allotments.

Favourable publicity was received by the Royal visits to the Barracks that took place in the nineteen-thirties. In the second week of July, 1932, King George V and the Prince of Wales paid an informal visit while passing through Portsmouth on their return from an inspection of the Home Fleet at Weymouth. Then in June, 1936, 4,600 men, 2,500 of whom were from the Barracks paraded in the drizzling rain for the visit of King Edward VIII. Just before the arrival of His Majesty the rain became so heavy that the inspection had to be transferred to the Drill Hall. In May, 1937, the accession of King George VI was marked by a Coronation Naval Review at Spithead followed by a ball for 1,500 guests given in the Gymnasium of the Barracks by the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty. Later in the same year, in November, their Lordships held an inspection at which over 3,000 men were present.

In the last two years of the decade large musters of men at the Barracks began to take on a more sinister purpose because of the turn of international events. After the issue of the first proclamations mobilising the Royal Navy and Royal Marine Reserves in September, 1938, men of all classes and professions converged from all parts of the country on the Barracks, filling it to capacity, and for some days Queen Street was thronged with naval personnel passing between the Barracks and the Dockyard to man the Reserve Fleet. In the event, the war that threatened was, as we now know, only temporarily averted. Thus what seemed at the time to have been only a false alarm actually proved a most effective and searching test of the mobilisation organisation at the Barracks, and when the war finally came in September, 1939, as Admiral Sir William James confirms in his book "The Sky Was Always Blue," it functioned almost exactly according to plan.

"As soon as the Royal Proclamation was posted, Royal Fleet Reservemen, Pensioners, Royal Naval Reservemen and Royal Naval Volunteer Reservemen began to pour into the Barracks. The mobilisation went like clockwork; I have seldom seen anything better done. The Reservists were shepherded first to the doctors, then to the dentists, then to the oculists; they drew their kit and some advance pay and were then directed to lorries marked with the names of their ships. . . .

There were some amusing incidents later on when conscription brought to the Barracks and camps men from every walk of life. One man, who had been celebrating his call-up, arrived with a carpet bag and a hot-water bottle and asked to be called next morning at seven with a cup of tea! I wish I had been able to follow his career; I feel sure he commanded a ship before the war was over."

And so the Royal Naval Barracks began to make preparations to meet its second trial by war.