

CHAPTER I

THE HULKS

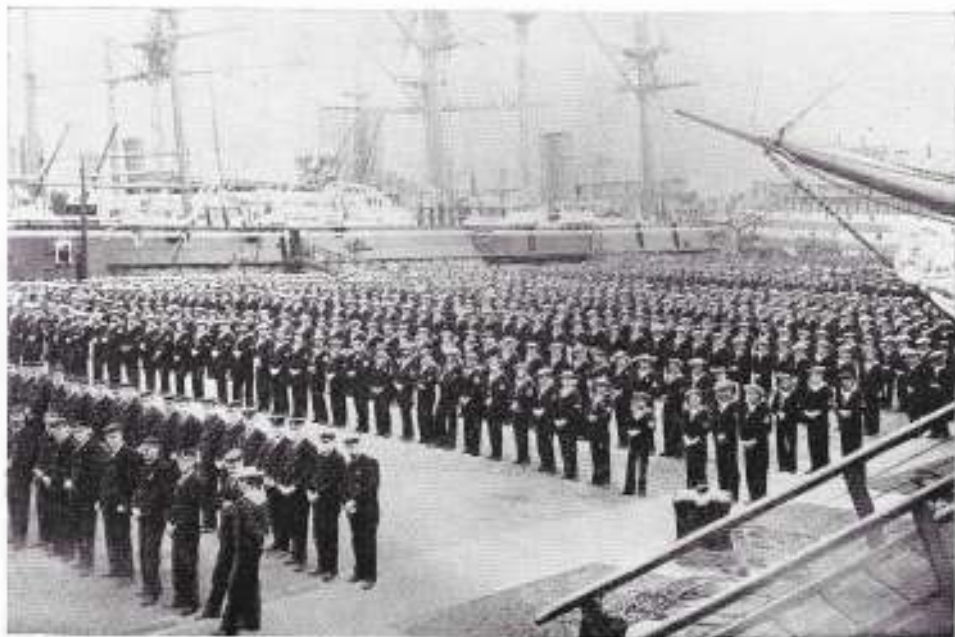
ALTHOUGH opened as late as 1903, the Royal Naval Barracks, Portsmouth, has the roots of its history deep in the 19th century. In fact it is necessary to go back as far as the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 to trace its origin. After the Wars, as the strength of the Navy was reduced, the press-gang method of recruiting seamen ceased and crews had to be obtained wholly by voluntary enlistment. This entailed appointment by the Admiralty of only the Captain, Officers and a detachment of Marines to each newly commissioned ship. The appointed Captain then opened a recruiting office, usually in some popular tavern close to the dockyard, and as fast as men could be induced to join the ship's company they were entered for the period of the commission and put to work preparing the ship for sea. The ship at this stage was little more than a bare shell; she was stripped to her lower masts, and spars, sails, rigging, guns, ammunition and all the other thousand and one smaller items required by a sea-going vessel had to be obtained from the dockyard. There was no living accommodation ready, and for this reason a hulk was attached to each ship fitting out, the new crew being sent to it as soon as their names were entered in the ship's books.

Living conditions on board the hulks were notoriously bad. The men were strangers to each other and theft was rife. They were worked hard, but poorly fed and ill-clad in return; and often they were in debt to the Crown for selling their official issue of sea kit when paid off from previous ships. Furthermore, they had no prospect of pay until the ship was ready for sea, and then they received only a small advance on their wages on the day before sailing. One exception to the general

rule was the "Bellerophon," which had been fitted out as a model hulk at Portsmouth. The remainder of the hulks were cold, dark and badly ventilated; the food provided was very poor, even by the standards of those days; the seamen had no mess traps; and it was difficult, if not impossible, for them to wash themselves or their clothes.

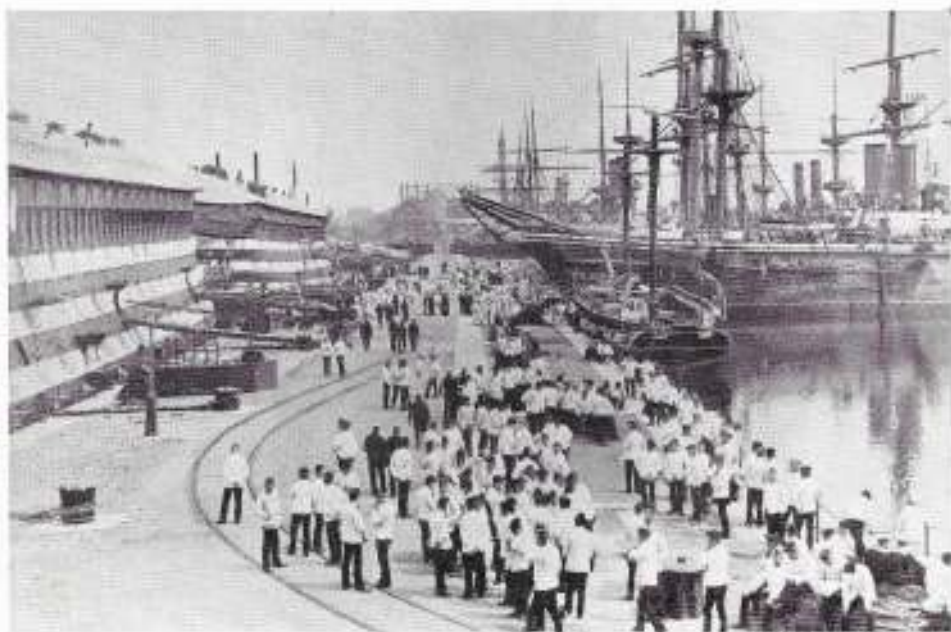
"I think these hulks are the curse of the Navy," asserted Admiral Sir Charles Napier; and so they were inasmuch as their existence largely accounted for the unpopularity of service under the Crown during the early years of Queen Victoria's reign. It was due to the hardships the crews suffered while their ships were being got ready for sea that the first suggestion for barracks to be built in the dockyards was made in 1858. The proposal was not pressed at the time because it seemed better, and cheaper, to improve conditions in all the hulks to the standard of the "Bellerophon," but the idea was to bear fruit at a later date.

During the long years of peace that followed the defeat of Napoleon, the Admiralty was faced with a manning problem that grew steadily more insistent. To quote Admiral Napier once more: "Since the peace of 1815 we have contented ourselves with going from hand to mouth and we have no regular system of manning the Fleet of any description whatever." In addition to attracting new recruits it became increasingly important to stop the wastage of men from the Royal Navy to other employment afloat caused by the bad conditions of service under the Crown. In 1849 Good Conduct Pay was instituted, and a further effort was made in 1852 with the establishment of a committee under Admiral Sir William Parker to consider the whole question of manning the Fleet. The most important recommendation made by the committee was that long service engagements should be introduced for general service, thus abolishing the sailor's privilege of choosing a particular ship in which to serve. As an inducement for men to volunteer for ten years' continuous service, substantial improvements in pay and pensions were made, and promotion prospects



Divisions at the old General Depot

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"Duke of Wellington" and "Marlborough" alongside the dockyard wall. Men of the Royal Marine Light Infantry in the foreground

were brightened by the introduction of two new rates: Leading Seaman and Chief Petty Officer.

Only a year after the recommendations of the Parker Committee had been put into effect the Crimean War broke out and large fleets were dispatched to the Baltic and the Black Sea. Recruits were not hard to find as the war was popular, at least in its initial stages, but considerable difficulty and delay occurred in getting newly commissioned ships to sea, and even when they were at sea the inexperience of the hands was evident. Rear-Admiral George Elliot records that "In the Baltic Fleet we had a great many landsmen; it was impossible to do anything with them. I do not think half a dozen would ever have made able seamen." This, and other similar observations, disturbed both the Government and the general public. The result was the establishment of a Royal Commission on manning the Fleet in 1858. The whole report of the Commission is of great interest to the naval historian; but its main recommendations for our purposes were that a permanent reserve of four thousand men should be kept ready in the Home Ports to complete the crews of those ships not in commission and that living conditions in the hulks should be improved.

The policy of maintaining permanent naval personnel recruited for continuous and general service, with reserves at the Home Ports, has remained substantially the same since 1859. It quickly produced changes in the Home Ports. Accommodation for a large number of men after their return from paying-off leave became a major problem, and for this purpose the "Hannibal," built in 1840 as a 90-gun ship at Woolwich, was selected to act as a receiving ship at Portsmouth. Her capacity soon proved insufficient, however, and the same year, 1863, she was superseded by the "Duke of Wellington." At a later date, 1881, the "Hannibal" was converted into a hulk and for many years formed part of the old General Depot, the predecessor of the Royal Naval Barracks.

The "Duke of Wellington" had been launched at Pembroke as the "Windsor Castle" in September, 1852, on the day on which the Duke of Wellington died—hence the change of name. She was a 131-gun screw ship of the line and, after having seen service in both the Baltic and the Mediterranean during the Crimean War, she had lain idle in Portsmouth Harbour for nearly five years before being commissioned as a receiving ship. In February, 1869, she hoisted the flag of the Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth, continuing as flagship until 1891, when the flag was transferred to the "Victory." The "Duke of Wellington" was then dismantled and placed alongside the outer wall of the rigging basin in Fountain Lake as a hulk to form part of the General Depot. In terms of the modern Dockyard she lay where the Asia Pontoon is now. This name was derived from another of the hulks, the "Asia," which wore the flag of the Admiral Superintendent of the Dockyard and was the guardship of the Steam Ordinary, or Steam Reserve as it was later called. On board the "Asia" a permanent staff of Artificers, Artisans and Engine Room Ratings was kept to service the men-of-war in the Dockyard, but the crew became so large that in December, 1888, the "Marlborough" had to be attached to relieve the congestion.

The "Marlborough" had been launched at Portsmouth as a 131-gun ship in 1855 and, after serving as a receiving ship attached to the "Asia," she too became one of the hulks forming the General Depot. She finished her long career as part of the Torpedo School, H.M.S. "Vernon." The history of the "Asia" herself is even more interesting. She had been laid down in Bombay as an 84-gun ship in 1819 and arrived at Portsmouth in 1824. Present at the battle of Navarino in 1827 as the flagship of Sir Edward Codrington, she later served in the Pacific, returning from that commission in 1841. She was not employed again until 1859, when she became the guardship of the Steam Reserve.

The Steam Reserve and the General Service Depot functioned as separate entities for many years; but it became more obvious each year during the mobilisation

of the Fleet that the system was inefficient because of the administrative difficulties involved. Finally, after the manoeuvres of 1887-89 had disclosed a number of defects in organisation, a small committee of inquiry was appointed by the Admiralty with the result that in 1891 several changes were made in the organisation of the Home Ports, the main one being that the Steam Reserve and the General Service Depots were combined to form one General Depot. At Portsmouth the "Duke of Wellington," "Marlborough," "Hannibal," "Asia" and "Victory" formed the General Depot, originally under the command of the Flag Captain of "Victory" and later under a separate Captain of the General Depot. These ships were superseded by the building of the Royal Naval Barracks and the transference of the function of the General Depot to it, though the "Victory" has, of course, remained the flagship of the Commander-in-Chief.

Before turning to the building of the Barracks, it may be of interest to indicate the lines on which the old General Depot was organised. The "Standing Orders of the Royal Naval Depot, Portsmouth, 1899," show that it consisted of:

- "Victory"—Signal School and receiving ship for Boys
First Class;
- "Duke of Wellington"—Receiving ship for Stokers,
Seamen, Artisan Ratings (ship's company) and
Domestics;
- "Marlborough"—Wardroom and Gunroom Officers and
Stokers Second Class;
- "Hannibal"—Marines, New Entries and all other Artisan
Ratings;
- "Asia"—Warrant Officers, Engine Room Artificers, Chief
Stokers and Chief Carpenters' Mates.