



## HMS 'Worcester'



### History (1)

In the middle of the last century, following the introduction of competency exams in 1851, the need for pre-sea training was recognised for potential officers in the Royal and Merchant Navy. This led to a group of London shipowners founding the 'Thames Nautical Training College' in 1862. The Admiralty was approached for the loan of a suitable ship and was allocated the 'two-decker' HMS 'Worcester'. At the time, the Royal Navy was starting to replace their fleet of 'wooden walls' with iron clad vessels. They had a vast surplus of such vessels and the 1473 ton 50 gun 'Worcester' was then laid up in the Nore. She had been built in Deptford Yard in 1843 and nearly £1,000 was spent on her conversion to a training ship prior to her being moved to her first base in Blackwall Reach. Within a year she was moved to Erith, thence in 1869 to Southend before finally moving in 1871 to what became a base forever associated with the 'Worcester' - the village of Greenhithe on the Kent shore and where successive ships remained until the 1970s.



*Ingress Abbey*

Over fifty years passed before a permanent shore base was established in 1920, with the purchase of the Ingress Abbey estate which provided space for playing fields, offices, a sanatorium, laundry and a swimming pool.

## History (2)

Starting with just 18 cadets, the numbers grew rapidly and there was soon a waiting list for entry. Official recognition soon followed - the Board of Trade allowed two years' satisfactory 'Worcester' training to count in part towards a watchkeeping certificate, and in 1867 Queen Victoria instituted a Gold Medal for presentation annually.



*HMS 'Worcester' (II) at the turn of the 20th Century.*

By the mid-1870s the first 'Worcester' was clearly too small for the task and the Admiralty was approached for the loan of a larger vessel, and in 1876 the College was allocated the two-decked battleship 'Frederick William'. She was an unusual vessel in many respects; her tonnage of 4,725 and length of 214 feet made her very much larger than even the preserved 'Victory'. She had commenced building in Portsmouth in 1833 as a 110-gun three-decker to be named the 'Royal Sovereign'. Construction of wooden ships was always a lengthy process but particularly so in her case - renamed 'Royal Frederick' whilst still on the stocks the design was changed in 1859 to a two-decker to carry 116 guns. There was one final batch of changes before launching in 1860 - engines and boilers were installed and her armament was reduced to 86 guns. To add to the confusion her name was changed yet again as a compliment to the King of Prussia and she was launched - 27 years after first laid down - as the 'Frederick William'.

## History (3)

Those who have visited Portsmouth Dockyard in recent years will have seen the stunningly restored HMS 'Warrior' - one of the world's first iron clad battleships. She was launched within a few months of the 'Frederick William', whose design instantly became obsolete so it is not surprising that immediately on launching she was 'paid off' into the reserve fleet at Portsmouth. She later spent two years as an Irish coastguard vessel but in 1868 she was laid up indefinitely in Portsmouth and with her machinery removed was earmarked for service as a hulk.

So the 'Frederick William' changed her name yet again, to become the second 'Worcester' and was moved to Greenhithe in 1877 where she could comfortably accommodate over 150 cadets, though at one time it had been suggested 250 was a suitable figure! For the next 62 years she served her purpose well and many improvements were made over the years. She was eventually connected to the shore for power and water supplies, but the problems of maintaining a ship whose construction had commenced a century before became more and more acute and thoughts were turning to a possible replacement.



*This silver model of HMS 'Worcester' (II) was presented by cadets to Queen Victoria and can still be seen at Osborne House, Isle of Wight.*

## History (4)

When the clipper 'Cutty Sark' was given to the College in 1938, a partial solution was found for the future, with her use as a 'boating station' moored off the Greenhithe estate coupled with thoughts of a possible shore building to house the College. However, the advent of the Second World War changed the future of the 'Worcester' as with so much else.

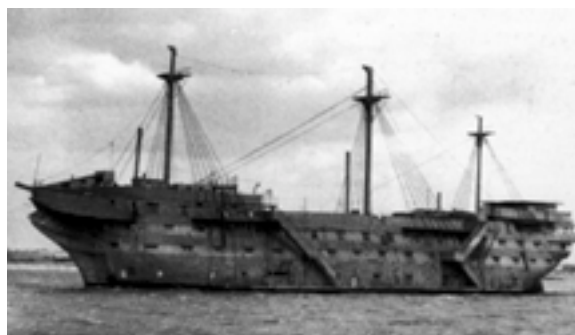
During the war years, the College was evacuated to nearby Foots Cray Place - see 'History (5)' - and inevitably a shortage of men and materials meant both ships deteriorated badly. The 'Worcester' was used as a training base by the Royal Navy and by 1945 was in a very poor condition, had lost most of her masts and only kept afloat by a large salvage pump. Happily, a replacement for the 'Frederick William' was found in the form of the 'Exmouth' - of which more later - but, following her war service, largely spent at Scapa Flow, she clearly needed all the financial resources and manpower the College could muster to recommission her as a replacement 'Worcester'.



*The 'Cutty Sark' alongside HMS 'Worcester' (II).*

As a result of the acquisition of the fine new ship, the potential role of the 'Cutty Sark' diminished, and with the approval of the original donor, Mrs Dowman, she was given to the nation through the National Maritime Museum. After restoration, she was moved to a permanent dry-dock at Greenwich where she remains to this day visited by many thousands every year.

Sadly, the final fate of the former 'Frederick William' was less happy - in accordance with the terms of the original loan, in 1945 she was returned to the Admiralty who were busy running down the vastly expanded war-time Navy. She was moved to Thurrock prior to being broken-up, but cheated the shipbreakers by sinking at her moorings a few weeks later having broken her back.



*HMS 'Worcester' (II) anchored off Grays in 1947, two years after she had been returned to the Admiralty.*

# History (5)

## The Wartime Years 1939-1945

After the declaration of war in September 1939, it was decided to transfer cadets to Foots Cray Place in Kent, which had been made available through the kindness of Lord and Lady Waring. In that month the College moved to a shore-based establishment which was to serve as a "Ship" until the end of the War in 1945.

It was an imposing building of Italian-style architecture, standing in an estate of 100 acres of beautiful Kent countryside. Tall double wrought iron gates opened to the Lodge and a long sweeping drive to the portico entrance.

The house itself was constructed on three levels. On the ground floor (middle level) the marble floor of the portico and entrance hall continued through to the large main hall on the same level capped and open to a large, round dome in the centre of the building's roof. At the upper floor level a gallery ran around the base of the circular dome, providing direct access to the rooms located on the four sides of the building.

This upper level was divided into bedrooms, both large and small, which accommodated two tier bunks and cadets' sea chests. There were four original small bath/dressing rooms of which one was allocated to the Chief Cadet Captain as his personal domain.

School classes were held on the middle level. The large and small dining room were also located here. The Captain Superintendent's day cabin was situated off the entrance foyer, as were other staff offices. A small mezzanine floor above this area accommodated members of the staff and their sleeping quarters. The basement consisted of wide catacomb-like stone passageways along the walls of which two tier bunks and sea chests were arranged to complete the cadets' sleeping area. Also located at this level was the galley, the sick bay and individual cabins of the Instructors.

Outside the basement two wooden huts were erected to augment the classroom facilities. A washroom with showers together with the 'heads' was constructed for the use of cadets in the basement.

Field sports were catered for with six grass tennis courts and three rugby and soccer pitches with cricket in the summer. The surrounding countryside with copse and undulating terrain provided excellent conditions for cross-country running.

Despite the large acreage, cadets were confined to a limited "in-bounds" area; the terrace on the south side of the house provided the space for the daily "slewing"... Wartime precautions were largely responsible for this confinement.

# History (6)

## **The Wartime Years 1939-1945 (continued)**

A typical day started at 0700 with two duty buglers sounding reveille in the main hall - the sound chamber effect of the dome on the buglers' efforts assured the awakening of the deepest sleeping cadet! Ablutions, dressing and bunk making all took place in double smart time before falling in by divisions for "Jerks". The level and intensity of this activity was a direct reflection of the particular cadet captain's own athleticism. Divisions followed with the Ship's Company fallen in for inspection and colours. The Chief Officer was the daily inspecting officer but on Sunday the Captain Superintendent passed his eagle eye over the assembly. Pity the first termers who had missed a speck on his square jacket - or worse still had "tramlines" for a trouser crease! Breakfast followed with a session of "Clear up Decks" before the start of school. Saturday mornings witnessed the sweeping, scrubbing and polishing of every inch of the building's floor space.

The morning session of school ended at noon when cadets moved to Sections with the pipe for lunch at 1300. The dining room seating was not based on divisions, except for first termers in the Afterguard Division. In the main Dining Room there were five refectory type tables each split into three groups. A cadet captain and senior badge cadet headed each group of ten, which descended in order of seniority. The mess group were identified as Window, Middle and Door number 1-5.

Wartime rationing allowed each cadet a 2-ounce packet of butter on Sundays and a 4-ounce packet of margarine on Wednesdays. Food parcels from parents invariably contained a pot of much favoured peanut butter.

Each term visits to the "Cutty Sark" were organised by Section, usually once each. It was a full day visit and the journey was made by train. Lifeboat drill, boat pulling and heaving the leadline were typical activities undertaken. The visit sometimes ended with a swim in the College baths.

Sporting activities played a large part in the College life. Three XV's and three XI's were fielded in winter competitions while three cricket XI's represented the Ship in summer months. Gymnastics were considered to be very important and the standard was such that gymnastic displays became a regular feature of Sports Day and fund raising for charities at local events.

# History (7)

## **The Wartime Years 1939-1945 (continued)**

Foots Cray is an ancient village where nearby the Greater London suburban town of Sidcup was developed between the wars and as such it suffered to some extent from the German bombing of London. The College was granted sub-warden status, which meant it received early warning of approaching bombers. On air raid alert cadets would repair to the basement and at night senior cadets were rostered on "Fire Watch" duty. Stationed on the roof their task was to report any wayward incendiary bombs falling on or near the building - stirrup pumps and extinguishers were at the ready!

On one such night in 1944, the duty firewatchers were alarmed and mystified to see flying objects with their tails alight coming from the South at regular intervals. They were witnessing the first of Hitler's secret weapons - the flying bomb or V1. Soon they started arriving by day as well, which necessitated a cadet standing watch ready to blow a whistle should an approaching bomb be on a flight path likely to pass overhead. When this was judged to be the case the watch cadet blew his whistle which sent cadets from their lessons down to the relative safety of the basement. Later that year the South East of England became the target of the V2 or rocket. Though more devastating in their impact, there were less nerve racking than the V1 as their arrival was totally unannounced by any noise or other phenomenon.

The College had the greatest of good fortune during these years. The only bomb damage of significance was the demolition of the Lodge during the summer holidays - during term time it provided overflow sleeping quarters for a dozen or more cadets. A single fatality was recorded during the War Years at Foots Cray - the handyman/cricket coach was killed by an unexploded British ack-ack shell falling on the College lorry as he drove from Greenhithe to Foots Cray.

Hostilities finally ceased with the defeat of Japan in August 1945. Captain Steele returned from his wartime duties and resumed his position by relieving Acting Captain Superintendent Jackson in the Michaelmas Term and Cornel Donner joined the staff as Third Officer.

Reflecting on those troubled years Captain Jackson, Chief Officer Richardson, Headmaster Luly and their respective staffs deserve high praise for maintaining without interruption the day to day activities and standards of the College. No special occasion was missed or cancelled during this period and Sports Day, Section Day, Prize Giving and Gold Medal Day and all sporting fixtures successfully took place.

*(Our thanks to (45) Brian Bark way-Jones  
for compiling this section on the Foots Cray.)*

# History (8)

At over 300' long, the 'Exmouth' - which became the third and last 'Worcester' - was an unusual vessel, since she was built in 1904 of steel and iron especially for nautical training and had many improvements over the converted hulks previously used.



*HMV Britannia' passes HMS 'Worcester' (III)  
after the Royal Tour in 1954.*

With good headroom, proper classrooms, heating, lighting and staff accommodation she certainly lacked the elegance of her predecessor, but was far more suitable for the purpose. Built by the London County Council to give sea training to boys largely from orphanages, she had been designed to accommodate 750 and the Royal Navy had berthed as many as 600 ratings aboard during the war years - so there was room to spare for the 200-odd 'Worcester' cadets. As with the previous 'Worcester's' most stayed aboard for just over two years, slept in hammocks and kept their belongings in a sea chest. Most left at about 16½ to join the various shipping companies - within a few months many had visited the farthest parts of the world and regularly returned to visit their Old Ship with tales of their adventures. There was a tremendous demand for cadets throughout the late 40s and 50s, but the early 60s saw many changes in the world of shipping and a dramatic fall in numbers at sea - particularly under the British flag.



*Sea chests used to store the cadets' belongings.*

# History (9)

Sadly, the College closed in 1968 and the last 'Worcester' was broken up a few years later. The village of Greenhithe has many 'Worcester' memories such as the sign at the waterside pub, and the streets of a new housing development which are all named after 'Worcester' personalities.



*R M Richardson - OW and Chief Officer for many years -  
poses alongside his **very own** road sign!*

The Ingress Abbey estate became the site of the Merchant Navy College, which proved to be an ill-fated venture since it closed within 20 years; in 1999 the palatial buildings were demolished and a vast housing estate is being built on the site. Happily, Ingress Abbey and The Lodge are currently being restored for use as offices.



*The Merchant Navy College.*

# History (10)

Many of the 8,000 odd 'Worcester' cadets served with distinction at sea and under many flags. The Japanese Admiral Togo became one of his country's great nautical heroes and H.R. Bowers sadly died with Captain Scott's South Pole expedition in 1912. There were two other OWs on this expedition and, as a lasting memorial to them all, every modern atlas shows the range of 'Worcester' mountains they named. Lord Mountevans of the Broke was probably one of the most decorated officers of the Royal Navy in the First World War.



*Commander Gordon C Steele, VC, RN  
Cadet 1907/9;  
Captain-Superintendent 1929/57*

Many OWs were decorated in the two World Wars, including awards of the Victoria and George Cross. Inevitably, many paid the supreme sacrifice and are commemorated on the two war memorials now on display at All Hallows-by-the-Tower church in London. Many OWs served in the other armed forces and achieved distinction and/or high rank... One OW, Dennis Wheatley - who later became one of the best selling authors of all time - served in the Army in the First World War and the RAF in the Second where he was on the Joint Planning Staff thereby somewhat unusually having served in all three of HM Forces; his fictional hero Gregory Sallust (a James Bond prototype) is cast as an OW! Many others reached Field, Flag or Air Rank in both World Wars.



*Reverend Charles Strong - Vicar of Greenhithe and  
the ship's Padre in the 1950s - conducting an informal service for OWs.*

The majority of OWs went to sea in the Merchant Service and many went on to achieve high rank with the leading shipping companies - for example, in 1998 all four liners operated by the PCompany were commanded by OWs! Sadly, the decline of the British merchant fleet post-war meant that many had to seek alternative employment ashore; some within the shipping industry but happily others have distinguished themselves in other fields such as the law, commerce, computers, engineering, surveying, publishing, travel, and the arts.