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GOVERNMENT AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN KENT: THE CASE OF THE ROYAL NAVAL DOCKYARD TOWN OF SHEERNESS

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'Such a town . . . is scarce to be found again in England.'

Wesley, J., *The Journal of the Reverend John Wesley*,
reprinted 1906, Everyman, 3, 316.

INTRODUCTION

With the exception of the twentieth-century dockyard of Rosyth on the Firth of Forth, Royal Naval dockyards have historically, for strategic, logistic and political reasons, been located along the southern coast of England and Wales (Fig. 1). Indeed, four of the one-time eight major dockyards, comprising Deptford, Woolwich, Chatham and Sheerness, clustered in the south-eastern corner of the country and principally in Kent. These yards were generally amongst the earliest of the naval dockyards to be established and the closure of Chatham naval base, following as it does the previous closure of Woolwich dockyard over a century earlier and of Sheerness yard in 1959, will bring to an end the long-standing links, extending over some four centuries, which existed between the Royal Navy, the dockyard establishments and this county.

Whilst the chronology of dockyard development is in most cases now well documented,¹ little attention has been similarly accorded to the townships which grew in response to the specialised demands of the naval service and whose relict features remain with us today fossilised in the urban form of several contemporary townships in Kent. The relationship between industrial development and urban growth in this instance is unclear, and the simplistic statement that

¹ See for example P. MacDougall, *Royal Dockyards*, Newton Abbot, 1982.

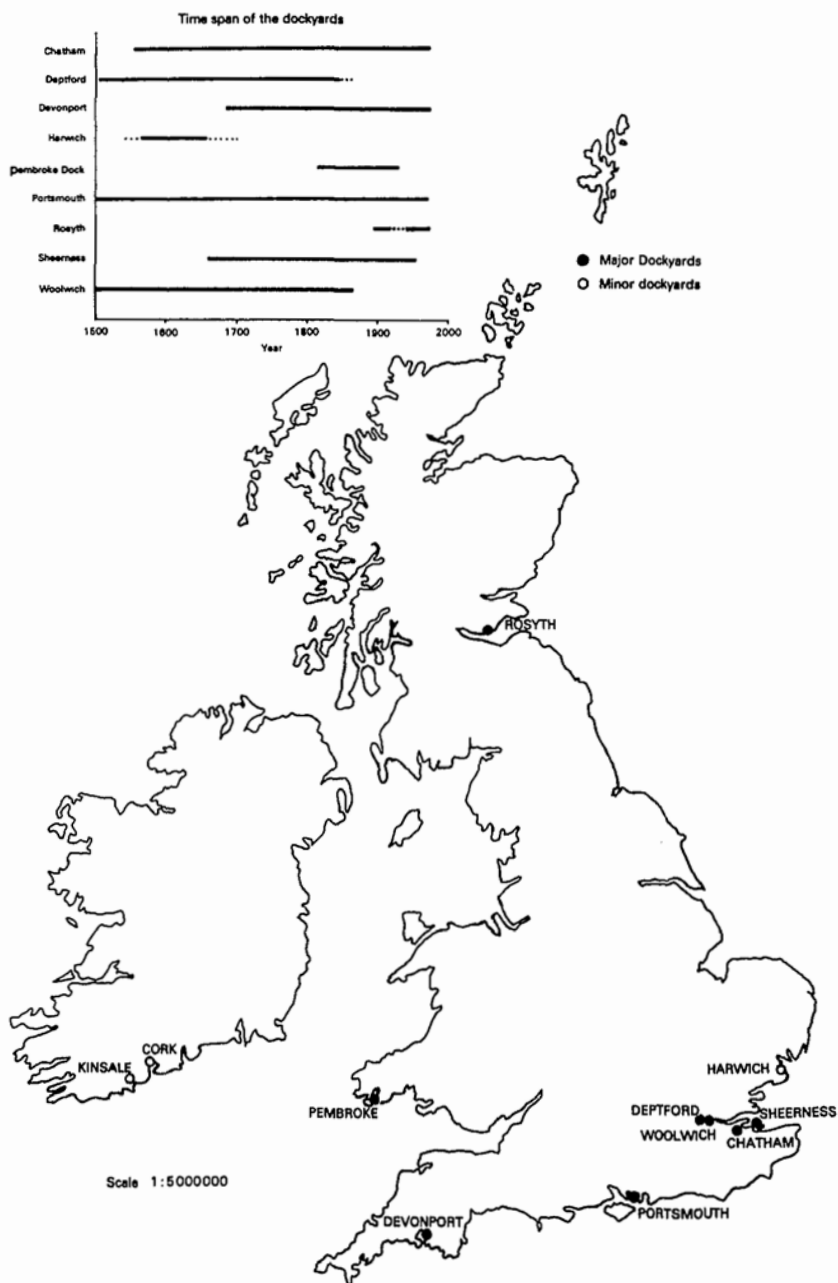


Fig. 1 The Location of naval Dockyards.

the townships grew in response to dockyard development obscures a complex but fascinating process. This paper is concerned therefore with illuminating the historical and geographical antecedence of just one of the Kentish dockyard towns, that of Sheerness on the Isle of Sheppey.

Sheerness exemplifies well several factors important in the development of naval dockyard towns, not least the rôle of the government in its affairs. As the major employer of labour in these locations, the actions of the government dominated the development and affairs of these towns. Almost all decisions of importance concerning the dockyards and dependent townships were taken by the executive in the government and the policy which filtered through the administrative tiers to be implemented by the Admiralty and Navy Boards was largely based upon criteria which were often far removed from the local and regional conditions of the dockyard locations themselves and, indeed, outside the traditional trade cycle. The dominant influence bearing upon the dockyard town was war and the threat of war, and dockyard activity and urban development fluctuated between the extremes of war and peace and according to the warlike intentions of this and other countries. Thus, policy toward, and activity in, the naval dockyard and township revolved around the government and the defensive needs of this country, real or imagined, and as tempered by financial and political considerations.

The interplay between the major government agencies involved in the operation and protection of the dockyard establishments with the dockyard townships resulted in the towns' possessing a unique urban form and socio-spatial structure. The naval dockyard function led to these locations possessing a multiplicity of defensive works and the resulting conflict of interests between the populace and the requirements of the military agencies left an indelible imprint on the morphology of the dockyard town. Few towns can have been threatened, as Sheerness was in the early nineteenth century, with wholesale demolition so that government plans to extend the dockyard and its defences could proceed. In many respects the resulting morphology of the dockyard towns, and Sheerness in particular, bears greater resemblance to the fortified towns of continental Europe than to urban development found elsewhere in Britain.

In a number of respects, however, Sheerness differs from other naval dockyard towns for here the government became extensively involved in the provision of accommodation for the civilian workforce and this resulted in the town acquiring the status of a 'quasi'-company town during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Yet, despite the rôle of Sheerness in the overall network of naval

dockyards, relatively little is known about the dockyard or town. For a number of reasons, therefore, Sheerness warrants an empirical study to elicit the dominant features of a type of town not uncommon to Kent, yet sufficiently distinctive to be considered unique elsewhere in the country.

THE ORIGINS AND EARLY HISTORY OF THE YARD

Sheerness, as the old English 'ness' implies, is situated on a promontory at the north-western extremity of the Isle of Sheppey at a point where the Medway curves north-eastwards to flow into the Thames estuary between the Isle of Grain in the west and Sheerness in the east (Fig. 2). The site possessed a number of qualities, both physical and strategic, which attracted the naval authorities to its potential as a naval base. During the Dutch wars of the seventeenth century naval activity was focussed in the eastern part of the English Channel and in the North Sea and although the Royal Navy was already supported in this area by the riparian dockyards at Deptford, Woolwich and Chatham and by the outpost at Harwich (see Fig. 1), the creation of a dockyard at Sheerness was largely undertaken in response to the deficiencies of these yards. In part, these deficiencies were due to the increasing difficulties involved in navigating the Medway and the Thames, particularly as the size and draught of men-of-war increased, and they were exacerbated by shoaling of the rivers which made access to Chatham, Deptford and Woolwich dockyards hazardous and the source of numerous accidents. The need to work the tides and to await favourable winds entailed further long delays in reaching and leaving the up-river yards.² Thus, whilst the defensive qualities of these sites ostensibly countered the disadvantages which accrued from an up-river location and contributed to the continued use of the yards, the deep-water site at Sheerness at the head of these rivers was easy of access and reduced the inconvenience and necessity of sending all ships to the up-river yards for repairs and victualling.³

Beside the strategic considerations the physical characteristics of Sheerness were also an important factor in the selection of the site for a naval yard. The western shore of Sheerness abuts onto a deep water harbour which is approached on the seaward side by an 8 km. long deep-water channel having a least depth of 8 m. at lowest ebb.⁴ (Fig. 2). Deep water at the Little and Great Nore in the Thames estuary,

² M. Oppenheim, (1926), 'Maritime History of Kent', *VCH (Kent)*, 1926, i, 353; Calendar of State Papers Domestic (hereafter C.S.P.D.), 8 October, 1672.

³ British Library (hereafter B.L.) Kings Mss. 44 f.20

⁴ Admiralty Chart LCD5 3683 1:12,500.

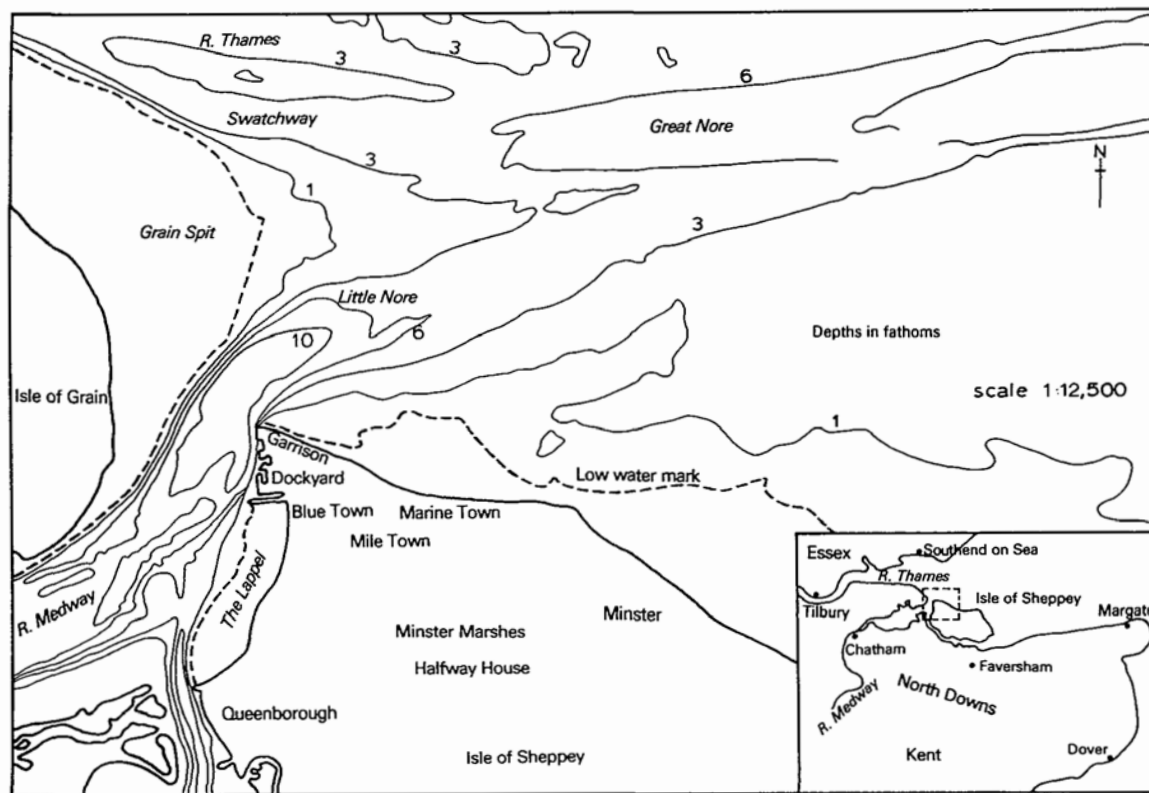


Fig. 2. Site, Situation and Water Approaches to Sheerness Dockyard.

only a few kilometres from Sheerness, provided further extensive anchorages for the fleet. These physical advantages of the site made up to some extent for the deficiencies of the riparian yards, not the least of which was the ability to accommodate capital ships unable to be laid-up afloat at Chatham or at the Thames yards.⁵

The construction of an advance naval base during time of war was not a new idea for during the First Dutch War (1651–54) Harwich had been developed in such a mode. However, the shallowness of water at that port, the long circuitous route to the Thames supply yards, the difficulty encountered in leaving Harwich against an easterly wind and the lack of room on shore to store provisions, all contributed to the abandonment of Harwich in favour of an outpost at Sheerness.⁶ Such a transfer of operations began during the Second Dutch War (1665–67) and in March 1673, during the Third Dutch War (1672–74), the Duke of York ordered that Harwich was to be run down and all vessels were thereafter to go to Sheerness.⁷ Continued use of Sheerness following the conclusion of hostilities effectively ended Harwich's life as a working dockyard although it did continue as a cruiser station for some time after.

The defensive potential of Sheerness to command the Thames estuary and the entrance to the Medway had been recognised from an early date for bulwarks had existed in that area since 1551, contemporaneous with the inauguration of Chatham Dockyard further up the Medway.⁸ During the Second Dutch War Sheerness was selected by the government as the site for a more extensive defensive work, and it was during the construction of this fort in 1665 under the auspices of Charles II that plans were drawn up to build naval facilities adjacent to the fortification.⁹ On 1 September, 1664, Peter Pett, the Navy Commissioner at Chatham Dockyard, had written to the Navy Board indicating that 'the ground to be staked out for a yard near the graving place at Sheerness will be most fit for a single or double dry dock, to contain nearly an acre and a half of ground.'¹⁰

⁵ B.L. Kings Mss. 44 f.20; B.L. Sloane Mss. 2448 f.39.

⁶ M. Oppenheim, (1907), 'The maritime History of Essex', *VCH (Essex)*, ii, 287; M. Oppenheim, (1926), *op. cit.*, 354.

⁷ M. Oppenheim, (1907), *op. cit.*, 292.

⁸ B.L. Cottonian Mss. Aug. 1.1.51; M. Oppenheim, 'A History of the Administration of the Royal Navy and of Merchant Shipping in Relation to the Navy, 1509–1660', London (1896), 102.

⁹ B.L. Sloane Mss. 2448 f.44; B.L. Kings Mss. 44 f.20; The importance attached to the site is indicated by the number of visits made by the king and his ministers to Sheerness during this period. See R. Braybrooke, *Diary and Correspondence of Samuel Pepys*, London 1924, 2, 40; B.L. Kings Mss. 44 f.20; C.S.P.D., 23 April, 1673.

¹⁰ C.S.P.D., CXXXII 5, 1 September, 1664.

Thus, the site had been in previous use as a graving place for the cleaning of ships' hulls, though this probably involved no more than the beaching of vessels on the shore, a common practice requiring no substantial provision of facilities. Sheerness was not, however, the only site considered for Sir William Winter, the Surveyor of the Navy, also surveyed nearby Grain and Queenborough as alternative sites for the dockyard before finally settling on Sheerness.¹¹ In March 1665, Pett wrote to the Navy Board requesting timber to build a small house at Sheerness to keep provisions in,¹² and in April a hulk, 'to be placed upon the beach', was sent to Sheerness and men followed soon after.¹³ Plans of the 'proposed dockyard at Sheerness' were sent by Commissioner Pett to Pepys in July 1665 and orders to proceed were received in August of the same year.¹⁴ Pepys, in his diary under 18 August, 1665, recorded, 'To Sheerness, where we walked up and down, laying out the ground to be taken in for a yard to lay provisions for cleaning and repairing ships, and a most proper place it is for the purpose'.¹⁵ On 13 November, 1666, the Navy Board directed that all large ships were henceforth to be cleaned at Sheerness, though the yard was already operational by this date.¹⁶

The Dutch raid on Sheerness and the Medway in 1667 by de Ruyter, despite the extensive damage inflicted, was only a temporary set-back to the defences and naval yard there. Whilst the immediate result of the raid was the destruction of the partially completed fort and dockyard at Sheerness¹⁷ the raid did emphasise the strategic importance of the site to the security of the Medway and Chatham Dockyard¹⁸, and far from reducing investment here the raid stimulated greater efforts to prevent a recurrence of such an embarrassing breach of the country's security. In August 1667, work began on rebuilding the fort and naval yard on a much larger scale than had been envisaged before the raid.¹⁹ In February 1673, Jonas Shish was appointed the first Master Shipwright of Sheerness Dockyard,²⁰ and

¹¹ H.M. Dockyard Sheerness closing ceremony, 31 March, 1960.

¹² C.S.P.D., CXV 24, 17 March, 1665.

¹³ C.S.P.D., CXVIII 73, 18 April, 1665; CXIX 61.

¹⁴ C.S.P.D., CXXVII 53; CXXIX 4; CXXIX 1; CXXIX 42; CXXIX 87; CXXXI 19.

¹⁵ R. Braybrooke, *op. cit.*, ii, 216.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 431; C.S.P.D. CXXVI 121.

¹⁷ C.S.P.D., 27 January, 1670.

¹⁸ See the diaries of Samuel Pepys (R. Braybrooke, *op. cit.*) and Phineas Pett (W.G. Perrin, (Ed.) *The Autobiography of Phineas Pett*, Navy Records Society (1918), 51) for contemporary accounts.

¹⁹ C.S.P.D. CCXIII, 14 August, 1667; 15 March, 1671; G. Robinson, 'Admiralty and naval Affairs May 1660 to March 1674', *Mariner's Mirror*, 36 (1950), 34-5.

²⁰ Public Record Office (hereafter P.R.O.) ADM 42.

in May the recently appointed Clerk of the Cheque at Sheerness noted 'The beginning of something like a yard here'.²¹

Throughout its history the strategic position of Sheerness was a vital factor influencing the operation and development of the dockyard. Because of the limited size of the yard only small repairs could be undertaken at Sheerness or at the anchorage at the Great and Little Nore, and it was the practice for ships to be examined initially at Sheerness before being forwarded to one of the up-river yards should major repairs be required. The yard also undertook an important role as a supply base, though small frigates were only constructed in order to fully employ the workforce. Besides being a supply and repair base the yard also performed the function of a naval base and maintained a cruiser station which patrolled the eastern Channel and North Sea and monitored the Dutch fleet and the French fleet when at Dunkirk.²² For these reasons the yard was particularly busy during time of war but, because it was expensive to maintain due to all necessities having to be imported from other dockyards by ship, the yard was slack during peace-time.

Sheerness did, however, operate under a number of constraints which contributed to its remaining the smallest of the naval dockyards.²³ The yard, as laid out, was on the lee-side and beyond the walls of Sheerness fort which extended on the landward side in the form of bastion fortifications (Fig. 3). In this respect, Sheerness differed from the other fortified dockyards of Chatham, Portsmouth and Devonport whose bastion defences were erected at a much later date though Sheerness was subsequently enclosed by further bastion-trace defences in the early nineteenth century (See Fig. 6). As a result of the proximity of these defences, however, the dockyard was continually hampered during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by a chronic shortage of space, and much of the yard was subsequently built on reclaimed land, 'below what was antiently high water mark'.²⁴ As part of the process of reclamation numerous vessels were sunk as breakwaters on the mud-flats in front of the dockyard wharves during the early years of the yard and as they broke down they were incorporated into the foundations for making new ground (See Figs. 3-4). Between 1673 and 1737, some 23 warships and hulks

²¹ C. Bredon (n.d.), 'Plague! and Sheerness Yard began', *Sheerness Times-Guardian* 10 October, 1958.

²² National Maritime Museum (hereafter N.M.M.) CHA/M/1 f.20; (Ed.) J.R. Tanner, *Catalogue of Pepysian Manuscripts*, Navy Records Society, iv (1922), 656; B.L. Kings Mss. 44 f.20.

²³ ADM 7/6662. Visitation of 1775.

²⁴ B.L. Kings Mss. 44 f.20.

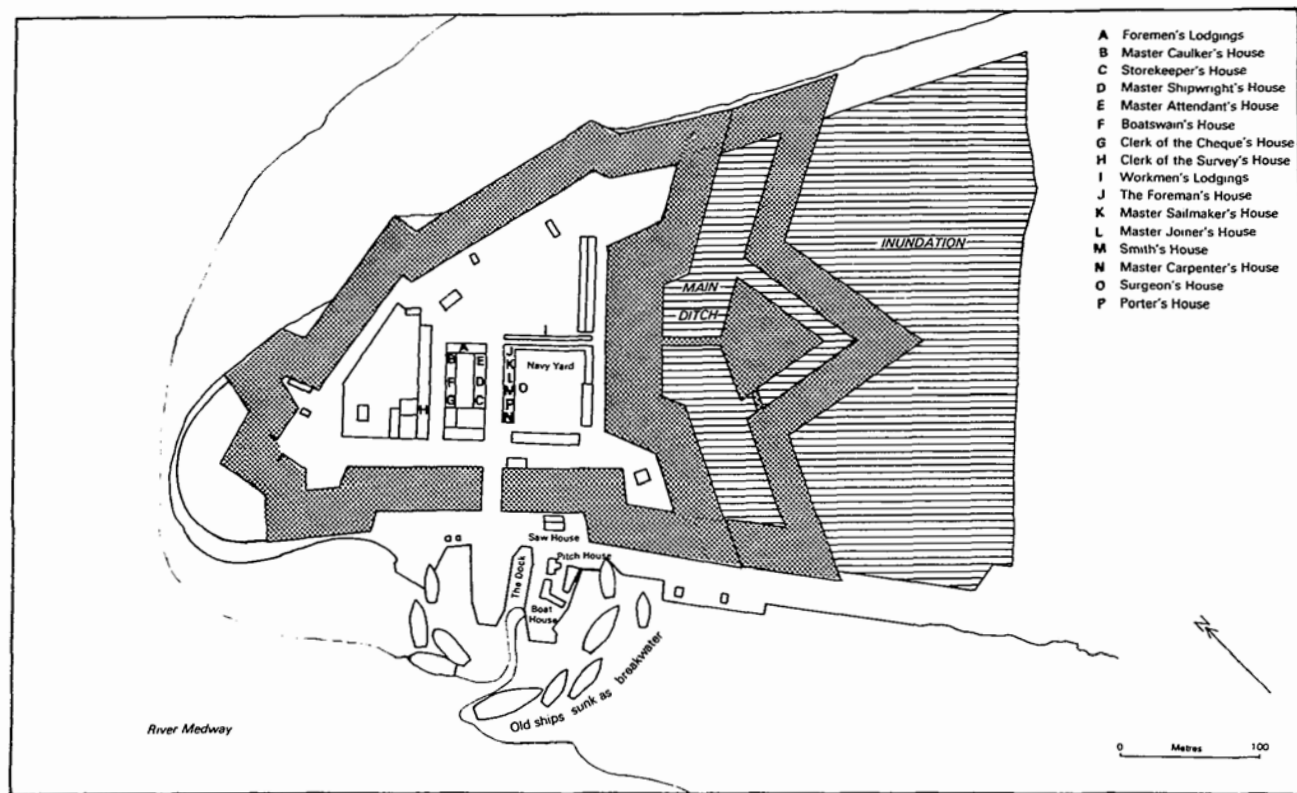


Fig. 3. Sheerness Dockyard and Fort, 1698.

were sunk to extend the yard in this manner²⁵ and 'a small but exceedingly useful Dockyard and Gun Wharf (was) formed'.²⁶ Due to the shortage of space these hulks were also utilised as storeships and offices and, as discussed later, as accommodation for the workforce. The lack of space also necessitated the dockyard authorities using buildings within the fort as offices and storehouses²⁷ (See Figs. 3-5).

In addition to the chronic shortage of space the location also suffered from a number of other disadvantages. The site and surrounding area consisted of low-lying alluvial marshland which was liable to flooding and inundation by the sea, and the poor subsoil necessitated extensive piling before buildings, docks and wharves could be constructed. The promontory was exposed and uninhabited and according to all accounts very inhospitable. The locality was also deficient in fresh drinking-water and this was a great problem not only to the inhabitants but to the dockyard because of the ships which called for supplies. Furthermore, although the yard was protected by a powerful fort, it was situated in an exposed position at the mouth of the Medway and was the most vulnerable of all the naval dockyards. That the yard remained in operation at all despite these deficiencies indicates the great utility of the yard to the naval authorities.

GOVERNMENT AND THE EARLY PROVISION OF CIVILIAN ACCOMMODATION

One of the most important aspects which distinguished Sheerness from other naval dockyard towns was the involvement of the government in the large-scale provision of accommodation for the workforce during the first century and a half of its existence. In many respects, this was a reflection of the difficulties experienced by the naval authorities in attracting workmen to the yard and retaining them thereafter. The remoteness and inhospitable nature of the site greatly contributed to these difficulties. The pristine site provided little that could be of help in supporting a large workforce and the two nearest settlements at Minster and Queenborough were some distance away. Initially, workmen travelled daily by boat from Chatham to Sheerness or lodged on board ships moored in the harbour and provided by the naval authorities.²⁸ Almost every

²⁵ P. Banbury, *Shipbuilders of the Thames and Medway*, Newton Abbot (1971), 203.

²⁶ B.L. Kings Mss. 44 f.20.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ B.L. Add. Mss. 9315 f.14, 40.

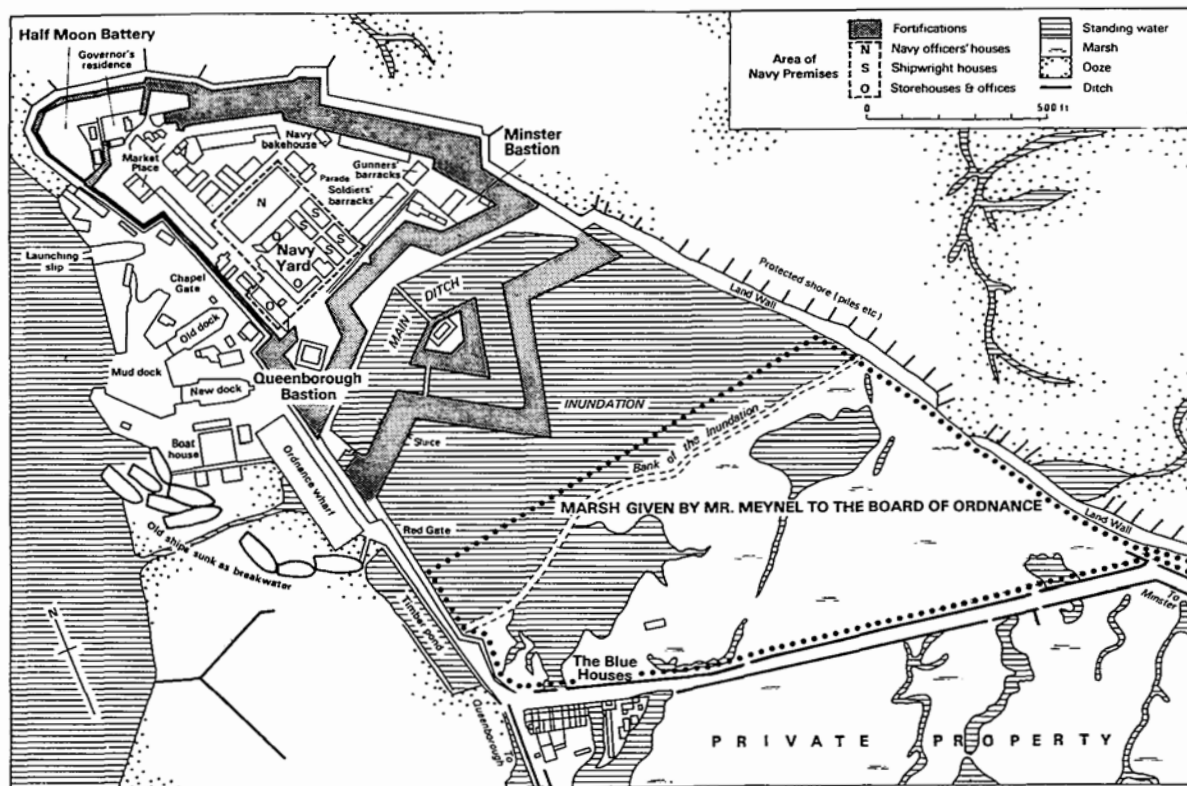


Fig. 4. Sheerness, 1738.

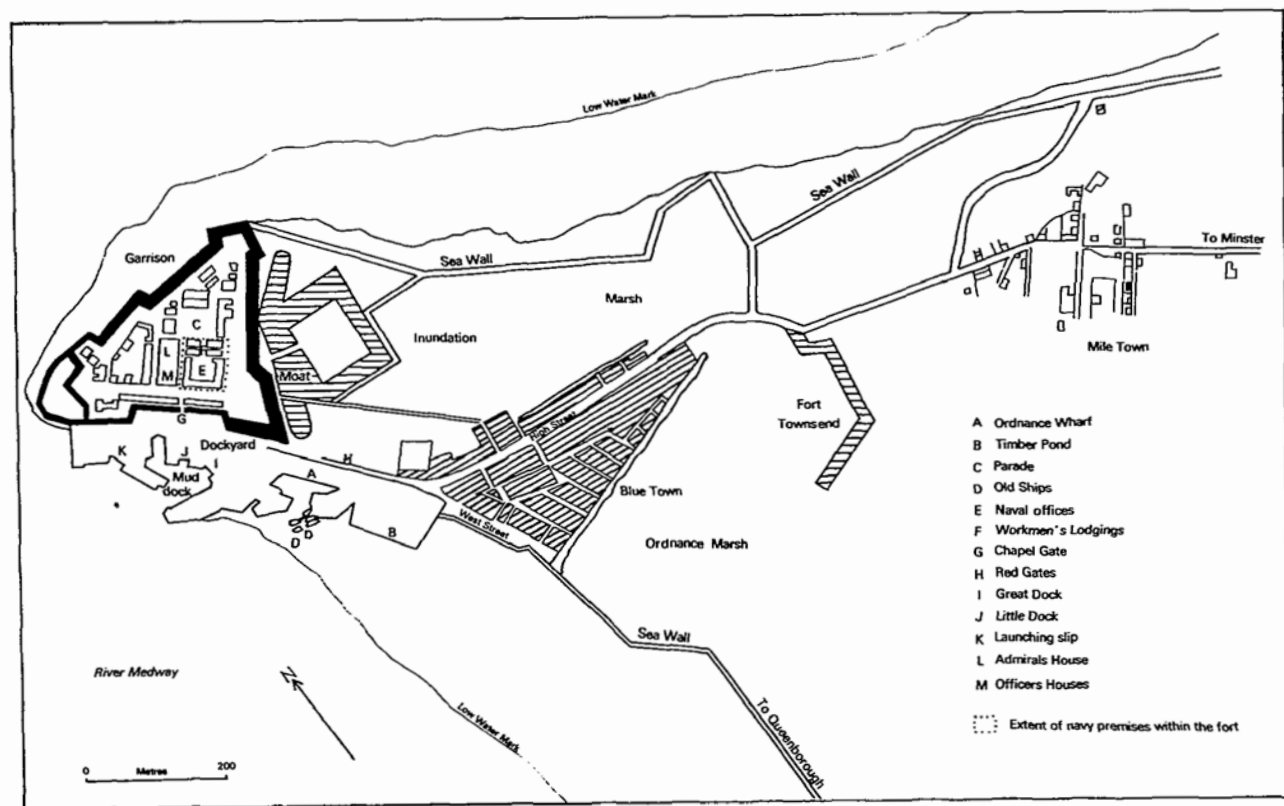


Fig. 5. Sheerness c. 1800.

necessity had to be brought to Sheerness by water from Chatham for land communication with the mainland via King's Ferry, 'that whimsical ferry', was poor and extremely time consuming.²⁹ Indeed, almost a century after the inauguration of the yard, Wesley referred to the isolated community of Sheerness as being 'in a little corner of the land, shut up, as it were, from all the world'.³⁰ Building materials, especially timber, were in very short supply and for the most part also had to be imported. Furthermore, the sub-soil and marshland surface provided further problems to would-be house builders.

The unhealthy nature of the site, for which Sheerness was renowned, contributed in no small way to the difficulties experienced in attracting suitable labour to the dockyard. Philipot referred to Sheppey as being 'more celebrated for the fertility of the soil than salubrity of the air, which is grosse and thick causing aguish infirmities that keep long residence when they get possession'.³¹ Hasted also made reference to the unhealthy nature of the island and to the 'vapours from the soil'.³² Nor was this limited to the early years of the yard for in 1849 the medical officer of Sheerness dockyard reported,

'that ague and intermittent fever prevail more or less all year round, that the inhabitants are subject to diarrhoea and that there is always a number of men from the dockyard on the sick list, . . . The public service suffers not only from this cause, but also from the fact of the men at Sheerness being allowed each 2 shillings extra, chiefly on account of the present unhealthy state of the district and place.'³³

The large number of open drainage ditches containing stagnant water, which surrounded Sheerness, must have contributed considerably to the prevalence of malaria in the district.³⁴

There are numerous references to the dislike of Sheerness experienced by the workmen, dockyard officers and military personnel sent there, especially in its early years, and to the toll which the place exacted on their health.³⁵ In 1743, the Sheerness officers reported that, 'Sheerness has not the best of Characters for health, the people

²⁹ J. Wesley, *The Journal of the Reverend John Wesley*, Everyman, 3, 357.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ R. Philipot, *Villare Cantianum*, London (1659), 379.

³² E. Hasted, *The History and topographical Survey of the County of Kent*, reprint (1972), iv, 679, first published 1798.

³³ W. Ranger, Report to the General Board of Health on a preliminary inquiry into the sewerage, drainage, and supply of water, and the sanitary condition of the inhabitants of the town of Sheerness, H.M.S.O., London 1849, 4-5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*; G.S. Buchanan, 'Report on the sanitary circumstances and administration of, and as to prevalence of enteric fever in, the Urban District of Sheerness' (1906). See also P. MacDougall, 'Malaria: its Influence on a north Kent Community', *Arch. Cant.*, xcv (1979), 255-64.

³⁵ See for example C.S.P.D. Charles II, 7 March, 1672; N.M.M. CHA/M/1, 30 October, 1690.

round the country do not care to send their sons here, so readily as they do (to) other yards'.³⁶ Again in 1774, it was recorded that, 'The Country adjacent to this place is all Marshy and has always been reputed unhealthy . . . therefore it has been difficult to procure Artificers and Labourers to reside there and indeed for the great part we have have (*sic*) been bred there'.³⁷ Under such circumstances and in order to maintain a functioning dockyard the government was compelled to provide more than just temporary accommodation. As the Commissioners of Visitation in 1814 recounted, Sheerness

'had always the reputation of being unhealthy. At one period indeed fevers and agues were so very prevalent that Shipwrights and other artificers were literally impressed and compelled to reside at this point, for which purpose it was necessary to provide them with lodgings at the expense of the public'.³⁸

The nature of these lodgings took two forms. The earliest workers in the yard were accommodated on board hulks moored in the harbour which was a common procedure for overcoming a temporary shortage at new dockyard sites. Soon, however, the workers were petitioning the Navy Board for houses, a market and a minister.³⁹ Uncharacteristically, the response of the Board was a positive one: 'A petition being read from the officers of Sheerness, complaining of the suffering through the unwholesomeness of the place, from the want of convenient dwelling-houses for themselves and families there; Agreed that for the sake of his Majesty's service, as well as in charity to the men, some provision of habitations may be fit to be provided'.⁴⁰ Thus, toward the end of the 1680s a house was built for the accommodation of workmen employed in the yard and a further provision of lodgings 'for shipwrights and other Artificers entertained there' was made in 1692.⁴¹ These lodgings were located within the walls of the fort and appear to have been similar to the barrack-like buildings occupied by the military.⁴² Additionally, the hulks were used in a dual rôle of breakwater and workmen's accommodation. There would appear to have been some early policy aimed at differentiating accommodation on the hulks and lodgings between married workmen and their families and single men, but this does not

³⁶ P.R.O. ADM 106/3553, 21 December, 1743.

³⁷ B.L. Kings Mss. 44 f.4.

³⁸ P.R.O. ADM 7/593, Visitation of 1814.

³⁹ M. Oppenheim, (1926) *op. cit.*, 359; C.S.P.D. Charles II, 12 July, 1667, XXVIII, 532; N.M.M. CHA/M/1, 30 October, 1690.

⁴⁰ J.R. Tanner, *op. cit.*, 539, 576, 587, 618.

⁴¹ B.L. Add. Mss. 10121 f.129, 30 September, 1692.

⁴² P.R.O. MPH 112; P.R.O. ADM 140/670; B.L. Kings Mss. 44 f.32

⁴³ N.M.M. CHA/M/1.

appear to have continued for long.⁴³ In the course of time the hulks attained the status of permanent streets in the face of the housing shortage at Sheerness and in 1734 the 'workmen's lodgings' within the garrison were made permanent and rebuilt in brick.⁴⁴

There can be little doubt that the provision of accommodation at Sheerness was closely linked to the need to attract workmen to the yard. 'Hence Government has been obliged', recorded the dockyard chroniclers in 1774,

'to grant them (the Sheerness dockyard workers) Advantages for their Encouragement that they have not in other Yards, that is, they and their Familys are provided with lodgings part of them in Houses and part of them in old ships laid there as Breakwaters. Viz 425 persons in 192 rooms, and 551 in 58 Cabbins, Total 976.'⁴⁵

At this time some 469 workmen were employed in the dockyard.⁴⁶

A shortage of accommodation at Sheerness continued throughout the eighteenth century especially during time of war. In 1742, it was recorded that lodgings 'are extremely much wanted on this encrease of people in the yard, several of whom are obliged to go upwards of two miles after they leave work at night, for lodgings, And which they pay very dear for, after trouble and Pains . . .'⁴⁷ The dockyard authorities were compelled, in the face of this chronic shortage, to continue to provide accommodation although in this they were aided by the continuous programme of sinking hulks as breakwaters adjacent to the yard which provided a ready source of accommodation.⁴⁸

The large-scale provision of accommodation for dockyard workmen and their families as at Sheerness was not undertaken at other naval dockyards. Government involvement in the provision of accommodation here was in response to the lack of private construction and speculative investment in housing, which was a reflection of the dislike felt toward this isolated location by all concerned. Dockyard and military officers alike tended to transfer elsewhere at the earliest opportunity, and the availability of capital for housing ventures was not forthcoming as at other dockyard locations. The transient nature of the workforce, many of whom were on temporary transfer from the up-river yards, also depressed demand for permanent private accommodation.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the early provision of

⁴³ B.L. Add. Mss. 9315 f.48, 5 April, 1734.

⁴⁵ B.L. Kings Mss. 44 f.20.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁷ P.R.O. ADM 106/3553, 8 December, 1742.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ D.A. Baugh, *British naval Administration in the Age of Walpole*, New Jersey 1965, 271.

accommodation by the government must in itself have deterred subsequent investment in private housing. Like companies elsewhere who were involved in specialised and company towns the government was forced, through economic necessity, to make good the housing shortfall.

Despite the provision of accommodation and a market place, however, the naval authorities had from an early date declined suggestions to take on a more extensive mantle of responsibility for community and town building. As early as 1678, Major Nathaniel Darell, commander of Sheerness fort, had forwarded proposals to the Lord Treasurer suggesting that,

'As the lands of the son of Alderman Mennel, deceased, called the level, adjoining the fort and other lands abutting thereon, are going to be sold cheap . . . (then) . . . the Lord Treasurer might buy them to great advantage . . . he will much consult his interest by the resale of some of these lands, and certainly a little town may be built there in short time, and besides the houses, the Lord Treasurer will get a good rent for them, and will thus have an entire domination over the corporation of Queenborough to dispose of it at his pleasure.'⁵⁰

Such a proposal was not pursued. Instead the government took the least costly and least involved course compatible with maintaining the nucleus of a workforce necessary to operate the dockyard without becoming embroiled in a field which the authorities considered lay outside the scope of the State.

That the dockyard authorities had little intention of undertaking a paternal rôle toward the dockyard community is illustrated by events concerning the supply of water in Sheerness. Great difficulties had always been experienced at Sheerness because of the shortage of local water supplies, 'there being no fresh water on the whole island sufficient to supply this place',⁵¹ and in the early years of the yard all water was brought in barrels by ship from Chatham. Attempts by the Navy Board to bore for water within the fort in 1724 failed⁵², but supplies were obtained from a well at Queenborough. However, the Navy Board attempted to reserve this supply for the sole use of the dockyard and naval ships only, and it was not until the Treasury intervened that the Navy Board was forced to open the supplies to the public.⁵³

⁵⁰ C.S.P.D. Charles II 42, 68, 13 March, 1678.

⁵¹ B.L. Kings Mss. 44 f.20

⁵² P.R.O. ADM 106/3188 9 July, 1726; 8 September, 1726.

⁵³ M. Oppenheim, (1926), *op. cit.*, 369.

URBAN AND DOCKYARD DEVELOPMENT DURING THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: THE RISE OF BLUE TOWN

By 1738, after some sixty years of dockyard existence, the first private houses had been constructed under the name of 'The Blew Houses' on private land situated as close to the dockyard as was possible without encroaching onto land owned by the Board of Ordnance or the naval authorities⁵⁴ (Fig. 4). Not only were the early house builders confronted by poor terrain but also a severe shortage of building materials for the site was tree-less and timber elsewhere on the island had been procured by the dockyard authorities.⁵⁵ It is commonly accepted that as a result of these shortages the town was built of timber taken from the dockyard as 'chips', supposed waste pieces of timber or 'cut-offs' less than 6 ft. in length which dockyardmen were permitted to remove from the yards as a perquisite. In view of similar accounts of houses built of chips in Portsea and of the well known abuses of the 'chips' privilege, there is good reason not to dismiss these claims.⁵⁶ The houses in Blue Town were constructed in typical shipbuilding 'clinker' style and were still to be seen until recently when slum clearances removed the last vestiges of them.⁵⁷ In similar vein, the name of Blue Town, it is popularly claimed, stems from the colour of paint taken from the dockyard and used on these houses. Under the circumstances, it seems reasonable to speculate that early private housing in Blue Town during the eighteenth century was undertaken by dockyard-men working on a do-it-yourself basis and using materials obtained from the dockyard and was not based upon injections of private speculative money.

This process of self-help would partly account for the slow and cautious development of Blue Town. Prior to the Seven Years War (1756-63), Blue Town had not expanded to any great extent beyond the addition of two further terraces of houses⁵⁸ though the proven utility of the yard during the war⁵⁹ led to plans being drawn up by Sir Thomas Slade, Surveyor of the Navy, in 1763 to expand the dockyard and to construct docks capable of taking larger ships. The proposal

⁵⁴ P.R.O. MPH 112.

⁵⁵ A.A. Daly, *The History of the Isle of Sheppey*, London 1904, 214.

⁵⁶ M.S. Bentham, *The Life of Brigadier-General Sir Samuel Bentham*, London 1862, 142-3. In 1802, the workmen at Sheerness 'had taken to going out of the yard as a body and carrying chips out with them three times a day'. P.R.O. ADM 7/663, Visitation of 1802.

⁵⁷ Photographs of these houses before clearances can be seen in K.A.O. UD/SH/TPI/13, 2.

⁵⁸ P.R.O. ADM 140/684; P.R.O. ADM 140/659.

⁵⁹ M. Oppenheim, (1926), *op. cit.*, 375-6.

seems to have been to construct an entirely new yard at Sheerness for the plan had 'little or no regard to the preservation of the yard as it then existed'.⁶⁰ However, due to the poor friable subsoil, which was liable to flood any dock which was deepened, the problems of obtaining fresh water and the confined space of the yard, Slade's plan was not implemented.⁶¹ Furthermore, an infestation of *Toredo navalis*, or 'the ship worm', at Sheerness at this time was causing substantial damage to wooden-hulled warships moored in the harbour, and naval ships which were not sheathed in protection against the worm could not safely be harboured in the vicinity.⁶²

Despite these difficulties and the rejection of Slade's plan, the dockyard was not abandoned for in the event of a northern war it was considered highly desirable to have a yard in this area⁶³ and the strategic advantages of Sheerness were considered to outweigh the physical defects which could, in any case, often be ameliorated.⁶⁴ However, until the basic deficiencies in the yard were overcome, and despite an extension to the yard in 1774, the workforce remained small.⁶⁵

CLOSURE OF THE HULKS: THE END OF QUASI-COMPANY TOWN STATUS

Government involvement in the provision of accommodation at Sheerness continued for well over a century, but by the end of the eighteenth century the development of private settlement, first at Blue Town and subsequently at Mile Town (Fig. 5) caused the authorities to consider ways of closing down the hulks and was eventually central to the withdrawal of government-sponsored accommodation in Sheerness. In 1767, the Reverend John Wesley had noted,

'In the Dock adjoining to the Fort, there are six old men of war. These are divided into small tenements, forty, fifty or sixty in a ship, with little chimneys and windows, and each of these contained a family. In one of them where we called, a man and his

⁶⁰ P.R.O. ADM 7/593.

⁶¹ P.R.O. ADM 7/663 M. Oppenheim, (1926), *op. cit.*, 377.

⁶² It was thought that the use of old ships infected by 'the worm' as breakwaters instigated this nuisance which was subsequently compounded by infected ships from the Levant being quarantined in Standgate Creek nearby. P.R.O. ADM 7/659, 7/660.

⁶³ B.L. Kings Mss. 44 f.20.

⁶⁴ The introduction of copper sheathing for example in the late eighteenth century greatly reduced the harmful effects of the *Toredo navalis* and Sheerness returned to favour as a result. R.J.B. Knight, 'The Introduction of Copper Sheathing into the Royal Navy 1779-1786', *Mariner's Mirror*, 59 (1973), 299-309.

⁶⁵ P.R.O. ADM 4/660, Visitation of 1773; P.R.O. ADM 7/661, Visitation of 1774.

THE DOCKYARD TOWN OF SHEERNESS

wife, and six little children lived; and yet all the ship was sweet and tolerably clean, sweeter (*sic*) than most sailing ships I have been in'.⁶⁶

However, other reports concerning the hulks present a less than glowing testimonial to their character and certainly, as accommodation in Blue Town increased, they became no more than an unwanted nuisance to the dockyard and fort authorities. Access from Blue Town to the hulks was via a passage through the dockyard, and by 1800 Commissioner Isaac Coffin was complaining of 'the inconvenience (which) resulted from . . . (the yard) . . . being a common resort of Whores and Rogues by day and night; the conduct of the former . . . (being) . . . more shameful and atrocious by a ready access to the Gin shops in the Old Ships'. He left it to the Navy Board 'to come to a determination most likely to put an end to the practice',⁶⁷ and in 1802 Coffin forcibly closed the hulks amidst riotous conditions.⁶⁸ The government had in the meantime made some attempt to provide alternative accommodation to the hulks by rebuilding in 1794 the 'Great Alleys', the barrack-like accommodation within the fort, for even toward the end of the eighteenth century accommodation was still in short supply in the town. After 1802, the Alleys were the only remaining source of government accommodation for civilian dockyard workers and they remained functional only until the 1820s when it was reported that large numbers of workmen were leaving the workmen's lodgings in the garrison to hire cheaper accommodation in Blue Town and the more recent settlement at Mile Town.⁶⁹ In the process of dockyard reorganisation and the growth of Mile Town during the 1820s, the government extricated itself completely from the housing market.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY DOCKYARD EXPANSION

Toward the end of the eighteenth century the fabric of the dockyard was in a poor condition.⁷⁰ A number of short term improvements had

⁶⁶ J. Wesley, *op. cit.*, 316.

⁶⁷ Letter from Coffin to the Navy Board, 17 July, 1800, cited by A. MacDermott, 'Dockyard Irregularities', *Mariner's Mirror*, 36 (1950), 92.

⁶⁸ M. Oppenheim, (1926), *op. cit.*, 384. It is claimed that occupiers of the hulks were granted £4 per annum 'cabin money' for the remainder of their lives as compensation for their eviction from the hulks. *Sheerness Times*, 7 September, 1872.

⁶⁹ The principal reason for this appears to be that the garrison lodgings were liable to charge for poor relief, which in the period following the Napoleonic War was substantial, whereas many lodgings in the town were exempt from the rate. P.R.O. ADM 106/3190.

⁷⁰ P.R.O. ADM 106/3222, Visitation of 1785.

been made to the yard since the rejection of Slade's plan and a continuous programme of piecemeal land reclamation had alleviated the pressing problem of space to some extent, but at the expense of an unplanned and inefficient yard.⁷¹ Further plans to reorganise the yard in the 1780s were not pursued,⁷² and, by 1802, the Commissioners of Visitation recorded that 'much inconvenience appears to be produced by the want of sufficient space, the dock being contracted, and many of the storehouses very small and scattered in different parts of the yard and the Garrison'.⁷³ The disadvantages of the site, well known for many years, continued to deter the large-scale reorganisation and investment which the yard by now so urgently required;

'although it has the advantage of depth of water and a situation to the North of the Forelands, yet the nature of the soil (in most places a quick sand) the very confined extent of wharfage near deep water and its being on the wrong side of the harbour with respect to the prevailing winds, are disadvantages that should prevent the expenditure of any considerable sums of money upon repairs (now much wanted) if another place can be found that is not liable to the same objections.'⁷⁴

The need for an outpost to the up-river yards was stressed by Inspector General Bentham in his proposals for improving the dockyard system⁷⁵ and, in a reappraisal of alternative sites to Sheerness, Bentham proposed a site at Blackstakes, near Coleman Creek on the Isle of Grain, a mile or two to the west of Sheerness.⁷⁶ The Commissioners of Visitation of 1802 were impressed with Bentham's plan, and surveys and estimates for both Blackstakes and Sheerness were made. In the event, the Blackstakes scheme was abandoned and repairs to the wharves at Sheerness were, unsuccessfully, undertaken by Bentham. Quite why Blackstakes was abandoned is not known, though it did coincide with a much larger scheme proposed by John Rennie the Elder to close the up-river dockyards altogether and construct a new yard at Northfleet on the Thames. Rennie was also of the opinion that the yard at Sheerness, 'composed only of some old wooden ships embedded in the mud, a few storehouses, a wretched basin lined with wooden walls, and some timber jetties,' should, because of the cost of renovation, be abandoned and his plan was enthusiastically accepted by the Prime Minister, William Pitt, and land purchases at Northfleet were begun.⁷⁷ The project, however, was

⁷¹ P.R.O. ADM 7/658-7/662.

⁷² M. Oppenheim, (1926), *op. cit.*, 380.

⁷³ P.R.O. ADM 7/663.

⁷⁴ P.R.O. ADM 7/664.

⁷⁵ P.R.O. ADM 106/3224; P.R.O. ADM 7/664.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ J. Rennie, *Autobiography of John Rennie*, London 1875, 163.

abandoned on the death of Pitt in 1806.⁷⁸ In view of the favourable response which this plan received, it may have precipitated the abandonment of Bentham's original scheme.

By 1808, little improvement to the yard had been accomplished and Commissioner Boyle wrote to the Navy Board calling their attention, 'to the defective state of this Dock Yard, which is growing more so every day'.⁷⁹ This state of affairs was fully confirmed by a subsequent survey by Rennie and the Master Attendant at Woolwich, Joseph Whidby; 'The timber of the wharves generally speaking is rotten, the foundations in many places have slidden outwards – the earth and pavement are sunk. A part of the side of the wall of the Mud Dock at the small launching slip has tumbled down, and indeed the great bulk of the Yard may be said to be a wreck'.⁸⁰

'the offices of the several officers of the yard . . . are scattered about in the most inconvenient manner . . . the storehouses . . . are dispersed in the same irregular manner over the yard, some being within and some without the garrison . . . (and) . . . very much inconvenience . . . arises to the Public Service . . . The storehouses are besides in a most wretched condition with regard to repair, as well as being ill-calculated for the purpose to which they are applied . . . many of them are old buildings that have been erected in the infancy of our Naval Power, and others . . . have been added as temporary expedients. No systematic arrangement has ever been thought of in any one part of this establishment.'⁸¹

They concluded that the yard was, 'not to be kept up by partial or temporary repairs. Its constituent parts are gone, patching and mending will only prolong the evil day for a short time, but the time will come, and this not very distant, when the whole must be thoroughly repaired . . .' and nothing short of a complete reorganisation and modernisation programme was required.⁸² Importantly though, they were now of the opinion that whatever the course of events at Chatham, Deptford or Woolwich, or even if a new yard was established in a better situation, Sheerness yard should be retained for fitting and repairing ships⁸³ for it was considered now as being of 'almost indispensable utility'.⁸⁴ Because of the pressure of wartime service no improvements could be made to the yard, but toward the end of the Napoleonic war the Admiralty Board instructed the Navy Board to draw up plans to reorganise the dockyard.⁸⁵ In 1815, work

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷⁹ P.R.O. ADM 7/3189, 27 May, 1808.

⁸⁰ P.R.O. ADM 106/3192, 22 July, 1808.

⁸¹ P.R.O. ADM 7/593, Visitation of 1814. Indeed, so derelict had the yard become that 'by far the best store belonging to the yard was a ship'. *Ibid.*

⁸² P.R.O. ADM 106/3192, 22 July, 1808.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 15 July, 1808.

⁸⁴ P.R.O. ADM 7/593.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

began on reorganising the yard according to plans drawn up by Rennie and by the time the scheme had been completed in 1827 the yard had been entirely rebuilt.⁸⁶

NINETEENTH-CENTURY URBAN COLONISATION

By 1815, increases in the military and civilian population had resulted in Blue Town growing to the maximum areal size possible within the constraints of the surrounding Board of Ordnance land. The town covered a triangular stretch of land adjacent to Sheerness Fort and the dockyard was surrounded on all sides by government land. It was unusual for the authorities to allow construction of private housing so close to the defences during the eighteenth century. Whether this was deliberate policy to encourage such private building or the inability of the government to purchase this land is not known. Certainly by the 1790s, the Board of Ordnance had accepted that the landward defences of Sheerness Fort were obsolete due to the presence of Blue Town on its immediate flank and allowed private houses to be constructed on Ordnance land to the north of High Street adjacent to the inundation (Fig. 5).⁸⁷ This section of the glacis contained only a 'burying ground' and standing water and, by 1800, encroachments extended for some several hundred yards along the northern flank of High Street and the western side of West Street,⁸⁸ but the houses were allowed to remain only on condition that the parties concerned should give up possession when the land was required by the government.⁸⁹ Despite the obsolescence of the defences, the action of the Board to allow such encroachments on the glacis was uncharacteristic and such leniency reflects the severe housing and land shortage which existed in the town.

As part of the defence schemes which were being implemented at other dockyard locations during the 1780s, the Board of Ordnance purchased further land encircling the settlement of Blue Town on its landward side and began construction of a second outer defence system part of which, Fort Townsend, existed in 1782. In this area encroachments were fiercely resisted and the limits of urban expansion of Blue Town firmly fixed.

⁸⁶ J. Rennie, *op. cit.*, 164, 453.

⁸⁷ P.R.O. MPH 293.

⁸⁸ P.R.O. ADM 140/670.

⁸⁹ P.R.O. ADM 106/3188, 2 November, 1814; 3 June, 1813. As acknowledgement of Board of Ordnance ownership of the land a small ground rent was levied and an annual perambulation made.

During the reorganisation of the yard following the Napoleonic war the Commissioners of Visitation negotiated for Major's Marsh and the now obsolete defences to be transferred to the navy authorities⁹⁰ for the land was 'wholly useless as works of defence by being surrounded with buildings (of Blue Town)', and was appropriate 'for no other use than as a receptacle for every kind of filth'.⁹¹ The Board of Ordnance ceded the land but retained part of the defences along the shore facing the Thames. The remaining fortifications were levelled and the height of the land raised 6 ft. using earth excavated from the dockyard extension to cover the filthy mud and prevent standing water from accumulating.⁹²

The dockyard expanded freely onto the Ordnance land and residences for dockyard and military officers were amongst the first buildings to be constructed (Fig. 6). In contrast the settlement of Blue Town had reached saturation point and infilling had proceeded as far as was possible. The tall narrow houses built during this period reflect the great pressure on land space. A number of factors combined at this time to force the movement of population out of Blue Town beyond the surrounding Ordnance land toward Mile Town. In preparation for the extension of the dockyard onto the glaxis, the naval authorities demanded that the houses which had encroached onto the glaxis along High Street should be vacated and demolished. By this date the buildings were 'generally of the most temporary description and let at very exorbitant rents such as generally reimburse the Parties both Principal and Interest in the course of four or five years after they have built', and were largely occupied by 'Artificers employed in the Dockyard' and tradesmen.⁹³ Whilst the tenants petitioned several times for the evictions to be cancelled or delayed the government feared little trouble from them for as dockyard employees they 'would not wish to give offence for fear of dismissal'.⁹⁴ Demolition of these houses was accomplished by December 1818.⁹⁵ Furthermore, other plans were implemented at this time to purchase a strip of private land containing houses adjoining the dockyard on the western side of West Street to gain additional room and to reduce the risk of fire.⁹⁶ The importance of these actions

⁹⁰ P.R.O. ADM 106/3195, 16 March, 1813.

⁹¹ P.R.O. ADM 7/593.

⁹² P.R.O. ADM 106/3190, 21 July, 1815; P.R.O. ADM 106/3195, March 1815.

⁹³ P.R.O. ADM/ 3188; P.R.O. 7/3189, 6 March, 1815.

⁹⁴ P.R.O. ADM/ 3228, 30 April, 1814.

⁹⁵ P.R.O. ADM 106/3188, 6 December, 1814; P.R.O. ADM 7/3189, 30 November, 1814.

⁹⁶ P.R.O. ADM 7/593.

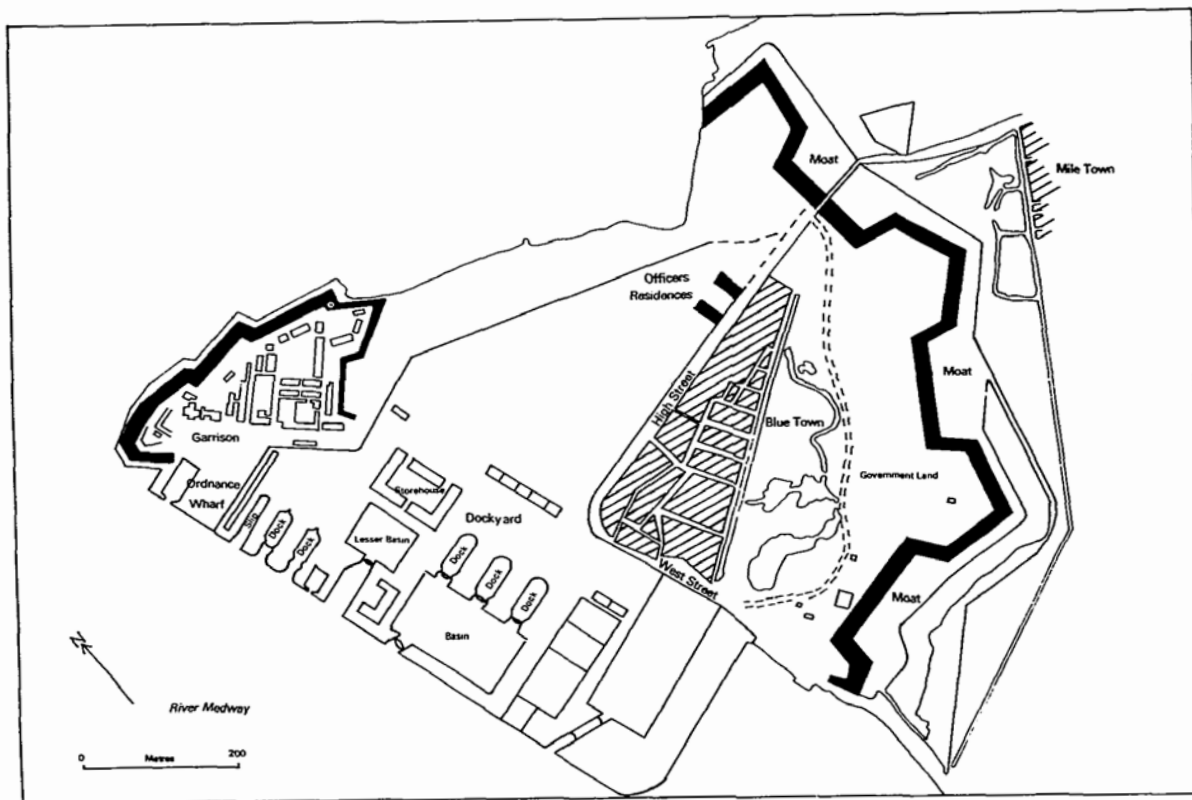


Fig. 6. Sheerness c. 1820.

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was that they coincided with the boom conditions of the Napoleonic War which, even though drawing toward a conclusion, was then being boosted by large numbers of workmen employed on the dockyard extension. The town, stimulated by the closure of the hulks and the war had utilised all available space for housing such that by 1815 no accommodation was to be had in the town.⁹⁷ A covering letter by Major-General Rudyard, commanding officer of the Royal Engineers at Sheerness, to a memorial sent to the Board from those tenants faced with eviction from Ordnance owned land stated that he had

'witnessed the consternation and real distress (which) the notices . . . (of eviction have) . . . occasioned and (was) of the opinion that the memorial . . . is not exaggerated, but falls short of the suffering many of them must experience . . . and were it even that Accommodations could be obtained in Blue Town or its neighbourhood . . . which from my thorough knowledge of the place there is no lodging to be procured even for a small family therefore it could be entirely out of their power to remove at so short notice . . .'⁹⁸

So severe was the shortage of accommodation that hulks were made available by the Navy Board to the contractors undertaking the dockyard modernisation work, Jolliffe and Banks, to accommodate a large number of their workmen. A further storey was also added to the workmen's lodgings in the garrison.⁹⁹

Requests by the inhabitants of Blue Town to the Board of Ordnance to allow the construction of housing on Ordnance Marsh to the south and east of Blue Town were rejected. Only sites beyond Ordnance land 'at a considerable distance from the dockyard and from the pier or landing place on which all the necessities of life are obliged by law to be landed' were available for the development.¹⁰⁰ This latter factor was especially important to those tenants threatened with eviction for, 'being principally tradesmen with large families whose means of support depend solely upon their trade and situation of their Houses . . . (from the sudden and unexpected peace) [they had] very considerable stocks remaining on their hands which can neither be immediately disposed of nor suddenly removed'.¹⁰¹

These forced removals and a congested Blue Town triggered the movement of inhabitants beyond government land in the search for

⁹⁷ P.R.O. ADM 106/3228, 30 April, 1814.

⁹⁸ P.R.O. ADM 106/3188, 20 November, 1814.

⁹⁹ P.R.O. ADM 3196, 2 September, 1813; P.R.O. ADM 7/3189, 14 June, 1816; P.R.O. ADM 106/3188, 31 July, 1810; March 1811.

¹⁰⁰ P.R.O. 7/3189, 6 March, 1815.

¹⁰¹ P.R.O. ADM 106/3228, April 1814; P.R.O. ADM 106/3188.

building land and ultimately led to the unique urban plan of Sheerness. An initial proposal was to develop a site to the south of the town on the road to Queenborough, but only a footpath connected this area with Blue Town and the dockyard and permission was required from the Board of Ordnance to construct a road over Ordnance land.¹⁰² A report from the local agent to the Navy Board noted no material objection that could give the Navy Board cause to oppose the proposal, and considered that, 'the situation . . . selected for building their habitations on is in my opinion, the most eligible in the neighbourhood, and certainly likely to be less expensive to them than any other owing to its contiguity to the Medway and the present landing place or pier . . .'.¹⁰³ No settlement was constructed in this area, however, and it is possible that the Board of Ordnance vetoed the plan for the land proposed for the settlement was subsequently purchased by the Board to become part of the glacis of the new defences.

In the event, the colonising movement took place toward Mile Town beyond Ordnance land to the east of Blue Town on the road from Blue Town to Minster. The small settlement of 'Mile Houses' was in existence from the early eighteenth century but, by 1815, it contained no more than a few farms and out-buildings (Fig. 5).¹⁰⁴ Early inhabitants of the colony comprised mostly clerks and artificers employed in the dockyard 'lately removed from Blue Town in consequence of the houses being taken down there'.¹⁰⁵

The colonisation movement was further stimulated by an intriguing proposal by Rennie that the site of Blue Town itself should be purchased, the houses demolished and the land included within the dockyard extension. An Act of Parliament for this purpose was actually obtained in 1816.¹⁰⁶ Rennie's advice to the Navy Board was to purchase the freehold interest of all land proprietors and to refuse to renew leases as they neared completion or to purchase the leaseholds on moderate terms or, if this proved impossible, on terms determined by a jury under the terms of the 1816 Act.¹⁰⁷ By 1819, no action had been taken in this respect and the inhabitants of Blue Town petitioned for a decision regarding the proposed purchase.¹⁰⁸ An agent was eventually appointed by the Navy Board in 1820 to enquire

¹⁰² B.L. Add. Mss. 31323 G2; B.L. 7/3189, 14 March, 1815.

¹⁰³ B.L. ADM 7/3189.

¹⁰⁴ P.R.O. ADM 106/3553; P.R.O. ADM/670; K.A.O. P254/12/2.

¹⁰⁵ P.R.O. ADM 7/3189, 28 January, 1819.

¹⁰⁶ 56 George III cap 74; P.R.O. ADM 106/3188.

¹⁰⁷ P.R.O. ADM 106/3194.

¹⁰⁸ P.R.O. ADM 106/3194, 2 January, 1819.

into the terms upon which the freehold property in Blue Town could be purchased, 'and so to frame future leases as to render the total removal of the town'.¹⁰⁹ The agent estimated that more than 500 houses were under consideration and the number of owners 'very great'.¹¹⁰ A Bill was drawn up in May 1821 to proceed with the purchase of 'the whole of the ground on which Blue Town stands', but was held in abeyance pending final instructions to proceed from the Navy Board.¹¹¹

It is unclear, despite the preparation of this Bill, to what extent the government seriously intended to proceed with the purchase and subsequent demolition of Blue Town. In 1819, the Commissioners of Visitation commented that if 'the space now occupied by Blue Town is likely to be required for Naval or Military purposes then undoubtedly it ought to be purchased at an early period but as relating to the Dock Yard the Committee do not think there is the most remote prospect of its being wanted'.¹¹² In 1820, the Navy Board again noted that they were 'not aware of the necessity or advantage for the purposes of the dockyard of having Blue Town and . . . suggests that the Act may be repealed'.¹¹³ Despite these statements of disinterest by the Navy Board, preparation of the Bill to purchase the town was allowed to proceed but the delay in implementing it brought about a spate of petitions to the government from house owners in Blue Town demanding a decision.¹¹⁴ In 1821, the Navy Board forwarded a petition to the Admiralty Board stating that they could not 'but forward the enclosure for their Lordships consideration without remarking that the state of suspense in which the proprietor's of houses are now left, is calculated to produce the most injurious effect upon their property, both as it respects any sales thereof or the repairs of Buildings standing on the Freehold in Question.' The Navy Board requested an end to the suspense by repealing the Act of 1816 and the proposed Bill.¹¹⁵

Quite why the proceedings were not ended earlier is unclear though the position of the military in this matter requires greater clarity. Certainly the costs estimated by the agents in 1820 may have been an important factor:

'The moment the Act was passed for the purchase of Blue Town the people began to entertain unreasonable and exorbitant expectations of the value of their property,

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ P.R.O. ADM 106/3194, February 1820.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² P.R.O. ADM 106/3190.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 18 January, 1820.

¹¹⁴ See for example P.R.O. ADM/3190, 21 May, 1821; 18 January, 1820.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6 June, 1821.

and in order to urge the Government to make the purchase they complained as a matter of hardship that the Act of Parliament was hanging over their heads which as they said kept them in a state of continual suspense as well as daily loss on their property and it was in consequence of this that the Act was repealed.¹¹⁶

The events of the early decades of the nineteenth century in Sheerness illuminate a number of interesting aspects regarding the relationship between the dockyard and military authorities and the dockyard town community. Military and naval requirements necessarily changed through time and yet the 'slate' upon which dockyard, defences and townships were drawn could not be wiped clean without considerable financial and social cost. What is particularly noticeable in the clearance of population from High Street and West Street and later the proposed demolition of Blue Town was that the authorities made no proposals for relocating the evicted inhabitants elsewhere. Proposals made to the authorities by the inhabitants involving government land were rejected. The authorities appear to have pursued a 'negative' rôle in development control, stipulating where settlement could not take place rather than undertaking a more positive approach and planning for future development in order to lessen the conflict between civilian and military objectives.

A SECOND COLONISING MOVEMENT: THE GROWTH OF MARINE TOWN

This aspect is particularly well illustrated by events surrounding the development of the colony of Mile Town during the 1820s and the later development of Marine Town in the 1850s. During this period the colony of Mile Town grew steadily from a small hamlet into a small town. The greater part of the land upon which Mile Town was constructed was owned by James Chalk of Queenborough¹¹⁷ but was mortgaged to Sir Edward Banks (1770–1835) who eventually came into full possession (Fig. 7).¹¹⁸ Banks was joint partner with Jolliffe in a leading firm of building contractors who undertook the Sheerness dockyard extension under the supervision of the Rennies.¹¹⁹ During the 1820s the proximity of the growing colony to the new bastion defences increasingly concerned the authorities because of the narrow glaciis and as a result a section of land within 600 yards of the defences and including the land surrounding Mile Town was pur-

¹¹⁶ P.R.O. ADM 106/3188, 25 August, 1820.

¹¹⁷ *Sheerness Times*, 25 December, 1897.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, P.R.O. MR 1331.

¹¹⁹ *Dictionary of National Biography*, 1, 1046; H.W. Dickinson, 'Jolliffe and Banks, contractors', *Transactions of the Newcomen Society*, xii (1931), 1–8.

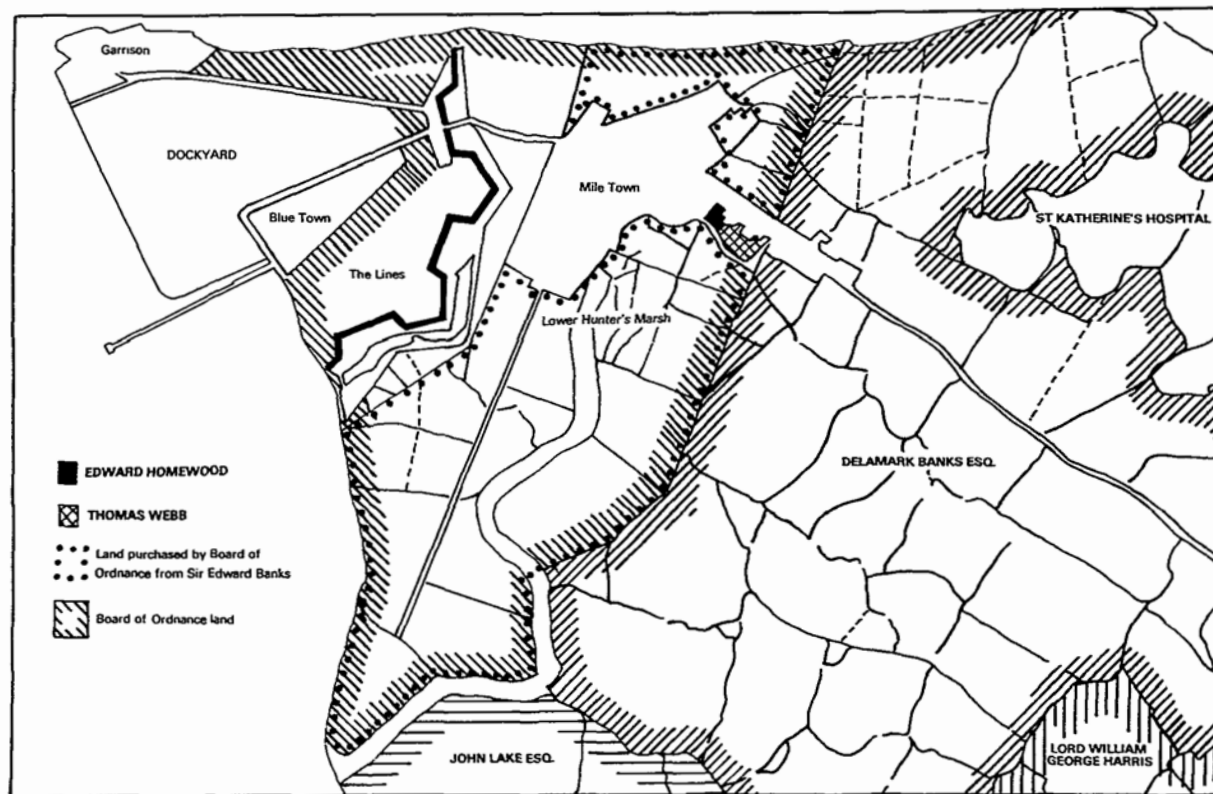


Fig. 7. Land Ownership in Sheerness, 1842.

chased by the government from Banks in 1827. This purchase effectively enclosed Mile Town within government land and because building on this land was not permitted, further expansion of Mile Town was curtailed. In view of the size of Mile Town by this time such a step was probably too late to have been effective in securing the continued effectiveness of the defences and, yet, by preventing further development of Mile Town, the government contributed to a second colonising movement to the north-east beyond the recently purchased government land to Marine Town. Government policy toward dockyard settlements as indicated by the case of Sheerness appears to have been short-term and, in relying on responding to situations, seems to have been largely a matter of expediency. Having restricted the areal expansion of Blue Town and stimulated population movement to Mile Town, the government then proceeded also to check, by land purchase, expansion of that settlement, bringing about a second colonising movement to Marine Town. That the rapid growth of Mile Town in front of the fortifications was not foreseen nor sites for future settlement set aside indicates the limited rôle which the authorities took in the planning and development of dockyard settlements. Indeed, in time the presence of Mile Town and Marine Town before the defences led to a further ramparted moat being constructed to the east of Marine Town in 1862 which thereafter prevented any further eastward expansion of Marine Town.¹²⁰

In many respects the action of Sir Edward Banks in the development of Mile Town was in stark contrast to that of the naval authorities. Banks became extensively involved in the development of large parts of Mile Town including the construction of houses in part of the town which became known as Banks Town. He gave land for the construction of Holy Trinity Church¹²¹ and, in an attempt to develop Sheerness as a watering-place, introduced a tri-weekly steam-boat service from London to Sheerness and paid for the restoration of the pier.¹²² In this way, Banks undertook a much more active rôle in the development of the town, a rôle which the naval authorities were now so reluctant to do.

¹²⁰ K.A.O. P254/B28/1; K.R. MacDonald, *The Isle of Sheppey and the Swale*, unpublished M.A. thesis, King's College, London 1949, 114.

¹²¹ H.T.A. Turmine, *Rambles in the Island of Sheppey*, Sheerness 1843, 32.

¹²² H.W. Dickinson, *op. cit.*, 5.

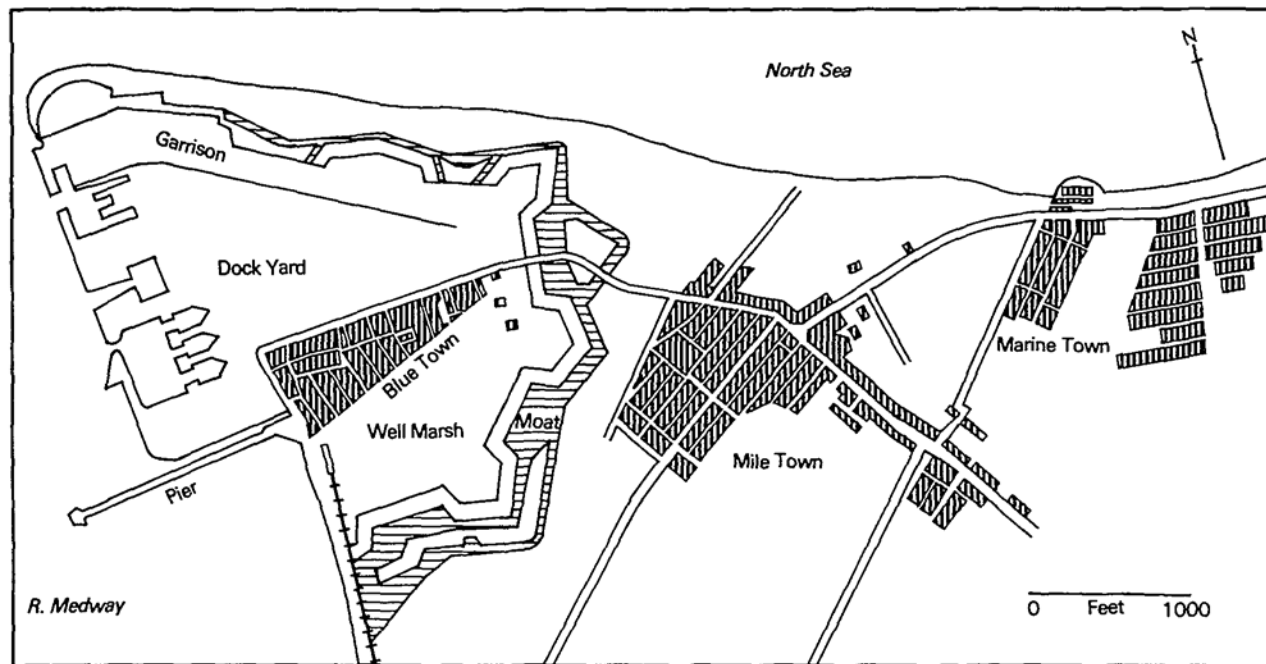


Fig. 8. Sheerness in 1871.

CONCLUSION

By the middle of the nineteenth century, therefore, the major features of the present-day township were established (Fig. 8). The closure of the yard in 1959, following a number of closure scares since the 1880s, significantly emphasised the dependence of the township and economy on the dockyard and government policy. With the exception of the extensive Government involvement in housing dockyard workers during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries such a pattern of events is similarly reflected in the development of Chatham Dockyard and the growth of settlement at Brompton and Gillingham. The absence of extensive landward fortifications at Woolwich, which came under the general defence umbrella of London, is reflected in the different urban morphology of that town though its encirclement by government establishments emphasised the military nature of the town. The involvement of the government in such a way as at Sheerness was a very rare feature outside of the dockyard system especially in the pre-twentieth century *laissez-faire* period although the deep involvement of private companies in the economy and affairs of a town is a more well known feature of urban development following the Industrial Revolution. No other county had such a concentration of naval dockyards or so many dockyard employees and the imprint which the government and the naval authorities have left on the contemporary economic, social and urban fabric of these Kentish towns in the defence of this country is probably without parallel.