Vintage Ports: The Transition of Historic Dockyard Buildings to Civilian Uses

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Abstract

Many countries’ defence estate contains their most impressive historic structures, now obsolete as the result of worldwide political change, reductions in defence expenditure and the new military requirement for rapid flexible response.

The transition of these important public assets to civilian uses needs to be examined in the light of increasing experience, to determine whether a reasonable balance can be struck between conserving their aesthetic and historic value in appropriate new uses, bringing compensating benefit to the local community and economy damaged by the peace deficit, and achieving an optimum financial return to the state. Trans-national transfers of experience may make a useful contribution to the process.

The defense estate includes government dockyards which have been centres of technological innovation for many centuries. Specialised dockyard buildings share generic characteristics related to their primary function. If they are to survive, they must find productive new uses which do not irreparably destroy their original meaning and structure.

Experience of reuse is examined in order to identify positive factors in the transition to civilian uses, in case studies of heritage tourism, maritime museum, marine research and development and other uses - in the three premier British dockyards: (heritage tourism), Barcelona: (maritime museum), and in Venice where the future of the historic Arsenale is still uncertain.

Public policy analysis and principles of conservation and community participation in town planning inform the research. Factors which contribute to successful transitions of defence heritage to civilian uses measured in terms of conservation, return to local communities and economic viability are becoming identifiable.

Note: ‘Military’ is used as a generic term to describe all service structures. ‘Dockyard’ is used to denote government shipyard.
Introduction

The furore aroused by the British Government’s proposed sale of the Royal Naval College at Greenwich in 1995 touched a sensitive nerve in national pride. In the UK there are two further factors contributing to redundancy - a reduced international role, and continuous pressure to reduce public expenditure.

The legacy of defence heritage, built from funds from the national exchequer, includes many splendid structures bound up with national pride. Architectural tours de force - the Royal Naval College, Greenwich and the Royal William Victualling Yard in Plymouth - are matched by a whole alphabet of elegantly functional buildings: arsenals and armouries, abattoirs, basins and balloon sheds, barracks, batteries, boathouses and breweries, casemates, caponiers and chapels, depots, docks, drillhalls, drydocks, factories, fortresses and foundries, gunpowder works and gunwharfs, magazines and monuments, pillboxes and pontoons, redoubts, rigging houses and roperies, slips and storehouses, sawmills and smitheries, turrets and towers, wardrooms, watchtowers, workshops, and even zoos. This paper focuses on those buildings contained within and defending government dockyards.

Finding new uses for such diverse assets, particularly those of national significance, is a complex national and international challenge. The search is constrained by the extensive apparatus of UK conservation law and activity, compounded by the Crown Exemption and severe limits to public access in the interests of national security, factors which inhibit creative debate on new use.

Since the redundancy of historic defence sites is an international phenomenon, experience of conservation and reuse in comparable European dockyards and of disposal of defense sites in the United States is drawn upon. The aim is to identify positive factors in the transition to civilian uses which make the process acceptable to as many parties as possible as well as being responsive in terms of conservation.

Symbols of national pride

Without the dockyards there would be no national navies. Until perhaps the early 1960s UK defence buildings including those in government dockyards were designed by military engineers or architects of national renown, and to the highest specifications - a contrast to today’s lowest tender procedure.

Dockyards are positioned according to two key determinants: access to the site of government via developing communications and to the direction of enemy bases and attack. Historically UK dockyards were developed in a spiral. Deptford and Woolwich on the Thames were a short ride from Westminster; Chatham on
the Medway and Sheerness in the Isle of Sheppey had access to the North Sea against the Dutch; Portsmouth commanded the channel against the French and Spanish and in the twentieth century the Germans; Plymouth and Pembroke gave access to the Western Atlantic, and Rosyth the North Atlantic.

Military activity has always stimulated the search for innovation - and this is sometimes also true of military buildings. The eighteenth century roperies in the UK’s three premier southern dockyards were amongst the world’s longest extant buildings; by 1750 the royal dockyards and the navy they served had become ‘by a large margin the largest industrial organisation in the western world’. Rodger [1]. The great series of covered slips designed by military engineers at Deptford, Chatham, Portsmouth and Plymouth - evolving in design in wood, iron and steel - predate the great railway sheds of Paddington and St. Pancras in London.

Redundancy and reuse of military heritage

Redundancy of dockyards occurs as the threat to national security is lifted or relocated, or as swift communication is available over longer distances, or as technical innovation produces larger and more complex ships, making new demands on equipment and space.

The robustness of much military architecture can be a positive factor in adaptation to reuse. Large interrupted volumes offer scope for space-consuming new activities, such as storage of bulky items or the insertion of subdivisions needed in radical changes such as the creation of modern living spaces or offices. The military have long been adept at adapting structures made redundant by technical or political change. These reuses may or may not offer pointers for civilian uses, as they were often ingenious, but untrammeled until very recently by considerations of conservation. The Square Tower, one of the inner defences of Portsmouth Harbour has been by turns a gunpowder store, firing platform, beef store, garrison governor’s residence, semaphore tower platform and - lastly - a museum, a use which respects all the previous changes but because of modern conservation rules does not allow for much subsequent change.

Whole sites have been recycled: Deptford Dockyard on the Thames has been in turn: an East India Company shipyard; a government dockyard where a distinguished line of navy ships were built, closed in 1869; a cattle importation yard for the City of London; a general store for the Ministry of Defence; an archive store for the National Maritime Museum; currently it is a storage site for newsprint for News International; in spring 1997 a cruise liner terminal is proposed for the site.

Until the advent of the conservation movement the survival of historic buildings through many radical changes had to depend on their adaptability or
siting. Defence Ministries’ reluctance to leave sites that have often been military for centuries may lead both to survival and to neglect and decay - as in the case of the splendid Venetian Arsenale and the Napoleonic dockyard at Den Helder in northern Holland, both largely unused but still in service control.

Where is the public interest in the disposal of publicly owned military sites?

The public interest is a vague and controversial concept much misused by politicians. Meyerson and Banfield [2] define a decision as being in the public interest if it serves the ends of the whole public rather than those of some sector of it. Detailed analysis of the concept is beyond the scope of this paper, but despite the difficulties of definition there would appear to be a relevant role for it in discussion of the disposal of assets built at public expense to protect national security.

The thorny question of the best return to the public interest on these sites has been defined by the UK Treasury in purely monetary terms. The 1992 Treasury Instruction directs Accounting Officers that once surplus government land or buildings are identified, Departments are expected to dispose of them within three years at maximum planning value by auction or competitive tender. This short-termism and insistence of the highest price militates against many longstanding conservation and environmental policies and good long term planning. The operational requirements and budgetary constraints of one public sector department can lead to policies in conflict with those of others: the Department of the Environment and the Department of National Heritage whose aims are to preserve the character of historic buildings and landscapes and to conserve their fabric. The primary purpose of the Ministry of Defence is to protect Britain’s national interests and land area by means of the armed forces. Against this, its responsibility for historic buildings is seen as a low priority. As far as historic government sites are concerned, subsequent Treasury guidance notes have modified the requirement of maximum financial return. This demonstrates the considerable influence of the conservation lobby, both statutory and voluntary.

Reuse is made more difficult by reductions in public spending required by the Treasury which leads to the Ministry of Defence to spend less on maintenance, putting at risk redundant buildings, especially those which have no active defence use and are unoccupied longterm. The legal protection of buildings from demolition - in the UK by scheduling as ancient monuments or historic buildings - is overridden by national security. But as military threats change or recede and buildings and sites are discarded for modern defence, such exclusion is less and less justified by the national interest. The crucial question is whether the cost of
the cost of the maintenance and disposal of defence heritage, the largest and most diverse publicly owned estate, should fall solely on defence funds.

**Filling the white holes - the national versus the local interest**

Defence sites, for so long only white spaces on maps, are coming into civilian focus for the first time as they are being prepared for sale. A key conflict also arises between the national interest, however defined, and the local interest as far as new uses for these sites is concerned. This challenge is particularly acute in areas where defence industry has dominated the local geography and economy, often as the major employer for centuries. Many of these sites were once vital motors of local economies. Generations of local people worked in them and they are often the key to economic regeneration. British practice has little role for local communities or authorities in arriving at reuses, except as planning authorities, where intense pressure is often brought to bear. The MOD and the government have not to date accepted any responsibility for the economic regeneration of former defence dominated areas. This contrasts with practice in areas devastated by the closure of coalmines or shipbuilding where special aid has been given. There are current moves to review disposal procedure to achieve a balance between national interests and the long-term economic advantages to local communities.

**Public participation in planning for change - the almighty wall**

People-centred development is currently seen as a potentially vital contribution to the reinvigoration of modern society - in many social and environmental fields. Local Agenda 21 places new emphasis on citizens’ right to participate in decision-making. But while ‘there may be a requirement to consult, unfortunately there isn’t a requirement to listen, or to share power, or to change the culture of the town hall to produce more open and receptive minds.’ [Streetwise 3]. Influencing not just a town hall but a government department as large as the Ministry of Defence looks like an impossible task. Driven by the Treasury, the Defence Lands Service exerts intense pressure on local authorities to accept high value land uses which may conflict with local plans and whose priority is the generation of profit rather than meeting local needs.

There has been considerable criticism of the current disposal system, which tends to provoke strong local opposition, particularly where the Ministry of Defence’s planning applications or those of subsequent owners conflict with established policies. In the US, a much more benign procedure which puts local needs at the top of the agenda is in operation. This could offer a model of how the
UK might find new uses for publicly owned assets including hospital sites. Negotiated disposal, offering sites first to local communities, a fully participatory local plan procedure, and transparent planning negotiations would do much to avoid confrontation between local communities, authorities, The Ministry of Defence and successor owners. This could offer a model of how the UK might find new uses for publicly owned assets including hospital sites.

Finding new uses for the enormously diverse defence heritage, particularly those buildings of national significance, is a complex national and international challenge which is compounded by severe limits to public access. Once military security is no longer relevant, claimed or real deterioration of closed buildings may be claimed to justify continued prevention of public access which inhibits creative debate on reuse. The enclosing wall is a perceptual as well as a physical barrier, which is hard to breach. European Heritage Open Days have been used in at least one defence-dominated area - Portsmouth in the south of England - to open up sites in transition to civilian uses for public tours. Public responses to subsequent planning applications have reflected the increased knowledge gained. Viewing the inside of an historic building is often critical in considering what it might become: public attitudes to the Vulcan building of 1811 on the Portsmouth Gunwharf site changed dramatically when its impressive unencumbered spaces unseen by local planners were revealed. Public intervention by local authorities or citizens at the critical early stage when land uses and building reuses are established is rarely possible. Citizens only get the chance to comment on what the developer proposes when the planning application is submitted.

Factors in reuse

Decisions on reuse - whether by the military or by successor owners - are taken according to key determinants such as:

* Site: geographical position in the larger area and the position of buildings within the site the perceived historic value of the buildings and metaphysical factors such as image;
* economic factors - acquisition costs, costs of adaptation as a return on investment compared with new site or buildings, income earning potential
* physical characteristics: location, scale, volume, fenestration, ventilation, structural capacity, adaptability of plan and the degrees of adaptation involved in new uses, and the influences of condition and maintenance regimes.

Britain is currently said to have lost her connection with the sea. On the micro-geographic level, ease of water communications has often been lost in the late
twentieth century, with its reliance on road communication. This in turn makes regeneration of maritime sites more difficult and reduces their perceived value. The convoluted geography of Plymouth makes John Rennie’s magnificent neo-classical food processing factory of the Royal William Victualling Yard of the 1820s on the end of the Stonehouse peninsula much more peripheral to the modern city than it once was in relation to Devonport Dockyard and other facilities upriver. Plymouth Development Corporation was set up in 1993 to regenerate three historic buildings-laden sites with difficult links by road but ease of communication by water. Their plans for new road access and a large-scale multistorey carpark in a reservoir, potentially very damaging to the local environment, have been both controversial and absorbed energies which might have been directed towards finding new uses for the site itself.

In contrast, the HMS Vernon/Gunwharf site in Portsmouth could not be better sited for sustainable transport: next to a railway terminus, a bus, coach and ferry interchange, a major pedestrian route, not to mention a projected LRT line, yet a large part of the cost of the currently proposed redevelopment is a seabed level carpark for 2,350 cars to attract visitors to a large factory shopping complex, which would seem to ignore current guidelines for transport sustainability.

Apart from the failure to use water transport, proximity to water is on the whole regarded by the present development industry as an asset. Early plans to fill in the Albert Dock in Liverpool were abandoned when the essential relationship of Jesse Hartley’s magnificent series of warehouses to the dock which they surround was recognised. Even if modern goods handling or ship repair activity is no longer possible because historic dock buildings are now too close to water without enough space, proximity to water is regarded as aesthetically important to residential or office development or museums.

Inside dockyard sites, the positioning of the longest building, the ropewalk, has for long been a determining factor in navy and post-navy planning. Portsmouth’s Double Rope House of 1771 and parallel hemp houses of 1776 at right angles to the contemporary storehouses has constrained later developments. In the 1950s a roadway was cut through the ropewalk to allow lateral access. Its immense length - over 330m - was no longer functional: ropes were no longer made there. In Chatham the Double Rope House (1787-1792) was in time paralleled from 1785-1805 by the two huge Anchor Wharf Storehouses, 213m and 183m long. Victorian expansion took place on St. Mary’s Island down river. When the Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust was set up following closure of Chatham Dockyard in 1982, this differentiation make it possible for the site to be divided into three separately treated zones: the historic dockyard offered to the trust, the Chatham Maritime site on the Victorian extension - which make the survival of historic structures there problematic - and the Freeport.
Buildings’ perceived historic value

The value placed on the preservation and conservation of historic buildings is comparatively recent. Earlier in the twentieth century museum use, preferably maritime related, was often perceived as the most appropriate use for redundant dockyard and maritime buildings. The marvellous thirteenth century Gothic shiphalls of the Drassanes Reales in Barcelona, long divorced from the sea by land reclamation, were saved from demolition in 1941 by the campaign of an artillery colonel who proposed them as an appropriate home for a Catalan maritime collection. In Portsmouth the three Georgian storehouses of 1763, 1777 and 1782 which now form the approach to Admiral Nelson’s flagship HMS Victory in the Portsmouth Historic Dockyard were in danger of demolition in the early 1970s. They were rescued as a result of pressure from the local authority and the Royal Naval Museum’s need for a home for the bequest of the Lambert McCarthy collection of Nelson memorabilia. Neither use is ideal: the storehouses’ narrowness constrains circulation and the soaring vaults in Barcelona overwhelm the exhibits - with the exception of the royal galley - which is the right vessel for the context. The Director of the Royal Naval Museum in Portsmouth would prefer the museum to be in the deep plan nineteenth century No. 6 Boathouse of 1846 which has an outstanding early example of an underslung truss construction in very large storey heights. (Fig. 1)

Fig. 1: No.6 Boathouse, Portsmouth Dockyard 1846
Designed by Lt. Beatson Royal Engineers; Survey Drawing: John Winter
Conservation can be either a positive and a negative force, inhibiting or enabling new use. The very strict rules of the Italian Ministero per I Beni Culturali e Ambientale prevent impingement of new structures into existing historic fabric. This was the case in Venice Arsenale where the insertion of the Thetis consortium’s marine research laboratory, workshop and library into a foundry building of 1911 had to be completely freestanding. This new historically appropriate activity on a site where early industrial production was celebrated by the construction of a galley in one day to impress a French king reintroduces the symbolic marriage between Venice and the sea.

By contrast to the strictness of the Italian law, the voluntary conservation sector represented by SAVE Britain’s Heritage, a small but influential group because of their links to the press, has been the key to revaluing British defence heritage. Their report and exhibition Deserted Bastions in 1993 [4] highlighted the very poor state of maintenance and limited understanding of many military buildings. The Ministry of Defence was stimulated into commissioning a reply, Defending Our Heritage [5]. Annual reports promised a strategy for implementation of effective management of the historic defence estate, including disposals. Quadrennial inspections are promised, but in practice repairs are still targeted mainly on buildings in use, not those in reserve or redundant. Much remains to be done, as a recent seminar in the Institute of Advanced Architectural Studies in York discussed. SAVE Britain’s Heritage continues to push forward the boundaries of what is regarded as heritage with their campaign to find new uses for the very large steelframed No. 4 Boathouse of 1938/9, a cathedral to small boat building. In its own way, it is a worthy successor to its neighbours in the Portsmouth heritage area, but local politicians and the press have dubbed it the ugliest building on the harbour and vowed to clear it.

The economic justification for conservation

In the context of continued pressure to reduce central government and agency budgets English Heritage, the state agency with equivalents in Wales and Scotland responsible for policy and grant aid commissioned research on the Economic and Social Value of the Cultural Built Heritage in 1995 [6] to examine methods of measuring the wider economic benefits of urban conservation. Thematic studies of military building types: barracks, forts and dockyard buildings have been initiated in order to identify the best examples for conservation and funding. The Department of the Environment/Department of National Heritage guidelines Planning and the Historic Environment (PPG 15) emphasises the economic justification for conservation. EU KONVER grants for defence devastated areas are being used conversions of dockyard buildings to new leisure-orientated uses.
for example Portsmouth’s No 7 Boathouse which is now a necessary restaurant, exhibition space and shop for the heritage area.

It may be therefore that at least in the UK few if any military buildings will be conserved for their intrinsic value as symbols of national pride - as for example the Tower of London. But this justification for expenditure appears still to be prevalent in Italy, where the magnificent covered wet dock in the Arsenale, the Gaggiandre of 1568-73 by Jacopo Sansovino, as well as other buildings have been splendidly restored for their own sake. In the UK conservation is justified by what they might become.

Historic dockyards as tourist attractions

From conversion of individual buildings the idea of maritime or dockyard heritage areas developed. In Portsmouth and Chatham historic dockyard trusts were appointed by the government to develop them as visitor attractions. A key issue remains the level of public endowment to restore large neglected buildings and to convert them. The ‘dowry’ was not sufficient in either Chatham or Portsmouth. New pressures are imposed: the EU sponsored Working Group Network Demilitarised says in Military Base Conversion: the Lessons from Experience [7]: “Tourism development represents one of the most common approaches to the reuse of historic or heritage sites. These will generally retain much of the intrinsic features …but often generate considerable pressures in terms of access and car parking requirements”. Generating the necessary visitor flows to ensure viability tends to favour the more accessible sites, which is why road access assumes so much importance. Portsmouth has an advantage not shared by Chatham and Plymouth: an established tourist industry focused largely on naval and military attractions. The operational dockyard, although downgraded to a fleet maintenance and repair base offers the backdrop of a continuous live theatre for the small heritage area within it.

Degrees of adaptation

In addition to the inevitable physical deterioration of any structure, there is continual flux in patterns of occupation and levels of investment. There are perhaps three categories of potential new activity to which redundant dockyard buildings can be put:

* buildings where the most suitable use is close to the original: rope-making, ship building or repair, flag making or other marine activity;
* buildings which are central to the historic character of the site, where the new use is often directed towards ‘heritage’: museums or interpretation: i.e. tourist related activity;
* buildings whose large uninterrupted spaces may offer scope for conversion to flats, offices of small industrial or commercial enterprises - at certain environmental costs, such as subdivision, the insertion of new circulation, services, means of escape, fire precautions, and upgrading of the internal environmental environment to match modern expectations of comfort and to comply with present day regulations.

The robustness and sober working character of these buildings needs to be respected in adaptation. The principle that the original use is usually the best may not always apply, either because the technical demands of processes have changed dramatically or because conservation of original fabric and reversibility make insertion of modern facilities difficult. An example is the storage of goods, especially when palletised, which require high floor to ceiling heights and access by fork lift trucks. Low key storage, for example of archives in Chatham’s Anchor Store Houses, where movement is infrequent, is kinder to historic fabric.

The degree of acceptable change perhaps needs to be related to the importance of the building. Particular cases may be analysed according to the degrees of intervention, for example those of Feilden [8] ranging from prevention of deterioration through restoration to reproduction and reconstruction, as in the reconstruction of the bombed cupola on No 10 Storehouse in Portsmouth. In Feilden’s view these nearly always involve some loss of ‘value’ in cultural property, but are justified in order to preserve objects for the future. Industrial uses need to be small scale or traditional - and the further from the original use - from storehouse or workshop to houses or offices - the more care needs to be taken not to let drastic insertions spoil them. Wholesale removal of interiors or insertions of a totally new interior which masks the original quality are now likely to be resisted by conservation agencies such as English Heritage. The most problematic conversions may be of industrial and residential buildings to offices. Lateral circulation introduced into vertically organised terraced houses, heavy floor loadings for computers and office storage, and increased levels of occupancy and heating may all put pressure on historic fabric. There would appear to be cases where the new use is so technically demanding that it is nearly impossible to prevent loss of integrity. The Portsmouth Iron and Brass Foundry of 1849 internally sheathed in iron may not be the best setting for the high-tech ship to ship communication for the Royal Navy.

Residential conversions of barracks are usually successful in conservation and property investment terms. They usually result in lower human density.
Apartments in Eastney Barracks in Portsmouth, the Royal Naval Hospital in Great Yarmouth, and Peninsula Barracks in Winchester have proved popular and profitable to their developers. But there were losses as well as gains: public access is now possible for the first time for a thousand years to Peninsular Barracks, but the drill shed, stables, school and ancillary buildings were cleared for carparking and new houses at Eastney.

Chatham also provides an interesting example of the original use making the transition to a tourist attraction. The ground floor of the Double Rope House is still used for demonstrations of ropemaking using the original Maudesley machinery, though in order for the private company to make enough income, more modern methods are used elsewhere. Portsmouth Ropehouse has suffered a double redundancy. It was eviscerated in the 1950s losing all internal floors and the roof for storage, only to become redundant once again as the greater volumes of the Factory of 1900 offered ease of mechanical handling. The challenge of finding permanent, sustainable uses for the Plymouth Ropery of 1812 which still has some of the late eighteenth century winding machinery in situ and for the magnificent La Tana or Corderia in the Arsenale which do not spoil their most important spatial characteristic, their immense length, remains.

Particularly heavily defended areas pose problems of quantity. The sheer number of forts a thousand yards apart built by Lord Palmerston’s government in the 1860s in response to a threat perceived from Napoleon III forming ‘ring fortresses’ round Portsmouth, Plymouth, Chatham and Valletta in Malta present an enormous reuse challenge. To take modern uses of the Portsmouth system as an example, Fort Wallington has been partly destroyed for an industrial park, Fort Brockhurst has undergone an exemplary restoration by English Heritage, Fort Nelson is an appropriate setting for the Royal Armouries’ collection, Fort Purboook is a Youth Activities Centre, but the Royal Navy would like to reduce Fort Southwick to a state of ‘controlled ruination’.

**Conclusion**

In “the greatest exchange of property since the dissolution of the monasteries” [Worsley 9], ingenuity and vision are prerequisites for productive reuse of historic military and dockyard buildings. Constraints may even be a spur to creativity. Dockyard buildings’ unquantifiable but strong connection with the identities of naval localities needs to be seen as an vital asset to be weighed against the considerable costs of conservation and conversion. In addition to the uses related to maritime heritage tourism, where technical innovation can return to historic dockyards as in the case of the Thetis consortium to Venice, the circle between the past and the future is complete.
References


2. Meyerson and Banfield *Politics, Planning and the Public Interest* 1955


