Devonport Dockyard in the 1920s

Jonathan Wood

By the twentieth century, Devonport Dockyard was the largest industrial enterprise, not just in Plymouth but in the south-west of England (west of Bristol). Half of Plymouth's economy depended on the dockyard, and Devonport – one of the three towns that had merged in 1914 to form the county borough of Plymouth – came into existence because of it. The dockyard was the main reason a city of Plymouth's size had developed in possibly the most remote location of any English city.

Devonport Dockyard was a national defence establishment controlled by the Admiralty in London, whose priority was the defence and maintenance of Britain's naval power. Consequently, the dockyard's fortunes were heavily dependent on national and international developments. National and international factors were the main reason for the dockyard's predicament in the 1920s.

In the years to 1918, notwithstanding fluctuations that led to lay-offs, the yard had enjoyed a long period of steady growth as the demands of the First World War increased the workforce to an unprecedentedly high level. The post-1918 situation was a marked contrast, and the yard entered a prolonged period of austerity, retrenchment and mass lay-offs. Continuous expansion was replaced by contraction. and even the continued survival of the dockyard was uncertain. The 1920s were traumatic years for dockyard workers and their communities.[1]

The Importance of Devonport Dockyard

Since the eighteenth century, Devonport had been one of Britain's three main royal dockyards, along with Chatham and Portsmouth. The senior official responsible for the day-to-day management of the dockyard was the superintendent, and, because of Devonport's size and importance, the post of superintendent of Devonport dockyard was a flag officer appointment, a post held by someone of admiral, rear admiral or vice admiral rank, and was therefore called the admiral-superintendent. [2]

Dockyard Expansion Before 1914

The years preceding the First World War were ones of intense activity and major expansion in Devonport Dockyard. This was the result of a naval arms race. In the late nineteenth century, France

[1] Plymouth Archives, Record Reference: 3642/236, 'Plymouth Area Study by the South-West Economic Planning Council 1969'; Plymouth Archives, Record Reference: 3642/4953, David Pritchard 'Powerhouse of the West: A History of Devonport Dockyard', p. 1; Peter Hilditch, 'The Dockyard in the Local Economy' in Michael Duffy, Stephen Fisher, Basil Greenhill, David J. Starkey, Joyce Youings (editors) *The New Maritime History of Devon: Volume II From the Late Eighteenth Century to the Present Day* (Conway Maritime Press, 1994), p. 215; Mary Hilson, *Political Change and the Rise of Labour in Comparative Perspective: Britain and Sweden 1890-1920* (Nordic Academic Press, 2006), pp. 69, 71.
[2] Duffy, et al., *op. cit.* pp. 11–12; Lieutenant Commander K. V. Burns, *The Devonport Dockyard Story* (Maritime Books, 1984), p. 36; Plymouth Archives, Record Reference: 3642/4953, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

was viewed as the major threat to Britain's maritime dominance, but by the early twentieth century, Germany, which was endeavouring to make itself a major naval power, was seen as the main rival.

The 1889 Naval Defence Act increased expenditure on new warships and provided extra work for Devonport and the other royal dockyards. The 1895 Naval Works Act devoted major new funds to the dockyards and the money it provided helped to fund the biggest expansion in Devonport Dockyard's history, the Keyham Extension. Work began on the extension in February 1896 and it was formally opened in February 1907. This project doubled the size of the dockyard, adding 130 acres to its area and making it the largest Western European dockyard.

In these years, Devonport Dockyard undertook its biggest ever programme of ship construction. Between 1883 and 1914, it built seventeen battleships and fourteen cruisers. The increasing size of battleships meant this represented an unprecedented quantity of tonnage.[3]

The Growth of the Dockyard Workforce

The size of the dockyard's workforce rose dramatically in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, during the period of large-scale ship construction.

Table 1: Number of Workers in Devonport Dockyard, 1890–1914[4]

1890	5,206
1900	8,456
1910	9,443
1914	12,290

Skilled Manual Workers in Devonport Dockyard

Building, repairing and refitting naval warships required a wide range of skills, and a high proportion of the dockyard's workforce were skilled manual workers. The skilled workers were organised in craft unions, which were resolute in defending the skills and status of their members.

Bert Medland, a noteworthy Dockyard trade unionist who eventually became a Labour MP, was a member of the dockyard branch of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE), a long-established craft union. In an article in a local journal, he recalled how important their craft status was to ASE members:

> In the Yard there were a large number of craft unions. Never will I forget those grand old men, members of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers… They were craftsmen and let no one forget it. The man who swept the floor was a person of lesser breed altogether.

The Dockyard ASE was selective in its recruitment of members: 'When I joined the union I had to

[3] Plymouth Archives, Record Reference: 2758, 'The Growth and Development of HM Dockyard, Devonport: An original Communication Presented Before the Summer Conference of the Institution of Structural Engineers' by Mr. John M.P. Hooley, p. 42; Jonathan Coad, 'Architecture and Development of Devonport Naval Base 1815–1982' in Duffy et al., *op. cit.*, pp. 172–73.

[4] Peter Hilditch, 'The Dockyard in the Local Economy' in Duffy, et al., *op. cit.*, p. 216.

have two sponsors, and there was careful consideration as to whether my mechanical ability was sufficient and my character good enough.'

In the dockyard, as well as the divide between the skilled and the semi-skilled and unskilled, there was a hierarchy among skilled workers, with the shipwrights and the engine fitters being the most prestigious trades. In the 1920s, the leading trade unionists in the yard were members of craft unions: Jimmy Moses of the Ship Constructors and Shipwrights Association, James Churchward of the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers (ASW), Bert Medland of the Amalgamated Engineering Union (created by the ASE's merger with several other engineering unions) and Harry Mason of the Boilermakers, Iron and Steel Shipbuilders' Society.[5]

The Shipwrights

The shipwrights, who constructed the ships and worked on their hulls, were the core skilled trade in the royal dockyards. In private yards their importance and status had declined because of the transition from wooden to metal ships, but in Devonport and the other royal dockyards they were re-trained to work with metal and retained their position at the top of the occupational hierarchy among dockyard manual workers. The shipwrights' pre-eminence was reinforced by the dockyard schools in which students with the best examination results were offered shipwrights' apprenticeships and received a more advanced and intensive education than those destined for other trades. Shipwrights had greater opportunities for promotion to technical, supervisory and managerial posts.[6]

The Impact of Technological Change on Skill and Status in the Dockyard

The increasing importance of electrical equipment, riveting and welding challenged the dominant position of the shipwrights. Engine fitters and electrical engineers achieved equal status with the shipwrights. Riveters and caulkers, on the other hand, who were regarded as craftsmen in private shipyards were classified as skilled labourers in the royal dockyards and thus not of full craft status. However, in 1914, the Boilermakers' Society, a craft union, decided to accept iron caulkers and riveters as members.[7]

Craft Union Rivalries and Demarcation Disputes

Intense rivalries existed between the dockyard's craft unions. The advantages enjoyed by the shipwrights were resented by members of other craft unions. The shipwrights in the royal dockyards undertook work performed by other groups of skilled workers in the private yards, and this situation led to demarcation disputes. A contributor to the journal *Mariner's Mirror* in 1925 noted that shipwrights in the dockyards continued to have demarcation disputes with plumbers, with fitters, with blacksmiths, with joiners, with boilermakers, with patternmakers and with electricians'… And

[5] Alderman H.M. Medland, 'They Called Me "Stormy", in *Christmas Cheers, Journal of the Plymouth Guild of Social Services*, Plymouth Archives Reference: 439/18/8 Biographical particulars regarding Alderman H.G. Mason, J.P. Hilson, *op. cit.*, p 91; Neil Casey, 'Class Rule: The Hegemonic Role of the Royal Dockyard Schools, 1840–1914', Chapter 4 in Kenneth Lunn and Ann Day (eds), *History of Work and Labour Relations in the Royal Dockyards*, published by Mansell Publishing Ltd, London and New York, 1999, pp. 73–74.

[6] Hilditch, *op. cit.*, p. 217; Hilson, *op. cit.*, pp. 92–93.

[7] Hilditch, ibid.

it must be confessed that the boundaries of the trade still wander from time to time.'

Bert Medland recalled the hard-fought demarcation disputes between the shipwrights and the fitters:

> There was always a bitter battle between the shipwrights and the fitters. The great men of the shipwrights were Jimmy Moses and Albert Hooper and, in these demarcation disputes it was always Jimmy on one side and "Stormy"(Medland's nickname) on the other.' [8]

The Establishment System

The workforce in Devonport Dockyard was divided into those with 'established status' and 'hired men'. The established workforce formed approximately one-fifth of the dockyard workforce (the percentage varied over the years.) Established workers had a virtual guarantee of continued employment, received a pension when they retired and were entitled to half-pay and free medical treatment if injured at work. If they were permanently incapacitated, they received compensation and if they were killed while at work, their widow would be paid a pension.

Most established workers were skilled workers and shipwrights were well-represented. The prospect of job security and other benefits meant establishment status had a strong appeal. The value of the establishment system to the Admiralty was that it enabled them to retain the loyalty of skilled workers through offering non-wage benefits without having to pay wage rates equalling those of private yards, which would have greatly increased public expenditure.[9]

Hired Men

The 'hired men' in Devonport Dockyard had no guarantee of job security and did not receive pensions. Hired workers were discharged and then re-engaged annually. However, because of the expansion of the dockyard and its workforce, many of the hired workers became permanent employees, entitled to non-wage benefits. If injured at work, hired workers were entitled to half-pay and free medical treatment.[10]

The Petition System and Industrial Relations in the Dockyard

By the early twentieth century, the Admiralty tolerated trade unions in the royal dockyards but did not officially recognise them for collective bargaining purposes. Instead, the Admiralty wished dockyard workers to raise their grievances via the petition system in the royal dockyards. Under this system, workers submitted written petitions detailing their grievances over wages and working conditions to the Admiralty whose officials would visit the dockyard to receive evidence before decisions were made. The petitioners were expected to use deferential language, for example '...These your humble petitioners do pray that these our humble petitions shall be considered by your Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty...'.

---

[8] Medland, *op. cit.*, pp. 6–7; Hilson, *op. cit.*, pp. 96–99; Peter Galliver, ' Trade Unionism in Portsmouth Dockyard, 1880–1914' in Lunn and Day, *op. cit.*, pp. 99–100.

[9] Hilditch, ibid.

[10] Hilditch, ibid.

Originally, petitions were submitted by individuals but by the early twentieth century trade unions played an increasingly important part in the preparations and presentation of petitions. As trade unionism grew in the dockyard, discontent with the limitations of petitioning increased. In the early twentieth century, Bert Medland, who became a leading figure in the Plymouth Labour movement and was at the time district secretary of the Devonport district of the ASE, rejected the supplicatory style of petitioning the Admiralty but instead wrote a letter on behalf of his district committee of the ASE, which requested the abolition of the petition system. When he presented this to the appropriate dockyard official, the Engineer-Manager, the response was hostile. 'He refused to forward my letter to the Admiralty and tore it into small pieces in front of me.' Medland, enraged, contacted the general secretary of his union who spoke to the financial secretary to the Admiralty and, after a second meeting between Medland and the Engineer-Manager, the latter passed Medland's letter on to the Admiralty.

The Admiralty could not ignore growing dissatisfaction with the petition system and in 1914 proposed a national conference which implied Trade Union Congress (TUC)-affiliated trade unions were the workers' representative organisations. Due to the outbreak of war, the conference was cancelled but this development was a harbinger of changes in industrial relations after 1918.[11]

The Dockyard and the Community

Devonport Dockyard – as the largest local employer and one that provided a degree of job security and non-wage benefits, which were rarely matched in private industry – had a profound impact on the economy and society of Plymouth, and Devonport in particular. Many young people in the community aspired to a dockyard apprenticeship and local people showed a keen interest in the dockyard's annual entrance examination.

Plymouth schools had special' dockyard classes. One dockyard worker recalled that at school, 'It was their intention to get boys into the dockyard. (At) our school, the curriculum is for the dockyard or naval apprentices.' Speaking in the House of Commons in May 1923, Isaac Foot, the Liberal MP for Bodmin, described how the Admiralty had encouraged local education authorities in Plymouth and other dockyard towns to provide special educational facilities. In Plymouth over the previous thirty years, special schools and classes to prepare young men for the dockyard had been established.[12]

Devonport Dockyard During the First World War

The growth of the dockyard – already impressive in the pre-war years – accelerated after the outbreak of the First World War. Ship construction was suspended for the duration of the war and the main task of the dockyard became refit and repair. The demands of total war provided a heavy workload, and the pressure on the dockyard's resources increased still further when the dockyard became an important centre of anti-submarine warfare. The size of the dockyard workforce increased to a level unequalled in its previous history.

---

[11] Alderman H.M. Medland 'They Called Me "Stormy"' in *Christmas Cheers: Journal of the Plymouth Guild of Social Services*, pp. 6–7; Hilson *op. cit.,* pp. 96–9; Peter Gulliver, 'Trade Unionism in Portsmouth Dockyard, 1880–1914' in Lunn and Day, *op. cit.*, pp. 99–100.

[12] Casey *op. cit.* in Lunn and Day *op. cit.*, p. 79; Hansard, Isaac Foot in 'Royal Navy and Royal Dockyard (Discharges)', vol. 163, debated 2 May 1923.

Table 2: Number of Workers in Devonport Dockyard During the First World War

1914	12,290
1916	14,035
1918	15,803

Because much of the adult male population was in the military, the dockyard, which had previously had only a limited number of naval widows in its workforce, found it necessary to increase the number of female employees to cope with the heavy workload.

The earnings and conditions of dockyard workers improved. They received wage increases, though this was compensation for the effects of wartime inflation, a supplementary war bonus and new overtime rates. The last was welcome because of the amount of overtime worked during the war.[13]

Post-war Cutbacks

After 1918, Devonport Dockyard experienced a dramatic reversal of the growth it had enjoyed since the late nineteenth century. The defeat and disarmament of Germany had removed any major naval threat to Britain, the government was anxious to achieve large-scale reductions in public expenditure because of the huge debt produced by its wartime spending, and the 1920s saw the beginning of a global recession which hit shipbuilding and ship repair especially hard.[14]

The Geddes Committee

In August 1921, the coalition government established a committee to explore ways of reducing public expenditure and appointed Sir Eric Geddes, former First Lord of the Admiralty and former Transport Minister, to chair it. The Geddes Committee, as it came to be known, made a detailed examination of the Navy estimates and recommended major cuts, requiring big reductions in the Navy's manpower and Admiralty shore establishments. It criticised the royal dockyards for being more expensive than private yards and proposed giving less work to the former, though the Admiralty rejected this conclusion.[15]

The Washington Naval Treaty

In 1922, the main naval powers – the United States, Britain, Japan, France and Italy – signed the Washington Treaty, which imposed restrictions on the size and number of their warships. The Treaty's provisions were an end to all plans to construct more capital ships (battleships and battlecruisers), the scrapping of a number of older ships and a ten-year moratorium on building warships over a certain tonnage. This had obvious implications for Devonport.

While meeting a joint deputation from Plymouth's Local Employment Committee and dockyard workers in February 1923, the First Lord of the Admiralty told them there was no urgent need to

[13] Hilson, *op. cit.,* p. 132; Burns, *op. cit.*, p. 81.
[14] Hilditch, *op. cit.*, p. 221.
[15] Burns, *op. cit.*, pp. 87–88; Andrew Lambert 'The Impact of Naval Technology on Warship Construction and Repair at Devonport 1815–1986, in Duffy et al., *op. cit.*, p. 183.

extend the dockyard facilities because the Washington Treaty meant there would be no ship construction for the next nine years.[16]

The Closure of Dockyards

The need to reduce the Admiralty's expenditure necessitated the closure of home dockyards. In 1923, Haulbowline Dockyard in Southern Ireland was given to the newly established Irish Free State. In 1926, Pembroke and Rosyth dockyards were put on a care-and-maintenance basis and many of their established workers and apprentices were transferred to the other royal dockyards – among them Devonport, which received 420 workers from the two mothballed dockyards. This exacerbated employment problems at a time when many Devonport workers had been laid off and worsened accommodation problems in an area already suffering severe housing shortages.[17]

The Dockyard's Main Focus Becomes Refit and Repair

In the 1920s, because of government expenditure cuts and the Washington Naval Treaty, there would be nothing comparable to the ambitious pre-war shipbuilding programme. Devonport Dockyard's main function had become ship refit and repair. The dockyard was also hampered because its facilities could not accommodate the largest warships. Before the war, Devonport could cope with the largest warships in existence at the time, but by the 1920s the biggest capital ships were considerably larger than any of their predecessors. The dockyard could not handle, for example, the 41,000-tonne HMS *Hood*, built in 1920.[18]

Mass Discharges in Devonport Dockyard

Dockyard workers who were laid off were described as being discharged, and a large number of workers in Devonport Dockyard were discharged after the end of the First World War. At first, it was those workers who had been employed on a temporary basis to meet wartime exigencies. The increase in the dockyard's female workforce had been due to wartime needs, and the first batch of women workers were discharged in March 1919. However, by the 1920s workers who had thought they had a permanent role, such as mechanics with up to ten years' experience, were being made unemployed. Even the shipwrights, the most prestigious and respected manual group, were affected. In May 1920, Jimmy Moses, the leading figure among the shipwrights, estimated that of the 1,500 dockyard workers who had been discharged since October 1919, nearly 400 had been shipwrights.[19]

Attempts to Create Alternative Work in the Dockyard

In 1919, the Admiralty appointed a committee, chaired by Lord Colwyn, to examine the possibility of using the dockyards to build and repair merchant ships to prevent mass discharges of dockyard workers. Committee members included Lovell Dunstan, Plymouth's Mayor. The Colwyn Committee completed its report in December 1919 and it was made public in 1920. It recognised

---

[16] Burns, *op. cit.*, p. 88; Lambert, *op. cit.,* p. 183; Kenneth Lunn and Ann Day 'Continuity and Change: Labour Relations in the Royal Dockyards, 1914–1950' in Lunn and Day (eds.), *op. cit.,* p. 130; 'Dockyard's Future: Plymouth Deputation to the First Lord at the Admiralty', *Western Evening Herald*, 8 February 1923.

[17] Burns, *op. cit.*, p. 91; Lunn and Day, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

[18] Burns, *op. cit.,* p. 95; Lambert, *op. cit.,* pp. 183–4; Lunn and Day, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

[19] Crispin Gill 'Plymouth: A New History'; Plymouth Archives, Record Reference: 1404, diary compiled by K. Cary, foreman of the Smiths in Devonport Dockyard; Hansard, 'Navy Estimates, 1920–21', vol. 126, debated on 18 March 1920; Mr Robert Young, column 2502.

the important differences between the construction of war ships and building merchant ships, where commercial factors such as speed of delivery and costs were much more important, but recommended the Admiralty use its surplus facilities to build merchant ships as a temporary measure to maintain employment in the dockyard towns.

The Admiralty opposed the Colwyn Committee's proposal to lease out some of the dockyard facilities to commercial firms. It did accept the idea that the dockyard would build merchant ships, although it was not very enthusiastic about doing this. Only a few commercial vessels were constructed in the dockyard.

The Colwyn Committee proposed trade union rules of demarcation should be suspended to facilitate the building of merchant ships in the royal dockyards and the Admiralty demanded this happen. At Devonport, the shipwrights opposed any suspension of demarcation rules and voted against this proposal in a ballot. However, a fortnight later, the three main trade unions, including the shipwrights, accepted the proposal. The shipwrights said they did not want to frustrate the aims of other trade groups.

Short-time working was used as another way of preventing mass discharges. The Admiralty suggested working one day less a week to avert large-scale redundancies. Trade unions in the royal dockyards objected because it would lead to wage reductions and thus impoverish many workers. When dockyard workers were balloted over proposals for short-time working, thousands abstained from voting. The organisation representing industrial workers employed by the government opposed short-time working, which it argued would drive workers' wages below the poverty line.

The Cabinet decided that the working week for government workers would be reduced by seven hours and short-time working began in the dockyard in January 1921. As a result of short-time working, the dockyard was able to recruit a number of unemployed people into its workforce. Opposition to short-time working diminished.

In August 1921, it was decided to make a gradual return to full-time working in the dockyard. Working hours were first increased to 42 hours in August 1921 and then in September 1921 to a full working week of 47 hours.[20]

The Work of the Dockyard in the 1920s

Shipbuilding

The Colwyn Committee had proposed commercial shipbuilding as an alternative source of work but Devonport did only limited work of this kind in the 1920s. Shipbuilding in the royal dockyards differed from that in the private shipyards and there was scepticism about the economic viability of commercial shipbuilding at Devonport. The Admiralty, while willing to accept private shipbuilding in the dockyard as a temporary expedient, was reluctant to allow anything that would divert the dockyard from its main function of maintaining and supporting the Royal Navy.

Between October 1919 and April 1920, the dockyard received several requests to build ships for private companies but most of these were rejected by the Admiralty. Two were accepted and the

[20] Burns, *op. cit.*, pp. 83–85; Lambert, *op. cit.*, p. 183; Hilditch, *op. cit.*, pp. 221–22; Hilson, *op. cit.*, pp. 170–71.

dockyard built a standard steamer and a small collier for Plymouth Cooperative Society. The dockyard also constructed two oil tankers: the *Olna*, which was used as a Royal Fleet Auxiliary, transporting oil for the Royal Navy and was launched in1922; and the *Nassa*, which was built for the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company. These were the only merchant ships built at Devonport in the 1920s.

The 1922 Washington Naval Treaty imposed restrictions on the size of new warships and light cruisers were the biggest warships built at Devonport in the 1920s. The dockyard built the *Adventure*, the Royal Navy's first purpose-built minelayer, and three cruisers: Cornwall, Devonshire and Exeter. In 1929, the building of two sloops: the *Hastings* and the *Penzance* began, which were completed in 1930.

Table 3: Ships built in Devonport Dockyard in the 1920s

Year	Name of ship	Number of guns	Tonnes
1920	*Frobisher*	10	9,860
1921	*Olna* (Oil tanker)	-	14,534
1923	*Nassa* (Oil tanker)	-	12,090
1924	*Adventure*	8	6,740
1926	*Cornwall*	36	10,000
1927	*Devonshire*	12	9,850
1929	*Exeter*	10	8,390
1930	*Hastings*	2	1,025

Table 3 demonstrates that the dockyard was building fewer ships than it was before the First World War and these ships were much smaller than the battleships constructed before 1914. For example, HMS Warspite, launched in 1913, was 30,600 tonnes.[21]

Ship Repairs and Refits

The repair and maintenance of the Royal Navy's ships had always been the dockyard's primary function, and in the 1920s refit and repair accounted for the bulk of the dockyard's work. In the early post-war years, refitting civilian ships that had been converted to military use in wartime to enable them to return to commercial activities formed an important part of Devonport's work.

A number of trawlers, which the Navy had used as minesweepers during the war, were refitted under the National Fishery Scheme. An Australian steamer – the *Nairana* – which had served as a seaplane carrier in the war, and a German liner – *Cap Polonia* – which Britain had taken possession of, were refitted at Devonport. Several large transports, which had been used for military purposes, were refitted for their return to civilian roles.

Devonport refitted and repaired a number of warships in the 1920s. Twenty-four American submarine chasers were overhauled in the yard before their return to the United States. Between 1920 and 1922, the battleship *Marlborough* underwent a comprehensive refit in the yard before

[21] Plymouth Archives Reference 1935/18, Gerry Dicker 'A Short History of Devonport Royal Dockyard', p. 32; Hilson, *op cit.*, p. 94; Burns, *op. cit*. pp. 85, 91; Pritchard, *op. cit.* 'Oil Tanker for the Navy', *The Times*, 21 June 1921, p. 15.

returning to serve in the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet. The *Marlborough* relieved the *Empress of India*, which then sailed home to have its own refit in Devonport.

In this decade, the dockyard for the first time refitted a foreign warship. The Chilean battleship *Almirante Latorre* had been built at Elswick and had been requisitioned by the British Government in the war. After the war she was refitted at Devonport before her return to Chile.[22]

Completion and Conversion Work

Completing warships whose construction had begun in other yards was another important part of Devonport's work at this time. Several warships – the light cruisers, *Durham*, *Enterprise* and *Raleigh*; the aircraft carrier, *Hermes;* and the destroyer, *Witch* – were all sent to Devonport to be completed and refitted.

The need for airpower at sea had become clear in the First World War, and the Admiralty attempted to meet this need by converting existing warships into aircraft carriers. This provided major construction tasks for Devonport. The *Furious* – built in a Newcastle shipyard – was originally designed to be a light battlecruiser but had been partially converted to be an aircraft carrier. However, it lacked a complete flight deck. In 1922, *Furious* was sent to Devonport to complete its conversion into an aircraft carrier – a process that lasted three years. This was one of the largest jobs of this type ever undertaken by one of the royal dockyards.

Two other battlecruisers completed their conversion into aircraft carriers in Devonport Dockyard. The *Courageous* arrived in 1924 and completed its conversion into an aircraft carrier in 1928, and the *Glorious* transferred from Rosyth to Devonport in 1926 and its conversion work was finished in 1930.[23]

Transfer of Workers from Pembroke and Rosyth

Devonport Dockyard had to find employment for established workers and apprentices transferred from the mothballed Pembroke and Rosyth dockyards, and 420 were transferred to Devonport. This added to the yard's difficulties at a time when existing workers were being discharged. When Leslie Hore-Belisha, the Liberal MP for Devonport, asked the parliamentary secretary to the Admiralty if he could provide a guarantee that none of the Devonport workers would be discharged because of the influx from Pembroke and Rosyth, the parliamentary secretary replied that he could not.

The arrival of the transferred workers in Devonport also exacerbated the accommodation problems in the area where there was a serious housing shortage. The Dockyard Industrial Review, a trade union journal produced for dockyard workers, noted that the Admiralty did not take responsibility for providing accommodation for those who had been transferred. The editor of the review commented on the problems the transferred workers encountered obtaining suitable accommodation

[22] Burns, *op. cit.*, pp. 85, 91–92; 'Naval and Military: Commissioning of the Marlborough' *The Times*, 24 January 1922, p. 18.

[23] Burns, *op. cit.*, pp. 88–89; Pritchard , *op. cit.*, p. 183.

in Devonport. He was especially concerned about the plight of transferred apprentices whom he felt had been unfairly treated by the Admiralty.[24]

Continuing Mass Discharges in Devonport Dockyard

During the 1920s, large-scale redundancies continued in the dockyard and those affected included groups which had traditionally had job security. Before 1914, former dockyard apprentices were assured continuity of employment. In March 1923, 104 ex-apprentices were discharged, including almost all those who had begun shipwright apprenticeships in 1917. The hired workforce suffered the bulk of the cutbacks, but in 1926–27 a number of established men, who had once been guaranteed job security, were discharged. After 1926, workers over the age of 60 were discharged from three departments. The size of the dockyard workforce fell to pre-war levels.

Table 4: The Size of Devonport Dockyard's Workforce, 1918–30[25]

1918	15,803
1925	13,950
1930	11,670

The Impact on the Community

This drastic reduction in the dockyard workforce had major ramifications for Devonport, which was so economically dependent on the yard. In the House of Commons in 1923, a Mr Duncan claimed that the Admiralty's policy had been to make the dockyard towns exclusively government dockyard towns, which made them very vulnerable in a time of severe cutbacks:

> The result is that when the Washington Treaty is entered into… the dockyard towns are absolutely helpless, and there is no other employment for these people to follow. Go to Chatham, Portsmouth or Devonport, hardly anyone knows of any manufacturers in those places.

Similar comments were made at the meeting between deputations from Plymouth and the First Lord of the Admiralty when a member of the Plymouth deputation, Mr Smale, said, 'Devonport Dockyard must be a first-class establishment. The local industries were petty, employing no great number of men, and the Dockyard was the only industry they had to look to.'

By 1920, there were 6,000 people unemployed in Plymouth. In a debate on the discharges in the royal dockyards in the Commons in May 1923, Isaac Foot spoke of how the hopes of people in

[24] Hansard, 'Devonport Dockyard' vol. 193, debated on 22 March 1926; 'Plymouth Archives Dockyard Industrial Review' vol. 1, no. 3, 3rd quarter 1925, pp. 88–101; 'Transfer of Established Men from Rosyth and Pembroke: 'The Dockyard Industrial Review', vol. 5, 1st quarter 1926, editor's notes, pp. 129–30; Burns, *op. cit.*, p. 91. Hilditch, 'Devon and Naval Strategy Since 1815' in Duffy et al., *op. cit.*, p. 162; Hilditch, 'The Dockyard in the Local Economy' in Duffy et al., *op. cit.*, p. 221.

[25] Hansard, Devonport Dockyard (Discharges), vol. 161, 19 March 1923; Hansard, Devonport Dockyard (Ex-Apprentices), vol. 162, 1 April 1923; Dockyard Industrial Review, vol. 5, 1st quarter 1926, Editor's Notes, pp. 129–30; Hilditch, 'The Dockyard in the Local Economy' in Duffy et al., *op. cit.*, p. 221.

Devonport were brutally crushed by the dismissal of those who had recently completed dockyard apprenticeships:

> These boys are selected from thousands, their parents … make considerable sacrifices and deprive themselves in many cases. After all these hopes have been created, and the state has incurred this expense, the boy is no sooner through his apprenticeship than he is thrown upon the labour market.' [26]

Reduced Earnings

In the years following the First World War, the workers in Devonport Dockyard had to cope with falling earnings as well as the threat of unemployment. The end of the war meant the end of their wartime bonus and diminished opportunities for overtime, made worse by the post-war recession. The workers in the royal dockyards had long complained their wage rates were lower than those in the private shipyards. In July 1919, dockyard unions balloted their members over whether they should take industrial action if the government refused to pay them wages equal to those in private shipyards. The workers in the royal dockyards voted overwhelmingly in favour of arbitration.

Reduced wages were a concomitant of the introduction of short-time working and recession and the 'Geddes Axe' increased the Admiralty's opposition to major increases in wage costs. A contributor to the Dockyard Industrial Review, E.P. Harries, commented that the Admiralty's policy in the years 1920 to 1925 had been 'the most stringent economy as far as the workers are concerned. Very heavy discharges have taken place, sweeping reductions made in wages, and persistent efforts made at speeding up and a general tightening up of the routine.'

MPs raised the issue of low wages in Devonport Dockyard in parliament. Mr Nichol drew attention to the fact the wages of adult labourers in Devonport Dockyard, including bonuses, were 41s a week which he declared did not 'constitute an adequate living wage for the breadwinner of a family living under present conditions'. In June 1924, Hore-Belisha expressed concern that the wages of skilled building craftsmen employed in the dockyard were considerably lower than those of skilled building workers in the private sector. Their pay and working hours were very unsatisfactory, 'These men (the yard craftsmen) are on duty 100 hours consecutively for about 50s a week … particular crafts or trades in the dockyard are working very long hours, and at very bad wages.'[27]

The Admiralty's Reluctance to Take Responsibility for the Socio-economic Problems of Dockyard Communities

Admiralty decisions had profound consequences for the communities dependent on Devonport Dockyard but the Admiralty did not accept it had any responsibility to help Devonport tackle unemployment or housing shortages. In November 1923, the Admiralty Joint Industrial Council discussed the housing shortages in dockyard towns, a problem that was especially acute in

---

[26] Hansard Navy Estimates, 1920–21, vol. 126, debated on 18 March 1920, Column 2502 Mr Robert Young, Column 2537 Lieutenant-Colonel Malone; Hansard Royal Navy and Royal Dockyards (Discharges), vol. 163, debated on 2 May 1923; Mr Isaac Foot 'Dockyard's Future: Plymouth Deputation to the First Lord of the Admiralty' in *Western Evening Herald*, 8 February 1923.

[27] Burns, *op. cit.,* p. 8; Hansard Devonport Dockyard (Labourers' Wages), vol. 159, debated on 6 December 1922, Mr Nichol Column 1737; Hansard Royal Dockyards (Craftsmens' Wages) vol. 174, debated on 19 June 1924, Column 2477, Major Hore-Belisha.

Devonport. Lord Linlithgow, who presided over the meeting, remarked that 'the matter was not one for the Admiralty as a government department to deal with', though the Admiralty was prepared to lobby the Ministry of Health to speed up housebuilding in dockyard communities where there was a shortage of accommodation.[28]

The Dockyard's Future in Doubt

The problems Devonport Dockyard faced after 1918 prompted people to question whether it might be privatised or even closed. In November 1919, a conference of local public bodies to discuss dockyard discharges was held in Portsmouth. At the event, Major Sir Bertram Fole, Portsmouth's MP, suggested Devonport, Chatham, Pembroke and Haulbowline should be turned into commercial ports and all naval work diverted to Portsmouth. This was an obviously tendentious proposal, but the possibility Devonport Dockyard might be privatised was a concern for activists in Plymouth.

In 1929, Jimmy Moses, former leader of the dockyard shipwrights who had become Labour MP for Plymouth Drake, talked in the Commons of 'the Dockyard's continuance as government establishment or – what nobody considers possible – its complete transfer to civilian control.' Two years earlier, Leslie Hore-Belisha had claimed 'naval towns are faced with disaster.'[29]

Industrial Relations in the Dockyard in the 1920s

Development in Dockyard Unions

The trade unions that represented dockyard workers were affected by the important trade union mergers that occurred in the 1920s. Many of the dockyard's skilled engineering workers belonged to the ASE, which combined with a number of other engineering unions to form the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU). Initially, the membership of the AEU, like that of the ASE, was composed solely of skilled workers, but in 1926 the AEU created a new section which semi-skilled and unskilled engineering workers could join. Unions representing carpenters and joiners united to form the ASW. In 1929, the Workers' Union which recruited semi-skilled and unskilled workers in a range of industries, including the royal dockyards, became part of the Transport and General Workers' Union.[30]

The Whitley Committee and its Recommendations

The petition system was suspended for the duration of the war and the 1915 Munitions of War Act, which introduced centralised government control over the industrial workforce in the sectors vital to the war effort, made sweeping alterations in the relations between the Admiralty and trade unions, by transferring control over dockyard workers from the Admiralty to the Ministry of Munitions in July 1915. This was a temporary expedient for the duration of the war.

---

[28] Hilditch, 'The Dockyard the Local Economy' in Duffy et al., *op. cit.,* p. 222; 'Housing Shortage in Dockyard Towns', *The Times*, November 19 1923, p. 8.

[29] Plymouth Archives, Record Reference: 193/18, George Dicker, *A Short History of Devonport Royal Dockyard* (1971), p. 32; Hilditch, 'The Dockyard in the Local Economy' in Duffy et al., *op. cit.,* p. 221.

[30] Hugh Armstrong Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889: Volume II 1911–1933* (Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 304–5, 459–61.

It was during the war that a permanent framework for industrial relations in the dockyards was devised. The coalition government was concerned about the risk of industrial conflict during the period of post-war reconstruction. It established a committee whose aims were to consider suggestions for achieving a permanent improvement in relations between employers and workers and to recommend ways in which industrial relations between employers and workers could be systematically reviewed in order to improve them. The committee was chaired by J.H. Whitley, Labour MP for Halifax, and came to be known as the Whitley Committee.

The Whitley Committee recommended setting up Joint Standing Industrial Councils in each major industry, which would bring employers and workers together on a regular basis to discuss matters of common interest. These Industrial Councils, often called Whitley Councils, would be independent bodies, not part of the British State, and would elect their own officers and decide their functions The membership of the Councils would be composed solely of members of organisations such as trade unions and employers' associations. In its recommendations, the Whitley Committee emphasised: 'Joint Industrial Councils must not displace… but be built on the existing organisation'. The councils would operate on three different levels. There would be national councils, district councils, and councils or committees in individual workplaces.

The Whitley Committee's original recommendations were for the private sector, but a new report in October 1917 proposed that Industrial Councils should also be set up in the public sector. The government acted on the recommendation.[31]

The Whitley Council System in the Royal Dockyards

The Whitley scheme involved an industrial council for every government department, which would be known as a departmental council. The departmental councils would be concerned with matters affecting the common interest of all the department's employees, regardless of their trade.

However, the government believed that the nature of the departmental councils made them unable to deal with all the issues facing government employees. It recognised that some issues, such as wages, were dealt with on a trade basis and consequently a second type of council that took trade divisions into account would be necessary. At a conference of trade unionists and government employees in February 1919 to discuss the application of the Whitley scheme, the Minister of Labour, Sir Robert Horne, explained why issues such as wages required a council that operated on a trade basis. He cited the determination of the different trades in government shipyards to protect their interests as an example of the need for a trade-based council:

> If it came to a question of boilermakers' wages in government shipyards, the boilermakers would not thank shipwrights or blacksmiths for any advice they might give them. When you come to the question of wages… you must deal with the particular trade where wages are in question, accordingly in addition to the departmental council, it will be necessary to have trade councils.

[31] Plymouth Archives, Record Reference: 186/11/6, Industrial Reports no. 1 Industrial Councils The Whitley Report, together with the letter of the Minister of Labour explaining the government's view of its proposals published by Ministry of Labour, 1917, pp. 1, 3; Plymouth Archives, Record Reference: 186/11/10 Industrial Councils, The Recommendations of the Whitley Report published by Ministry of Labour, 1917, pp. 1–3; Hilson *op. cit.* pp. 133–34; Lunn and Day, *op. cit.,* p. 132.

In the Admiralty, the departmental council was the Admiralty Joint Council, and the Trade Joint Council was the Shipbuilding Trades Joint Council. The Admiralty Industrial Council was concerned with issues involving the common interest of Admiralty employees: discipline, organisation and management, working conditions, welfare, education and training. The Shipbuilding Trades Joint Council was responsible for wages and the trade-based concerns of workers employed in the royal dockyards and the Admiralty establishments. An important responsibility of both the councils was to provide machinery for 'the ventilation and avoidance of grievances'.[32]

The Whitley Scheme in Devonport Dockyard

The Admiralty responded to the Whitley proposals with its own scheme for trade and shop committees in May 1918 and presented it to dockyard workers who largely approved of these ideas. The Admiralty established an Admiralty Staff Conference, which met in January 1919 and agreed a constitution for the new committees. The constitution had to be revised to ensure it conformed with the constitution for the nascent Industrial Councils, which the government had approved. A conference was held in London to set up Whitley Councils in the royal dockyards. The first meeting of the Admiralty Administrative Council was held on 21 October 1919.

In November 1919, a large number of employee delegates attended a meeting in the dockyard, presided over by the yard's admiral-superintendent (from 1919 to 1922) Rear Admiral Edwin Underhill. They listened to representatives of the Admiralty Industrial Council explain how yard committees would be established at Devonport. A representative from the Ministry of Labour, Mr Todd, emphasised the importance of the fact that, for the first time, the government would be meeting representatives of their workers on a regular basis in a system that gave them official recognition.

However, prominent trade unionist Bert Medland opposed the suggestion that the meeting should create a provisional Yard Committee because, although trade union representatives had been consulted, the trade union members had had no opportunity to express their views on the proposals. He moved a resolution saying that a provisional committee should not be established before the scheme had been submitted to trade union members to see if they accepted it. Jimmy Moses seconded this resolution and it was passed overwhelmingly by the meeting.

Despite these early difficulties, however, Devonport Dockyard soon set up its Yard Committee. The District Committee of the Admiralty Administrative Council came into existence at Devonport Dockyard in February 1920 and the admiral-superintendent, Edwin Underhill, was appointed its president.[33]

[32] 'Whitley Councils in State Works', *The Times*, 21 February 1919, p. 12; 'The Government's Whitley Scheme: The Dockyards', *Western Evening Herald*, 26 February 1919, p. 3; 'Shipbuilding Trades Joint Council' by H. Berry, Amalgamated Engineering Union, Secretary of Trade Union side, in the *Dockyard Industrial Review*, vol. 1 no. 2, 2nd quarter 1925.

[33] Burns, *op. cit.,* p. 87; Hilson, *op. cit.,* p. 135; 'Dockyard Committees, Admiralty and the Whitley Scheme. Delegates Devonport', *The Western Evening Herald*, 21 November 1919, p. 4; 'Whitley Scheme Devonport Administrative Committee', *Western Morning News*, 6 February 1920, p. 5.

The Structure of the Whitley Scheme in the Dockyards

In its recommendations, the Whitley Report had emphasised that the industrial councils had to work through decentralised machinery, stating that the National Industrial Council would not be complete in itself and the industrial councils would be based on a triple organisation operating in the workplace, the district and at national level.

Devonport Dockyard had its Industrial Council Yard Committee (often referred to as the Devonport Yard Committee), one part of the national system of Industrial Councils in the Admiralty. It held its first meeting in January 1920. Its chair was Rear Admiral Edwin Underhill, the admiral-superintendent, and Councillor James Churchward of the ASW was the vice-chair. This committee comprised the official side, consisting of the admiral-superintendent, naval officers and managers, and the employees' representatives, whose members were elected trade union representatives. The Yard Committee created local committees to cater for different sections of the dockyard's huge workforce. Shop committees were established for manual workers and the dockyard's Whitley Administrative Committee helped to form office committees for white-collar workers.

The Yard Committee and its subsidiary committees were responsible for a very wide range of issues including work rules, the payment of wages, holidays, welfare, training and efficient working in the dockyard. The Yard Committee was one of the workplace components of the Admiralty's national Whitley Council System, and at the national level there were the Admiralty Industrial Council and the Shipbuilding Trades Joint Council. The Admiralty Industrial Council and the Shipbuilding Trades Joint Council each had an official side, which consisted of representatives from the Admiralty, the War Office and other relevant government departments, and the employees' side composed of representatives of the dockyard trade unions. If the official side and the employees' side were unable to reach agreement on an issue, they could send it to the Whitley System's Industrial Court for arbitration.[34]

The Work of the Industrial Councils in Devonport Dockyard

The Yard Committee and its subcommittees dealt with a diverse array of topics. The *Western Morning News* outlined the varied concerns of the Yard Committee and its subordinate committees – the issue and revision of work rules, the distribution of weekly hours and breaks, time recording, the payment of wages and the methods of payment employed, grievances other than those of specific trades, holidays, physical welfare, promotion, disciplinary issues, libraries and lectures on technical subjects, work organisation, efficiency, charity collections, entertainments and sport.

It was hoped questions of welfare and discipline could usually be resolved at a shopfloor level, but if this proved impossible they would be referred upward to the Yard Committee. Press reports of the Yard Committee's proceedings reveal the variety of the issues it dealt with. The Yard Committee had to respond to the regular discharges of workers which reduced the size of the workforce. In July 1920, the Yard Committee made a decision about the procedure to be followed when workers were discharged and the admiral-superintendent ordered that the procedure be complied with. A memorandum explaining the reasons for the discharges from the dockyard was submitted to the

[34] Mavis Waters, 'The Dockyardmen Speak Out: Petition and Tradition in Chatham Dockyard, 1860–1906' in Lunn and Day *op. cit.*; 'The Dockyard Industrial Review, vol. 1, no. 2, 2nd quarter, 1925, Editor's Notes, pp. 33–37; 'Admiralty Industrial Council, Dockyard Committees', *The Times*, 1 October 1919, p. 5; 'Dockyard Workers: Operations of Devonport Yard Committee' *Western Morning News*, 16 September 1922, p. 6.

Yard Committee in March 1927. The workers' side of the Yard Committee produced a reply to the memorandum for the admiral-superintendent to forward to the director of dockyards.

In October 1920, the Yard Committee passed a resolution calling for seven days' leave for dockyard employees, in addition to their official holidays, and that discharged workers would be entitled to receive a gratuity after seven instead of fifteen years. The committee devoted considerable effort to finding alternative work for the yard to decrease the number of workers being discharged.

Health, training and welfare were concerns of the Yard Committee, which worked to improve standards of hygiene in the workplace and examined the training of apprentices and yard boys with the aims of maximising efficiency and providing promotion opportunities. The Committee scrutinised the control of traffic through the dockyard's gates.

In May 1925, a meeting of the Devonport Royal Dockyard Canteen and Restaurant Society discussed a claim from the Admiralty for the cost of steam it supplied to the canteen. Jimmy Moses expressed the view that this was a welfare matter that should be considered by the Yard Committee and, though some society members were vocal in their opposition to this, a motion to refer the issue to the Yard Committee was passed by one vote.

The Yard Committee helped to improve relations between workers and management, but in a period of job losses and wage reductions it was highly critical of government policy. Government proposals for short-time working with concomitant wage reductions were denounced by workers in the royal dockyards. The employees' side of Devonport's Yard Committee passed a resolution declaring they would hold aloof from:

> …all deliberations on short-time proposals, realizing they are not proposals which will alleviate general distress. This committee knows that the government is in an abortive position with respect to the question of unemployment, and recommends to them as a solution the complete control of industry by the workers.[35]

How the Whitley System Changed Management–Worker Relations in Devonport Dockyard

The Whitley Council System, in which trade union representatives had a guaranteed role, was very different from the earlier petition system, but there was disagreement about its success in achieving its goals. Rear Admiral Underhill regarded the Industrial Council Yard Committee as useful and the dockyard's constructive manager Mr S.W.F. Furze-Morrish credited the Whitley Committees with making a big contribution to the development of cooperation between management and workers.

In an assessment of the work of the Devonport Yard Committee in September 1922, the *Western Morning News* commented that the dockyard's ability to minimise hardship when large numbers of its workers had to be discharged was 'in no small measure due to the happy relations existing

[35] 'Devonport Attitude: Men Dissatisfied with Proposals', *Western Morning News*, 6 January 1921, p. 5; 'Dockyard Workers: Operations of Devonport Yard Committee', *Western Moring News*, 16 September 1922, p. 6; 'Dockyard Canteen: Admiralty's Claim for Steam,' *Western Morning News*, 15 May 1925, p. 3; 'Royal Dockyards: Order of Discharge on Reduction, *Western Morning News*, 16 July 1920, p. 5; 'Dockyard Holidays: Appeal for Additional Week Per Year', *Western Evening Herald*, 14 October 1920; 'Devonport Dockyard: Control of Traffic Through the Gates', *Western Morning News*, 10 July 1920.

between the principal officers and the workmen through their representatives'. The paper believed the results of the Yard Committee's action on a range of issues affecting the workforce were of 'permanent value to the workforce and have become part of the general outline of the yard'.

A trade unionist who was a member of the Industrial Councils wrote a review of the Whitley System for the *Dockyard Industrial Review*, in which he stated:

> … the Whitley machinery is the best that has existed, both locally and nationally, between the Admiralty and their employees for the purpose of settling grievances, conducting negotiations and making possible more cooperation between the management and employees in… the works in the royal dockyards.

He was able to remember 'the time when it was impossible for a regular trade union deputation to discuss any question, either at the Admiralty or in any dockyard. We have advanced from that position… to the present method.'

A.G. Gourd, secretary of the trade union side of the Admiralty Joint Industrial Council and divisional organiser of the Workers' Union praised the work of Devonport's Yard Committee, stating that the Whitley Councils' success is 'dependent upon the interest taken in the Departmental and Yard Committee work. Given an active committee such as the Devonport team, there is no limit to the possibilities for mutual well-being.'

However, views of the Whitley Council System in the dockyards weren't always so positive. On a couple of occasions, the smooth functioning of the royal dockyards' system of Industrial Councils was disrupted by disputes between unions and management or between different unions. In February 1921, the dockyard unions instructed their representatives to resign from the Whitley Councils in protest at the imposition of short-time working on the workforce in the royal dockyards. In November 1925, the Admiralty Industrial Council and the Shipbuilding Trades Council had to be suspended because of a dispute between the Workers Union and the other unions representing dockyard workers. These councils were unable to meet in the normal manner for a prolonged period.

Kenneth Lunn and Ann Day in their chapter 'Continuity and Change: Labour Relations in the Royal Dockyards 1914–19' in *History of Work and Labour Relations in the Royal Dockyards* contend that, although the Whitley System provided trade union participation and better opportunities for consultation and conflict-resolution, in reality the Admiralty and other government departments retained their control of decision-making in the royal dockyards. Despite the Whitley System, they argue, the Admiralty's 'management style remained authoritarian'.

A member of the Industrial Councils, in a review of the Whitley System published in the *Dockyard Industrial Review*, criticised the operation of the Admiralty Industrial Council. The trade union side of the council had reason to complain about 'short and sometimes curt replies given by the official side', despite the fact that the council's chairman admitted that the trade union representatives were 'entitled to reason for refusal by taking certain matters back for evidence to be given in support of the official side's statements.'

Trade union representatives felt 'the official side do not appear willing to share with the trade union side in the least degree the central control of the Dockyards'. Jimmy Moses alluded to the limitations of the system when in another issue of the *Dockyard Industrial Review* he wrote that the

Devonport Yard Committee had been successful in the interests of the dockyard workers 'within the narrow limits of the Whitley Council Constitution'. In the Commons, the Devonport MP Leslie Hore-Belisha, was strongly critical of the failure of Whitley Councils to resolve the problem of the low pay of skilled building workers in the dockyard, declaring 'The Whitley Council Machinery is not functioning.'[36]

Devonport Dockyard and the 1926 General Strike

The crisis in Britain's coal mining industry led the coal owners to demand that miners accept wage reductions and a longer working day. The leaders of the miners' unions rejected these demands and the coal owners threatened to lock out their members. The miners appealed to the TUC General Council for help and the General Council – while doing all they could to achieve a settlement – made plans for sympathetic strike action. The miners lock out began on 1 May 1926 and, after government withdrew from last-minute negotiations, the General Council called on workers in a wide range of industries to take strike action beginning on 4 May 1926, and the General Strike began.

The workers in Devonport and other royal dockyards were not asked to join the strike. The dockyard workforce – by far the largest single group of industrial workers in the city – remained at work. This was noted in the 9 May issue of the *Western Independent*: 'Devonport up to yesterday appeared to be hardly affected by the strike… The dockyard has been working as usual, no men having gone on strike.' The *Western Independent* observed that 'Conditions in the yard are different from those of private employment. "Absence without leave" would be the official description of the strike, and it would entail serious consequences in establishment and pension.' Dockyard workers were officially industrial civil servants and could be penalised for taking strike action. For 'established men', particularly, participating in an industrial dispute might jeopardise their pension rights, established status and right to continuity of employment.

Devonport Dockyard workers did not join the General Strike, but dockyard union activists supported the action and the striking miners in other ways. James Churchward, leading figure in the dockyard branch of the ASW, was president of the Plymouth and District Trades Council. When the General Strike began, Plymouth Trades Council created a Central Strike Committee to coordinate support for the strikers and James Churchward became president of the Strike Committee. In this capacity, Churchward was keen to ensure that delivery of food supplies in Plymouth and the surrounding areas wouldn't be disrupted.

After nine days, the TUC General Council called on the strikers to return to work on 12 May 1926. The miners, however, remained on strike until November 1926 and they and their families endured intense hardship. The Trades Council and the workers' side of the Dockyard Whitley Committee formed a Joint Committee to raise money for the striking miners. Bert Medland, secretary of the AEU branch in the dockyard, was the Joint Committee' s chairman. James Churchward was also

[36] Hansard, 'Royal Dockyards (Craftsmen's Wages) vol. 174, debated on 19 June 1924, column 2477, Major Hore-Belisha; 'Introduction' by A.G. Gourd, J.P, Secretary of the Trade Union Side of the Admiralty Joint Industrial Council and Divisional Organiser of the Workers' Union and 'Review of the Whitley Machinery' by a member of the Council in the Dockyard Industrial Review, vol. 1, no. 1, 1st Quarter, 1925, pp. 3–7; 'The Admiralty Industrial and Shipbuilding Trade Council: The Suspension of the Councils', *Dockyard Industrial Review* Volume 5, 1st quarter, 1926, p. 131; Lunn and Day, *op. cit.*, p. 134; Hilson, *op. cit.*, p. 135; 'Dockyard Workers: Operations of Devonport Yard Committee' in *Western Morning News*, 16 September 1922, p. 6.

involved in these relief efforts. The committee organised a Flag Day and regular collections, and raised over £4,900 for the hard-pressed mining communities.[37]

Unofficial Workers' Associations in Devonport Dockyard

The government wanted to deter a repetition of the General Strike and in July 1927 the Trades Disputes and Trade Unions Act, which imposed restrictions on the unions, became law. This Act included a section that barred civil service unions from associating with unions outside the civil service, which meant they could not affiliate to either the TUC or the Labour Party. Hugh Clegg claims those employed in government industrial establishments were exempt from this provision, but the Admiralty nonetheless used it to impose curbs on trade unionists in the dockyards. The Admiralty introduced a measure that stipulated that workers acquiring established status after 29 July 1927 could not be or become 'members of Trade Unions in the narrower sense', by which was meant conventional trade unions affiliated to the TUC.

This ruling was helpful to unofficial associations of dockyard workers that were not affiliated to the TUC and not part of the mainstream trade union movement. One such unofficial association was based in Devonport: the National Union of Government Ship Joiners, Furnishers and Allied Trades (NUGSJFAT). The members of this association were all on piecework (Payment By Results), a payment system which was strongly opposed by the trade union movement. Consequently, NUGSJFAT was outside the official trade union movement. NUGSJFAT and its Portsmouth counterpart, the Portsmouth Royal Dockyard Ship Joiners' Association, were not officially recognised by the union movement and were not eligible for representation on the Whitley Councils. The Devonport association applied to the local Whitley Council for recognition in 1928, but in October 1928 the trade union side of the Admiralty Industrial Council rejected NUGSJFAT's application.

Pressure for recognition was coming from a large unofficial association, the Admiralty Established Civil Servants' Federation, which had members in Devonport, Portsmouth and Chatham. They claimed access to all the material received by and sent from the Whitley Committee. The Admiralty was sympathetic to the aspirations of the unofficial association and was willing to grant them some form of recognition. This posed a threat to fundamental principles of the Whitley System, which was based on the workers' representatives being members of recognised trade unions.

The official trade unions resolutely opposed this. The Admiralty accepted that the unofficial associations could not have representation on the Whitley Councils, but in March 1929 issued a general letter that announced any properly constituted association was entitled to regular meetings with their yard's admiral-superintendent and to receive fleet orders and other Admiralty documents. The secretaries of the trade union sides of the Admiralty Industrial Council and Shipbuilding Trades Joint Council requested a joint meeting of the two councils to consider the decision to send papers to the Admiralty Established Civil Servants' Federation. After this joint meeting in April 1929, the Admiralty abandoned the proposal to send official papers to the Federation.

Dockyard trade unionists continued to be concerned about the regular meeting between the unofficial workers' associations and dockyard officers. They regarded this as creating a rival to the Whitley System, which would strengthen the unofficial associations and enable them to weaken the

[37] 'Shipping Delay at Plymouth. Newspapers Nearly Normal. Entertaining the Strikers. Mr Solomon Stephens and the Tramwaymen,' *Western Morning News*, 7 May 1926, p. 3; 'At Devonport: Conditions Not Abnormal at Present Dockyard Not Touched', *Western Independent Plymouth*, 9 May 1926, p. 2.

dockyard trade unions. The protests from the unions were effective. The letter issued in March 1929 was withdrawn and regular meetings with the unofficial associations ended.[38]

Sickness Benefit Societies in Devonport Dockyard

During the 1920s, there were dramatic changes in employment, working hours, the industrial relations system and many other aspects of dockyard life. For the dockyard workforce, it was often a matter of responding to initiatives that came from the Admiralty, the government or international diplomacy – the Geddes Axe, the Colwyn Committee and the Washington Naval Treaty.

Among the dockyard workers, there was a strong tradition of mutualism and self-reliance, and in Devonport the workers established numerous clubs and societies run by the workers and independent of the state. Mutualism and self-help continued to be part of the occupational culture of Devonport Dockyard in the 1920s and sickness benefit societies provided an example of this. The Devonport Dockyard Mechanics' Sick Society, Devonport Dockyard Fitters' and Labourers Accident Society, and the Devonport Dockyard United Friendly Broken Bone Society were three of the societies in the dockyard. The Fitters' and Labourers' Society had been in existence since the late nineteenth century, while the Dockyard Mechanics' Society was a more recent organisation, established in June 1922.

The three sickness benefit societies were similar in a number of ways. They were all sickness benefit societies founded and run by dockyard workers, which provided financial assistance for members who were absent from work due to illness, disease or injury, or who had been invalided out of the dockyard due to ill-health. All were managed by officers and committees who were elected annually and faced re-election, and all had Annual General Meetings that enabled the members to elect officers, examine the financial position of their particular society and so on.

Dockyard workers employed by the state continued to operate sickness benefit societies and other organisations independent of the state. In a decade when dockyard workers were profoundly affected by national and international developments and Admiralty decisions over which they had little or no control, the sickness benefit societies were bodies that they controlled and which acted in their interests.[39]

Conclusion

The situation Devonport Dockyard faced in the 1920s was radically different from its position in the preceding decades. The sustained growth of the yard and its workforce was succeeded by a prolonged decline. The yard had been indispensable to the British Navy in wartime but in the post-war economic recession even its long-term future seemed uncertain. Mass discharges, affecting even the 'established men' who had once been assured of continuity of employment, wage reductions, changes in hours and working conditions made this a difficult decade for the workforce.

---

[38] Lunn and Day, *op. cit.*, pp. 140–42; Hilson, *op. cit.*, p. 135; Clegg, *op. cit.*, pp. 422–23.

[39] Hilson, *op. cit.*, p. 129; Peter Gulliver 'Trade Unionism in Portsmouth Dockyard, 1880–1914' in Lunn and Day *op. cit.,* p. 102; Plymouth Archives, Record Reference: 2401/1, 'Rules and Orders of the Devonport Dockyard Mechanics' Sick Society'; Plymouth Archives, Record Reference: 241/4, 'Rules of Devonport Dockyard Fitters' and Labourers' Accident Society 1920'; Plymouth Archives, Record Reference: 2401/6, 'Devonport Dockyard the United Friendly Broken Bone Society'.

The framework of industrial relations in the yard changed. The Whitley System for the first time gave the trade unions an official role as representatives of the workers.

These were important changes, but they did not produce a transformation of the dockyard. The key decisions affecting the dockyard and its workforce continued to be made by the Admiralty, a traditional and conservative body. The ‘establishment’ system was retained and the division between ‘established’ and hired workers continued. The Whitley Councils gave the trade unions an official role but – as trade unionists’ problems with the Admiralty Industrial Council demonstrated – did not give them the power to alter or influence the Admiralty’s major strategic policies.

In the early 1930s, the workforce of Devonport Dockyard – though substantially smaller than in 1918 – still represented one-fifth of adult male employment in Plymouth. Despite the vicissitudes of the 1920s, the dockyard remained pivotal in the city’s economy.