

SPOTLIGHT ON SHEERNESS DOCKYARD

Sheerness dockyard lies on the western tip of the Isle of Sheppey, off the north coast of Kent. It has, since Roman times, and the creation of London, been an important site in terms of its position. At the mouth of two rivers, the Thames and the Medway, it has been a strategic point of defence, with the advantage of deep draft to accommodate the largest of ships. Sheerness docks first came on to the international stage when the dockyard, being built by Samuel Pepys, came under attack by the Dutch in 1667. In what has now come to be known as the Dutch Raid, Sheppey took its place in history as the only part of the country that had ever been invaded and occupied by a foreign power.

In the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, the strategic position of Sheerness came again to prominence, and with an anxious country concerned about invasion, the dockyard at Sheerness was completely rebuilt. The site was levelled in around 1815, and a new dockyard was erected in one phase of construction, on a plan devised by John Rennie (1761–1821). The individual buildings were the work of George Ledwell Taylor (1788–1873).

Unlike other dockyards, which developed through successive stages, this dockyard was meticulously planned and built as a whole. Every building was designed for a specific purpose, and all were designed in the same late Georgian style with restrained Grecian detailing. To enable the board of the Admiralty to see the potential finished product, a model was created to scale, with every building represented, together with its multitude of foundation piling. This model, which covers an enormous 1,600 square feet, is now in the care of English Heritage awaiting a permanent home.

The naval dockyard closed in 1962 and the site became a commercial dock. There followed a terrible series of demolitions including Admiralty House, built for the Duke of Clarence (later William IV), and the massive quadrangular Great Store, one of the most impressive dock buildings in the country. Now, although the destruction has stopped, a substantial number of the dockyard's historic buildings face an uncertain future. Standing at the entrance to the docks, symbolic of the precarious state of this great historic site, is the forlorn shell of Dockyard Church (featured in the 2008 Buildings at Risk catalogue), gutted by fire in 2001.

A number of the houses in Naval Terrace, adjacent to the church, have now been lovingly restored and with renewed interest in the dockyard and its magnificent historic building stock there is hope that this long neglected site will undergo the right kind of regeneration.

Dockyard House

Dockyard House is a substantial late Georgian mansion, built to accommodate the superintendent of the naval dockyard and his family c.1825. It is listed Grade II*. After the Admiralty left the docks in 1962 the house was converted, not very sympathetically, to house the offices of the new commercial dock. It now stands empty along with neighbouring Regency Close, in an enclave of historic buildings within dockyard walls. The house retains many fine interior features and decorative elements and is eminently capable of restoration as a single house, or as a small number of spacious apartments.

The house, together with Regency Close and other neighbouring historic buildings, is owned by a developer and not by the commercial docks which owns the rest of the site. An application for major development of this historic enclave, (including substantial new build) was turned down last year, but another application has since been submitted. SAVE has written to object to the proposals, advocating the careful rehabilitation of the site under partnership with a building preservation trust. This site has enormous potential.



Regency Close

This magnificent group (a grander version of Naval Terrace, just outside the docks) was built for ‘superior’ officers in the 1820s. The terrace comprises five 5-bay houses with porches. Behind, where once stretched 200ft walled gardens, is now a wilderness, although the foundations of the demolished walls and coach houses are still visible. The houses are listed Grade II*.

The terrace was converted to apartments following the closure of the naval dock in the 1960s, but most of the interior features are preserved, including decorative plasterwork, chimney-pieces and staircases. One tenant remains, but the rest of the terrace is empty. Although some emergency works have been carried out over the last year, the buildings are still vulnerable. Like Dockyard House, they are currently the subject of a planning application for conversion and enabling development. SAVE feels the future for these superb buildings is as single houses, with the gardens and other landscape features reinstated.

