



The launch of HMS Salisbury in 1952. Princess Yachts will soon follow

PLYMOUTH NAVAL BASE MUSEUM

Iron, oak and fibreglass

IT'S A SMALL STEP FROM NEWPORT STREET TO THE HISTORY BOOKS. PRINCESS TAKES A GIANT LEAP INTO SUPERYACHT BUILDING – AND DEVONPORT'S SOUTH YARD

Words • Alan Harper

In June, Princess Yachts signed a 125-year lease on a prime piece of shipbuilding real estate. The South Yard area of Plymouth's Devonport Dockyard complex has been surplus to Royal Navy requirements for some years, and while much of the site is occupied by protected, stone-built Georgian structures, the yacht builder has secured an unrestricted 15-acre waterfront segment, complete with wet dock, slipway, hard standing and several large, modern industrial buildings, which will enable work to begin almost as soon as the ink on the lease is dry.

"Princess is an anchor tenant for South Yard," said David James, operations manager of the South-West Regional

Development Agency. "They also have a huge supply chain. The vision here is to create a marine manufacturing centre for the city and the region."

The acquisition is also essential to Princess's development plans, according to managing director Chris Gates. "We have been working for some time to achieve the waterfront location we require in the Plymouth area," he said. "Expanding locally has always been a priority." The nearby Newport Street yard is working to capacity on the larger V-series and flybridge models, and cannot handle anything bigger than the current Princess 95 Motor Yacht. The company's move into 100ft-plus yacht building (see 'Princess M Class Yachts', p36) necessitates more space, and more waterfront access.

But while the new site will soon exemplify all that is modern and hi-tech in yacht-building, as the Princess 32M and then the 40M begin to take shape, South Yard has been a focus of British shipbuilding since the 18th century. What began in oak, and continued in iron and steel, is about to move into the fibreglass era.

Wooden walls

The Royal Dockyard was originally constructed off the deep anchorage of the Hamoaze in the early 1690s, with a locked wet basin and dry dock, gardens, officers' ➤



Next to the new Princess yard, the Navy's historic No. 1 Slip, from 1761



When he asked why the dock had been lengthened, the King was told it was to accommodate the largest ships in the navy — the French navy

houses, workshops and stables. When Greenville Collins surveyed Plymouth Harbour for his *Great Britain’s Coasting Pilot*, he noted: “Just above Froward-point is a most excellent Dock and Yard, built for the use of the Navy.”

The dock had been formed out of an existing cove, with rubble from levelling the surrounding site used to reclaim a further four acres of ground. Ship construction began immediately in the nearby yard of Mr Fint under naval supervision, and the first ship built in the new King’s Dock, the ‘fifth rate’ frigate HMS *Looe*, was launched in 1696.

Wars kept the shipyard’s order books full. By the time the Navy expanded southwards in 1761, into the area now occupied by Princess, more than 50 vessels of various

types and sizes had been built. More building slips were constructed on the newly acquired land, of which Slip No. 1, the ‘covered slip’ immediately alongside the new Princess yard, is the sole survivor and a Scheduled Ancient Monument. The useful dock just inside the yacht builder’s perimeter also started life as a construction slipway, and once had a roof like its neighbour, but it was dug out in the early 1900s to provide small craft berthing. The first vessels to use it were Edwardian torpedo boats, secured against the concrete walls; future tenants will have a sleeker, less warlike demeanour, and will lie alongside floating pontoons.

With the new slipways, the Royal Dockyard had ten building slips in operation by the late 18th century. The rate

of production continued as rapidly as in earlier years, but the ships were bigger. The Devonport ship of the line HMS *Foudroyant* was Nelson’s flagship when the British admiral began his affair with Emma Hamilton at Naples. The 104-gun *Royal Sovereign*, 184ft (56m) on her gundeck, was one of the biggest ships to serve in the Georgian navy, and fought with distinction at Trafalgar.

Overlooking the Princess site is an ornate circular pavilion built on top of a rocky buttress. The Summer Pavilion on King’s Hill, or Bunker’s Hill, was built to commemorate the visit by King George III in the 1780s, to view the construction of a new dock. This was the New Union Dock, at the north end of South Yard, which the Admiralty, midway through the build,

ordered to be lengthened by ten feet. Naturally the King asked why. He was told that the dock was designed for the largest ships in the Royal Navy — but that the extra length would enable it to accommodate the largest French ships, too. Sure enough, the first ship to use the new dock, in 1793, was the 120-gun leviathan *Le Commerce de Marseille*, captured by the British in Toulon.

Iron, steel and steam

In the age of steam, the Royal Dockyards could never seriously rival the great industrial empires of the Clyde or the Tyne for either technical innovation or efficiency. “Do you see that begrimed mechanic with the steam hammer?” asked the industrialist John Brown of a visitor to his Atlas steelworks in the 1860s. “What do you imagine we pay him every year? We pay that man £900 per annum! If, then, the Dockyards were to pay their hammermen £900 a year, what should we have to pay the Admiral Superintendents?”

A parliamentary committee heard evidence from Professor Edgar, a naval architect, who viewed the naval dockyards as ‘relics of the past’: “The traditions of the timber age have been perpetuated in the iron age,” he said. “Ships are laid down in considerable numbers, and a little is done now and a little again, just as though iron became seasoned and improved after being worked into a hull. The difference is due to

red-tapeism, which accepts that all the available talent of the country is employed at Whitehall.” He was dismissive of the navy’s business acumen.

The great moderniser Admiral Jackie Fisher wrote in 1904: “There should be more new construction given out to contract, and fewer men in the Dockyards, which should be confined more to repairs.”

It was often true that Dockyard vessels ended up more expensive than their commercially-built sister ships, but not always. The Devonport battlecruiser *Indefatigable* came in £130,000 cheaper than the Govan-built *New Zealand*, and of the five-ship Queen Elizabeth class, Devonport’s *Warspite* was second cheapest — although the most expensive, *Queen Elizabeth*, was built at the Royal Dockyard in Portsmouth.

Admiral Fisher might have wished to shift more work to the private shipyards, but the pace of shipbuilding during the naval arms race with Germany in the years before World War 1 was as frenetic as anything seen during the wars with the French, and — in big warships at least — the Royal Dockyards had the lion’s share.

Battleship production line

Technology and tactical thinking made great strides too. The 16,000-ton *Hibernia* was soon to be as out of date as the feathered hats on her crowds of well-

DEVONPORT’S FINEST

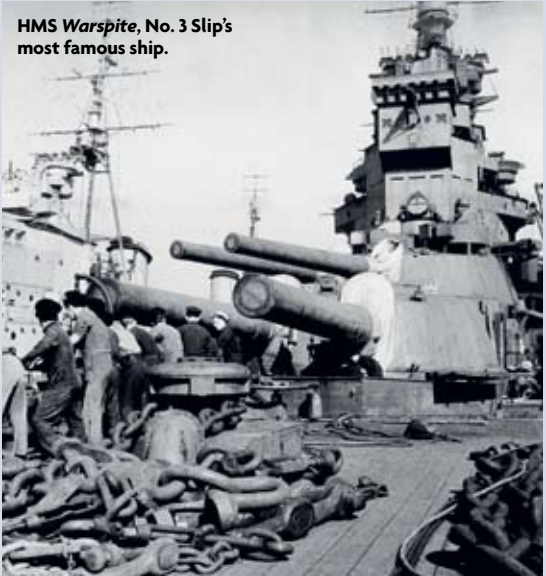
The huge, 690ft (210m) Building Slip No 3 in the new Princess shipyard is one of the most impressive industrial sites in Britain. In little over 60 years, Devonport ships bearing some of the most resonant names in Royal Navy history slid down its concrete incline into the deep waters of the Hamoaze.

This was where the most impressive of Devonport’s ships were built — the Dreadnought-era battlewagons. The first, 1907’s HMS *Temeraire*, was to sail unscathed through the Battle of Jutland and meet a peaceful if ignominious end in the breaker’s yard in 1922. The *Collingwood* was another survivor of the great World War 1 engagement in the North Sea, with the future King George VI serving in a turret as a young sub-lieutenant. *Indefatigable* was not so lucky — she blew up in a duel with a German battlecruiser and went down with over 1,000 men. *Centurion* ended her days as a blockship off Omaha Beach in 1944. HMS *Marlborough*, one of the navy’s last coal-burners, survived a torpedo hit at Jutland to serve until 1930, but the *Royal Oak*, also a Jutland veteran, was sunk by a U-Boat at the outbreak of WW2.

Undoubtedly the most famous Devonport ship was the *Warspite*, a 30,000-ton battleship with eight 15in (381mm) guns, which steamed at 24 knots and fought at Jutland, Narvik, Matapan and Normandy before being finally sold for scrap in 1946, after 31 years of eventful service.

The aircraft carrier HMS *Terrible* was the first ever built in a Royal Dockyard, and after WW2 she was transferred to the Royal Australian Navy and renamed *Sydney*. She served in Korea and Vietnam, and was broken up in 1975.

HMS *Scylla*, a Leander-class frigate, was the last warship



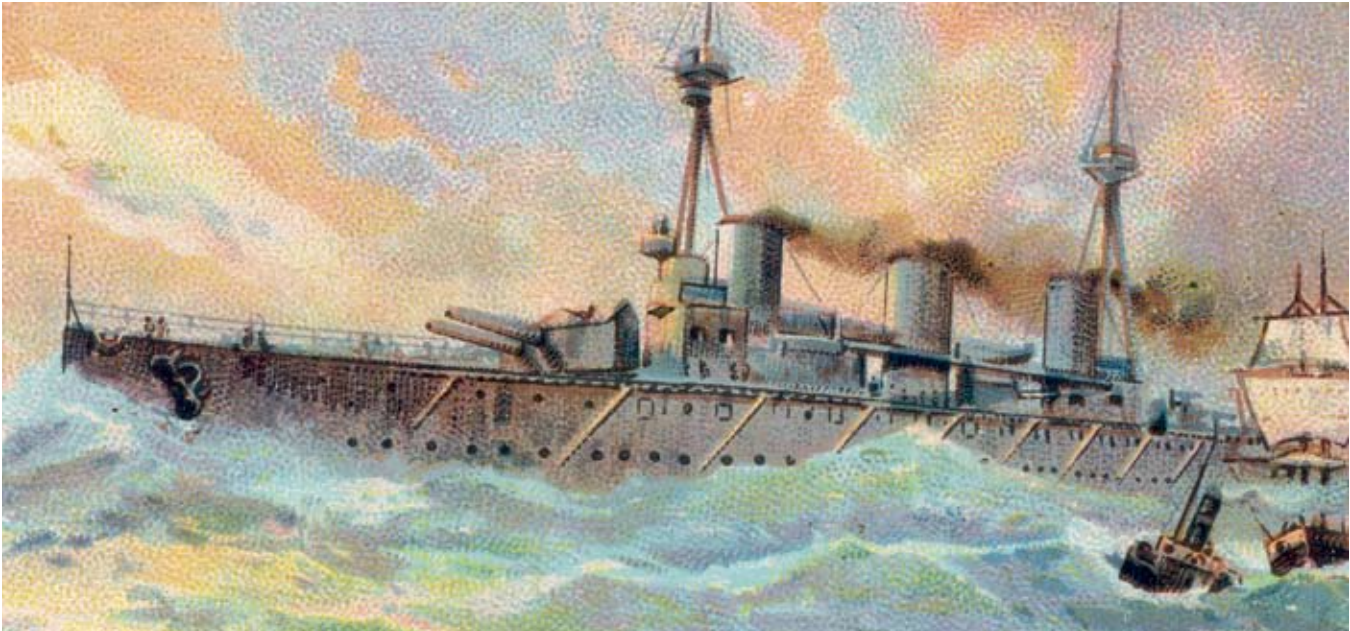
built at Devonport. She was deliberately sunk in 2004 off Whitsand Bay in Cornwall, not far from Plymouth, as an artificial reef and dive site. But she is not the only Devonport ship that can still be seen today — and the other two don’t require any special equipment. HMS *Plymouth*, the sixth Royal Navy ship of that name built at the yard, was completed in 1961 and served with distinction during the Falklands conflict. Until recently she was open to the public as a museum ship in Birkenhead, but campaigners are now trying to find her another berth.

HMS *Wellington*, a 990-ton patrol sloop, was launched in 1934, and since 1947 has been moored on the Thames in central London as the headquarters ship of the Honourable Company of Master Mariners. She is open for viewing by appointment.

South Yard down the ages. Left to right: 1692, 1810, 1913 and 1980s.



Edwardian illustration of the ill-fated *Indefatigable*, sunk at Jutland.



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Princess’s No. 3 Slip became a battleship production line. First was the 18,000-ton *Temeraire*, launched in August 1907

wishers when she was christened in June 1905 – with a bottle of whisky – and launched down Devonport’s old No. 3 building slip. The ‘all big gun’ era ushered in by Fisher saw the new No. 3 Slip become a Dreadnought production line. The first of the modern battleships to be built upon it, with ten 12-inch (305mm) guns, was the 18,000-ton *Temeraire*, launched in August 1907. Then came the 536ft (163m) *Collingwood*. In 1908-9 the slip was lengthened to accommodate the eight-gun battlecruiser *Indefatigable*, and just a month after her launch, the keel was laid for the mighty *Lion* – 26,000 tons, 660ft (201m) overall and mounting eight 13.5-inch (343mm) guns – the largest and fastest capital ship of her day. *Centurion*, *Marlborough* and *Warspite* followed, and finally the *Royal*

Oak in 1914 – the last of Devonport’s battleships. As the age of the armoured battlewagon passed into history, the pace of construction at Devonport barely slackened. Minesweepers and submarines continued to be produced at South Yard, and several eminent cruisers were built in the 1930s. The longest ship to be launched from what is now the Princess slipway was the 695ft (212m) aircraft carrier HMS *Terrible* in 1944. Inevitably, things went rather quiet after World War 2. The country needed fewer ships, and fewer docks, slipways and shoreside buildings. Gradually, South Yard became surplus to requirements as the Navy contracted out more of its shipbuilding and invested in the massive repair and refit facilities of the North Yard

– just as Admiral Fisher had demanded, years before. Slip No 3 was still the focus of Devonport’s shipbuilding, but it had to wait until 1952 for the first contract of the post-war period – the *Salisbury*, a new type of air-direction frigate, and the yard’s first all-welded ship. After her, only five more ships would be built at Devonport. The last, HMS *Scylla*, was launched in 1968. Now, after a long fallow period, the huge slipway is to be put to good use once again. Princess’s production will not be in the open, but in a vast, climate-controlled hall where work is soon to begin. They won’t be slid stern first into the Hamoaze down greased timbers, but lowered down No. 3 Slip by a state-of-the-art amphibious hoist. And they won’t be grey, but graceful – each one the latest in a long and illustrious line.

PRINCESS M CLASS YACHTS

Princess’s new line of 100ft-plus motor yachts is the reason behind the company’s move into South Yard. “We’re working now on the design of the site and on getting planning permission for our development proposals,” says Princess managing director Chris Gates. “But in the big modern shed we’re also able to begin production immediately on the new 32M, and get started on plugs and mould tools for the 40M.” The 32M breaks new ground for Princess, and will place the company confidently in the superyacht market. With guest accommodation in either three or four ensuite cabins, it promises to combine luxury with performance, with vast expanses available for outdoor recreation, exceptionally generous entertainment areas, a raised wheelhouse and a huge, class-leading owner’s suite sited on the main deck. Meanwhile, Princess’s long-range 40-metre flagship is in the final stages of design and development. This will be a three-decker with versatile custom layout options for up to 12 guests, plus a main deck owner’s suite and cabins for eight crew. Work is well under way on the Princess 32M, which will be unveiled during 2010. The 40M will follow on in 2011.



To be unveiled in 2010: the Princess 32M