

SHIPYARDS, SCANDAL AND PIGSTYES

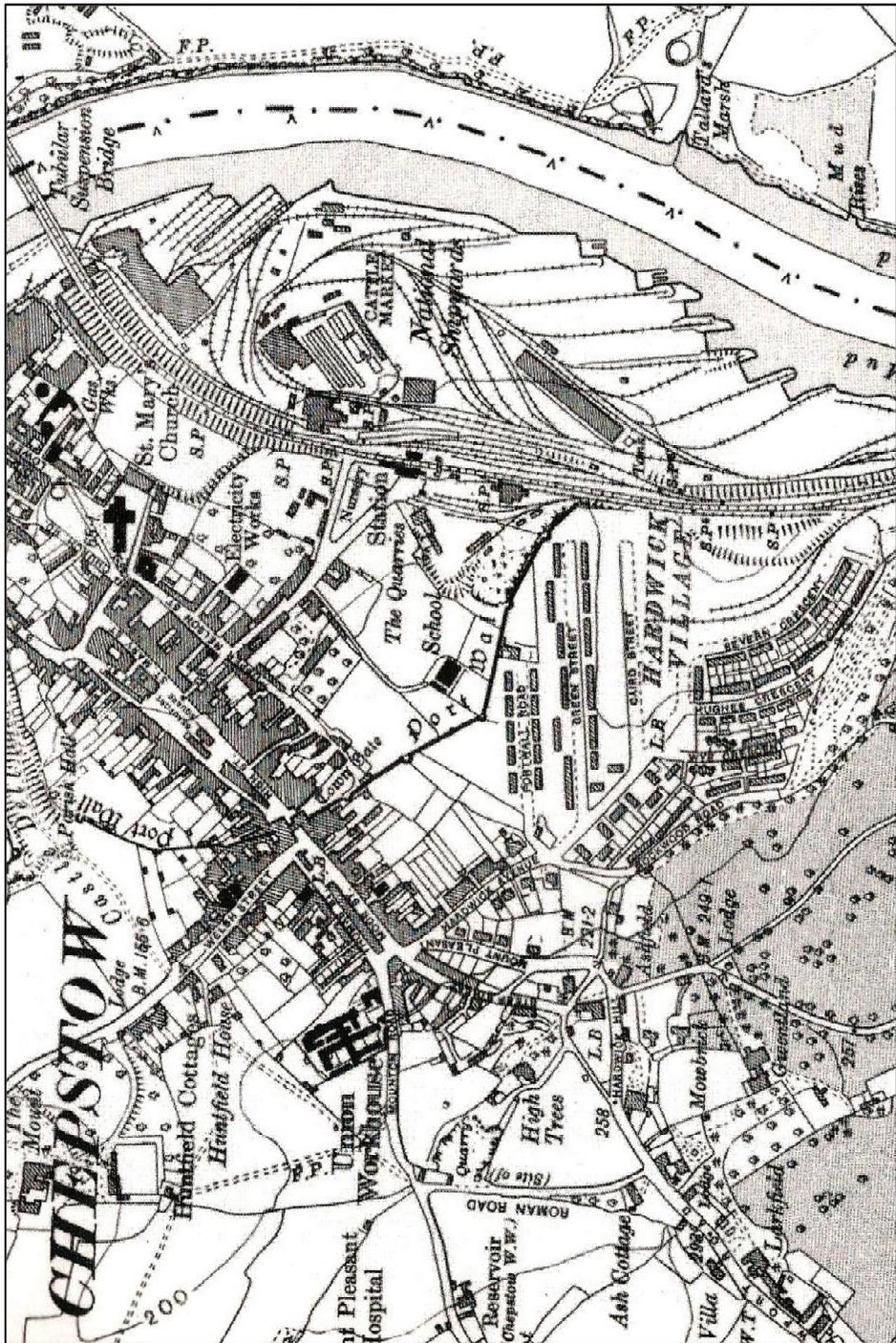
CHANGING CHEPSTOW IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR



A CITY OF SHIPS.
— — — — —
NEW ADMIRALTY BASE.
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**TOWN AND DISTRICT'S GREAT
FUTURE.**



THE CHEPSTOW SOCIETY





Chepstow High Street before the First World War

At the start of the Great War in 1914, Chepstow was a small market town of some 3,000 people.

It had been an important port before and during the Napoleonic Wars - but, a century later, it was best known for its castle, for its salmon, and as a crossing point between Gloucestershire and south Wales. Boats ran to Bristol on market days, and there were excursions by rail, boat and, increasingly, char-a-banc, up the Wye valley.

By far the largest local employer was Finch's engineering yard, the Bridge

Works, beside the river, where several hundred people worked. Edward Finch, an iron merchant from Liverpool, had established the yard in 1849 to build Brunel's innovative Tubular Bridge, taking the railway across the Wye.

The works continued making dock gates, masts, bridges, piers and other structures, and, after Finch's death in 1873, also built small tugs and barges.

In 1911, Tom Valentine Ellis – the son of one of the founding staff of the yard – became its managing director.

After war was declared in August 1914, the town responded to the call to arms.

Many men joined up – and there were local issues to be addressed.

Within a week, a town meeting agreed to set up a convalescent hospital in Chepstow, where less seriously injured combatants could return to convalesce.

Ellis owned Gwy House on Bridge Street – now the Museum – and in November 1914 offered it for use as a hospital. The offer was gratefully accepted, and the hospital, run by Red Cross volunteers, opened in 1915. Run entirely on a voluntary basis, it continued to provide care for wounded soldiers for the duration of the war.

Another early impact of the war on the town was the influx of refugees from Belgium. By October 1914, thousands of Belgian refugee committees were set up nationally, and many men joined up to help liberate “plucky Belgium” from its German occupiers.

The Belgian Refugee Committee in Chepstow was one of forty such groups in Monmouthshire. It sought homes where the refugee families could be housed, found interpreters, helped arrange employment, and organised fundraising. By the end of 1915, over 800 refugees had arrived through Newport.



Henry Avray Tipping (1855-1933)

One of the homes provided for resettling the refugees was Mathern Palace, owned by Henry Avray Tipping. Born in France, the son of a wealthy Quaker businessman and MP, he grew up in Kent and became the Architectural Editor of “Country Life” magazine.

In 1894 he bought the partly ruined Mathern Palace, the former home of the Bishops of Llandaff, from local solicitor G. C. Francis. Tipping rebuilt it as a home for himself and his aged mother.

After her death he commissioned a new home for himself, Mounton House, designed by Francis’ architect son, Eric. Tipping and Eric Francis later collaborated in designing High Glanau, near Trellech.

Avray Tipping was also involved in planning the new garden suburb of Rhiwbina in Cardiff. He was also partly responsible for the gardens at the Prime Minister’s home, Chequers, as well as countless articles and books on country houses and architecture.

THE STANDARD SHIPYARD

Merchant shipping in the Atlantic provided essential fuel and food to the country. But, by the middle of 1915 it was being devastated by German U-boats operating in the waters beyond the Bristol Channel, off the Wales coast and around Ireland.

The submarines were generally undetectable. Radar had not been invented, and sending airships out over the ocean to observe them and drop bombs by hand was largely ineffective.

The losses were considerable, in terms of ships, manpower and essential supplies. Up to 300,000 tons of shipping was being lost to attacks each month, a huge loss for the country to bear.

But, at the same time, industry in the United States was being revolutionised by the adoption of the assembly line practices pioneered by Henry Ford.

J. H. Silley and his associate, Allan Hughes, were among the first to propose that similar practices of “standardization” be adopted in Britain, to build ships more rapidly than using the old methods.



John Henry Silley (1872-1941)

Silley was born at Tutshill. He had been apprenticed at Finch’s yard before joining the Star shipping line in London, rising to become its chief engineer.

He set up his own business in London, later merging it with others to form R and H Green and Silley, Weir, Ltd, which became one of the leading ship repair companies in the country.

In 1915, Silley persuaded several leading shipowners, including Lord Inchcape of P&O, to form a consortium to build cargo ships to standardised designs.

In April 1916 the Standard Shipbuilding Company was established.

The new company was chaired by James Caird of Turnbull, Martin & Co., with Silley as managing director.

Silley proposed that a major new shipyard be developed at Chepstow. The area was deemed relatively safe from air or sea attack. There was flat land for development, beside deep water, and the railway could connect the site directly with the iron and steel works at Newport.

Important to the shipowners was the fact that it was free of the trade unions in established shipbuilding centres, and was seen as more open to innovation. Though the town lacked a sizeable workforce, the company expected this to be resolved through Government conscription.

Official Statement.

We are officially informed that an interesting experiment is on the eve of being started at Chepstow. A company with powerful interests, called the Standard Shipbuilding and Engineering Company, Ltd., has been formed for the purpose of building standardised steamers with the view of assisting the replacement as rapidly as possible of the tonnage lost by our mercantile marine during the war. For many years past it has been in the minds of some members of the shipping community that advantage should be taken by shipbuilders of the benefits now known by standardising machinery, and the company has been formed with a view of making the interesting experiment of adapting this policy of standardisation to the steamers themselves. A suitable site has been secured on the River Wye in close proximity to Chepstow, and an early commencement is assured. The company is taking a step which is somewhat unique in shipbuilding concerns by forming a separate company to lay out for the benefit of its workmen and their families roomy houses of the garden city type. The company anticipate that by building these houses in large numbers they can be let more economically than the ordinary accommodation furnished generally to workmen.



Looking towards the railway bridge - the Meads before the shipyard was developed.

The Standard Shipbuilding Company bought Finch's yard at a cost of £300,000, and with it acquired a further 45 acres in the Meads – the open area of fields downstream of the railway line. There, they were to develop a new shipyard for building prefabricated “standard” ships, of a larger size than could be built at Finch's yard.

The Company acquired rights to the foreshore, and settled the interests of local salmon fishermen. Public footpaths through the Meads were closed, and the southern stretch of the medieval Port Wall was demolished, together with several cottages and the old Mill House.

The contractors - Topham, Jones and Railton - laid railway tracks into the area, and started work on eight new slipways where ships of up to 3000 tons, would be assembled.

Workers had to be brought in from outside. Experienced men from Tyneside, Teesside and Clydeside came to the area, and free railway passes were provided for those coming daily from Newport, Cardiff, and elsewhere.

Within weeks, virtually all accommodation in Chepstow had been requisitioned. The old bobbin factory on Lower Church Street was converted into accommodation, and informally renamed the “Bob Inn”.

Local landowners, businesses and farmers claimed that they could not compete with the wages offered by the yards, and questions were asked in Parliament over the influx of population.

At the same time, the need for more men to enlist to fight in the war itself was growing.

In May 1916, one report said that *“Chepstow will have no rival as a large shipbuilding centre”*. Another said that: *“This great venture will prove that no other country can build ships as well and as cheaply as Great Britain”*.

But *The Times* was more pessimistic. It reported in September 1916 that:

“A dearth of labour is delaying the Standard Shipbuilding Company’s scheme at Chepstow. Just under 200 men are employed, but a number have left because they could not obtain house-room in Chepstow, a little old-fashioned town of under 4,000 inhabitants... Little progress has been made with the garden village scheme, and a considerable time is likely to elapse before any new homes will be ready...”

For the first time, the Finch’s yard began employing women workers. In December, the *Weekly Argus* reported that, *“the firm having used every possible effort to obtain men... [they] had no alternative but to resort to females, a number of whom are now engaged at their shipyard...”*.

The Company planned to provide houses for its workers, on 150 acres of land sloping down towards the railway line, below Hardwick House. The land had been used until then as allotments and orchards.

The shipyard aimed to provide good quality, comfortable and affordable houses, in a planned landscape with ample open space - along the lines of the then-popular Garden City movement. The architects were the London practice of Dunn, Watson & Curtis Green.

The plan was for a central spine road – Hardwick Avenue – from which side streets extended, following the contours of the site. Three of the roads came to be named after partners in the Standard shipyard – Green, Hughes, and Caird.

The estate was directly linked to the shipyard by a passageway under the railway line. Three open spaces were proposed – a village green with trees, a tennis and bowls area, and a recreation ground.

Houses were designed for different classes of workmen – labourers, skilled tradesmen, foremen, and clerical staff. It was intended that there would be no standard designs. Each house was planned to suit its site and prospect, although standardised doors, windows, stairs and chimneys were fitted. The houses would later be described as being in the “Arts and Crafts” style of the period.

The estate pioneered the use of concrete blocks in house building. The

blocks were made on the site, many by prisoners of war.

An architect's textbook at the time called the Hardwick Garden City houses:

"... an excellent example of successful design in concrete. The clients have shown the most commendable spirit in this scheme, as they have spared no effort to make the cottages models of good building with ample accommodation and artistic appearance.

The site is a very picturesque one, in a valley outside the ancient walls of the town, and as the contours of the ground are very irregular the design of each block has been varied to suit its

particular position, while the prospect and aspect has been carefully studied in each case.

The difficulty of getting bricks and the presence of good material for concrete led to the adoption of concrete blocks for all walls and partitions....

The general texture and colour of these external walls is very pleasing and the effect, when seen, would remove the prejudice that exists among many designers against the appearance of concrete as an exposed surface. "

(from A. Lakeman (ed.),

"Concrete cottages, small garages, and farm buildings", 1918)



Part of Hardwick 'Garden City' in 2016

THE NATIONAL SHIPYARD

The Standard and Finch's shipyards were amalgamated, and by March 1917 more than 500 men and women were working there.

The Times reported that "real progress is being made... Since the yard was acquired the number of men employed has been more than doubled.. and now about 40 women are employed with satisfactory results."

The Standard shipyard company still had ambitious schemes. In April 1917, the *Weekly Argus* reported that three slipways were in use, and huge workshops housing "the most modern and wonderful machines" had been put up. Plans were well advanced for "platers' shops, engine and boiler sheds, saw mills, carpenters' and joiners shops, blast furnaces...", and the old Malthouse building was to be converted into a power station.

The newspaper commented:

"It will not be surprising if, by-and-by, Chepstow comes to be known as "the City of Ships".

But, in the three months to June 1917, Britain lost 1.4 million tons of shipping to German attacks.

Many of the attacks were off the Pembrokeshire coast, and in the approaches around Ireland. Protective convoys were inadequate, and there were few counter-measures to the U-boat threat.

The new Prime Minister David Lloyd George's War Cabinet took the view that the Standard Shipbuilding Company had been acting too slowly.

The Government's answer was to try to build more ships, more quickly, to replace those being lost.

In August 1917, it decided to take over the Chepstow Standard Shipyard as one of three National Shipyards.

The others were to be entirely new developments – at Beachley, a couple of miles downstream on the Wye; and at Portbury, across the Severn near Bristol.

The Government planned to build 15 berths at Chepstow, known as National Shipyard No.1 - seven at the old Finch's yard and eight at the Meads.

At Finch's, the ships would be built by the old methods, but elsewhere

A CITY OF SHIPS.

NEW ADMIRALTY BASE.

TOWN AND DISTRICT'S GREAT FUTURE.

The important announcement made on Monday that the Standard Shipbuilding and Engineering Company had received notice that the Government desired to occupy its yard at Chocston, presumably for the duration of the war, occasioned considerable surprise. This yard was the first planned for the construction of standard steamers.

No intimation appears to have been given regarding the policy to be adopted respecting the completion of the yard and the building there of standard ships. Hopes are, however, expressed that the Government will be able to make use of the efficient organisation which has been built up, and has been responsible for the satisfactory progress already made in the development of the yard. It is also hoped that certain extensions which had been planned will be carried out.

The Standard Shipbuilding Company, formed in June of last year, was very strongly supported, for it included among its shareholders such names as the P. and O., Orient Steam Navigation, Messrs. Furness, Withy and Co., Turnbull, Martin and Co., A. Weir and Co., Harris and Dixon, Trinder, Anderson and Co., Bethell, Gwyn, and Co., and Birt, Potter, and Hughes (Limited). The idea of standardisation gradually developed throughout the second half of last year, and led to the adoption this year, with the appointment of a Shipping Controller, of a very large State programme of standard cargo ships.

the plan was to use the new yards to assemble ships from parts prefabricated in other parts of the country – inland, rather than at shipyards - and brought to the yards by rail. The ships would be assembled by unskilled civilian labour, under supervision, but the new yards themselves were to be built by Royal Engineers and German prisoners of war.

The *Argus* commented: *“Where it is proposed to plant one of the largest shipbuilding yards in the country, absolutely the first essential is to provide suitable dwellings for the men, and this the Standard directors did, but the contractors were unable to secure the necessary labour to complete them rapidly....”*

Several hundred navvies were engaged, but what happened was that they would not, and could not be expected to, put up with really indifferent and insufficient accommodation, and off they went...”

Beachley was described in *The Times* at the time as *“quite a little seaside resort, patronized by the people of Gloucester and the immediate district.”* But its closeness to deep water on both sides of the peninsula, and to the existing shipyard at Chepstow, drew it to the attention of the Admiralty.

The decision to commandeer an area of some 250 acres, under the Defence of

the Realm Act – DORA - was announced in a letter to the villagers – mostly farmers and fishermen – on 1st September 1917. It said that, because of a matter of “urgent national importance”, they were required to vacate their land and houses within just eleven days. It became evident that this was to be the site of National Shipyard No.2.

The *South Wales Argus* reported scenes of “the greatest grief” as the villagers moved. Compensation for the Beachley villagers was not finalised until almost a year later, in July 1918.

The sudden nationalisation of the shipyards caused a storm of protest.

The Standard Company objected vigorously. In a long letter published in *The Times*, Lord Inchcape said that *“...we were unceremoniously evicted...All the work and thought and time spent in negotiation, in forming the company, in securing the land, in purchasing buildings and small plots, in arranging regarding rights of way, in securing a railway siding, in planning and erecting workmen’s houses on the plan of a Garden City, in planning the yard and all its accessories, in settling with owners of fishing rights on the Wye who thought shipbuilding might prejudice salmon catching, have gone by the board...”*

Later, he explained:

"In July 1917, an officer of the Government Shipbuilding Department accepted an invitation to pay a visit to Chepstow to see the progress we were making with our yard... He inspected the yard, expressed himself delighted, returned to London, and in a few weeks' time we received notice that the Government had acquired our yard, and that our order for standard ships was cancelled. I am afraid that unawares we entertained the reverse of an angel..."

New managers – civil servants – were put in place to run the shipyard.

There was talk of the yards employing 10,000 workers, and Chepstow becoming the largest shipbuilding centre in the world.

But there were already doubts expressed in the national press over the suitability of the site and the need for dredging – and over the continuing difficulties of securing, and housing, the workforce needed.

THE CHANGING TOWN

Some 6,000 Royal Engineers came into to the area to develop the shipyard.

The cattle market – beside the Malthouse just east of the railway line – was commandeered for use as a parade ground. A temporary theatre – the Pavilion – was erected on the riverbank to provide entertainment for the workers.

The pier on the river, used for steamboat excursion trips, was in the way of the shipyard extension and was dismantled. The cottages remaining in the Meads were demolished. Land was levelled, railway sidings laid out, and sheds were erected.

Plans were laid to remodel the town's road system, to take account of the expected growth in heavy traffic. It was reported that the Town Gate *"is apparently doomed to be swept away to complete the main thoroughfare, while the station road itself will be widened from end to end ..."*

The Admiralty insisted on commandeering the Chepstow Workhouse at the bottom of Mounton Road, home to many elderly residents,

some of whom had been there for fifty years. The building was to be used to house shipyard workers, and the workhouse closed in August 1918. The *Argus* reported that *“the old folk keenly felt leaving a home where many of them had passed a number of years, and there were some touching scenes...”*

Shortly after the Admiralty took control of the shipyards, it was announced that as part of their plans they would build a new hospital for the workers, on a field at the junction of Mouton Road and St Lawrence Road.

Mount Pleasant Hospital was built rapidly, and opened at the end of October 1918. It was said to be one of the best of its kind, equipped with the most modern appliances. But it was regarded as an eyesore, and its distance from the shipyard presented difficulties.

The *Times* asked why, when the priority should have been to provide housing for the labour force needed, they spent £90,000 *“upon a hospital which was obviously not required until the yards were in partial or full working order”*.

There were stories – later denied – that on one occasion, when a Government minister was to visit, convalescent patients from the Red Cross hospital at Gwy House were placed in beds at the

new hospital, so that the visitors would not realise it was lying empty.

In Bulwark, huts for the soldiers were built beside Fairfield Lodge, a house on the site of what had been Claypits Farm.

Work also started on connecting the Camp to the shipyard, via a zigzag light railway “on the Alpine model”, and the path between Bulwark and the town, known as Fishermen’s Walk, was closed.

The *Argus* reflected on the changes. *“The old Thornwell lane is losing its quiet and charm. This locality will now and for evermore be known as Bulwark, which promises to develop into a largely populated suburb of Chepstow...”*

The nationalisation of the shipyard in 1917 caused the house building programme to slow down. While concrete huts and basic cottages were built for the incoming soldiers at Bulwark, and at Pennsylvania Farm at Sedbury, permanent housebuilding was neglected for almost a year.

Work on the Hardwick estate continued throughout the war, and eventually work began on permanent housing at Bulwark and Sedbury. Plans were completed for 200 houses at Hardwick “Garden City”; 223 at Bulwark; and, for those working at Beachley, 342 at Pennsylvania Farm.

The first houses at Bulwark were completed in September 1918. The overall plan was by Henry Farmer, chief architect to the Admiralty. The roads were made straighter than those at Hardwick Garden City, again with a mix of semi-detached and short rows of housing, and centred on the Octagon.

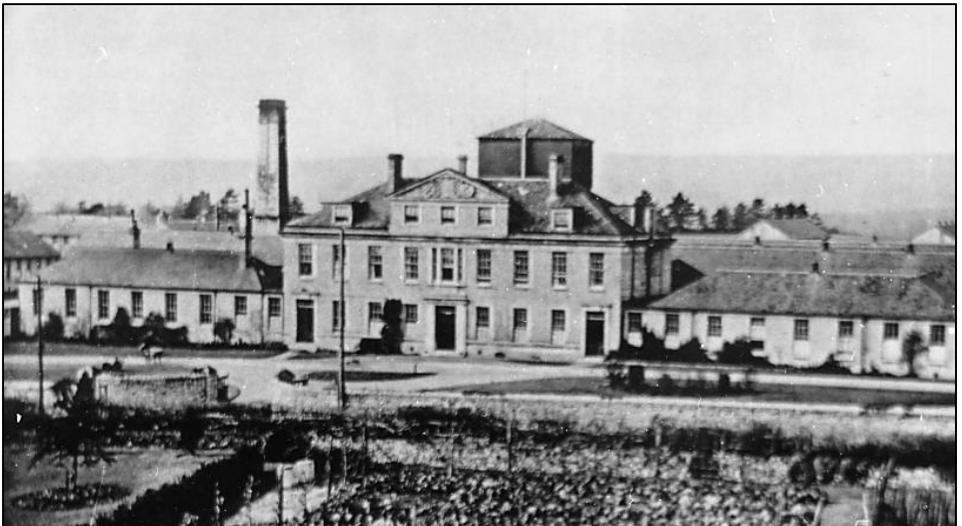
Initially, the Bulwark houses were met with a local outcry because of their small size. One member of the town council described them as *“pig-styes and dog kennels”*.

It transpired that they were being built to designs overseen by Avray Tipping, who had been advising the Admiralty. Tipping said that, because of shortages of labour and materials, it had been

necessary to build the smallest houses at Bulwark first. Eventually the Admiralty agreed to alter some of the designs.

Tipping had previously helped plan the Rhiwbina suburb in Cardiff. It was later revealed that he had been asked by the Admiralty in 1917 to prepare a comprehensive plan for Chepstow and its shipyards, including a new road access to the railway station, but his proposals had not been accepted.

He was highly critical of the Town Council’s decision to reject his offer to help prepare a proper plan for Chepstow’s growth, at the time when the Standard shipyard was first proposed.



The Admiralty hospital

BULWARK GARDEN CITY

Condemned by Urban Council.

"Pig-styes and Dog Kennels."

The first of the four classes of cottages which the Government are erecting at the Bulwark Garden City was strongly criticised at the Chepstow Council meeting on Monday evening. Mr. H. J. Thomas described them as forming an absolute scandal, and suggested asking the Local Government Board to hold an inquiry. He said it was impossible for a person to turn round in them, and added that 50 of the same class were being built. They should also ask for plans and how many cottages to the acre it was proposed to erect there. The Local Government Board rule was eight, and he thought it was more like 50 at Bulwark.—The Chairman (Mr. Lawrence): You know our position.—Mr. H. J. Thomas: I know, but we should appeal to the Local Government Board.—The Chairman: We are putting ourselves in an entirely false position, because we have no right to interfere in the matter at all.—The Clerk (Mr. Fothergill Evans): Let us get the plans first.—Mr. H. J. Thomas pointed out that the houses were being erected, and described them as pig-styes and dog kennels.—The Chairman reminded Mr. Thomas that he was present at the interview with General Collard.—Mr. H. J. Thomas: I don't care for

*The
Weekly
Argus,
21 Sept.
1918*



Houses under construction at Bulwark



TENSIONS RISING

In December 1917, the largest ship ever launched at Chepstow, the *Petworth*, slipped into the Wye. Four months later, sections of the first standard ship, the *War Forest*, arrived for assembly.

But the effect of the Government decision to bring in new management was to slow the progress on ship building.

The project faced growing criticism, from politicians, private shipbuilders, and the trade unions who objected to the use of military labour.

In May 1918 the workers at Finch's yard passed a resolution against their yard being taken over by the military.

On 6 June, *"over 2,000 workers, including all Finch's shipyard workers and the men employed on the military hospital, attended a mass meeting held on the Institute football ground, to protest against the Government proposals of conscript labour in the national shipyards..."*

Delegates were present representing the whole of the trade union movement in the country, including transport workers, railwaymen, shipwrights, navvies, dockers and miners... The whole of

Labour was looking to Chepstow... to enter an emphatic protest against the employment of conscript labour in the national shipyards, the feeling amongst the workers being that it would lead to the conscription of labour generally...."

Just two weeks later, the Government climbed down and agreed that civilian workers, rather than the military and prisoners of war, would be used in the Chepstow and Beachley yards.

Over the next few weeks, 1,400 Royal Engineers were evacuated from Bulwark to Sedbury, and an influx of civilians to work in the shipyard was anticipated.

The Select Committee on National Expenditure reported to Parliament in July 1918, and were highly critical of the Government's takeover of the yards.

They pointed out that there had been no consultations with private shipbuilders, and no proper estimates of costs, before the yard was nationalised - and that, anyway, Chepstow was unsuitable for launching larger ships, because of the narrowness of the river.

The Committee said that the initiative had assumed that military labour would be used in the yards. They acknowledged *"..that the scheme was decided upon at a time of great national emergency, but.. before embarking on a scheme involving an expenditure of nearly £4 million, steps should have been*

taken to make sure that the conditions necessary to the successful prosecution of the scheme could be fulfilled."

In the House of Commons, the Liberal MP Sir Hamar Greenwood described the initiative as a scandal, saying:

"What really is a serious matter is that the time and energy of the War Cabinet, which should think of nothing but this awful War, where men are slaughtered daily, have been wasted by innumerable deputations, by arguments for and against, and by the pursuit of this phantom of a great national shipyard on the mud flats of a river in the West of England [sic]. Up to the present not a ship has been produced, and there is no sign of a ship being produced for years.."

Nevertheless, work continued. In July 1918 the Chepstow yard was visited by a party of Japanese naval officers, and in the same month it was toured by the Assistant Secretary of the US Navy, Franklin D. Roosevelt – later to become President.

In August, it was reported that work in the shipyards was proceeding rapidly. The *War Forest*, the "first standard ship to be built at Chepstow" was launched

from the old Finch's yard on 23 September 1918, "in the presence of about 2000 persons" according to *The Times*.

In October the first keel was laid on one of the first slipways started by the Standard company.

But, by the time the war ended, the Chepstow and Beachley yards were still being developed.

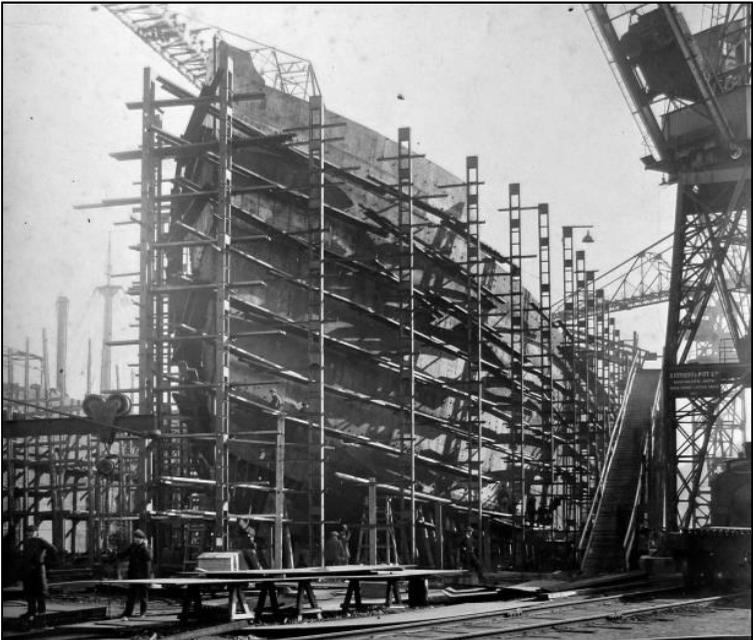
The Armistice was announced on 11 November 1918.

No prefabricated ships had been launched from any of the yards during the war.

The lack of labour and shortage of housing in the area had proved to be insuperable problems.

The need for workers to come to in the area coincided with the even more pressing need for more men to replace to those lost on the battlefields, and the lack of resources to build sufficient new houses quickly.

The war ended before the shipyard initiative could succeed.



THE “CHEPSTOW SCANDAL”

Immediately, everything possible was done to end further government spending on the shipyards.

The Royal Engineers were asked whether they wanted to continue to work in the shipyards as civilians, but only 36 out of 4,000 did so.

By the end of 1918, practically all the 7,000 officers and soldiers working at the shipyards were demobilised - but many of the civilians, who had come into the area from other parts of the country to work there, stayed.

According to the *Weekly Argus* in December:

“The initial error, which is really the root of the whole trouble, was in interfering with and ousting the powerful Standard Shipbuilding Company, which private enterprise, formed as much in national as private interests, was choked for materials and labour at a time when the Government were in a position to do so and would have been justified in offering such facilities in view of the submarine campaign and the urgent need for ships.

....

[The] Admiralty, having stopped the Standard Company, wholly failed to take steps to make the enterprise a success by ignoring the most important duty of providing housing accommodation, and, goodness knows, the position to-day would be chaos gone mad had not Mr. Tipping, of Mounton House, gone to London and stirred the Government officials into some kind of activity. Assuredly the public owe that gentleman a deep debt of gratitude.

But what is equally inexplicable is the present unfinished state of the Chepstow yard, despite the fact that several thousands of men have been available, to say nothing of an unfailing supply of material. With the facilities at their command nine, and at the outside twelve months was a generous period for not only the final completion, but also the building of one or two ships.

Had they been left alone the Standard Company would have done this in 18 months from the commencement without a penny cost to the taxpayers.”

Weekly Argus, 7 December 1918

In March 1919, an anonymous letter on behalf of the shipyard workers was published in *The Times*. It revealed chaos and corruption at the shipyard.

“Eyewash’ was rampant.... On one occasion, a concrete gang, taken off other work, were ordered to work night and day laying the foundation for a large crane at Beachley; two days after the completion of this work it had to be blown up with explosives, as not in accordance with an amended scheme....

“When the Parliamentary Committee came down to inspect the work an official bulletin of instructions was issued which provided that a train of empty wagons should stand on a line where they would obstruct the view of the abandoned wet dock, in case the Committee should wish to see the dock, “which is not to be encouraged”.

“Competent works officers were in charge of sections of work, many of them... well able to organize and carry out the work in a proper manner, but were continually badgered by receiving urgent instructions to stop certain portions of work and recommence others without delay, for obviously no other reason than to impress visitors or to enable figures to be put into a report.”

An engineer who worked on the scheme said that he had been threatened with arrest when he pointed out that work on one concrete structure was being done in a dangerous way - but, two days later, was vindicated when the whole structure collapsed into the Wye.

“One of the main troubles at Chepstow and Beachley was that rank bore no relation to ability. Men who knew their work were constantly overruled by men who, with an extra ‘pip’ upon their shoulders but no technical knowledge, were their military superiors.

“Even the German prisoners of war were coached in their duties. These on one occasion consisted in making as much noise as they could, clanging iron upon iron, and it is said they did their job nobly. But the whole effect was spoiled when, having made the day hideous by their noise, the prisoners, as the party of visitors moved off, stopped work with one accord, apparently considering that the curtain had fallen on their part of the performance.”

There was criticism of the continued use of prisoners in building the new houses. The unions objected that the prisoners of war were doing skilled as well as unskilled work, and in April 1919 it was announced that the prisoners would be withdrawn.

The incomplete berths at Chepstow and Beachley were abandoned, and building work on the yards ended, though it continued on the houses.

The total cost of the work at Chepstow and Beachley was given as £6,120,000: including £162,000 to purchase the Finch's yard, £964,000 for the No.1

Shipyard, £1,933,000 for the No.2 Shipyard at Beachley, £863,000 to build houses and camps, and £109,000 for the new Admiralty Hospital. The figures did not include the cost of materials for the ships, nor the costs of maintaining the workforce, or the prisoners of war.

Local and national newspapers described the whole affair as “The Chepstow Scandal”, with millions of pounds wasted on a scheme that was “doomed to fail”. Politicians demanded that the shipyards be returned to private enterprise.

But, by this time, the board of the Standard Shipbuilding Company had lost interest. Though Government began discussions with the unions, with a view

to them taking over the yards, in August 1919 it was announced that they would be sold to a private company.

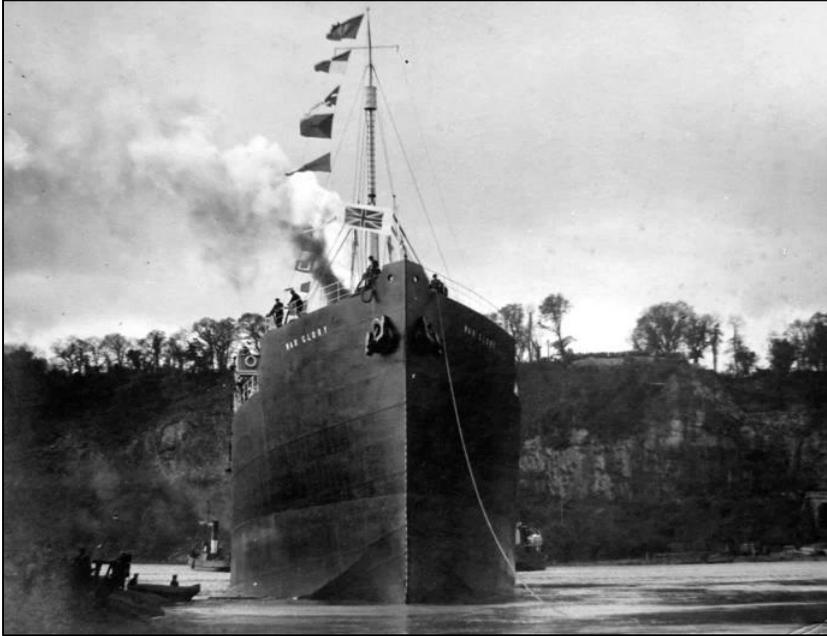
A new syndicate – including the Clydeside firm, Fairfield Shipbuilding and Engineering Co. – formed the Monmouth Shipbuilding Company to take over the Chepstow yard, from January 1920. It continued to build ships, but demand slumped after the war, and many of the workers faced years of unemployment.

The largest ship launched on the Wye at the time was the *War Glory*, of 6,543 tons. Five further ships of similar size – the *War Iliad*, *War Odyssey*, *War Genius*, *War Epic*, and *War Idyll* – were launched in 1920 and 1921.



SHIPS LAUNCHED AT CHEPSTOW

<i>Launch name</i>	<i>Tonnage</i>	<i>Launched</i>	<i>Later names</i>	<i>Outcome</i>
Petworth	2,012	17 Dec. 1917	"Garlinge"	Torpedoed, 1942
Tutshill	2,089	16 March 1918	"Carcavellos", "Fintra"	Torpedoed, 1943
War Forest	3,103	23 Sept. 1918	"Albergallus", "Grado"	Torpedoed, 1943
War Apple	2,492	31 May 1919	"Selenga"	Broken up, 1965
War Trench	3,080	11 Nov. 1919	"Neath Abbey", "Mar Caspio"	Wrecked, 1937
War Grape	2,572	24 March 1920	"Guebwiller", "Henri Mori"	Wrecked, 1931
War Glory	6,543	21 April 1920	"Monte Pasubio"	Wrecked, 1924
Nash Light	2,546	19 June 1920	"Gothic", "Balilla"	Sunk, 1941
War Iliad	6,551	7 July 1920	"Sile", "Jantje Fritzen"	Scuttled, 1945
War Fig	2,568	17 Aug. 1920	"Charterhague", "Jaamari"	Sunk, 1944
War Odyssey	6,547	20 Sept. 1920	"Monte San Michele"	Lost in storm, 1921
War Genius	6,573	29 Oct. 1920	"Taifun", "Carl Fritzen"	Scuttled, 1939
War Epic	6,574	11 Dec. 1920	"Adige", "Monsun"	Wrecked, 1942
War Idyll	6,565	5 Aug. 1921	"Concordia"	Scrapped, 1932
Cynthiana	3,443	19 Oct. 1921	"Schwarzes-Meer"	Scuttled, 1944



The launch of the War Glory in 1920

THE AFTERMATH

In 1924 the **Standard shipyard** was taken over by Fairfield, who sold off the shipbuilding machinery and brought in new equipment for heavy engineering works, such as bridges and dock gates. The slipways themselves became derelict and largely overgrown. In the Second World War, tank landing craft, sections of Mulberry Harbour, and floating cranes were built there.

When the Fairfield company went bankrupt in 1966, the site was taken over by the Mabey Bridge engineering

works. The works closed in 2016, and the site is currently proposed for housing development, with the slipways being retained as a heritage feature.

Finch's yard north of the railway line was taken over after the Second World War by the Dendix company, making industrial brushes. The factory closed in 2011 and the site is now being developed for housing.

The commandeered **Workhouse** on Mounon Road became the Regent House public assistance institution, before being demolished. The Fire Station and Severn View care home were

later built on the site. The only workhouse building that remains is now used as a children's nursery.

Mount Pleasant Hospital was transferred to the Ministry of Pensions in 1919, and became a centre for accommodating permanently disabled war pensioners, particularly poison gas victims, known as the "boys in blue" for their serge uniforms. As the number of pensioners diminished, the hospital was used for a wider range of operations and treatments, and for geriatric care. In the Second World War the St Lawrence Hospital, specialising in plastic surgery and burns, was built opposite.

Mount Pleasant Hospital was demolished in 1998, and the current Chepstow Community Hospital was built on its site.

At **Hardwick Garden City** and **Bulwark**, housebuilding continued after the war ended. As a result, Chepstow's population grew by 69% over the decade up to 1921.

Some of the concrete huts at Bulwark remained as workshops, and were later used by the Red and White Bus Company which established its base there between the wars. Most of the area was later developed as the trading estate.

At **Beachley**, the shipyard plans were abandoned. Many of the villagers were

allowed to return after the war, and new housing continued to be built at Sedbury.

The shipyard site itself remained in Government ownership but, by 1923, the area was derelict. It was cleared, and in February 1924 the Army Technical School – which trained NCOs and potential officers in technical and military skills - was moved there from Aldershot. It became the Army Apprentices College, before closing in 1994. The site is now the home of the First Battalion the Rifles, but is scheduled for closure.

J. H. Silley was awarded the O.B.E. in 1917. After the war ended, he bought the Gate House at the top of the High Street, and donated it to the town council, whose offices it now contains. He continued to work with Allan Hughes, especially in developing the shipyard and engineering works at Falmouth in Cornwall.

H. Avray Tipping worked with Eric Francis on his homes at Mounton and later High Glanau, near Trellech, and continued to write extensively on country houses and architecture. Eric Francis designed Chepstow's Cenotaph in Beaufort Square, unveiled with great ceremony in 1922, and later lived and worked in Somerset.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Information in this booklet has been derived from many sources, including:

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While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of this publication at the time of writing, the Society cannot accept responsibility for any errors or omissions.

Text by Guy Hamilton

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One of the former National Shipyard No.1 slipways in 2016



THE CHEPSTOW SOCIETY

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