













PRISONER OF WAR MEMORIAL

Royal Naval Barracks Chatham

BY 1798 a large number of French Prisoners of war were incarcerated in England. In that year there were 30,625 French prisoners, besides 300 officers on parole confined at Portsmouth, Plymouth, Normancross, Liverpool, Edinburgh, Chatham and Stapleton. In 1799 the number was 25,646. On 1st January, 1801, in consequence of the high rate of mortality among them the prisoners were supplied with warm clothing at the public expense.

Those imprisoned at Chatham were confined in hulks in Gillingham Reach and Short Reach and the bodies of those who died were interred in the marshes adjoining the hulks. Those from Short Reach were buried on the marsh land now called St. Mary's Island. Those from Gillingham Reach were buried on what was known as Prisoners' Bank, once an island, but now a marshy promontory belonging to the Gillingham Gas Company.

In 1854 the Admiralty purchased St. Mary's Island and the marsh land adjoining to allow for an extension of Chatham Dockyard which had long been in contemplation. The Chatham Dockyard extension Act was passed on 26th July 1861, and work began after the construction of suitable dams had been completed. Convict labour was employed. The convicts were drawn from various penal establishments, and were housed while the work was in progress, some in hulks in the river and later on ground which is now occupied by the Royal Naval Barracks.

In 1868 the attention of the Secretary of State for Home Affairs was drawn to the burial ground at Prisoners' Bank. The Gillingham Gas Company stated that the erosion of the bank was causing the exposure of skeletons and coffins. The Home Secretary requested the Admiralty to remove the remains or to construct works to protect them.

A question arose as to whether any convicts who had died while employed on the Dockyard Extension were interred there, as this apparently had a bearing on the disposal of the remains, but it was shown to the satisfaction of the Home Secretary that deceased convicts had been buried in Gillingham Churchyard.

After the Gas Company had given their consent to the removal on 21st January, 1869, subject to all damage being made good, the Admiralty on 8th March, 1869, issued an order to remove the remains from Prisoners' Bank, and to re-inter them in the existing French Cemetery on St. Mary's Island. This cemetery already contained the bodies of a large number of prisoners, but no details are available as to their number or nationality.

On 11th May, 1869, the Chatham Dockyard authorities reported to the Admiralty that 711 skeletons and some coffins had been removed from Gillingham Prisoners' Bank and re-interred in the French Cemetery at a total cost of £67 6s. 0d. At the same time isolated and scattered graves on St. Mary's Island were opened and all remains were concentrated in the French Cemetery.

In 1869 the Admiralty Director of Works, by their Lordships' order produced a design for a Memorial which was approved to be built and erected in the French Cemetery, the work to be done by Convict labour. In September of the same year a tender was accepted for a Sicilian marble figure for the Memorial but the figure was eventually made of some other material. The convicts erected and completed the work.

On 5th December 1891 the charge of the French Cemetery on St. Mary's Island was taken over from the Dockyard by Captain Ernest Rice, R.N., H.M.S. Pembroke, and the Admiralty having approved the annual sum of ten pounds for its maintenance this sum was ordered to be paid to the Paymaster of the Depot Ship.

In 1899 the Gillingham Gas Company reported the discovery of two more skeletons contained in coffins similar in construction and material to those found thirty years previously. On the evening of 3rd July 1899 these remains were brought over by boat and re-interred in the French Cemetery.

On 4th February 1903 in view of the contemplated construction of a new Dockyard Basin which would take in the French Cemetery, Rear-Admiral R. W. Craige, Admiral Superintendent and Senior Officer at Chatham, appointed a committee consisting of Captain L. Wintz, H.M.S. Pembroke; Chaplain the Rev. J. H. Moriarty, R.N., and Thomas Hunter, Esq., Superintending Civil Engineer to report on the best procedure for transferring elsewhere from French Cemetery all the remains, and to report on the best site in the Dockyard to erect the Memorial.

A grass sward near the Staff Captain's office was selected but was objected to by the Rear Admiral on the grounds that it would occasionally be flooded by the river. A site in Gillingham Old Cemetery was then proposed by the committee and the Vicar of Gillingham and the Rear Admiral concurred. But in March 1903 the Admiralty having desired that the remains and the Memorial should be on Naval ground, the Rear Admiral directed Captain Wintz to submit proposals for a suitable site in the New Naval Barrack Grounds.

On 17th March 1904 the Commander-in-Chief (Admiral Sir H. L. Pearson), the Admiral Superintendent (Rear-Admiral R. W. Craige), Captain L. Wintz, H.M.S. Pembroke, the Superintending Civil Engineer, and the French Naval Attaché inspected the French Cemetery, visited the Royal Naval Barracks, and approved the present site.

Admiralty Letter D.W. 5095/4296 of 20th April 1904 directed the removal of the remains and the re-erection of the Memorial on the site to the South of the Naval Chapel in the Royal Naval Barracks. The cost was made chargeable to the item Chatham Dockyard Extension under head (b) of the Naval Works Act, 1903.

The remains were exhumed and placed in deal varnished boxes 6ft x 24 x 2ft, and as the Admiralty had directed that every care was to be taken that the work should be carried out decorously and without publicity the Dockyard workmen employed worked in the evening after normal working hours. The transfer began on the evening of 25th August 1904 and on 10th September it was reported that 521 skulls and remains had been re-buried in 29 boxes in the Royal Naval Barracks Site.

The re-erection of the Memorial then began and under date 7th December 1904 the Commander-in-Chief reported to the Admiralty that the work was completed. The total cost of the transfer was £645. Under date 24th January 1905 Their Lordships wrote in reply "It is considered best not to have a public ceremony for the unveiling of the monument."

In addition to the French Prisoners of War it is possible that some Dutch prisoners taken at the Battle of Camperdown on 11th October, 1797, may have died and been buried on the Medway Banks, but no records in confirmation can be found. It is improbable that there are any prisoners remaining dating from the three Dutch wars in 1652-5, 1664-67 and 1672-74.