

2017

# Dockyard, Naval Base and Town: The social and political dynamics of plymouth 1800-1950

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/10135>

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# *Dockyard, Naval Base and Town: The Social and Political Dynamics of Plymouth 1800 to 1950*

## Introduction

The influence of the military on human geography is a long established factor in the development of towns and cities. As B.K. Prasad has identified 'the first cities were, in effect, war machines built within walls for defense and organised for battle and conquest'.<sup>1</sup> In the British context Roman Army fortresses provided a focus for the development of the earliest towns in England such as Colchester, Exeter, York and Chester. There has, though, been very little academic work on the role of the Royal Navy in shaping some of the port cities of the United Kingdom. This constitutes a gap in both British urban history and our understandings of the Royal Navy within the national and local contexts. Lawton and Lee's 2002 study *Population and Society in Western European Port Cities c.1650-1939* has at least established some important lines of inquiry using a series of case studies including Portsmouth. Their focus was, however, primarily on demographic change and we await extensive academic studies of the role of the military in the development of the naval base port cities of the United Kingdom. The four most significant base cities in a twentieth century British context are Portsmouth, Plymouth, Chatham and Rosyth. This chapter examines the development of Plymouth in the period 1800 to 1950, and its relationship with the Devonport dockyard, in the light of some of the emerging scholarship on the growth of port cities, the history of the Royal Navy and older scholarship on urban development around Plymouth Sound.

From seventeenth century origins, Her Majesty's Naval Base Devonport grew by the twentieth century to cover an area of 940 acres, making it the largest naval base in western Europe. It was also home to a naval barracks (HMS *Drake* – formerly HMS *Vivid*) which served as one of the principal manning depots for the Royal Navy. In 2015, with its 25 tidal berths and five basins, incorporating 44 alongside berths, the dockyard is capable of docking frigates, destroyers, submarines, amphibious warfare vessels and visiting naval vessels from other countries. With its 14 dry docks of varying sizes, and extensive ship repair facilities, Devonport in 2015 can easily support the maintenance and refit requirements of a Royal Navy that has contracted to a fraction of the size that it once was. Devonport is the designated facility for the repair and refuelling of the nuclear vessels of the Royal Navy. With easy access to the English Channel and the Atlantic for sea training purposes, under Flag Officer Sea Training, HMNB Devonport is the premier naval base for sea training in the United Kingdom, and an important base for visiting NATO naval units.<sup>2</sup> The naval base remains one of the principal employers for the City of Plymouth (covering thirty square miles and home to 256,400 people) with the Devonport area as one of its principal districts.<sup>3</sup> The naval base has dominated the history and development of Plymouth and the surrounding area.

Inevitably, and as mirrored by the development of Kiel, Brest, Norfolk, and other naval base cities, the relationships between dockyard, naval service and civilian populace and government have been less than easy in some respects. In

the twenty-first century the city seems to embrace the influence of a maritime past. It promotes itself as Britain's 'Ocean City', and its connections to the Elizabethan exploits of Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Francis Drake, the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, and the sailing of the Mayflower in 1620, are promoted as landmarks in the tourist version of the history of the city.<sup>4</sup> However, in this narrative the dockyard has a very small place and is secondary to more populist and iconic elements, despite Devonport's centrality to the social and economic development of the city.<sup>5</sup> Dockyards are perhaps duller and harder to sell to tourists than merchant adventurers mapping the new world, or Puritan zealots seeking to build a fundamentalist community on the other side of the Atlantic. The decline of the workforce in the dockyard and its existence as a walled-off and secure enclave within the city (heightened by the presence of nuclear materials), and guarded by armed Ministry of Defence Police, keep dockyard and city very much separate. Maritime movements in and around Plymouth remain closely controlled by the military and by the Queen's Harbour Master under the 'Dockyard Port of Plymouth Order, 1999'.<sup>6</sup>

This increasing separation of military and civilian spheres in the twentieth century has diminished the identification, understanding and involvement of the civilian populace with the dockyard, its processes, development and history. This problem manifests itself in twenty-first century attitudes towards the presence of the Royal Navy in the city, public understandings about Plymouth's history and in historical writings about the city. There is no comprehensive history of the Devonport Naval Base, and little academic study of the history of the city. Instead, published works are by popular historians and journalists.<sup>7</sup> The best modern study is by the journalist Crispin Gill, who worked for *The Western Morning News* and *Plymouth Evening Herald* after being brought up in the city.<sup>8</sup> At school he was taught by Charlie Bracken who wrote one of the first histories of the city in 1931.<sup>9</sup> Prolific local author Chris Robinson also worked for the *Plymouth Evening Herald* before concentrating on publishing works on local history.<sup>10</sup>

This chapter shows that the history of city and dockyard is more fractured and problematic than most observers have noted, and that this was responsible for significant issues that became manifest from 1850 to 1950. Secondly it shows that the division between dockyard and city cast a long shadow over developments in Plymouth in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. During this period decline and adaptation are the principal characteristics of the life of the dockyard. Even at the height of Britain's naval power, Devonport dockyard had already entered gentle decline, causing problems for the city of Plymouth. Finally, the chapter suggests that these continue today.

## Plymouth Dock

The maritime history of Plymouth was shaped by its position as a natural anchorage in the form of Plymouth Sound at the western end of the English Channel. With the Rivers Plym, Lynher and Tamar emptying into Plymouth Sound, the area was a natural point for the development of trade, fishing and transport. However, the port of Plymouth remained small until the 1500s when trade increased and Tudor

England's disputes with Catholic continental powers led to the steady development of fortifications to protect the anchorage. The defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, in which some of Plymouth's sea captain traders/explorers and slavers played a notable role, demonstrated that in the age of sail and with prevailing westerly winds, Plymouth was ideally placed to play a vital role in national defence. Control of the English Channel was central to England's, and then Britain's, national security, making Plymouth's anchorage a prime strategic location. Plymouth also benefitted from the colonisation of the new world after 1492, but it was other ports in the West (Bristol and Liverpool) which grew rich through the Trans-Atlantic trade in slaves and colonial commodities. While Bristol and Liverpool grew as commercial ports, Plymouth's history was closely tied to national defence and the story of the Royal Navy.

Despite Plymouth's part in the defeat of the Armada, the erection of Tudor fortifications, and an important role in the English civil war of the seventeenth century, by the late 1600s, as the Crown began to investigate a site for a Royal dockyard, Plymouth was still a small town. In 1690 the Admiralty commissioned Robert Waters of Portsmouth to construct a stone dock, not at Plymouth, but on the nearby East bank of the Hamoaze, where the Tamar and Lynher rivers meet. The site would be known as Plymouth Dock, and around it a small settlement developed to house the construction workers.<sup>11</sup> The working dockyard was separated from the developing town by Dockwall Street and a twelve foot high stone wall.<sup>12</sup> Investment in Plymouth Dock as a centre for the Royal Navy was supported by the erection of a lighthouse on the Eddystone Reef which lay on the route into Plymouth Sound. The first lighthouse was built in 1698 and swept away by the sea in 1703, but it was succeeded by other structures which would make the Eddystone Reef much safer for shipping approaching Plymouth Sound.<sup>13</sup>

As early as 1725 the military and naval commands of the city had been moved from the Tudor Citadel in Plymouth to the Plymouth Dock base area.<sup>14</sup> The settlement of Plymouth Dock developed rapidly, so that by 1733 the population had grown to around 3,000.<sup>15</sup> By the turn of the nineteenth century Plymouth Dock (population now 23,747)<sup>16</sup> was larger and more populous than the old town of Plymouth (16,378) and the town of Stonehouse (3,807) which lay between the two.<sup>17</sup> Population growth in the towns around Plymouth Sound appears to mirror the experience of other port cities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including Portsmouth with its (approximately) 32,000 population in 1801 (including Portsea). Since Lawton and Lee suggest that the growth of population in European naval towns was not as rapid as in the commercial port cities, this may suggest that in Portsmouth and Plymouth something unusual was happening in terms of their growth rate – a phenomenon that requires further investigation.<sup>18</sup> There was a chicken-and-egg pattern of improvement, growth and improvement: for example, the increased number of naval vessels entering Plymouth Sound, and its vulnerability to storms from the south west, led to the erection of a breakwater across Plymouth Sound after 1812 (completed in 1840) which further increased its value as an anchorage.<sup>19</sup> With improvements continuing to make the dock busier year on year, by 1811 the population of Plymouth Dock had grown to more than 30,000.

Population growth presented new challenges. By the early nineteenth century, the town was struggling to cope with the presence of so many sailors, marines and soldiers.<sup>20</sup> Dockyard work for civilian employees was also dangerous, leading to accidental deaths, injuries and disablement, and an epidemic of a new type of fever, 'Plymouth Dockyard Disease', broke out in the 1820s.<sup>21</sup> The town had more than its fair share of vice and violence but there was also a degree of civic amenity: the developing infrastructure made it a more pleasant place to live than Plymouth (particularly Plymouth's cramped Elizabethan heart around the Barbican) and local guide books extolled the virtues of the developing town.<sup>22</sup> The middle classes of Plymouth Dock, and the Commissioner of the Dockyard, did what they could to elevate the intellectual and moral horizons of the town by building churches and providing public facilities.<sup>23</sup>

By the early nineteenth century, because of the town's role in national defence, there was a powerful sense of both national and civic pride developing amongst the people of Plymouth Dock and its nearby towns. When in 1815 HMS *Bellerophon* called into Plymouth Sound with Napoleon on board, *en route* to exile in St Helena, hundreds of the local inhabitants took boats out to see him. Yet the ending of the French wars resulted in a severe downturn of the local economy as the flow of government contracts dried up. As R.N. Worth noted:

Gloomy indeed did the prospects appear when Napoleon was finally subjugated. With the war ended the traffic which had sprung out of it; and the pursuits of peace, so long neglected, required time for development. All classes suffered. Men of capital, from the closing of the channels through which it had flowed. Proprietors of houses, who had made exorbitant rents, single rooms sometimes letting for £10 a year, from the sudden decreases of population caused by the restriction of operations at the public establishments. The working classes from want of employment, which caused the workhouses to overflow with tenants.<sup>24</sup>

The slump which followed the French Wars was a powerful demonstration of the fact that the economies of Devonport, Plymouth and Stonehouse were intimately integrated with defence spending and the security needs of the nation.

## Devonport

Burgeoning civic pride associated with the presence of the Royal Navy in Plymouth Dock and Plymouth Sound and the vital work of the dockyard expressed themselves in a number of ways. This was part of the growth of national pride in the Royal Navy from the late eighteenth century, and especially in the aftermath of British victory in the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. In this context, the dockyard and naval presence in Plymouth was sometimes referenced in culture at the national level. J.M.W. Turner's *Hulks on the Tamar*, exhibited in 1812, and prefiguring his far more famous painting *The Fighting Temeraire tugged to her Last Berth to be Broken Up, 1838*, captured the afterlife - as hulks - of some of the Royal Navy's warships.<sup>25</sup>

Locally, the role of Royal Navy and dockyard was celebrated by an emerging and cultured middle class (most of whose members had close connections to the naval service). For example, Ann Thomas, a naval widow living on the Cornish side of the River Tamar opposite the dockyard, wrote poems in praise of the Royal Navy that were published in 1784 with the help of over 650 subscribers. Most of them had Royal Navy connections or lived in Plymouth Dock, Plymouth or Stonehouse.<sup>26</sup> Some of these men and women came together to form the Plymouth Institution (later Plymouth Athenaeum) in 1812 as a society to promote learning in the arts and sciences. One of its members was Nicholas Toms Carrington, former dockyard clerk and seaman, who ran a private academy at Plymouth Dock. In 1826 he wrote *The Banks of the Tamar* which contained the kind of references to dockyard and Royal Navy typical in patriotic poetry of the period:

But or in Peace or War there is no pause  
To the huge labours of that Arsenal  
Whose foot the TAMAR laves. There Science lays  
The solid keel, and on it rears a frame  
Enduring, beautiful, magnificent. The woods  
Of Europe, Asia, Africa devote  
Their mightiest foliage to form the vast -  
The thunder-bearing structure, 'till at last,  
By thousand hands prepar'd, the Finish'd Ship  
Is ready for the impressive LAUNCH.<sup>27</sup>

Against a background of such expressions of a proud and distinctive identity, in 1823 the residents of Plymouth Dock petitioned the King for a more fitting name for the still-growing town. As working class housing developments sprung up beyond the dockyard wall, the notion that the settlement was merely a 'dock' seemed reductive.<sup>28</sup> The residents suggested a new name, Devonport, and this was accepted. As part of the campaign to redesignate Dock, a town hall, funded by public subscription and designed by John Foulston in classical style, was constructed between 1821 and 1822.<sup>29</sup> A public library and news room was opened in 1823. The following year work began on a 37 meter high classical column, also designed by Foulston, and set alongside Devonport Town Hall in triumphal recognition of the renaming. In 1825 a Mechanics' Institute was established for the education and moral improvement of dockyard employees and the other working men of Devonport.<sup>30</sup> A Post Office followed in 1849. Such landmarks testified to town pride but also a growing rivalry between Devonport and "old" Plymouth. Devonport now asserted itself as Devon's key port, eclipsing its smaller neighbour Plymouth, whose harbour was shallower, limited in its scope for development by surrounding Tudor buildings and comparatively archaic.

In truth, the scale of the impact of Royal Navy and dockyard on the development of the area around Plymouth cannot be understated. In 150 years Devonport had risen from nothing to be the most populous town in South West Britain, one of the focal points for national pride in the Royal Navy, an embodiment and expression of nineteenth century British confidence in science, engineering and maritime culture. There was the very closest connection between the naval presence

and almost every aspect of life, in the economy and urban geography in the towns around Plymouth Sound and the network of rivers which flowed into it. When plans were laid to build a railway bridge over the River Tamar in the 1850s, linking the neighbouring county of Cornwall to the national rail network and to Devonport and Plymouth, the engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel was forced to incorporate a clearance to the river below of 30 meters at the insistence of the Admiralty.<sup>31</sup> Their Lordships wanted no impediment to their ships' movements, now or in response to future development. The Royal Albert Bridge was completed in 1859 integrating South East Cornwall more firmly into the economy of the greater Plymouth area, and making easier the task of defending the dockyard and coastline in time of war. Yet despite such considerations of national and local defence, Devonport, Stonehouse and Plymouth remained separate entities, even as the spread of each (thanks to rising populations) threatened to join them together physically.

Those separate identities were further reinforced in 1837 when Devonport, along with Plymouth, became municipal boroughs under the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act. The Act also required Devonport and Plymouth to set up a Watch Committee, to oversee good order and public morals, and appoint constables to keep the peace.<sup>32</sup> Stonehouse, still the smallest of the three towns, became an urban district with its own council and police constables who were part of the Devon County force. Such separate identities ran counter to military efficiency, effective control and management. Interestingly, the emergence of three separate police forces in the three towns had been preceded by a proposed Parliamentary Bill in 1808 establishing a Plymouth Dock police force with authority over the three towns and the settlements on the Cornish side of the River Tamar. That this never happened indicates the strength of local independence in each town.

Reinforcement of the separate identities of the three towns also ran counter to the more integrated naval and military development of the whole area around Plymouth Sound which proceeded throughout 1750-1840. Plymouth had a naval presence in the form of the Victualling Office and stores, whilst Stonehouse by 1850 had effectively been colonised by the Royal Navy. The impetus for this came from wars from the 1750s onwards (the American War of Independence and the Peninsular War) which placed growing demands on the dockyard itself and on Plymouth Sound as an anchorage. The building of a Royal Naval Hospital at Stonehouse, between 1758 and 1765, which was capable of housing 1,200 patients in ten (60-bed) wards, was a useful adjunct facility to Devonport Barracks, and to the separate Royal Marine barracks which had been erected at Stonehouse in 1781.<sup>33</sup> Parties of Royal Marines would be rowed out from Stonehouse to ships coming down the Hamoaze from the dockyard and into Plymouth Sound. In addition to being an embarkation point, Stonehouse became the through route for loading some provisions (including live and slaughtered animals) onto ships at the revealingly-named Mutton Cove, thus supporting distant land campaigns. This vital role during the Peninsular War, and the inability of the old Plymouth Victualling Office to easily supply all the Navy's needs, was recognised by the decision in the 1820s to build a state of the art victualling facility at Stonehouse. Built between 1826 and 1835 over a 16 acre site, the Royal William Victualling Yard incorporated warehouses, a bakery and brewery, and dedicated facilities for the transhipment of live animals onto ships.

Given the vital role of the dockyard in supporting Britain's ability to wage trans-oceanic warfare around the globe, and the massive state investment into facilities, it was inevitable that the government would enhance the defences of Plymouth Sound and the surrounding towns to protect it in time of war.<sup>34</sup> The building of a network of land and sea forts in the 1840s, extending into South East Cornwall in response to fears about a revival of French military power, was a massive and costly undertaking.<sup>35</sup> For example, developing the fortifications of Drake's Island in Plymouth Sound cost £4,000.<sup>36</sup> Such investment only served to increase the role of the state in the economy and infrastructure of the area.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, in some ways, the dominance of the state helped to suppress the development of a local entrepreneurial culture that was otherwise typical of nineteenth century Britain. The Navy dominated the three towns. For example, between 1891 and 1911 around half the male population of Devonport was involved in the defence sector, mostly ratings and officers in shore establishments, and this did not even include the civilian dockyard employees.<sup>38</sup> Employing some 10,000 people just before the First World War, the dockyard was the largest employer in the area. The next largest employer, the Co-Operative Society, had only around 1,000 employees.<sup>39</sup>

## Private Enterprise, Public Spaces, Mindset and the Military

With the state, and its guaranteed payments, as the biggest purchaser of goods and services in the area of Plymouth Sound there was little reason to find new opportunities for business. Indeed, with every aspect of culture of the three towns being shaped by the naval presence - from the names of public houses, through to the kind of acts appearing in local theatres - the mindset in the three towns was constantly channelled towards the public rather than the private sector. That mindset, and crossovers from the military to the civilian elite (with for example, retired sailors taking up positions in civil government, including the police forces) limited the amount of friction between the civilian and military sectors in the three towns, but it had a deleterious effect on economic developments within the region. The military presence helped to limit the growth of entrepreneurship and private enterprise across the area, impacting on the growth of the commercial port and the marine industries. The development of the private sector in Plymouth thus conforms to Lawton and Lee's 2002 model of private enterprise being restricted by the naval presence in dockyard cities. Drawing particularly on French examples they argued:

the naval authorities were often anxious to restrain competition from commercial enterprises and land-based employment was often dependent to a high degree on opportunities provided by the provisioning and servicing of the fleet. The merchants of Toulon, for example, were encouraged to concentrate on provisioning the local military establishment and, apart from extensive property investments, showed little inclination to diversify their commercial interests.<sup>40</sup>



Stapleton's study of Portsmouth does suggest, however, that in comparison the naval authorities in Plymouth were more accommodating to the ambitions of private sector entrepreneurs.<sup>41</sup> In 1812, for example, local merchants came together to form the Sutton Pool Company to improve quayside facilities for commercial shipping in Plymouth. Docking facilities at Millbay followed in 1844 (under the Great Western Docks Act, 1840) and at Cattedown in 1888. Millbay Docks were connected to the Great Western Railway and taken over by them in 1875, and allowed passengers and mail to leave - by tender - ships that had crossed the Atlantic and to continue their journeys via rail.<sup>42</sup> By 1890 R.N. Worth stated that: 'As a general commercial port Plymouth may be ranked about seventh in importance in England and Wales'.<sup>43</sup> It also became the chief depot for emigrants to the colonies.<sup>44</sup> But without fail, the development of commercial facilities around Plymouth Sound was scrutinised by the Admiralty, to ensure that they would not impact on dockyard and naval efficiency.<sup>45</sup> During the late Victorian and Edwardian period the naval authorities - after a series of naval scares - blocked a number of proposals. For example, plans were made in 1897 to develop the Cattewater to give it deep-water quays capable of accommodating the large liners which Millbay could not handle. But they were halted by objections that an increase in commercial traffic would not be in the interests of the Royal Navy.<sup>46</sup> In 1903 the Admiralty purchased Turnchapel Wharf from commercial interests, and orders were issued preventing the fishing fleet from using parts of Plymouth Sound for the purposes of anchoring.<sup>47</sup>

This pro-active – even aggressive – attitude towards private enterprise to prevent any threat to military efficiency reached new heights with the Contagious Diseases Act of 1864 (and successor Acts).<sup>48</sup> The Act gave the local authorities in port cities the power to suppress immoral drinking dens and brothels. It also gave them the power to detain prostitutes and to treat them for venereal disease in so-called "Lock Wards". In Devonport this was in the Royal Albert Hospital, opened in 1863 with a £3,500 grant from central government.<sup>49</sup> Later the provisions of the Act were extended to cities without a substantial military or naval presence. It is true that the scale of the prostitution problem in Victorian Britain was considerable: the census of 1871 reveals 77 women in the Lock Ward of the Royal Albert Hospital.<sup>50</sup> But figures were bandied about in debate in a way that portrayed Devonport as embodying a national shame. For example, uproar was caused in 1871 when the Home Secretary himself claimed that in Devonport 2-3,000 prostitutes were at work - meaning, as one opponent of the Acts pointed out, that 'every third woman' in Devonport was assumed to be a prostitute, and also 'every third child' between the ages of thirteen and fifteen.<sup>51</sup> Another concerned M.P. stated in 1873 that at least 300 child prostitutes aged between 12 and 15 were on the streets of the three towns on any given night.<sup>52</sup> These figures were contested. But what is really striking about the Contagious Diseases Act as applied in places like Devonport and Plymouth is that it was military and naval imperatives to efficiency, rather than straightforward concerns about welfare, which provided a focus, and ultimately the legal mechanism, to deal with the wider social problems associated with prostitution in Victorian Britain.

In Devonport the authorities were very vigorous in using the provisions of the Acts to effect significant change.<sup>53</sup> Inspector Silas Annis, of the Metropolitan Police, headed the special police in Devonport, consisting of nine constables and a sergeant,

charged with enforcing the Acts and he was both enthusiastic and self-publicising about the impact he had on the moral climate. This was much to the ire of the Borough Council, who contested both his estimate of the scale of the problem and his results.<sup>54</sup> Yet Annis was not the first to claim a transformation of Devonport by decisive action against prostitutes. One Parliamentary estimate in 1868 suggested a decline in reported cases of venereal disease from 360 per thousand military personnel in 1865 to 110 in 1868.<sup>55</sup> The authorities in Devonport appear to have been particularly and repeatedly pro-active, as the figures for Portsmouth suggested a much smaller fall from 329 per thousand personnel in 1865 to 260 in 1868 (Chatham 292 to 230 and Aldershot 302 to 207).<sup>56</sup> Despite the operation of the Contagious Diseases Act (and there is some evidence that it was less than rigorously enforced from the late 1860s onwards) the problem of venereal disease in the three towns remained a significant issue. For example, in a ten week period ending on 20 July 1883 out of 2,859 soldiers in Plymouth 183 required hospitalization in the military hospitals at Stoke and Stonehouse for venereal disease.<sup>57</sup> Levels of venereal disease in the three towns relating strictly to the naval presence are rather harder to calculate for any given period as ships arrived and departed, but on 21 July 1883 it was estimated that there were 121 hospital cases relating to venereal disease out of a total naval establishment of 7,309.<sup>58</sup> Hugely controversial, because of the harsh measures taken against prostitutes, the Contagious Diseases Acts were partially suspended in 1883.

This represented a significant success for some elements within the society of the three towns. Within non-conformist congregations in Plymouth, Devonport and Stonehouse there was a well-organised and vocal opposition to the Acts and (in effect) to the military and social imperatives which lay behind them. Richard Bishop, a draper, and William Littleton, tailor to naval officers in Devonport, were prominent in the campaign, and Felicity Goodall suggests that Littleton lost trade as a result.<sup>59</sup> The campaign also received support from some parts of the establishment. For example, the Vicar of St Mary's in Devonport in 1884 gave evidence to the Home Secretary in support of the Acts' repeal.<sup>60</sup> They were eventually repealed in 1886, although up until 1914 Plymouth Watch Committee continued to receive suggestions to reintroduce some parts of the Acts, with the Plymouth and Stonehouse branch of the National Vigilance Association voicing its concerns.<sup>61</sup> Prostitution, stoked by the ongoing presence of soldiers and sailors, was not eradicated despite the best efforts of the naval or civilian authorities.

Likewise, the issue of heavy drinking persisted. Drinking establishments, particularly catering for the military and Navy, were one of the features of the service sector of the economy of the three towns from the eighteenth century onwards. The impact of drinking culture on naval efficiency and the public in Devonport, Plymouth and Stonehouse can be imagined from a poem (author and date unknown) that once hung on the wall of the Boot Inn in Devonport. It recalls the practice of naval ratings touring the pubs along the wall which separated the dockyard from the civilian streets of Devonport:

But up the hill we sail me lads, and down to Albert Gate,  
For Plymouth Ales, the "Prince of Wales", by now we're feeling great.

Heigh ho! The good old "keppels", a certain port 'o call,  
To feast and dine on apple wine, outside the Dockyard Wall.

Now tread your measures softly lads, and shed a beery tear,  
as you guide your feet through Williams Street, for the pubs of yesteryear.  
"Spare Boiler", "Standard", "Morice Town Vaults", and those beyond recall  
They stood the test in line abreast, beside the Dockyard Wall.

Across the Ferry Road, me boys, to Devonport Park we steam,  
Where tall and straight, the Gunwharf Gate, is on our starboard beam,  
A noggin in the "Marlborough", and as we onward crawl,  
We spy once more the "Fleet Club" door, beside the Dockyard Wall.<sup>62</sup>

As can be seen in the preceding sections of this chapter, the military and naval presence on the streets of the three towns was thus considerable and civilian life in the area was shaped by military regulations and procedure. Naval policy impacted on the fortunes of the dockyard, harbours and shipping more generally, and the presence of sailors and soldiers brought some legislation to the forefront of three towns life. Even small changes in naval procedure and practice could have subtle effects on the service sector economy. As late as the 1950s Jim Luckie, one of the publicans on Union Street connecting Devonport to Plymouth, observed:

[Sailors] used to get paid once a fortnight – cash. The first week all the pubs would be busy ... the second week it was the cider pubs that were busiest. At tuppence... a pint, cider was the cheapest way to get drunk. Then when sailors started getting money paid into their bank account, the pattern changed – they had to go into town to get their money and of course coming back the Prince Regent was the first pub in the street they came to.<sup>63</sup>

The military's imprint on civilian life within the three towns also extended to the use of public spaces. In the 1850s, with a rising population in Devonport, the War Office wrote to the local corporation to express its concerns that citizens were trespassing into some of the green spaces formed by the town's fortifications. These had been laid out in 1756 and then expanded in 1783 and 1810. The corporation responded that access to such green spaces was necessary for the citizenry and proposed leasing part of the fortifications. The War Office agreed, allowing the lease of lands to form what became known as Devonport Park. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Devonport Park became home for a number of naval memorials, including a fountain (1863) erected in memory of Admiral Sir Charles Napier and paid for by donations from sailors and marines in gratitude.<sup>64</sup> Later, following the South African War of 1899-1902, the crew of HMS *Doris* paid for a machine gun captured from the Boers to form the centrepiece of a new memorial to their fallen shipmates.<sup>65</sup>

Even more significant developments, in terms of naval memorialisation, took place from the 1870s to the 1890s on Plymouth Hoe – the clifftop open space beside the old Citadel - which was developed for recreational purposes. There was a clutch of new memorials erected for the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the defeat of the Spanish

Armada in 1888.<sup>66</sup> These memorials emphasised British naval genius, while the passing citizenry could gaze from the Hoe at the new generation of Royal Navy ships coming and going from Plymouth Sound. The naval memorials thus colonised the new public space, reinforcing a message about the service's centrality to the history of all three towns. Similarly, in the Edwardian period when the Army closed Millbay Barracks and handed the land over to Plymouth Borough Council for a recreation ground, a plaque on the entrance to the space reminded the public that by entering it they were still 'Subject to Military Regulations'.<sup>67</sup> Even beyond the First World War the practice of the military releasing land to the civilian sector, but retaining a controlling interest in the land, has marked developments in the locality. For example, the 1924 memorial and park to the Devonport naval officer and polar explorer Robert Falcon Scott, who died in Antarctica in 1912, was erected on land given to the local authority on the basis of a 999 year lease. Such memorials provided powerful semiotic reminders that Devonport, Plymouth and Stonehouse were naval towns.

As such they had national importance. The Royal Navy's centrality to British national life during the late nineteenth century meant that events at the naval base and shipping movements in Plymouth Sound were reported on at the national level. Under headings such as 'Naval Intelligence' major British newspapers would report on such things as naval appointments, the visits of important dignitaries and court martial proceedings held at Devonport.<sup>68</sup> Royal visits were given special prominence in reporting on Devonport at the national level.<sup>69</sup> Given the increasingly close association between the Royal Family and the Royal Navy, such visits to the dockyard were commonplace, further increasing civic pride in Devonport and the rivalry between the civic authorities in Devonport and Plymouth.

## Civil Government 1850 to 1950

By the late nineteenth century, with the three towns growing together and the naval presence increasingly dominating life, there was an inevitable logic pushing towards a centralisation of power in the city. Only by such means could the authorities hope to resolve some of the problems of two hundred years of haphazard development. Chief amongst these was the issue of civil administration. As a naval entity Plymouth Sound, its rivers and facilities and network of land and sea defences made sense, but as an increasingly urbanised area Devonport, Stonehouse and Plymouth, under different local authorities and police forces, did not. Rivalry between the three towns was not conducive to efficient administration, and differing local government spheres had a direct impact on the operations of the Royal Navy. Unified military command could potentially be undercut in time of war by splits in civilian control. Even in time of peace, having separate police forces between Plymouth, Stonehouse and Devonport did not promote security or naval discipline, as sailors and marines frequented all three towns. The presence of a substantial numbers of soldiers in the form of garrison troops for the fortifications designed to defend the naval base added to the combustible mix in the city. An atmosphere of violence, with drunken scuffles and the occasional murder, was seen to be a blight

on life in the three towns and an affront to civic dignity.<sup>70</sup> To offset this disorderly image, Devonport police officers - renowned for their impressive statures - were known for their ability to deal with drunken sailors and soldiers in a way which the other local constabularies were not. The Devonport constabulary had an excellent working relationship with the naval authorities. But the overall picture was one of concern about the management of public order.

As so often in the history of the area, military imperatives – this time in the shape of the First World War - forced change. In 1914 hearings were held at Plymouth Guildhall to investigate the possibility of uniting the three towns under one authority. By this stage, as Best Harris has pointed out, the three towns 'had become physically interwoven. The stranger would never know where each began and ended'.<sup>71</sup> At the hearings the military authorities, in the form of Major General A.P. Penton (Commander-in-Chief South Western Coast Defences), were particularly supportive of the merger of the three towns into one entity. Penton argued that the job of the military authorities in event of a need to mobilise the civilian population would be significantly easier if they had to work with one civilian administration rather than three.<sup>72</sup> The outcome was approval of the proposal and on the outbreak of the First World War the Borough of Plymouth was created, with Devonport and Stonehouse as two of its principal districts. Plymouth was granted city status in 1928. Suspicions linger to this day that Devonport was the victim of the merger, with resources channelled towards the old Plymouth districts of the city and away from the district that had rejected Plymouth's control and influence in the nineteenth century. In addition, if the primary goal of forming the city of Plymouth was to make the potential task of the military authorities easier, then the alignment of civilian government and the operating area of the naval base could have gone further. Plymouth sits on the border between the counties of Devon and Cornwall, and key sections of Plymouth Sound, the network of rivers, and the defended approaches to city, anchorage and base lie on the Cornish side of the River Tamar. Resolving this potential set of administrative complications would remain untackled after the passage of a bill through a House of Commons select committee on 15 July 1914 recognising Plymouth's status as a single borough.

## **Impact of Changing Military Technologies 1850 to 1950**

If the problem of civil government was largely resolved by Plymouth becoming a single borough in 1914 then there was another problem which cast a long shadow over the dockyard and naval presence in the city from the 1850s onwards. Arguably it is still possible to discern this shadow over the city. In the hundred and fifty years from 1700 to 1850 the Royal Dockyards like Plymouth became very good at turning out the wooden warships on which Britain's control of the seas depended. Devonport with its industrial processes and productivity seemed an embodiment of the spirit of the British industrial and scientific revolutions - so much so that from mid-century up until 1914 public tours could be taken of the dockyard to wonder at its sites and processes. As one observer noted: 'Persons are permitted to view this establishment three times during each day (Sundays

excepted)... A policeman accompanies each party, and is usually an intelligent officer, who points out to visitors the objects most deserving notice'.<sup>73</sup> The dockyard was a wonder of its age.

During the Crimean War the dockyard worked 'at full pitch building and repairing ships' and in the decades that followed rapid technological change meant plenty of work.<sup>74</sup> In 1859, the French launched the *Gloire* - a revolutionary vessel incorporating the lessons of the Crimean War. She was a steam-driven battleship, with an iron-clad hull, carrying rifled guns. Her armour had been designed to thwart direct fire from even the heaviest British naval guns. At a stroke she rendered every other naval vessel obsolete, ending Britain's naval supremacy and bringing to a close the era of wooden walls. Fortunately the Royal Navy had begun to respond before the *Gloire* was launched, and in 1860 HMS *Warrior* (steam-driven, iron-clad hull, carrying rifled guns) was completed. With the completion of HMS *Black Prince* in 1861 Royal Navy supremacy was restored. Britain had the largest fleet and the most technically advanced ships in the world. However, the *Gloire-Warrior* episode was instructive and it would bring in an age of rapid advances in naval technology in which the Royal Dockyards would struggle to compete. By the late 1800s dockyards built to furnish navies of wood, rope and canvas were having to adapt roperies and sail lofts to the needs of fleets of steel and steam. Rapid advances in technology also favoured the private rather than public sector, and by the late nineteenth century the place of the Royal Dockyards in building ships for the Royal Navy was increasingly being taken by private shipbuilders such as Armstrong, Cammell Laird and John Brown.

At least in Plymouth investment was forthcoming to build fresh facilities for constructing complex warships of the largest size. Rising international tensions in the late nineteenth century forced the Admiralty and Royal Navy to think carefully about the infrastructure supporting fleet operations. Plymouth was directly affected by the naval scares of the 1890s which set Britain on the path to a naval building race with Germany. For example, in May 1899 the Admiralty instructed the dockyard authorities to prohibit the employment of non-British nationals.<sup>75</sup> More significantly, in 1895 the Admiralty agreed to an extension of the dockyard at Keyham. The new Steam Yard scheme involved a considerable expansion (112 acres) and the building of a new tidal and a new closed basin together with three graving docks capable of holding ships of 660 to 750 feet in length. The purpose of the scheme was to ensure that Devonport could hold even the largest future ships, since in anticipation of war the dimensions of modern ships were increasing dramatically in tonnage, length and calibre of weapons. Devonport would struggle to adapt to this technological race without continual investment. Counterproductively, the government, alarmed by the growth of naval spending, instituted a programme of dockyard economies in 1904-1906 with work being contracted out to save money. This programme resulted in some 8,000 job losses between Plymouth and Portsmouth in the lead-up to the outbreak of war in 1914. But even without the need for economies and contracting out, by 1914 it was becoming increasingly problematic for the Devonport Naval Base, with a restricted river frontage, to contemplate building the designs of the future which were projected to reach over 50,000 tons in weight.

## First World War and Its Aftermath

The heyday of warship building came to an end in Plymouth with the outbreak of the First World War. But during that conflict and the one that followed it Plymouth retained a vital role in fleet support, maintenance and refit work. These were key roles in two world wars and in the periods of peace which followed them. The wars marked a period of intense work in the dockyard and its urgency in 1914-18 meant that civilian dockyard employees sailed on board some ships leaving Devonport in order to carry on working on them. With the peace Plymouth became home to a new Naval Memorial to the fallen of the First World War. During the inter-war period, with naval building initially restricted by international treaty and the need for post-war economy, work in the dockyard concentrated on refit and modernization programmes for the Royal Navy's ageing fleet. New ships were rare: until the launch of the cruiser HMS *Exeter* in late 1929, only six ships were built and launched from the slipways of the dockyard. After 1929, even with the impact of the great depression, work in the yard picked up as the Royal Navy replaced units at the end of their useful lives. Twenty four vessels were built and launched from the dockyard up until the end of 1938.<sup>76</sup> The dockyard remained the driving force behind the city's economy with 15,000 men being employed there in 1935.<sup>77</sup>

Culturally, the close relationship between Royal Navy and city (and other naval port cities in the United Kingdom) was maintained by annual "Navy weeks" during which time the dockyard would be opened to the public and ships would be available for visit.<sup>78</sup> Navy weeks were opportunities for the expression of local and national pride, an opportunity for taxpayers to see what their taxes were being spent on, and a powerful recruiting event for the Royal Navy within the local maritime community. The occasional ship launches during the inter-war period provided further occasions for expressions of pride in the Royal Navy and in Devonport Dockyard. For example, the cruiser HMS *Exeter* was launched on 18 July 1929 by the wife of Sir Charles Madden, the First Sea Lord. Newsreel organisations such as Pathé News sent their cameras to record these events for local and national consumption.<sup>79</sup> The recordings had a wider significance in that by distribution throughout a far-flung Empire they could emphasise the political message from London that Britain had the resources to meet any threat to imperial security.

## Second World War

The pattern of work established during the First World War continued during the Second World War. Winston Churchill, as First Lord of the Admiralty, was on hand to welcome back a badly damaged HMS *Exeter* to Devonport for refit following the destruction of the *Graf Spee* in December 1939.<sup>80</sup> In some respects, however, by the Second World War Plymouth was struggling to meet the demands of the naval service. With spare land in the city in increasingly short supply, on 9 January 1940 HMS *Raleigh* opened in Torpoint, opposite Plymouth on the banks of the River Tamar, to meet the need for training more seamen established by the Military

Training Act of 1938.<sup>81</sup> The changing nature of warfare saw some important changes too. The fall of France and the need to alter convoy routing patterns away from the South Western approaches led to the transfer of Western Approaches command from Plymouth to Liverpool in February 1941. In March and April 1941 the city of Plymouth was badly bombed by the Luftwaffe and much of its old Elizabethan and commercial heart destroyed. Plymouth was subjected to further air raids during the war but never on the same scale. During the war 1174 people were killed as a result of air attacks with a further 1092 people requiring hospitalisation as a result of injuries.<sup>82</sup> The dockyard meanwhile escaped relatively lightly. Its function was not seriously impaired.

From 1943 onwards, in addition to providing fleet support, maintenance and refit, the dockyard also supported the American build up in the South West in preparation for the Allied landings on the coast of France on 6 June 1944. These roles were handled quietly and efficiently, and the wartime expansion of the work of the dockyard owed much to a docile and supportive workforce. In the immediate post-war period, as an extension to the Naval Memorial to carry the names of the Second World War dead was added on the Hoe, and as the city began to rebuild, there were calls to extend the dockyard to utilise some of the spaces opened up by the destruction of civilian housing in Devonport. There was also some consideration given to the idea that the dockyard defences against air attack might be enhanced by the kind of concrete domes and pens which had become a feature of German naval ports during the war. This came to nothing, and there was an inevitable peacetime contraction in numbers employed at the Dockyard which again drew attention to the cooperative nature of management-workforce relations there.

## Union and Political Issues

Although the two world wars saw profound social and political transformations in Plymouth, the labour movement as a whole remained remarkably unproblematic for the authorities. Prior to the First World War, as Mary Hilson has revealed, the labour movement in Plymouth was weak.<sup>83</sup> A workforce who saw their labours in patriotic terms, within a highly stratified and status conscious organisation, and a traditionalist political climate in the South West of England limited the growth of the labour movement in Plymouth. Deference and trust marked industrial relations in the dockyard at the same time as the language of class struggle was becoming more prevalent in Northern cities. Only rarely did the realities of harsh lives, poverty and exploitation find expression on the political level. For example, in 1897 during a debate on the Naval Estimates Edward Morton, the Liberal Member of Parliament for Devonport, called attention to poverty and poor living conditions in the terraced streets housing the families of dockyard labourers:

Rents in Devonport were for all practical purposes economically fixed... He was sure that if he could take the right hon. Gentleman into some of the streets of Devonport and show him the scenes he had witnessed—whole



families, in some cases three generations, living in a single room—it would soften even the proverbially hard hearts of the Government officials and lead them to consider this matter in a different light.<sup>84</sup>

Such conditions created a close-knit community. Devonport conforms to the pattern suggested by Lawton and Lee in which 'adverse social conditions' maintain the value of 'family and kinship' networks especially when 'reinforced by the urban work patterns of port-cities'.<sup>85</sup> That in turn impacted on local politics.

The strength of the Liberal Party in the South West meant that there was no real political challenge from the Labour Party until the end of the First World War. In the early nineteenth century the growth of Devonport had made an unanswerable case for it to be included in the list of new Parliamentary seats under the Great Reform Act of 1832.<sup>86</sup> Up until 1918 Devonport elected two (usually Liberal) members of Parliament. Conservatives did not tend to fare well in the town. Plymouth, which similarly elected two Members of Parliament after 1832, showed rather more of a balance between the forces of Conservatism and Liberalism but even here changes in naval policy could make themselves felt in local politics. For example, in the 1906 general election, with the area experiencing high unemployment as a result of the Conservative government's dockyard economies of 1904-06, the Liberal Party won all four of the Devonport and Plymouth Parliamentary seats. The general elections of 1910, marked by Anglo-German naval antagonism, saw all four seats fall to the Conservatives amidst allegations that the Liberals did not have a sufficiently robust naval policy.

Such were the transformations in the city of Plymouth wrought by the First World War that following it the Labour Party emerged as the principal rival force to the Conservative Party. Yet at the heart of the transformation was not a growth of labour militancy in the dockyard but the politicisation of the local Co-operative movement. Struggling to preserve members' interests in the face of wartime regulations, shortages and high prices, the Co-operative movement was politicised to the point where in 1918 it supported two labour movement candidates in the three re-organised Plymouth constituencies of Drake, Sutton and Devonport.<sup>87</sup> Although neither won, the development of the Labour presence in the city was in stark contrast to the overall passivity of the dockyard labour force during the war, and it was a pointer to a long term electoral shift in the city. In the period up to the Second World War Conservative candidates such as Nancy Astor and Clement Kinloch-Cooke won support from an electorate keenly interested in naval policy, but the Labour Party's sympathy for declining staple industries such as iron, coal, steel and shipbuilding ensured that it was also seen as very much aware of the importance of naval policy. In 1929 the Drake constituency was captured by a Labour candidate and in 1945 all three of the city's constituencies fell to Labour.

## Conclusion

More than most naval base cities, Plymouth's identity - from its landscape to its electoral politics - has been shaped by the presence of the Royal Navy. The role of the military in shaping the urban environment of some of our major towns and cities has received insufficient recognition from historians and geographers. Through the impact of that prevailing influence on the growth of the three towns that came together to form Plymouth, and the struggle of a civilian populace to come to terms with the military presence, we can learn much about the growth of settlements in Britain during the Industrial revolution, and the role of the Royal Navy in the lives of civilians in Britain at the height of Britain's naval dominance. Such study can tell us much about the shaping and expression of public concerns and governmental responses during the Victorian and Edwardian eras. The period 1850 to 1950 saw three towns turn into one city, and a dockyard and base begin to come to terms with long standing issues of development. Undoubtedly Plymouth has much in common with other non-British naval base cities, but it differs from most of them in that by the mid-nineteenth century the base and dockyard were entering a long period of decline. Even so the Royal Navy presence continued to make itself felt on almost every aspect of life in the city. The cultural effects were and are particularly striking and this factor has been neglected by geographers interested in the growth of naval port towns. Some of the effects were very obvious, such as the number of local people employed in the dockyard, but many were much more subtle, some stemming from the mindset of the people, others from small but significant economic shifts, such as the influence of naval pay policy on patterns of trade in the service sector of the local economy. Making sense of a local economy, culture and urban geography shaped by the naval presence dominated the affairs of the city until long after the end of the Second World War. As the Royal Navy continues to contract, the city continues to struggle with its naval past and the possibilities of life as an "Ocean City".

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<sup>1</sup> Prasad, Urban Development,p.55.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/our-organisation/where-we-are/naval-base/devonport> accessed 9 November 2015.

<sup>3</sup> 'Plymouth's Population Fails to Grow as Quickly as Predicted, Census Shows', <http://www.plymouthherald.co.uk/Plymouth-s-population-fails-grow-quickly/story-16547340-detail/story.html> accessed 9 November 2015.

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<sup>12</sup> White, *History*, p.644.

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<sup>21</sup> See for example, Butter, *Remarks*.

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<sup>28</sup> Gill, *Plymouth*, p.144.

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- <sup>55</sup> Figures contained in a speech by Viscount Lifford, 15 May 1868, House of Lords Debates, vol.192, col.324.
- <sup>56</sup> See also Motion for Repeal.
- <sup>57</sup> Figures contained in a speech by Marquess of Hartington, 3 August 1883, House of Commons Debates, vol.282, col.1474.
- <sup>58</sup> Figures contained in a speech by Marquess of Hartington, 3 August 1883, House of Commons Debates, vol.282, col.1474.
- <sup>59</sup> Goodall, Lost Plymouth, p.163.
- <sup>60</sup> On the Moral Condition.
- <sup>61</sup> Mayhall, The Militant Suffrage Movement, p.186ff. See also minutes of the Plymouth and Stonehouse chapter of the National Vigilance Association, 1904-1919, PWDRO94/BoxQ
- <sup>62</sup> Author and date unknown,  
[http://www.devonportonline.co.uk/historic\\_devonport/articles/devonport-poem.aspx](http://www.devonportonline.co.uk/historic_devonport/articles/devonport-poem.aspx)  
[accessed 25 November 2015].
- <sup>63</sup> Robinson, Union Street, p.52.
- <sup>64</sup> Tait, Devonport, p.78.
- <sup>65</sup> Tait, Devonport, p.81.
- <sup>66</sup> Beckford, The Story of Plymouth Hoe.
- <sup>67</sup> Plaque on the entrance to Millbay Recreational Grounds.
- <sup>68</sup> See for example, 'Naval Intelligence', Morning Post, 27 March 1851. p.5; 'Naval Manoeuvres', Morning Post, 28 July 1896. p.5; 'Naval Court Martial Devonport',

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Morning Post, 30 August 1883. p.6; 'The Lords of the Admiralty at Devonport', Morning Post, 4 October 1876, p.2.

<sup>69</sup> 'The Prince of Wales at Devonport', Morning Post, 5 November 1887. p.5.

<sup>70</sup> See for example, 'The Military Murder at Devonport', The Morning Post, 30 December 1865, p.2.

<sup>71</sup> Best-Harris, Stories, p.75.

<sup>72</sup> van der Kiste, Plymouth, p.12.

<sup>73</sup> Wood's Handbook to Plymouth, p.102. A Pictorial and Descriptive Guide to Plymouth.

<sup>74</sup> Trewin, Portrait of Plymouth, p.94.

<sup>75</sup> 'Naval Intelligence', The Morning Post, 30 May 1899, p.7.

<sup>76</sup> Robinson, A History of Devonport, p.187.

<sup>77</sup> Wasley, Devon in the 1930s, p.74.

<sup>78</sup> See for example, Plymouth Navy Week 1929; Plymouth Navy Week 1931; Plymouth Navy Week 1935.

<sup>79</sup> 'Navy's Newest Cruiser', Pathé News, 22 July 1929, Film ID 796.13, <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/navys-newest-cruiser/query/navy+plymouth> accessed 7 November 2015.

<sup>80</sup> 'HMS Exeter Home', Pathé News, 19 February 1940, Film ID 1035.39, <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/hms-exeter-home> accessed 7 November 2015

<sup>81</sup> David, An Invitation, p.286.

<sup>82</sup> Wasley, Blitz, p.203.

<sup>83</sup> Hilson, Political, p.85.

<sup>84</sup> Speech by Mr Morton, House of Commons Debates, 27 July 1897, vol.51. col.1301.

<sup>85</sup> Lawton and Lee, Population and Society, p.22.

<sup>86</sup> See for example, House of Commons Debates, 3 August 1831, vol.5, col.720ff.

<sup>87</sup> Gill, Plymouth, p.181.