

CHEPSTOW IN THE GREAT WAR 1914-1918

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



clamation, Mr. Silley briefly replied.

KILLED IN ACTION.

**PRIVATE
 JACK HOLLINS,
 R.A.M.C.,
 Son of Mr. & Mrs.
 John Hollins,
 Wye Stores,
 Chepstow.
 Three other sons
 are serving at
 the front.**





**This is a draft of an intended
Chepstow Society publication.**

**Any comments and corrections
should be sent to Guy Hamilton.**

**ghmyrtle@gmail.com
tel. 01291 628779**

November 2014

CHEPSTOW IN 1914



STIGI BEAUFORT SQUARE, CHEPSTOW

In 1914 Chepstow was a small market town of some 3,000 people, with a distinguished history. It had been an important port, especially in the Napoleonic Wars in the early 19th century. But, by the time of the First World War a century later, those days had passed. The town had fallen into a gradual slow decline. 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 "Tubular Bridge" taking the railway across the Wye. After Finch's death, the works continued making dock gates, masts, bridges, piers and other structures, as well as small tugs and barges. In 1911, Tom Valentine Ellis (1854-1926) – the son of one of the founding staff of the yard – became its managing director.

William Royse Lysaght (1859-1945), owner of the huge Orb iron works in Newport, lived at Castleford, across the river from the castle, which he had bought in 1913 from the Duke of Beaufort.

Chepstow also had its slums, with hundreds of people crammed into insanitary and overcrowded housing courts, particularly in the Thomas Street and Nelson Street areas.

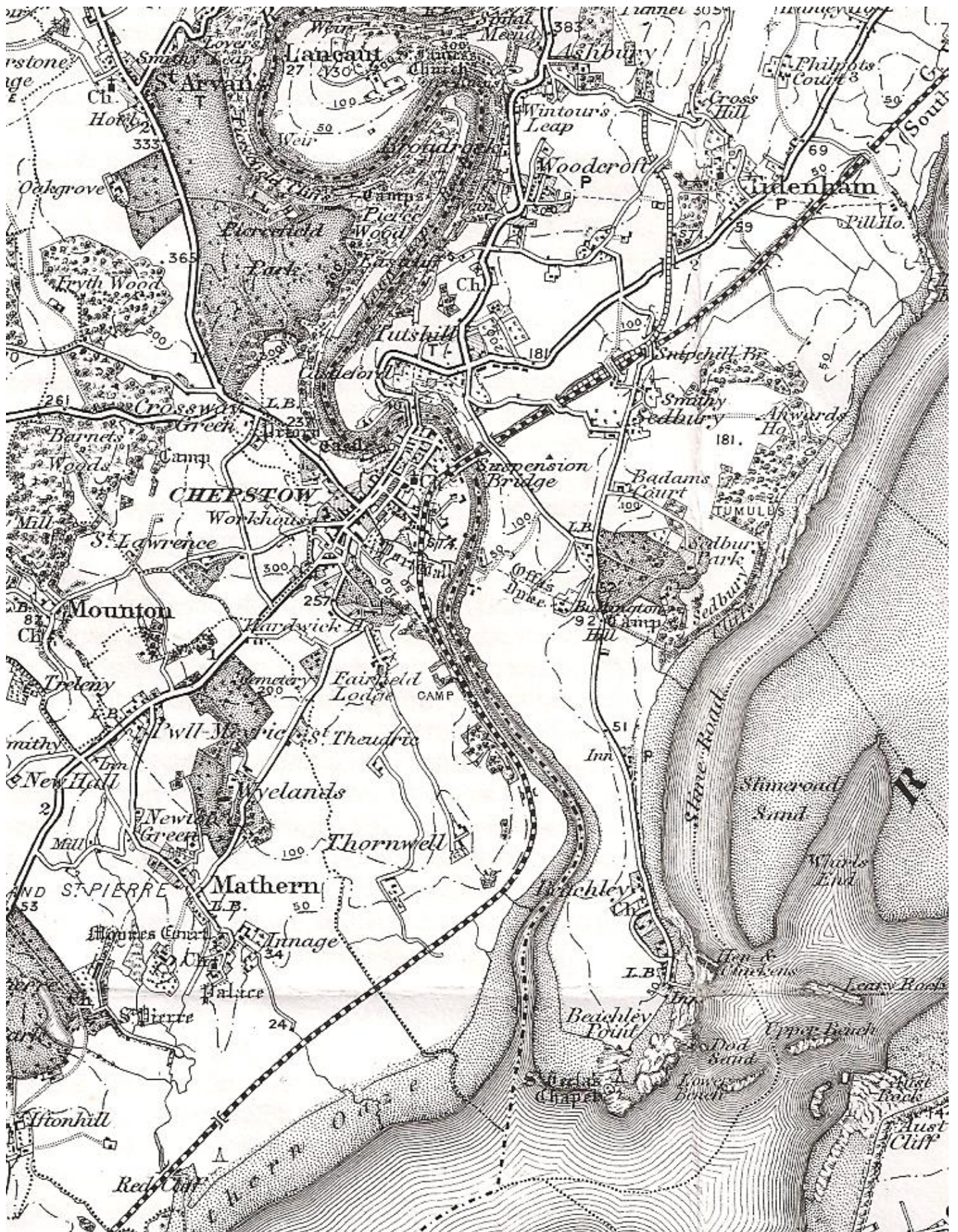
Life went on.....

However much one might deplore the desecration of the Sabbath day by the large number of Char-a-bancs which bring visitors to our town on Sundays, yet, as the Clerk to the Urban Council remarked, it was a thing that had come to stay. So far we believe the visitors have been quite orderly, should they become otherwise they may safely be left to our efficient Police force.

Chepstow Weekly Advertiser, 4 July 1914



Sketch by Mercedes Waters

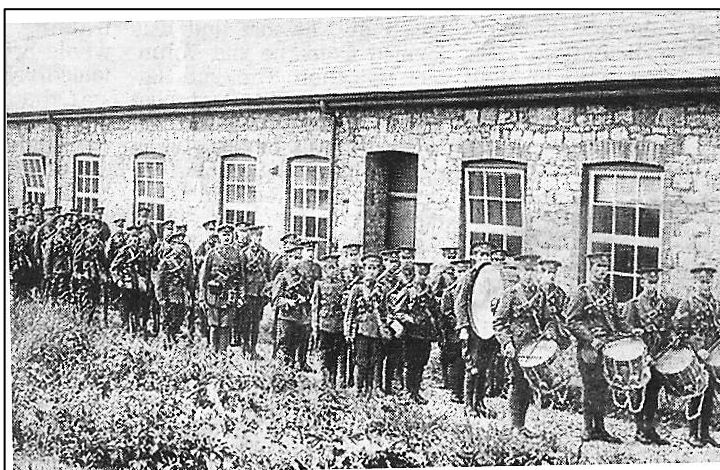


The area in about 1900

WAR IS DECLARED

The declaration of war on Tuesday 4 August 1914, after the German invasion of Belgium, was met with immediate mobilisation.

In Chepstow, the officers and men of "E" Company of the 1st Battalion Monmouthshire Regiment paraded outside the newly-built Drill Hall on Lower Church Street.



Overnight, trains took the volunteers to Newport. Early the next morning, hundreds flocked to the recruiting station in Stow Hill at Newport to sign up for the armed forces, before travelling to Pembroke Dock to start their training programme.

The Chepstow Weekly Advertiser sent out a call for new recruits (*see right*)

Changes to local life soon became evident. Panic buying of essential goods such as bread and flour became a problem, and increasingly the country came to rely on supplies imported from the USA and Canada. A decision was made to close all public houses in Monmouthshire at 9 pm, rather than at 11 pm. Local licensees wrote to the Home Secretary to object, claiming that

" it is manifestly unfair that a small town possessing the irreproachable reputation of Chepstow should be treated in the same manner as the largely populated towns and districts of the county "

South Wales Argus, 1 December 1914

YOUNG MEN OF CHEPSTOW, DO YOUR DUTY!!

We want men, we want them badly, and we want them quickly. We are engaged upon a life and death struggle, and the longer we take to realise that fact the greater the cost in money and lives is going to be...

The response to Lord Kitchener's call for a new army of recruits has been gratifying, but has been no more than could confidently be expected of the manhood of Great Britain... The rush to the recruiting offices has dispelled in a breath the suspicion of laxness or unwillingness to bear arms on the field. It has shown on the contrary that there are thousands upon thousands of the pick of our manhood asking for nothing better than to see active service, to risk life and limb on the field of battle, to dare all for their country.

And if the men have played their part, so too have our women. Not only have they seen their sons, sweethearts, and brothers don the khaki and vanish into the fighting ranks without murmuring, or more than tears shed in secret perhaps; but they have inspired their men-folk to do their duty. They have taken heart of pride in the service of their knights and sent them forth to battle as bravely and nobly as ever 'Fayre ladies' of old pinned their favours on the breasts of their crusaders and sent them out to victory...

Chepstow Weekly Advertiser, 15 August 1914





Although initial expectations had been that the fighting might be over by Christmas, this was not to be.

Things generally promise to be very quiet in Chepstow this winter, what with so many men having joined the Army, the abandonment of the football, and the concert seasons, notably the activities of the Operatic Society...

Weekly Argus, 5 December 1914

Christmastide has come and gone, and never has it passed off so quietly. Men in khaki were to be seen everywhere, and the town presented quite a military aspect. Other soldiers will be coming home on leave in the New Year prior to taking part in stirring events....

Weekly Argus, 2 January 1915

Once it became apparent that the war would not end within a few months, and that thousands of volunteers were being killed on the front lines, recruitment initiatives were stepped up. Conscription was eventually introduced early in 1916.

Are the Men of Chepstow doing their bit?

In Chepstow we have regular soldiers of our Army guarding the railway bridge. These men are required to undertake far more important work in France and elsewhere... It is the duty of the men of Chepstow to undertake this work and to release the trained soldiers...

We are struck by the absence of a large number of able bodied men in Chepstow who ought to be in this squad but who are conspicuous by their absence. On coming away from the drill field we meet with a trio of youths in flannels with their oiled hair parted in the middle, swinging tennis racquets and smoking cigarettes. We wonder why these men have not accepted the pressing call sent to them by Lord Kitchener, why have they not been down to learn their drill preparatory to becoming a conscript soldier.

As we pass further up the Town we are met by the sound of cannons, emanating from the billiard tables of the club. We venture to visit the club and there we are astonished to find a number of excellent candidates for khaki engaged in snooker or watching the game. We wonder why these men have not enlisted or at any rate have not taken advantage of the military training which is open to them at their very door.

As we pass the Town gate we meet some half dozen young men returning home with their golf clubs. We wonder if these men are prepared to assist their gallant captain who is in the trenches, a journey of six hours off.

Cannot any of these men spare two hours a week to learn the national drill. They may be wanted to render some service of home defence but yet they do not trouble to qualify themselves for such a contingency.

Chepstow Weekly Advertiser, 21 August 1915

THE BELGIAN REFUGEES

One of the first effects of the war on the area was the influx of refugees from Belgium, who began to be displaced as soon as the German troops invaded their country.

Almost a quarter of a million Belgians fled to Britain - the largest contingent of refugees ever to come to the country. By October 1914, around 2500 Belgian refugee committees were set up nationally. Hundreds of charity initiatives were organised, and many men joined up to help liberate "plucky Belgium" from its occupiers.

The first boatloads of refugees arrived at Newport within the first week of the war. By February 1915, 550 had arrived through Newport, and by the end of the year the numbers had risen to almost 800. They came from all levels of society – among them farmworkers, shopkeepers, and workers in the diamond industry.

The Belgian Refugee Committee in Chepstow, chaired initially by Mrs Edith Stacey of St Pierre, 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.

Mathern Palace, owned by H. Avray Tipping, became the temporary home of many refugees, before they were found homes elsewhere in the county

This ancient building has been made a depot for the South Western District, and here large numbers of the destitute Belgians have been sent, from whence they are drafted out to suitable homes wherever they can be obtained for them. So large has been the number received that oftimes the accommodation at the Palace – commodious building though it is – has been taxed to its utmost.

*Chepstow Weekly Advertiser,
24 October 1914*



Henry Avray Tipping (1855 - 1933) was the son of a wealthy Quaker businessman and MP. Born in France, he grew up in Kent before studying at Oxford. After working on the Dictionary of National Biography, he began writing articles on garden design and on country homes, and eventually 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, and redesigned its gardens. After her death he commissioned a new home for himself, Mounton House, designed by Francis' architect son, Eric. Tipping and Francis also collaborated in designing a later home, High Glanau, near Trellech.

As a designer, Tipping was partly responsible for the gardens at the Prime Minister's home, Chequers, as well as countless articles and books on country houses and architecture.

During the war, he was involved in discussions with the Admiralty over the layout and design of the "garden city" estates built at Chepstow for the shipyard workers (see page 26). He criticised the town council for its failure to prepare an overall town planning scheme when the scale of the shipyard proposals was becoming apparent.

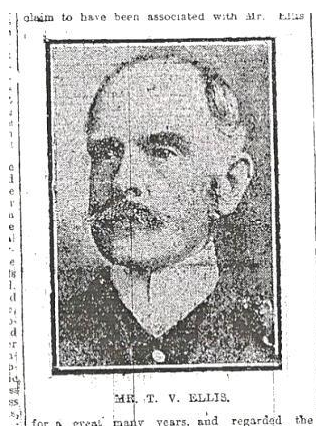
GWY HOUSE - RED CROSS HOSPITAL

In the first days of the War, hospitals were set up around the country, where less seriously injured combatants could return to convalesce.

Responsibility fell, mostly, to the Red Cross. Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) were set up, of local people trained by the Red Cross and St John's Ambulance. In Monmouthshire, eleven VAD hospitals were set up in the county.

Soldiers wounded in action were treated first on the battlefield, and then moved away before being sent to the Red Cross hospitals. A range of injuries were treated this way, including gunshot and shrapnel wounds, gangrene from the waterlogged trenches, concussion, and – later in the war - the effects of poison gas.

Within a week of war being declared, a local meeting agreed to set up a convalescent hospital in Chepstow. At first, it was hoped that the Church Boys' House - a large galvanised iron building behind St Mary's Church - could be converted, but it was soon shown to be unsuitable. It later became the Standard Institute, the social club for workers at the shipyard.



In November 1914, Tom Valentine Ellis, the managing director of Finch's shipyard, stepped in and offered Gwy House, on Bridge Street, for use as a hospital. The building – now the Chepstow Museum – had been built in 1796 as a merchant's

home, and in the years before Ellis bought it in 1913 had been a girls' school, run by the three De Bochet sisters.



Mr. Ellis's offer was gratefully accepted.

It is probable that no house in the town could have been obtained which would lend itself so admirably to the object to which it is now to be put than Gwy House; the rooms are spacious, and well ventilated, with plenty of light. The house is pleasantly situated overlooking the River Wye, commanding extensive views of the beautiful Piercefield woods; at the rear of the house are extensive grounds where the invalids may pass many pleasant hours while being nursed back to health and strength. No praise would be too great to bestow upon Mr Ellis for his patriotic action in placing such a desirable building at the disposal of the promoters free of cost.

*Chepstow Weekly Advertiser,
21 November 1914*

Mrs Stacey, the wife of Major Cyril Stacey of St Pierre, was appointed as Commandant. She held the post until 1916 when she left to be replaced by Miss Corben, and later Mrs Francis, who had been the hospital secretary. Nurse Emma Gold was the Nursing Sister throughout the war. The Medical Officer was a local doctor, Dr William A. Shoolbred.

All the VAD nursing staff were unpaid local volunteers who were given basic training in First Aid, Home Nursing, Hygiene and Cookery. Each was expected to work at the hospital for three months. Volunteers were also responsible for the hospital administration.

After conversion work had taken place, the hospital was opened on 17 March 1915, when the first 18 men arrived after initial treatment at Cardiff Hospital. Nine were suffering from gunshot wounds, and the remainder from frostbite or diseases. More patients arrived in May, bringing the total to 30.

The hospital had a homely atmosphere. The standards of food and amenity were better than some of the soldiers - many from poorer backgrounds - had experienced previously. All the furniture, linen, cooking utensils, and food were donated by local people. Volunteers provided nursing care, companionship, and help with gardening, cooking, providing haircuts and the like. Regular gifts and loans - of food, cigarettes, clothes, and luxuries such as gramophones, records, and a piano - were reported weekly in the local Advertiser. Many fundraising events and flag days were held to raise money.



Entertainments were laid on for the convalescing soldiers. W. R. Lysaght allowed the field below the castle - now the car park - to be used as a recreation ground for the convalescents. There were steam boat rides on the river, and local car owners took the men on drives around the countryside. Trips were arranged to concerts and

sporting events, and Colonel Marling, of Sedbury Park, allowed cricket matches to be played there between the convalescing soldiers at Chepstow and those at Lydney. The men themselves, sometimes joined by their nurses, occasionally put on concerts in the town, to packed houses.

At Christmas 1915, a full dinner was held, for the soldiers and nurses. According to the Red Cross history of the hospital: *"the early bed rule was waived and the soldiers stayed up until 10 pm..... It was inevitable that in this more sociable and personable atmosphere romance would develop between the soldiers and the Red Cross Nurses."*

Within the first eleven months of opening, the hospital had treated 113 soldiers, of whom 100 had been discharged as "fit for light duties" or "for service overseas in three months". By the end of 1916, its capacity had been raised to 35 soldiers. It continued to provide care for wounded soldiers for the duration of the war, remaining entirely on a voluntary basis.

One of the most poignant local stories of the war is that of Trooper Gordon Edwards, of the 12th Australian Light Horse Regiment. He was wounded at Gallipoli in 1915, and, after being treated in Malta and then Cardiff, arrived at Gwy House hospital to convalesce.

While there, he fell in love with one of the nurses, Emily May James. They were married in Chepstow in June 1916, and had a daughter the following year. But, tragically, their intended life together in Australia never came to pass. Gordon returned to action in France, and was then posted to Egypt and Palestine to fight the Turkish forces. Two weeks after the Armistice had been signed, he fell ill and died of pneumonia. He is buried at the military cemetery in Beirut.



THE STANDARD SHIPYARD

By 1915, merchant shipping in the Atlantic, which provided essential fuel and food to the country, was being devastated by German U-boats operating in the waters beyond the Bristol Channel and around Ireland. The submarines were generally undetectable. Radar had not yet 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.

About this time, industry was being revolutionised in the United States by the adoption of the assembly line practices pioneered by Henry Ford. John Henry 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.

In late 1915, a consortium of leading national shipping companies, led by Lord Inchcape of P&O, formed the Standard Shipbuilding Company, to build cargo ships to standard designs. The new company was chaired by James Caird of Turnbull, Martin & Co., with Silley as managing director.

Silley persuaded the consortium to develop a major new shipyard at Chepstow. In 1916, the Standard Shipbuilding Company bought Finch’s yard, at a cost of £300,000. They also purchased 45 acres in the Meads – the open area of low-lying fields lying on the south side of the railway line, towards the river. There, they were to develop a new shipyard for building “standard” ships, of a larger size than could be built at Finch’s yard.

Chepstow had flat land for development, beside deep water, and the railway connected it directly with the iron and steel works at Newport. It was

free of the trade unions in established shipbuilding centres, and was seen as more open to innovation.

Chepstow lacked a sizeable workforce, but the company expected this to be resolved by Government conscription. One report at the time said that “Chepstow will have no rival as a large shipbuilding centre”.



JOHN HENRY SILLEY

John Henry Silley (1872-1941) was born at Tutshill. He worked as an apprentice at Finch’s yard, and completed his training there before joining the Star shipping line in London. He travelled to Australia and New Zealand, where he took out several patents, and in time became chief engineer at the shipping company.

He set up his own successful engineering business in London, before 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.

He persuaded several leading shipowners to invest heavily in setting up the Standard Shipbuilding Company, and in developing the Meads at Chepstow.

He was awarded the O.B.E. in 1917. After the end of the war, he purchased the Gate House and donated it to the town council, as a war memorial. He also worked with Allan Hughes on expanding the shipyard and engineering works at Falmouth in Cornwall.

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.

The Standard Shipbuilding 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 Port Wall was demolished, together with several cottages and the old Mill House.

"...In a little time the old familiar Meads will be no more. Workmen are on the site sinking trial holes, as a preliminary to constructing the shops and slips. Perhaps it is the sense of impending change which of late has led so many people to visit the riverside and to pace the paths so soon to be closed.

"It will be a sacrifice to the people to forego so pleasant a recreation ground, and it is to be hoped that among the provisions for the future will be a scheme to secure for the public – that great population which will follow in the train of

industrial developments – ample recreation grounds.

"Chepstow is about to turn a new page – to begin a new chapter. Where now the grass grows green and the children play, great ships will be built. It is claimed to be an ideal site, and Hardwick Reach, into which the biggest vessels will be launched, is said to be without an equal in the kingdom. It is promised that the best use will be made of the natural facilities. May the new chapter be a record of progress, prosperity, service."

South Wales Weekly Argus, 13 May 1916

The contractors - Topham, Jones and Railton - laid railway tracks into the area, and started work on eight new slipways, where ships of up to 600ft in length, and of up to 3000 tons, would be built. They also started building a small "Garden City", for the workers and their managers, in the steep-sided valley between Rockwood Road and the railway, previously used as allotments and orchards.

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.

But, it soon became apparent that there were difficulties in finding the labour needed to carry out the work.

The Times 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, Finch’s 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...”*.

But, in January 1917, *The Times* reported rather more positively, saying that

“real progress is being made... The company has energetically taken in hand the provision of the most modern machinery and plant, and since the yard was acquired the number of men employed has been more than doubled. A month ago a start was made with female labour, and now about 40 women are employed with satisfactory results. A beginning has also been made with the provision of better housing accommodation.”

The Standard and Finch’s yards were amalgamated as E. Finch & Co. (1916) Ltd., and by March 1917 more than 500 men and women were working there.

The company still had ambitious schemes to transform Chepstow and turn it into one of the major shipbuilding centres, not just of Britain but of the world.

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 malthouse was to be converted into a power station.

“The transformation that has already come over the place is remarkable, and in another six months the changes will be still more wonderful. Other schemes which cannot fail to add magnitude to the enterprise are in contemplation, and it will not be surprising if, by-and-by, Chepstow comes to be known as “the City of Ships”. We are living in deeply-stirring times, and Chepstow is coming to her own – only on a scale more huge, modern, and expansive than in days gone by.”

South Wales Weekly Argus, 28 April 1917

THE TROOPS IN ACTION

THE FIRST MONMOUTHS – 8TH MAY 1915



Major Lyttleton Lawrence.

One of the first Chepstow men to give his life in the war was **Major William Lyttleton Lawrence**, the son of Dr A G Lawrence JP, of the Cedars in Welsh Street, and the brother of solicitor James Lawrence, the chairman of Chepstow Town Council.

Bill Lawrence studied at Eton, before becoming a career soldier in India, South Africa and elsewhere with the 1st South Wales Borderers. Fighting on the front in Belgium, in command of C Company, he was mentioned in despatches and awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) "for gallantry and ability in repelling the enemy" in September 1914. His troops had taken over a position near Gheluvelt, when Bavarian troops broke through and launched an attack on three sides. He was ordered to hold on at all costs, and managed to do so until relief forces arrived.

The next month, aged 41, he was killed in the first battle of Ypres, when his company, entrenched east of Gheluvelt, was almost completely wiped out. He "stuck stoutly to his almost untenable position, setting a magnificent example of steadfast courage... From front, flank and rear the enemy swarmed upon the battered trenches... Major Lawrence went down fighting to the last..."

He has no known grave, and is commemorated on the Menin Gate memorial at Ypres (now known as Ieper) in Belgium. His sword and medals were presented by his family to Chepstow Museum.

Many local men answered the call to fight in the war. The 1st Battalion of the Monmouthshire Regiment drew its recruits from Chepstow, Newport, and southern Monmouthshire. After their initial training, they sailed for France on the *SS Caledonian* in February 1915.

Devastated in the battles around Ypres that spring, many did not return.

Soon after the start of the war, a long battlefront was established in Belgium and France. The Germans tried but failed to push westwards towards the ports on the English Channel; the Allies tried to force them back. A stalemate developed, with both sides digging trenches and fortifying their positions.

The front bulged eastwards around the town of Ypres (Ieper), south of Dunkirk. This was a place of key strategic importance, which the Allies sought to hold at all costs. A major battle was fought there in October and November 1914 - but it was the second battle of Ypres, in the spring of 1915, that was to see the highest death toll of men from Chepstow and other parts of Monmouthshire.

On 22nd April, the German troops began an artillery bombardment of the French troops defending Ypres, followed by the release of chlorine gas - the first time this had been used on the battlefield. Some 6,000 French troops died within minutes, and a wide gap was opened in the Allied line. The Germans continued their attacks, and, by 1st May, British troops were forced to withdraw to new defences closer to the town itself. Part of the line now followed the Frezenburg ridge north of Ypres, defended by the 28th Division, which included the 1st Battalion of the Monmouthshire Regiment.

On 6th May the 1st Monmouths were ordered to move up to the front line. Under continuous artillery bombardment, they began repairing the trenches. The Germans then broke through the

lines to the south, at which point the Monmouths lost touch with their artillery support and their headquarters. With German troops in front of them and to their right, they were heavily outnumbered, and under constant and deadly attack.

Captain Harold Thorne Edwards of the 1st Monmouths was the son of a Newport solicitor, and lived at Tutshill. On 8th May, with attacks on them continuing, he attempted to lead a counter-attack. The attack failed, and Captain Edwards was called upon to surrender. Firing his revolver at the attackers, he shouted "Surrender be damned!" before he was killed. He was 32. The incident is commemorated in a painting by Fred Roe at Newport Civic Centre, and he himself is remembered on the memorials in Tidenham parish.



Eight of the names on the Chepstow war memorial are of men with the 1st Monmouths who died on 8th May 1915 – Rifleman Victor Bailey (aged 26), Rifleman Jack Dade (18), Rifleman David Field (25), Corporal Thomas Griffiths (19), Rifleman Charles Hobbs (18), Rifleman Cyril Priest (19), Captain Charles Stanton (24), and Rifleman Francis Warman (18).

None of those listed have a known grave; they are all commemorated on the Menin Gate. Many more from surrounding nearby towns and villages

were also killed at Ypres, on and around 8th May 1915.

By the end of 1915, Chepstow had lost over 20 of its men on the Western Front, as well as at Gallipoli and elsewhere. They came from all levels of society, and across a range of ages.


The youngest person from Chepstow to be killed in action was **Rifleman Wilfred Jones** of the 1st Monmouths, who lived with his parents in Thomas Street. He was 16 when he died in France in July 1916, and was buried at Le Treport cemetery in France.

The same month saw the death of **Lieutenant-Colonel Humphrey Bircham**, aged 41. He was the son of Edith and Francis Bircham, Inspector of the local Poor Law Union, who lived at The Gwentlands on Bulwark Road.

Humphrey went to Eton, and played cricket for his school and Sandhurst. He joined the Army in 1896, serving with the King's Royal Rifles Corps, and was wounded in the Boer War before marrying Gladys in 1908. After joining the war in France, he was awarded the DSO for "distinguished service in the field" in 1915. He was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel the following year shortly before the Battle of the Somme, where he was severely wounded, dying a few days later. He is buried in Corbie cemetery in France.

Jack Hollins of the Royal Army Medical Corps was the son of shopkeepers in Church Street. He died of his wounds in Belgium in 1917, aged 26, and was buried there, though remembered at the family grave in Chepstow.

clamation, Mr. Silley briefly replied.

<p>KILLED IN ACTION.</p> <p>PRIVATE JACK HOLLINS, R.A.M.C., Son of Mr. & Mrs. John Hollins, Wye Stores, Chepstow. Three other sons are serving at the front.</p>		<p>W — fr C d r s n e u d tl</p>
---	---	---

The War Memorial list includes several pairs, or groups, of brothers.

Jerome, Timothy, and Michael O'Leary, from Albion Square, were all in the 1st Monmouthshire Regiment. Timothy – who had worked at the Bridge Works - and Michael both died in the early part of the war, while Jerome died of illness after returning home.

Brothers **Gethin and Llewellyn Young**, from Bridge Street, both died in action in France in the last few months of the war.

Harry and Wilfred Curtis were the sons of a well-known local family of shoe shop owners, living in Tutshill.

PRISONERS OF WAR

Many Chepstow men survived the war, often in heroic circumstances. Soldiers who were captured in the fighting during the War were held as prisoners of war in German camps.

A committee was set up at the Church Boys House in Chepstow to ensure that they received parcels of food and other essentials. Volunteers packed parcels containing items given by local people, or collected through financial donations; there were frequent fund-raising drives locally.

The parcels contained such items as soup tablets, cakes, butter, sardines, cigarettes, tobacco, pipes, toothbrushes, buttons, soap, corned beef, jam, syrup, marmalade, potted meat, cheese, Oxo cubes, fruit cake, chocolate, concentrated coffee, condensed milk, canned tomatoes and beans – as well as comforts such as hairbrushes, combs, bath towels, woollen sweaters, pencils, boots, bibles, packs of cards, flannel shirts, woollen mufflers, socks, woollen vests, and underwear.

On average only about half the parcels sent ever arrived – many were tampered with en route, and others were delayed for weeks. But, those who received them were forever grateful.

Corporal **Cuthbert Lovell Jolliffe** was born in Chepstow in 1892. He served in the 1st Monmouths at Ypres, and was wounded by shrapnel at Frezenburg Ridge.

Unable to withdraw because of the numbers of dead and wounded men in the trenches, he was captured by German troops and was taken to a prison camp. There, the conditions were poor, but he was able to receive parcels from home.

After being moved between several prison camps, he ended up at Bexten Listrup, near the German-Dutch border, and planned an escape. In October

1916, he and other prisoners were escorted to Salzbergen railway station to collect food parcels. They tricked the guard into going into a hotel to buy cigars, and Jolliffe and the other prisoners managed to run away.

After two days, hiding during the daytime, they managed to cross the border into the neutral Netherlands, and secured a passage back from Rotterdam to England

Jolliffe continued in the Army until 1923 when he resumed his earlier career as an accountant, and died in Chepstow in 1951

THE NAMES ON THE WAR MEMORIAL

Chepstow's War Memorial lists 83 names of those local men who died during the war. Some of those listed did not live in Chepstow, but had family connections in the area. Many more with local connections, including many from surrounding parishes such as Tidenham and Mathern, are not shown there, but are listed on local parish memorials.

		Age at death	Burial site (where known)
Private John Arthur	18 th Welch Regiment	32	
Rifleman Victor S. Bailey	1 st Monmouthshire Regiment	26	Hadra (Egypt)
Lieutenant Henry James Ball	Royal Flying Corps	31	
Private Michael Barry	1 st Welch Regiment		
Rifleman Sydney Bevan	1 st Monmouthshire Regiment		
Lt.-Col. Humphrey Francis William Bircham , DSO	King's Royal Rifle Corps	41	Corbie (France)
Rifleman Harry Carey	1 st Monmouthshire Regiment	19	Noeux-les-Mines (France)
Rifleman Bertie William Collins	1 st Monmouthshire Regiment	18	Cabaret Rouge (France)
Private Walter Gilbert Collins	12 th Gloucestershire Regiment	21	Cerisy-Gailly (France)
Private Francis George Coombe	9 th Cheshire Regiment	34	Trois Arbres (France)
Private Harry Cecil Curtis	Royal Army Medical Corps	21	
Private Wilfred Curtis	Australian Rifles		
Rifleman John Dade	1 st Monmouthshire Regiment	18	
Rifleman Henry John Davies	1 st Monmouthshire Regiment		St Quentin Cabet (Belgium)
Private Samuel James Davies	3 rd King's Shropshire Light Infantry		
Private William Francis Dean	1 st East Yorkshire Regiment		
Private Charles Edward Dibden	1 st /4 th Essex Regiment	37	Gaza (Palestine)
Trooper Gordon James Edwards	12 th Australian Light Infantry	26	Beirut (Lebanon)
Rifleman David Field	1 st Monmouthshire Regiment	25	
Rifleman Alfred James Fisher	1 st Monmouthshire Regiment	24	Chepstow
Private M. Henry Fisher	9 th Welch Regiment	28	Chambrecy (France)
Private William Edwin Fisher	20 th Durham Light Infantry		
Private Frederick Fox	1 st Welch Regiment	22	Boulogne (France)
Corporal Thomas Henry Griffiths	1 st Monmouthshire Regiment		
Rifleman Harrington Eugene Hammonds	1 st Monmouthshire Regiment	17	Cambridge
Private John James Harry	1 st Devonshire Regiment		
Rifleman Charles William Hobbs	1 st Monmouthshire Regiment		
Able Seaman John Henry Hobbs	Royal Naval Division Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve	28	Chepstow
Corporal Arthur Holley	1 st South Wales Borderers		
Private Jack Hollins	Royal Army Medical Corps	24	Westoutre (Belgium)
Sergeant Arthur Howe	2 nd Natal Regiment, South African Infantry	35	
Private William James Howell	6 th South Wales Borderers	36	
Stoker George Hughes	Royal Navy		
Rifleman James Hughes	King's Royal Rifle Corps		
Private Benjamin James	2 nd Royal Welsh Fusiliers	35	
Lance-Corporal Gilbert Llewellyn Jenkins	1 st /6 th Gloucestershire Regiment	20	
Private Oliver Wilfred Jenkins	12 th Gloucestershire Regiment	21	

Private Alfred James Jones	2 nd Monmouthshire Regiment	30	
Lieutenant David Raymond Jones	10 th Army Signal Company, Royal Engineers		Klein-Vierstraat (Belgium)
Rifleman Frank Jones	2 nd Monmouthshire Regiment		
Rifleman John Jones	1 st Monmouthshire Regiment		Chepstow
Rifleman Wilfred Bertram George Jones	1 st Monmouthshire Regiment	16	Le Treport (France)
Sapper William Kelly	Royal Monmouthshire Royal Engineers		
Private Patrick George Kennedy	South Wales Borderers	22	
Sergeant Alfred Ashby Kingsford	8 th Welch Regiment	29	
Major William Lyttleton Lawrence , DSO	1 st South Wales Borderers	41	
Private Alfred Stanley Lewis	12 th Gloucestershire Regiment	25	Cerisy-Gailly (France)
Private Charles Lewis	12 th South Wales Borderers		
Private Francis G Lewis	2 nd South Wales Borderers		
Private George Wilfred Maddox	1 st Canadian Expeditionary Force		
Sergeant Charles Edward John Mansell	2 nd Royal Fusiliers	33	
Lieutenant Walter Martin	Royal Naval Division		
Corporal Alfred Matthews	King's Royal Rifle Corps	24	
Private Ernest Charles Morgan	1 st /5 th Welch Regiment	32	Beersheba (Israel)
Private Stephen Joseph O'Connell	6 th South Wales Borderers	21	Millencourt (France)
Rifleman Jerome O'Leary	1 st Monmouthshire Regiment		
Rifleman Michael William O'Leary	1 st Monmouthshire Regiment		
Rifleman Timothy O'Leary	1 st Monmouthshire Regiment	35	
Driver Charles Oakley	Royal Field Artillery	28	Delville Wood (France)
Rifleman T John Petheram	1 st Monmouthshire Regiment		St Pol (France)
Gunner Mervyn Ivor Powell	Royal Field Artillery	24	
Private Albert George Price	Gloucestershire Regiment		
Lieutenant Gordon Bassett Price	12 th South Wales Borderers		
Sapper William J Price	Inland Water Transport Royal Engineers	36	
Rifleman Cyril Francis Priest	1 st Monmouthshire Regiment	19	
Lieutenant William Harold Proctor	6 th Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment	27	Feuchy Chapel (France)
Private Albert Richards	1 st South Wales Borderers		
Rifleman Peter Richardson	10 th London Regiment	33	Baghdad (Iraq)
Private Charles Rosser	Gloucestershire Regiment		
Private Harry Shurmer	9 th Welch Regiment	37	Oostaverne Wood (Belgium)
Private William H Simmill (or Simnel)	2 nd South Wales Borderers		
Captain Claude Wilfred Stanton	1 st Monmouthshire Regiment	24	
Corporal Charles Henry Stringer	5 th South Wales Borderers	34	Spoilbank (Belgium)
Rifleman Francis George Warman	1 st Monmouthshire Regiment	18	
Rifleman Bert Wellington	King's Royal Rifle Corps		
Private Edwin Benjamin Wilkins	Gloucestershire Regiment	28	
Private Sidney Williams	4 th South Wales Borderers	26	Azmaq (Turkey)
Able Seaman William Charles Williams , VC	Royal Navy	34	
Private William Wootton	1 st /7 th King's Liverpool Regiment	18	
Sapper Alfred Wyatt	Royal Engineers	33	Etaples (France)
Private Victor Albert William Wyatt	Royal Welsh Fusiliers	28	
Rifleman Gethin Young	1 st Monmouthshire Regiment	21	
Private Llewellyn Young , MM	6 th South Wales Borderers	23	Jonchery-sur-Vesle (France)

ABLE SEAMAN WILLIAM WILLIAMS, V. C.



William Charles Williams was born in 1880 in Shropshire, where his father worked as a gardener. As a child, he moved to Chepstow and lived in Thomas Street while his father, also William Williams, worked at Pottinger's nursery in Station Road.

The young William joined the Boys Service in Portsmouth at the age of 15, and was promoted to Seaman in 1898 and Able Seaman in 1901. He joined the Royal Fleet Reserve in 1910, and, after a period working in the iron works at Newport, was recalled in August 1914 to serve in the war. During his career, he served on eighteen different ships, on some more than once.

He died at Sedd el Bahr, Gallipoli, in 1915 as he tried, while under fierce attack of rifle fire from Turkish troops on a nearby hilltop, to keep a hold of the ropes which helped form a bridge between

H.M.S. *River Clyde* and the shore, so allowing the troops to reach land. Williams was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross, the highest award for gallantry.

Captain Edward Unwin was in command of the *Hussar*, and also received the Victoria Cross for his actions at Sedd el Bahr. At the unveiling of the naval gun in 1922, he explained that Williams – who had been a Leading Seaman – insisted on being downgraded to Able Seaman so that he could take part in the action. He told the crowd:

“Williams kept going until the ropes were connected on the beach, and he helped them there with his back to the enemy. Never had I seen such magnificent conduct. Williams remained there all the time until after an hour I said to him ‘What’s up, Williams?’ He replied, ‘A shell has struck me, sir.’ I looked back, and could see how serious it was. Then he fell into my arms and died.”



CHEPSTOW CEMETERY

Only a few First World War combatants – who were wounded in the war, returned home, and died later of their injuries – are buried in Chepstow Cemetery.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission maintains eleven graves at the Cemetery from the First World War – listed below. They are all located in the westernmost part of the older part of the Cemetery, on the north side of Mathern Road. Those marked * are also listed on the War Memorial

Pioneer Herbert Andrew, Royal Engineers

Pioneer Patrick Carr, Royal Engineers

*Private A. J. Fisher, South Wales Borderers

Sapper Henry Grant, Royal Engineers

*Able Seaman John Henry Hobbs, Royal Naval

Division Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve

*Rifleman John Jones, 1st Monmouthshire Regiment

Private E. Lewis, North Somerset Yeomanry

Driver W. J. Lewis, Royal Engineers

Sapper John Brien Merrill, Royal Engineers

Sapper Henry McClean, Royal Engineers

Sapper Francesco Portinari, Royal Engineers



SURRENDERING BEACHLEY

In the three months to June 1917, Britain lost 1.4 million tons of shipping to German attacks. There were few counter-measures to the U-boat threat, and the Government's answer was to try to build more ships, faster, to replace those being lost.

The small village of 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. The letter said that, because of a matter of "urgent national importance", they were required to vacate their land and houses within 11 days.

I have been instructed that it has been found necessary that you should vacate your house by the 14th inst. if you are unable to vacate it before.

As the property has been taken over under the Defence of the Realm Regulations, the compensation payable to you will be limited to the actual monetary loss to which you will be put owing to the Department having to take over the premises.

I shall be glad if you will make your arrangements as soon as possible, as I am instructed that the matter is most urgent. I shall hope to see you on Tuesday next, the 4th inst.

Yours faithfully,

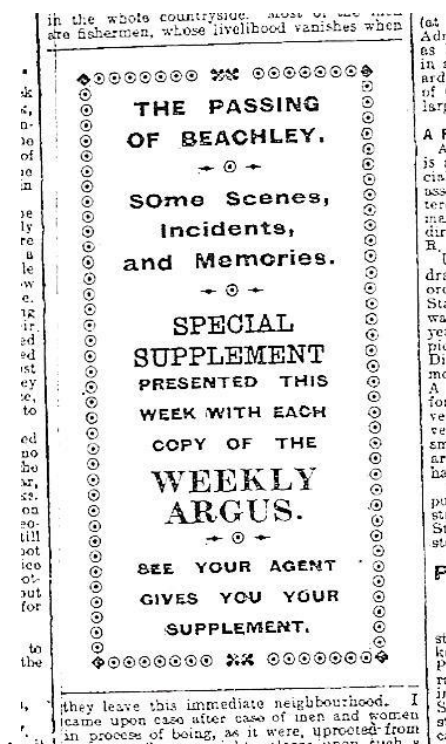
H. Driver Jonas, Major, Deputy Chief Valuer and Compensation Officer

The project was for the Admiralty to develop a new shipyard on the site. There was no alternative. Over 100 people, in 29 houses, were affected.

The *South Wales Argus* reported scenes of "the greatest grief" as the villagers moved. The *Daily Mail's* correspondent reported that many had nowhere to go.

"Chepstow town is already full to overflowing, and there is not a vacant cottage in the whole countryside. Most of the men are fishermen, whose livelihood vanishes when they leave this immediate neighbourhood.... "We know we're at war; we know well enough we've got to suffer; but this way o' making us suffer be bitter hard," said an old lady."

Farms were abandoned. The local school was closed, its pupils transferring to Tutshill. The evicted residents were mostly taken in by local families, and some temporary accommodation was provided by Colonel Marling at Sedbury Park. Compensation for the Beachley villagers was not finalised until almost a year later, in July 1918



SWAMPED BY NATIONAL DEMANDS - PARTING WITH THE DEAR OLD HOMES

The exigencies of the war and the discovery of Beachley as the ideal spot needed for certain important purposes has led to the estate being suddenly acquired. The intimation came as a bombshell to the owner of the greater part of the estate and the other property owners, while it caused the greatest grief to residents of the naturally beautiful village. For a time the news staggered them. Was it really true – Beachley to be given up as quickly as possible? Yes, it was all too true. The die had been cast, and there was no help for it...

Events moved rapidly indeed, and there have been some pathetic and affecting scenes in most of the tiny, old-fashioned, and truly rural cottages nestling peacefully between the two rivers which are to make history, and the utmost sympathy is felt for those old folk for whom the wrench will be sad beyond description, though to others it will mean nothing except a temporary regret.

No one contemplated such a great upheaval. It was not thought that the coming of the Standard Shipyard to Chepstow would swallow up Beachley; but eventualities have to be reckoned with, and the perfect and incomparable position and facilities offered at Beachley for a certain object had only to be seen for the place to be doomed and changed as quickly as possible. ...

There is more than a tinge of regret in Chepstow at the acquisition and partition of Beachley. No more picnics, no more happy reunions on the beaches, no more fun on the Salmons green, and no more regattas. The children have paddled and made sand castles for the last time, and young couples who found delight in strolling to Beachley Point to dream of "joining up" and other married joys will sigh

and have some uncomplimentary things to say about the "discoverer of Beachley".

Even so, the pangs of the loss of dear, happy and fascinating Beachley must soon wear off. Time is a sure healer, and we shall try to think it is all for the best.

South Wales Weekly Argus, 8 September 1917

SURRENDER OF BEACHLEY – AFFECTING SCENES OF FAREWELL – "THE GREAT SACRIFICE"

"Beachley is dead. Long live Beachley". It was surrendered with dignity and grace, and the military have by now taken possession. The evacuation of the village went on steadily, and now it is to be isolated.

Soon, in a few days, shutters will bar the path to high and low except those who can show authority, and when the sale of Beachley Farm is over, Beachley will be closed to the outside world. No layman can foretell what it will look like after the nation has done with it, but possibly a greater Beachley will arise and a portion of it once more be occupied by a civilian population. Its actual fate and future is as obscure as the end of the war, and for the moment and for a year or two to come the precise nature of the form of transformation must remain a mystery, which, when unfolded, is likely to astonish the world.

All we can say with any truth now is that Beachley is dead, involving the snapping of ties, friendships, and associations of many years' standing. Colonel Marling, V.C., has interested himself in the cottage folk, and has been able to provide temporary accommodation for them, and we may make the gratifying announcement that not a single resident was without shelter when the official time limit expired on September 14

South Wales Weekly Argus, 15 September 1917

THE NATIONAL SHIPYARDS

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 Chepstow, 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., Borball, Gray, 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.

Beachley Naval Base.

THE OFFICIAL ANNOUNCEMENT.

The official announcement made by the Press Bureau is as follows:

The Admiralty have decided to construct a naval base at Beachley, where the Wye enters the Severn, and the necessary notices have been served upon owners of property and land to quit as soon as possible.

Naval experts have been prospecting for some time and the decision comes by no means as a surprise.

The dock, upon which several thousand men will be engaged, will be connected by a new line joining the main line below Adenham Station, near Chepstow.

TWO YEARS' CONSTRUCTION WORK.

Several London newspapers are paying great attention to developments, and the special correspondent of the "Daily News" and "Leader" points out that the peninsula of Beachley at the junction of

Lloyd George's War Cabinet took the decision to take over the Chepstow Standard Shipyard as one of three National Shipyards, together with new yards at Beachley and Portbury, on the English bank of the Severn.

The Government planned to build 15 berths at Chepstow - seven at the old Finch's yard and eight at the Meads - as well as the 18 at Beachley. At Finch's, the ships would be built by the old methods, but elsewhere 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 were to be assembled by civilian labour, but the new yards were to be built by Royal Engineers and German prisoners of war.

There was an immediate upsurge in activity in and around the town. The *Argus* reported on 30 September that "...Already we see and hear the march of industrial progress at Chepstow. The old Bridge Yard is possessed by a new spirit, and is invaded by a company of the new industrial army of women workers, who (in overalls blue or brown) go about the grimy labour of a shipyard, helping the men to build new ships and in other ways to fight the submarines...."

The newspaper justified the government takeover:

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. The same remarks apply precisely to Messrs. Topham, Jones and Railton, who were entrusted with the work of making the Standard Yard. They were up against innumerable and constantly recurring difficulties.

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. The old bobbin factory in Lower Church Street was converted into a lodging-house – the Bob Inn – an honest attempt to relieve the difficulty and save the situation, so to speak. But the number dwindled rather than increased until the work slackened down to an extent which opened out no prospect of the eight standard ships being completed for a considerable period, and it was this prospect and outlook which influenced the Government in taking the action it did

South Wales Argus, 13 October 1917

The Government argued that the Standard Shipbuilding Company had been acting too slowly. But the sudden nationalisation of the shipyards caused a storm of protest. The Standard Company objected vigorously to the Government takeover of their yard. In a long letter published in *The Times* in March 1918, 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...

If the seizure of our ideas and our yard had proved of any advantage to the country we should have acquiesced in it without a murmur, but as the country’s interests would have been infinitely better served had we been left alone to carry out or project in our own way, it is only natural that we should feel somewhat sore that the foresight and enterprise which we displayed should have been squandered as it has been, and that our property and perspicuity should have been filched from us without up to this time having been of the slightest use to the nation.”

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, in particular, over the difficulties of securing, and housing, the workforce needed.

THE GARDEN CITIES

The First World War brought to Chepstow perhaps the most radical changes to the town since the castle and priory church were built over 800 years earlier. As well as the shipyards themselves, hundreds of new houses were built for the shipyard workers .

In 1916 the Standard Shipbuilding Company announced its intention to provide a new "Garden City" on 150 acres of land sloping down towards the railway line, below Hardwick House – the area now known locally as Garden City. Until then, the site had been used as allotments and orchards.

The company wanted to provide better conditions for its workers - good quality, comfortable and affordable houses, in a planned landscape with ample open space amid beautiful countryside. , along the lines established by the then-popular Garden City movement which was influencing housing developments in other parts of the country - including Rhiwbina in Cardiff, a scheme on which Avray Tipping had worked. It aimed to provide

The architects were the firm of Dunn, Watson & Curtis Green, a London-based practice. 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 were named after partners in the shipyard – Green, Hughes, and Caird. The estate was directly linked to the shipyard by a passageway under the railway line – later blocked up. 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 themselves 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 Chepstow 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."



THE CHANGING TOWN

The sudden takeover of the Standard yard by the Admiralty in 1917, and the decision to develop a second shipyard at Beachley, led to huge changes in the town, within months.

Some 6,000 Royal Engineers came to the area to develop the shipyard. There were complaints that Chepstow had become a garrison town – but, by February 1918, the *Argus* was able to report that *“Chepstow people are now quite accustomed to see more soldiers than civilians about the town, and it is gratifying to say that the conduct of the men has so far been exemplary. They are proving a credit to themselves and to the Army...”*.

The cattle market – beside the Malthouse just east of the railway line - was commandeered for use as a parade ground. Huts for the soldiers were built at the Bulwark Camp - beside Fairfield Lodge, a house on the site of what had been Claypits Farm, and now the site of Severn Bridge Social Club. 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 pier on the river used for steamboat excursion trips was in the way of the shipyard extension, and was dismantled. Those cottages remaining in the Meads were demolished. Land was levelled, railway sidings laid out, and sheds were erected. A temporary theatre – the Pavilion – was erected on the riverbank to provide entertainment for the workers.

In May 1918, plans were being made to remodel Chepstow’s road system, to take account of:

“the enormous traffic which must follow the establishments on the Wye.... Among the first parts to be dealt with

are the Town gate and the Beaufort Arch, leading to the station. With regard to the former, this historic gateway 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 and longstanding residents, some of whom had been there for fifty years. The building was to be used to house shipyard workers, and was 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.... They did not take at all kindly to the disturbances, and for one and all the transfer and severance was a sad incident.”*

At the same time, the *Argus* reflected on change in Bulwark. *“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 lane is being widened as far as the first turning, and it is pleasing to note that the fine old oak has been spared and left standing as an island...”*

DELAYS IN HOUSE BUILDING

The nationalisation of the shipyard in 1917 caused the house building programme to slow down. While concrete huts and basic cottages were built at Bulwark and Pennsylvania Farm at Sedbury for the incoming soldiers, full-scale housebuilding was neglected for almost a year. It was only resumed when the shipyards became hampered by a lack of skilled workers.

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, Sedbury.

The first houses at Bulwark were completed in September 1918, but 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 soon transpired that they were being built to designs overseen by Avray Tipping, the architectural historian and writer, who had been asked by the Admiralty to advise on their design and layout. Tipping said that, because of shortages of labour and materials, it had been necessary to build the smallest houses at Bulwark first. Concessions were eventually won from the Admiralty, who agreed to alter some of the designs.

King's Fund for disabled sailors and soldiers.

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 General Collard.—The Chairman: But we have no power in the matter. If we decline them they would still go on.—Mr. H. J. Thomas: It would take a bit to convince me about that.—The Clerk said that when the Lydney Rural District Council saw General Collard with [redacted] to the [redacted] houses he met them

THE ADMIRALTY HOSPITAL

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 shipyard workers, on what had been Five Acres field at the junction of Mounton 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 its existence and location were controversial. According to *The Times*, it was regarded as an eyesore, and its distance from the shipyard presented difficulties.

The newspaper 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 VAD hospital were sent for, and placed in beds at the new hospital, so that the VIP visitors would not realise it was lying empty.

TENSION AT THE SHIPYARDS



December 1917 saw the launch of the *Petworth*, at the time the largest ship ever launched at Chepstow. Sections of the first standard ship, the *War Forest*, arrived at Chepstow in April 1918.

But the effect of the Government decision to bring in a new management team was to slow the progress on shipbuilding, and 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 employed at Finch's yard passed a resolution against their yard being taken over by the military.

"That the mass meeting of shipyard workers of Chepstow and district strongly protests against the methods that are being adopted in the working of the National Shipyards at Chepstow, as we consider these methods result in waste of material and labour, and are not conducive to the rapid output of ships. We consider the employment of military labour under military discipline a

breach of faith on the part of the Government, who pledged their word to the trade unions that they would not conscript labour. We, therefore, call upon the Government to carry out its pledges and that men from the Army engaged in shipbuilding and munitions works should be placed upon trade union rates of wages and under trade union conditions. We further call upon the Government to carry out the pledge that it gave the country that no existing shipyard should be taken over by them."

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. They agreed that civilian workers would continue to be used to build ships in the Chepstow and Beachley yards, rather than using military labour and prisoners of war.

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 also said that Chepstow was unsuitable for launching larger ships because of the narrowness of the river.

The Committee said that the initiative had only been taken on the assumption that military labour would be used in the yards.



Deck view of 'N' type ship No. 2 berth, looking forward
(Photo by courtesy of E. J. T. Wiles, Esq.)

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.”

The *Argus* commented that

“The whole thing has been thrown out of gear owing to an inexplicable miscalculation as to the attitude of the trade unions towards a policy of constructing ships by military labour. This scheme came to the ground like a pack of cards, and as the housing schemes were held up it is not possible to accommodate civilians. Immediate steps will now be taken to begin town planning schemes both at Beachley and Chepstow, which ought to have been put in hand last September in preference to the building of a hospital....”

There was open criticism of the National Shipyards initiative in the House of Commons.

The Liberal MP, Sir Hamar Greenwood, described the initiative as a scandal. He went on:

“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. 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 at the yards.

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.



View of Nos. 3, 4, and 5 ships, 'N' type, from the Riverside
(Photo by courtesy of E. J. T. Wiles, Esq.)

The “War Forest”, described as 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 following month, the Chepstow and Beachley yards were still being developed. No prefabricated ships were launched from any of the yards during the war.

The war finished before the shipyard initiative could succeed. 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 those lost on the battlefields, and the lack of resources to build sufficient new houses quickly.

THE BEACHLEY SHIPYARD AND CAMPS

The work to set up the shipyard at Beachley was initially expected to be completed within 18 months.

A camp was built for German prisoners of war, between Tutshill and Beachley, so they could help build the shipyard. In February 1918, the *Argus* reported that there were “nearly 3,000 German prisoners in the concentration camp at Beachley. They are employed in various directions and seem well satisfied with their lot.”

Many of the prisoners made the concrete blocks to build the huts and houses. The few who escaped from the camp were usually recaptured quickly. On one occasion, a German-speaking sapper in the Royal Engineers was court-martialled for helping a prisoner to escape, and was sentenced to ten years penal servitude.

Huts were built at Beachley Point for the soldiers, but these were finished more slowly than the POW camp, leading to criticism that the prisoners were living in better conditions than the soldiers. The cottages at Beachley Green were demolished, and railway tracks were laid to link the site to the main line at Tutshill. The Loop Road was built to provide access to the new sidings. Cottages for the displaced fishermen were built at Buttington and Tutshill. Eventually, houses for the soldiers working on the shipyard began to be built at Pennsylvania Farm.

Four slipways began to be built, with large tower cranes beside them. A power station was built, to generate electricity, with a large cooling reservoir beside it. An assembly hangar 1000 feet long – described at the time as the largest shed in the world – was built at Buttington Farm, and large tower cranes were installed, dominating the skyline.

But, work on building the shipyard was far from complete at the time of the Armistice. Although one ship, the *War Odyssey*, was started, no ships were ever completed at Beachley.

PEACE AT LAST

The Armistice was announced in Chepstow on 11 November 1918.

HOW PEACE CAME – LOCAL REJOICINGS

After waiting throughout Sunday in a state of suspense and expectancy, Chepstow received the glad tidings that peace had come with great joy.

The messages posted in the *Argus* window on Sunday were read with interest by soldiers and civilians alike, and a large number waited in the vicinity in the hope that the news of the acceptance of the terms would come through.

When the message was displayed in the *Argus* window about 10:20 on Monday the greatest excitement prevailed. News spread like wildfire, and soon the town was ablaze with flags and bunting.

Business was entirely suspended for the rest of the day, and the streets were quickly crowded with people, who gave expression to their gratification.

The Parish Church bells were rung at intervals, and the flag over Barclay's Bank was hoisted, and the din of hooters, cannon, and whistles served to increase the excitement.

There was a scene of great animation in the shipyard and among the soldiers in the camps and even the German prisoners at Beachley became infected and demonstrated.

Work in the shipyard ceased for the day, everybody and everything became bedecked with ribbon, and the children, to whom the victorious peace meant more than they are yet able to appreciate, were released from school after singing the National Anthem.

The Doxology and "God Save the King" were sung in Beaufort-square, and cheers given for the boys at the front.

Then rain came to interfere with outside celebrations, but at short notice Mr. Albany Ward's manager placed the Palace Theatre at the disposal of a number of enthusiasts for a concert, a short and enjoyable programme being sustained by Mr. and Mrs. Butt, Miss Irene Cole, Mr. Sutton, Mrs. Pacey, Mr. C.J. Cole, and others. One or two films were shown.

The Royal Engineers employed in the national shipyard marched back to camp in the best of spirits, and en route they sang merrily and cheered with visions of home and liberty in the near future.

At dusk a powerful arc lamp was flashed from the roof of the Palace Theatre, and the places of amusement were crowded.

At the first performance, the orchestra under Mr. Blythe played "Rule, Britannia" and the National Anthem, and Madam Davies gave a beautiful rendering of the "Marseillaise".

Good order prevailed throughout the evening, and the dance at the Standard Institute was well patronised.

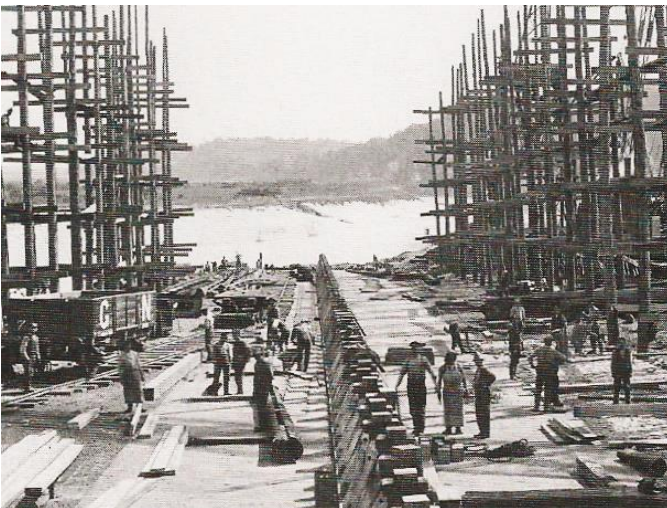
Weekly Argus, 16 November 1918

“THE CHEPSTOW SCANDAL”

After the Armistice, everything possible was done to end further government spending on the shipyards. Responsibility passed to the Shipping Controller, Lord Pirrie.

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:

Demobilisation of the Royal Engineers is proceeding, and a spirit of cheerfulness prevails in the camp with early prospects of home and liberty. Some of the best have already gone. The soldiers are given an opportunity either to remain or return to work in the national shipyards, and many have come to a decision. Civilian labour on a large scale is expected to be available through the Labour exchanges....

To speak plainly the Government are up against a difficult and complex problem created entirely by itself. 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. But once the construction of the yard was taken over, as well as the new site at Beachley, it was up to the Government to justify the step by accelerating the work and getting ships built and launched during the war, as the Standard Company, if encouraged, were prepared to do at their own cost.

But what really happened, if not yet ancient history, was sufficiently unsatisfactory and wasteful to create a feeling of disappointment and disquiet, because what do we find? In the first place 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 unflinching 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*, revealing chaos and mismanagement.

- *“‘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.”*

In a later article, 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.”

A ‘special correspondent’ wrote in *The Times*:

“The National Shipyards at Chepstow and Beachley have so long been the object of derision locally that there is no surprise here that public attention is once more called to what has long been felt to be a crying scandal....

At Chepstow and Beachley today there is little sign of activity of any kind. There are many men still employed there, and gangs of German prisoners, well fed, cheerful, and possessed of plenty of tobacco and cigarettes, are moving about in batches, apparently marking time....

However enthusiastic men may have been – and in the early days men came here full of enthusiasm for what was undoubtedly a great scheme – the work suffered so much from the paralysing influence of constant change of, or absence of, proper plans that a kind of moral blight has settled upon the place.....

With all the resources of the Government behind them, with supplies of labour and material which have been the envy of the private shipbuilder, the situation today is that the

Chepstow and Beachley yards, called upon only to supply fabricated ships, have actually retarded the production of ships.....”

There was criticism of the continued use of German prisoners in building the new houses, as well as in the shipyards. The trade unions objected that the prisoners were doing skilled as well as unskilled work.

In April 1919, it was announced that the prisoners of war would be withdrawn from the work. 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, £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.

The Government began discussions with the unions, with a view to them taking over the yards. But 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.

Though the yard continued to build ships, 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	2012	17 December 1917	“Garlinge”	Torpedoed, 1942
Tutshill	2089	16 March 1918	“Carcavellos”, “Fintra”	Torpedoed, 1943
War Forest	3103	23 September 1918	“Albergallus”, “Grado”	Torpedoed, 1943
War Apple	2492	31 May 1919	“Selenga”	Broken up, 1965
War Trench	3080	11 November 1919	“Mar Caspio”	Wrecked, 1937
War Grape	2572	24 March 1920	“Henri Mori”	Wrecked, 1931
War Glory	6543	21 April 1920	“Monte Pasubio”	Wrecked, 1924
Nash Light	2469	June 1920		Sunk, 1941
War Iliad	6551	July 1920	“Sile”	Scuttled, 1945
War Fig	2568	August 1920		Sunk, 1944
War Odyssey	6500	September 1920	“Monte San Michele”	Lost in storm, 1921
War Genius	6573	October 1920	“Taifun”, “Carl Fritzen”	Scuttled, 1939
War Epic	6543	December 1920	“Adige”, “Monsun”	Wrecked, 1942
War Idyll	6565	August 1921		Scrapped, 1932

THE WAR MEMORIAL

Within a few days of the Armistice, Chepstow Urban Council wrote to the Admiralty to seek permission to erect a captured gun in the town, to commemorate the Victoria Cross won by Able Seaman Williams.

The Admiralty replied that the matter would be considered, but a gun was not available at that time.

The council kept up its request, saying that Chepstow had been “almost unique” in responding to the calls for fighting men. It also looked at other ways of providing a permanent memorial to those who had died, and collections began to be organised to raise funds.

In July 1919, the Gate House – previously the home of the Metropolitan Bank – became available. Its purchase price of £2,500 was donated by J. H. Silley, vice-chairman of the Standard Shipbuilding Company, and the building came into the town council’s ownership.

The idea was for the building to become a “peace memorial”, with inscriptions giving the names of all those who took part in the fighting – including those who had been killed.

A new public hall was built in the grounds of the Gate House, and opened in 1920.

Eventually a field gun was sent to Chepstow and placed in the grounds of the Drill Hall, but – as Williams had been in the Navy – the pressure to provide a naval gun was maintained.

In March 1920, it was announced that a 105mm naval gun would be allotted to Chepstow to commemorate Williams’ bravery. It was said at the time that the gun came from a submarine operating in the Baltic – but this was not the case.

A temporary memorial was set up in Bank Square, and was marched past when Chepstow celebrated the return of local troops in June 1920.

At the same time, discussions continued on the location and design of a permanent memorial to all those who had lost their lives. It was not until December 1920, after the *Argus* published a letter from F. T. Bircham of Gwentlands – whose son Humphrey had been killed in the fighting – that a permanent cenotaph was considered.

Mr Bircham proposed “*that a cross or obelisk, with steps round the base, would be the best type of memorial, and that the proper site would be the centre of Beaufort-square...*”.

The town’s War Memorial Committee considered the proposal, and agreed that a young local architect, Eric Francis, should prepare designs.

In May 1921, the Committee reported, with Francis’ plans. It was decided to proceed, and in July agreement was reached with Barclays Bank on the siting of the naval gun.



On 8 January 1922, both the war memorial and the naval gun were unveiled with great ceremony, before a crowd of several thousand.

The gun was unveiled by Able Seaman Williams’ sister, Mrs Frances Smith, and the cenotaph was

unveiled by Lt-Col. Charles Evill of Mathern, a local solicitor who had been in charge of E Company of the 1st Monmouthshire Regiment. It is described in *The Buildings of Wales* as being “in an eighteenth century idiom, of two tall stages contrasting in design, and crowned by a gadrooned urn”.



Strikingly impressive and imposing were the ceremonies attending the unveiling at Chepstow on Sunday of permanent memorials to the 83 local men who made the supreme sacrifice in the Great War, and to Seaman William Williams, a Chepstow boy, upon whom the V.C. was conferred for an heroic deed during the landings at the Dardanelles. There was a large and distinguished gathering... The crowd must have exceeded 5,000 people.

Mrs. Smith, sister of the V.C. and whose first husband was lost in the war, having entered the forecourt to unveil the gun, Captain Unwin V.C. led her back to the memorial steps. Then, facing the greatest concourse of people ever brought together at Chepstow, he told in plain and simple terms the story of how Williams gained the coveted distinction.....

The Weekly Argus, 14 January 1922

After the unveilings in Beaufort Square, a further ceremony took place in St Mary’s Church. The Admiralty presented to the town with two ensigns flown during the war by the Dover Patrol, which had helped prevent German ships from entering the English Channel from the east.

Also unveiled in St Mary’s Church was a painting, paid for by public subscription, by the eminent maritime artist Charles Dixon (1872-1934). This shows the landing at V Beach, Seddul Bahr in Gallipoli on 25 April 1915, at which Williams died. A copy of the painting is now displayed on a plaque beside the gun.



MR. ERIC FRANCIS,
Hon. Architect who designed the Monument.

Eric Carwardine Francis (1887-1976) was born in Chepstow, and after his training became an assistant to a leading architect, Detmar Blow. He also began working with Avray Tipping, the architectural editor of *Country Life*, who had inherited a fortune and bought land at Moun-ton on which to build a new home.

After working on Moun-ton House, and on Chepstow’s War Memorial, Francis designed Wyndcliffe Court at St Arvans for the Clay family, and Tipping’s retirement home, High Glanau near Trellech, as well as designing his own house at Tutshill.

He later joined the Taunton architectural practice of Stone and Lloyd, and was responsible for restoration work and buildings in Somerset, where he lived until his death.

THE NAVAL GUN

The Chepstow gun is a 105 millimetre L45 calibre gun - the standard deck gun for U-boats, and an adaptation of the anti-aircraft gun used by surface ships. It was controlled by a single gunner, who fired it by pressing a lever with his knee. The shells weighed 18kg. and the gun's range was 6,500 yards.

Chepstow is one of only two places in the UK where a submarine gun is displayed as a memorial. The other is at Bangor in Northern Ireland, also to commemorate a VC recipient.

Where did the gun come from?

Research undertaken by Bryan Rendell has shown that the gun came from UB-91, a German U-boat which attacked Allied merchant ships in the final months of the war. Although at the time it was claimed that UB-91 had served mainly in the Baltic Sea, this was not the case.

Most sinkings by U-boats took place within 100 miles of the Pembrokeshire coast. Records show that, between her launch at Hamburg on 7 March 1918, and her surrender eight months later on 11 November, UB-91 undertook five patrols in the Bristol Channel and off the west coast of Wales. She caused the sinking of five ships – four with torpedoes and one with gun fire – and claimed some 430 lives.

Submarine UB-91 saw her first action on 7 August 1918, when she had a gunfight with an armed trawler, the *Lacerta*, sailing between St Kilda and Stornoway in the Hebrides. The trawler was holed below the water line and managed to return to St Kilda for repairs. UB-91 was undamaged and returned to her base at Heligoland in the North Sea.

On her second patrol, UB-91 fired her torpedoes at an armed English steamer, the *Hebburn*,

sinking her off the coast of Ireland on 25 September, with the loss of six lives. The next day she sank the US Navy Cutter *Tampa* off the north coast of Cornwall. The *Tampa* had escorted a convoy from Gibraltar to Milford Haven, and was returning into the Bristol Channel when she was torpedoed by the submarine. Further explosions caused by depth charges sank the ship, and all 131 on board perished.

The sinking of the *Tampa* was the greatest combat-related loss of life for the US Navy in the war. Six weeks later, two bodies in US Navy uniform were washed up in Pembrokeshire. One was identified and taken back to America, while the second, unknown, sailor was buried with full military honours in Lamphey churchyard.

On 28 September, UB-91 sank another British steamer, the *Baldersby*, off Anglesey. The steamer was carrying supplies of oats and wheat from Canada; two lives were lost.

Finally, on 4 October 1918, UB-91 surfaced at night in rough seas in the middle of a convoy of ships some 60 miles west of Lundy. She fired two torpedoes against the largest target, a Japanese liner, the *Hirano Maru*, which had sailed from Liverpool bound for Yokohama by way of South Africa. Of the 320 on board the vessel, the lives of 292 were lost; the remaining 28 were found alive in the water with life jackets and clinging to wreckage.

Ten days after the Armistice, UB-91 surrendered at Harwich, and as part of a victory propaganda campaign was taken on a tour of ports in Wales and England. In December 1918 she was at Cardiff, and in the new year she visited Swansea, Newport and Port Talbot, before reaching Pembroke Dock at the end of January.



In 1921, UB-91 was finally broken up at Briton Ferry near Neath, and the gun was taken to Chepstow for presentation to the town.

Originally the gun was positioned in front of the old Barclays bank building in the High Street, pointing up towards the Gate.

When the building was demolished in 1966 to make way for the current bank, the gun was taken to Beachley for storage and repair. In 1970 it was brought back to its new location, beside the War Memorial.



The Commander of UB-91 was Wolf Hans Hertwig. Born in 1885 in Hesse, he joined the Imperial Navy in 1904 and fought in the Battle of Jutland, before taking charge of UB 91 in 1918. After the war he left the Navy, married, and settled in Riga in Latvia, where he set up a small business. Later he rejoined the military, remarried, and was sent back to Riga after the Germans occupied the city in the Second World War. He became a prisoner of war in Copenhagen in 1945, later rejoining his wife and child in what had become Soviet-occupied East Germany. He died in 1958.

AFTER THE WAR

- 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 berths 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.

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 intended 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 for geriatric care.

In the Second World War it was extended to cater for tuberculosis patients, and the St Lawrence Hospital, specialising in plastic surgery and burns, was built opposite. Mount Pleasant Hospital was demolished in 1998. The current hospital was built on its site, and the portico moulding from the front façade of the old Admiralty hospital was preserved.



- At **Garden City, Bulwark** and **Sedbury**, housebuilding continued after the war ended. 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 a trading estate.

The old prisoner of war huts at Sedbury were sold off and many became industrial units; some remain in

Grahamstown Road. The houses at Pennsylvania 'garden city' were taken over by the Ministry of Defence and between the wars were used as married staff quarters for Beachley. Later they were taken over by the local council, many eventually going into private ownership.

- At **Beachley**, the shipyard plans were abandoned. Many of the villagers were allowed to return after the war, and the power station reservoir was used for some years as an open air swimming pool. The shipyard site itself remained in Government ownership. The shed was dismantled and re-erected at Port Sunlight on the Wirral, as part of the Lever soap factory. By 1923, all that remained were disused huts, and derelict areas covered with concrete blocks, railway lines, and other material.

The site was cleared, and in February 1924 the Army Technical School – which trained NCOs and potential officers in technical and military skills - was moved to the site from Aldershot. It became the Army Apprentices School in 1947, and the Army Apprentices College in 1966, before closing in 1994. The site is now an army infantry barracks, the home of the First Battalion The Rifles.





BIBLIOGRAPHY AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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

- Naylor Firth, *Chepstow Ships of World War I*, The Monmouthshire Antiquary, vol. 28, 2012, pp. 83-115
- Victoria Jackson, *Escape from Germany*, Gwent Archives WW1 Newsletter, 2014, pp.7-10
- Robin Jones, *History of the Red Cross in Monmouthshire (Gwent) 1910-1918*, British Red Cross Society, 1988
- Ellen Spencer Jones and Teresa Lewis, *The Glorious Men and Women of Monmouthshire: Roll of Honour*, Gwent Family History Society, undated CD-ROM
- Anne Rainsbury, *Chepstow and the River Wye: Britain in Old Photographs*, The History Press, 2nd edn., 2009

- Bryan Rendell, *Chepstow's Unique War Memorial*, privately published, 2009
- Ivor Waters, *The Town of Chepstow*, Moss Rose Press, 1975
- Ivor Waters, *Beachley: Between the Wye and the Severn*, Army Apprentices College, 1977
- Ivor Waters, *Chepstow Notebook*, Moss Rose Press, 1980

and many archived newspapers of the period

Grateful thanks are offered to all those who have made suggestions and provided information, including Henry Hodges, Liz McBride, Chris and Rosemary Penrose, Geoff Sumner, Keith Underwood, and the staff of Chepstow Library, Newport Central Library, and Gwent Archives.

Text by Guy Hamilton for the Chepstow Society

**This is a draft of an intended Chepstow Society publication.
Any comments and corrections should be sent to
Guy Hamilton, ghmyrtle@gmail.com, tel. 01291 628779**



THE CHEPSTOW



SOCIETY

November 2014