

## Information sheet no 026

# Dockyard Battalions

The idea of a local dockyard force of volunteers being raised to maintain the security of dockyards was first conceived around in 1659. Over the centuries, these forces have been raised and disbanded many times.

In 1847, another such scheme was brought into being for the protection of Royal dockyards in Britain and abroad. The Dockyard Superintendants were asked for their views on the raising of a volunteer Force from adult employees. The first experimental battalion had been established in 1846. £20,000 was voted for the Royal Dockyard Volunteers from the Naval Estimates in 1847.

The battalions had many different aspects including infantry artillery, boat battalions, sappers and musicians. The officers of the battalions were usually employees holding high office in the dockyards. In 1847, the strength of the battalion was 10,000 men and officers - 2,000 in Portsmouth, 1395 at Chatham, 1784 at Devonport, 1057 at Deptford, 994 at Woolwich, 890 at Sheerness and 817 at Pembroke excluding officers and sergeants. Men from victualling yards in Gosport and Plymouth were also recruited. Employees between 18 - 55 years were eligible for entry. Entry was voluntary at first but became a condition of employment afterwards. Officers were not gazetted in the normal way in the London Gazettes but were described as "esquires" for Captains and "gents" for Lieutenants. The uniform was a duck fatigue dress and forage cape loaned free of charge.

Drills took place in summer months for which the men were allowed to go home early from work and then return for drill, for which they received two hours extra pay. Failure to return for drill resulted in half a day's pay being docked. Although small arms drill was undertaken, mainly by men under the age of 36, most of the drills were for handling heavy guns and the management of launches and gunboats. Retired Royal Marine instructors acted as drill instructors.

The battalions were disbanded in 1857, although in subsequent decades other forms of volunteer dockyard defence forces were formed.

Sources used:

Burns, K - [The Devonport Dockyard Story](#). Maritime Books, 1984

Crawshaw, J - [The Story of Chatham Dockyard](#) (Vol 2, chapter 15.) Privately published, 1999