

Information sheet no 032

Origins of nicknames for Portsmouth, Chatham and Devonport

NB: All of the explanations below are anecdotal and inconclusive. A list of sources from which this selection has been derived can be requested from the library.

PORTSMOUTH - "POMPEY"

- Bombay was part of the wedding gift of Catherine of Braganza to Charles II. Portuguese seaman saw a resemblance between the two ports and may have called Portsmouth "Bom Bhia" which to English ears sounds like Pompey.
- Dame Agnes Weston was describing the murder of the Roman general Pompey at a lecture to a naval audience. A member of the audience exclaimed "Poor old Pompey!" and this phrase stuck.
- A drunkard's slurred pronunciation of Portsmouth Point (where there are many taverns popular with sailors)
- Ships entering Portsmouth harbour make an entry in the ship's log "Pom. P." - a reference to Portsmouth Point (this being too long). Navigational charts also use this abbreviation.
- La Pompee was a captured French ship moored in Portsmouth and used for accommodation. (Captured 1793 and broken up 1817). There is a Yorkshire term "pompey" for prison or house of correction.
- Volunteer firemen in the eighteenth century (known as pompiers) exercised on Southsea Common.
- In 1781, some Portsmouth sailors climbed Pompey's pillar near Alexandria and became known as the "Pompey boys".
- The pomp and ceremony connected with the Royal Navy at Portsmouth led to the adoption of the nickname, "Pompey".

CHATHAM - "CHATS"

- Derived from an old word for "louse", implying that Chatham manned ships were lousy.
- Chatham manned ships were referred to as being "happy and chatty" by sailors from other ports (derogative term).
- "Chats" is short for Chatham.



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DEVONPORT - "GUZZ"

- Short for "Guzzle", relating to the sailors act of "guzzling" down food and drink – probably of a West Country nature – on return to Devonport after a long voyage at sea .
- Call sign – It was thought that it may have related to the radio call sign for Devonport but no substantial evidence can be found for this.
- Another theory by Godfrey Dykes is that it relates to the dialect used by an oarsman to "gozell ouer" –sailors were rowed ashore from ships moored in the River Hamoaze.
- It is derived from the Hindi term "guz" which is a measurement equivalent to the English measurement "Yard" (36 inches or 91.5cm approx) which is a shortened term for "dockyard". There is no compelling evidence as to why this could be specific to Devonport or the west country as the shortened form of "dockyard" i.e. "Yard" is used generically in most areas where dockyards are situated.