Drill Hall
History of Royal Naval Barracks, Chatham
The Royal Naval barracks were purpose-built to provide accommodation and training facilities for the men of the reserve fleet who were waiting to be appointed to ships.

Designed by Colonel Henry Pilkington, construction of the barracks began in 1897 (on the site of Chatham convict prison) and the first phase of development (which included the Drill Hall) was completed on 26th March 1902. The second phase of building included the development of barrack facilities, such as swimming baths and a bowling alley, and was completed by December 1902.

‘H.M.S. Pembroke’ was adopted as the name of the barracks as this had been the title of one of the depot ships that had originally housed the men.

On the 30th April 1903, the men entered the barracks by the main gate for the first time to begin their occupation. The barracks had cost £425,000 and could originally accommodate 4,742 officers and ratings.
The word “drill” means military exercise or training.

The Drill Hall was constructed to provide an indoor space in which the exercise and training of navy personnel could be undertaken during inclement weather. Often referred to as the ‘Drill Shed’ it has also been used variously as an overflow barracks, exhibition centre, naval store and building materials warehouse. The Court Martial Room is located on the upper floor at the rear of the Drill Hall.

The gates to the Naval Barracks were finally closed on 31st March 1984.
Throughout its life, the Drill Hall had been used as a temporary overflow dormitory when the barrack accommodation blocks were full.

On the night of 3\textsuperscript{rd} September 1917 there were 698 men either asleep or resting in their hammocks in the Drill Hall.

The weather was fine as five German \textit{Gotha} aeroplanes set off for Medway from Gontrode in Belgium at around 9:30 pm. One of the \textit{Gothas} later had to turn back over the Channel due to engine trouble but the remaining four continued, each loaded with 300lbs of bombs.

At around 11:00 pm, the four remaining \textit{Gothas} flew over Eastchurch and began to follow the moonlit River Medway towards Chatham. The raiders continued their approach unchallenged and found the town fully illuminated and completely unprepared for an attack.
Two 50kg bombs made a direct hit on the Drill Hall, crashing through the glass roof and exploding on the concrete floor of the sleeping quarters.

The hands of the clock in the tower were frozen at 11:12 pm, giving the exact time the bombs hit the Drill Hall.

What followed were scenes of unthinkable carnage, as the quarter inch thick glass roof fell in on the sleeping men. It was originally estimated that about 89 men had been killed in their hammocks and another 115 so seriously injured that they were not expected to live.

The total number of men who died was confirmed as 131.

**Air Raid Casualties**

The bombs that fell on the Drill Hall caused the largest single loss of life from an air raid in the whole of the First World War.

The wounded ratings were attended to at the scene by the medical officers before they were taken to local hospitals. Sadly, due to the severity of the wounds, many died from their injuries shortly afterwards.

On Thursday 6th September 1917, 18 lorries draped with Union Jacks drove 98 of the ratings to the cemetery in Woodlands Road, Gillingham, where they were to be buried with full military honours (25 families had requested private interments elsewhere and other ratings were buried later when they had finally been identified).
Bibliography

ANON., 1917. 'Local air raids – heavy loss of life'. Chatham, Rochester and Gillingham News, 8th Sep, pp.4-5.


Acknowledgements

Marcus Bedingfield
Harold Bennett, Chatham Dockyard Historical Society
Ben Watson
Peter Wood

Contacts

If you would like any further information, or you have some information about the history of the Drill Hall you would like to share, please contact:

The Drill Hall Library – 01634 883278
In Memory of the Men Who Died in
The Drill Hall Bombing 3rd September 1917

John Thomas Abrey Aged 54
James Anderson Aged 35
Robert Anderson Aged 27
Alfred Andrews Aged 20
Harry Barker Aged 32
Herbert Lewis Barister Aged 26
Joseph Beal Aged 26
George Joseph Bell Aged 26
Frederick George Benmore Aged 21
John Benson Aged 25
William George Berwick Aged 21
Walter Beverley Aged 23
Henry David Bird Aged 19
George Boyd Aged 27
Joseph Clarence Henry Brightwell Aged 22
Michael Brown Aged 24
William Bullock Aged 39
George Butler Aged 18
Frederick Charles Cable Aged 26
George Cain Aged 20
Albert Cairns Aged 28
Thomas Carmichael Aged 28
Charles Cash Aged 23
Arthur Charteris Aged 25
William Henry Clark Aged 33
Reginald James Clark Aged 21
Charles Alfred Clarke Aged 29
John Clements Aged NK
Albert Chest Aged 21
Robert William Collett Aged 24
Knights Cooke Aged 24
Herbert Cooper Aged 37
Benjamin Cooker Aged 27
Francis Thomas Crocker Aged 20
Thomas Samuel Cropley Aged 34
William Alfred Croud Aged 35
John Dobbs Dapper Aged 19
Frederick Isaac Dower Aged 29
Victor Ross Drexel Aged 30
Raymond Ellis Aged 18
Robert William Ferrett Aged 27
Alfred James Finlay Aged 24
Leonard Fish Aged 23
John Kerr Foreman Aged 39
Robert William Franklin Aged 22
Alfred Gibbs Aged 33
George Gilbert Aged 51
William Herbert Gillet Aged 26
Thomas A Gunn Aged 22
Alfred Eldred Goddard Aged 31
Albert Alfred Goddard Aged 25
Herbert Cecil Godden Aged 26
William John Godwin Aged 20
Nathaniel Gooby Aged 19
Charles Henry Goodsell Aged 20
John Green Aged 20
George Gunn Aged 25
Samuel Hadley Aged 25
John William Hammond Aged 18
Stephen Perry Hare Aged 20
Frederick George Harnall Aged 25
Thomas Giles Lanseley Haville Aged 20
Arthur Haxell Aged 19
Archibald Mitchell Hay Aged 18
John Henderson Aged NK
Henry Charles Hill Aged 25
Ernest Horne Aged 36
Arthur John Humphrey Aged 26
Joseph Charles Sackett Jackson Aged 32
Sydney Jackson Aged 31
Henry Owen Jones Aged 37
Alexander Kennedy Aged 21
Archibald Edward Langridge Aged 28
Charles Lennard Aged 25
William Alfred Littlewood Aged 31
John Robert Loosie Aged 24
Frederick Lumb Aged 30
Sidney Albert Macer Aged 19
Alexander MacGregor Aged 26
Neil Mackay Aged 33
William Downey Magog Aged 19
Roland William John Mates Aged 21
John McGregor Aged 19
Cliff Millar McKenzie Aged 22
Alexander McClan Aged 24
Gilbert McLoughlin Aged 20
John McNaught Aged 20
Neil Moore Aged 35
Percy Edwin Moore Aged 28
Alfred George Moss Aged 32
Percy Walter Nicholls Aged 19
Jack Nicholson Aged 20
William John Nolan Aged 24
John William Oakes Aged 24
William Alfred Osborne Aged 25
Frederick (sic) John Parker Aged 27
William John Payne Aged 20
Bertie Pegram Aged 24
Robert Peters Aged 24
Alfred Putton Aged 22
James William Pre Aged 28
George William Rae Aged 33
John Raven Aged 42
Frederick Walter Reay Aged 33
James Richards Aged 24
Sydney Gordon Rigdon Aged 20
Jesse Edmund Sandys Aged 22
Sidney Seymour Aged 22
Horace Stanley Sharp Aged 25
William Leonard Shirley Aged 21
George James Henry Shuttle Aged 18
George Wilfred Simpson Aged 42
Robert Frederick Sydney Smith Aged 26
William Hastings Smith Aged 31
James Stables Aged 46
William James Street Aged 20
William Edward Sullivan Aged 13
Alexander Sunderland Aged 18
Frederick Frank Upson Aged 20
John William Varney Aged 27
Arthur Edward Voice Aged 22
William Walsford Aged 39
Edmund Walsh Aged 32
William Walton Aged 31
James Edwin Warne Aged 33
Henry Wate Aged 26
George Watson Aged NK
Alfred Watts Aged 20
Arthur Stanley Webb Aged 15
Alexander McDougall Westgarth Aged 32
Gregory Ernest Wooton Aged 15