

**ODD NOTES ON ROYAL NAVY SHORE ESTABLISHMENTS IN  
THE BRISTOL AREA**  
**1914 to 1919 & 1939 to 1945**

**BRISTOL (Ashley Down)**

**HMS Cabot - 1940 to 1942**

The Royal Naval Training Establishment, Ashley Down, was formed on 2 May 1940 at Muller's Orphanage as an overflow establishment for HMS Drake at Devonport barracks and base, and on 13 July 1940 was commissioned as HMS Cabot. On 15 September 1942 the three Orphan Houses it had occupied were vacated and handed over to the War Office, the training having been transferred to Risley and Thorpe Arch, near Wetherby.

PHOTO: Sailors from HMS Cabot at Ashley Down clearing debris in Bridge Street following the first large scale air-raid on Bristol carried out during the evening of 24 November 1940 (Jim Facey for Bristol Evening Post).

**HMS Bristol - 1942 to 1943**

Announced as HMS Britannia IV, a Royal Naval College at Muller's Orphanage, Ashley Down, which was to temporarily receive some intakes transferred from HMS Britannia at Dartmouth on 3 October 1942. However that month it was commissioned HMS Bristol, and the first seven terms of Dartmouth College arrived on 17 October 1942. The establishment closed when the main college transferred to Eaton Hall, and was Paid Off on 1 January 1943.

It was commissioned again as HMS Bristol on 15 February 1943 and served as a Training Establishment until being Paid Off on 28 December 1943, prior to being returned to the War Office on 1 January 1944.

**AVONMOUTH**

Avonmouth was a minor Royal Navy base in the Great War. For command purposes the Royal Navy was divided into a number of major or local stations, fleets or other formations, each normally under an admiral or senior officer. As a base and local area command of the Royal Navy, Avonmouth was originally created in August 1914 as one of the geographical divisions into which the Royal Navy administered its responsibilities. It was defined so by the Department of Admiralty to identify the area jurisdiction of the Divisional Naval Transport Officer, Avonmouth, and existed until August, 1919.

Divisional Naval Transport Officer, Avonmouth: Captain Armytage Anthony Lucas, 1 August 1914 to 25 July 1918 (retired).

Captain George Ellis Cave, 25 July, 1918 to 20 August, 1919 (retired).

### Senior Naval Officer:

Captain (retired) Francis T. Barr, 1 August, 1918 to 2 February, 1919.

### Late 1930s

Senior Naval Officer: Commander John B. Spurgin, 26 September 1938 to 8 October 1938.

### HMS Cadmus

HMS Cadmus was the name selected for a base at the commercial port of Avonmouth. A Naval Officer in Charge was ordered on 27 August 1939, prior to it opening on 1 September 1939, although by then it had been decided not to use the name. Divisional Naval Transport Officer: Captain (retired) Charles T. Wilson, 25 August 1939 to 12 October 1940.

By 1939, concurrently with the formation of Royal Engineer Bomb parties, the Admiralty and Air Ministry had also set up their own separate and distinct Bomb Disposal organisations, each with an exclusive responsibility to its parent service. In August 1940, the UK Joint Service Bomb Disposal Charter was raised to outline and establish inter-Service responsibilities for UK Explosive Ordnance Disposal, and the Royal Navy was tasked with dealing with unexploded devices found on Admiralty property, or on areas occupied by the Navy. They were also responsible for bouyant mines and other marine weapons that were washed ashore, the nearest Rendering Mines Safe Section taking on the work. In the event of a parachute mine burying itself in the ground, Army Bomb Disposal personnel excavated the mine which was then defused by officers of the Land Incident Section, Royal Navy.

Naval Bomb Disposal Teams were set up under the Directorate of Naval Ordnance under the Director of the Naval Unexploded Bomb Department (DUBD) to discharge the Royal Navy's responsibilities and each of the bomb disposal teams formed was led by a BSO (Bomb Safety Officer), who was normally a Sub-Lieutenant, RNVR. By 20 September 1940 there were Naval bomb disposal teams at 27 shore establishments, including Avonmouth, which was also able to deal with mines. During the early spring of 1941 the Royal Navy's Bomb Disposal Section at Avonmouth was kept busy, and was twice called to deal with unexploded bombs in ships which had been removed to the special berth in Portishead Dock reserved for vessels which were in a dangerous condition.

The first incident involving a ship carrying phosphates was dealt with easily, but this was followed an air raid carried out against the Bristol area raid on the night of 3 April 1941 which resulted in an unexploded 250 kilogramme bomb being discovered aboard the 8955 ton Anglo-American Oil Company's tanker Chesapeake which was loaded with high octane aviation fuel. After a couple of days had been spent pumping out the petrol Temporary Lieutenant Hugh Verschöyle Cronyn, RNVR, alone and wearing a wooden helmet attached to an

airline to protect him from noxious fumes, went down into the hold and succeeded in defusing and removing the offending bomb. For this act of "gallantry and undaunted devotion to duty", on 28 February 1942 Cronyn, who was still serving with the Department of Unexploded Bombs, Admiralty, (for duty outside Admiralty), was gazetted with the George Medal, the actual investiture taking place on 7 July. (See below for biographical details of Cronyn).

In September 1944 the duties performed by Director of the Naval Unexploded Bomb Department were taken over by the Director of Torpedoes and Mining (DTM), the new department thus formed being known as DTM (Bombs and Mine Disposal Section). This new branch went on to control the Bomb Safety Officers and the Rendering Mines Safe Section personnel, who were already an integral part of Director of Torpedoes and Mining and the Land Incident Section.

The station at Avonmouth was reactivated during World War Two on 6 March 1944, and until July 1945 it was then under the command of the Naval Officer-in-Charge Avonmouth, Captain G.M.R. Rayne, RN (see below). On 29 October 1944 the Royal Navy's Avonmouth base was listed as HMS Cabot, but on 28 July 1945 it was reduced to RNO status, before ceasing its base operations on 28 July 1945, and finally closing on 15 October 1945.

**HMS Vansittart**, pennant D64, long range escort destroyer, commissioned in 1919: Withdrawn from operational service and placed in Reserve at Port Talbot in May 1944. On 1 August 1944 taken to Swansea as an accommodation ship. Transferred as such from Swansea to Avonmouth on 14 February 1945 until 13 August 1945. It then became a Base Ship at Avonmouth on 18 August 1945 to 7 January 1946. Having already been placed on the Disposal List it was sold BISCO for demolition by J. Cashmere on 25 February 1946 arriving in tow at the breaker's yard at Newport on 5 May 1946.

### **Captain Geoffrey Middleton Randall Rayne RN**

Captain Geoffrey Middleton Randall Rayne was born on 20 August 1881 at Ealing. He entered the Royal Navy on 15 January 1896. he became a Midshipman in 1897 and was appointed Sub-Lieutenant in 1901, Lieutenant in 1903, Lieutenant-Commander in 1911, Commander in 1916 and retired with the rank of Captain in 1927. During this period he had served as Navigator aboard HM Yacht Alexandra, February 1913 to August 1914; then as Navigator aboard the battleship H.M.S. Glory, August 1914 to July 1915. He then commanded the 'Kite Balloon Vessel', HMS Hector, July 1915- to June 1916. In the latter years of the war he served aboard the battleships Revenge and Resolution as Navigator. Amongst the appointments held after the war was that of King's Harbour Master at Plymouth, 1921-23. He was recalled to the Service on the outbreak of the Second World War and served during 1942 to 1943 as Senior British Naval Officer in Curacao, for which he was awarded the Order of the Orange Nassau. Rayne served as Naval Officer-in-Charge, Avonmouth, from 6 March 1944 until July 1945, and ended the War still as the

Senior Officer Commanding HMS Lucifer (Avonmouth), prior to reverting to the Retired List in July 1945.

### **Temporary Lieutenant Hugh Verschoyle Cronyn RNVR**

Hugh Verschoyle Cronyn, was born at Vancouver in Canada on 30 April 1905 of French-Canadian parentage, being the son of Verschoyle Francis Cronyn (1865 to 1956), and his wife Mabel Margaret Philpot (1876 to 1952). He was educated at Ridley College, St Catherines, Ontario, and although he went on to become a professional artist, it was not until he started attending evening classes in drawing whilst working for the Anglo-American Tea Company in Toronto between 1923 and 1928, that he received any kind of training. That, however, led him to become a student at the Ontario College of Art, while in 1929 Cronyn had the opportunity to go to New York to study portrait painting at the Art Students' League. From 1931 to 1933 he worked in Paris at the Académie Lhote and the American School of Fine Arts at Fontainebleau, before travelling through France, Italy, Germany and Spain, and finally, in 1935, settling near the river at Hammersmith in London, where Cronyn worked freelance with a group of painters.

Also a keen sailor, in 1939 he joined the River Emergency Services, a Thames based civil defence unit under the control of the Port of London Authority, the duties of which included casualty rescue and evacuation, running floating ambulances and coordinating communications. However, on 4 October 1940 he was commissioned Temporary Sub-Lieutenant RNVR, and on 19 November was posted to the Naval Unexploded Bomb Department. Cronyn was promoted to Temporary Lieutenant on 4 January 1941 and it was during his deployment at Avonmouth that in April 1941 he won his George Medal. His personal life changed on 24 June 1942 when, at St Nicholas Church in Chiswick, he married Jean Harris MA (Oxon), the daughter of daughter of Percy Harris of Beaconsfield in Buckinghamshire, and the couple went on to have two daughters. Then, between 24 August 1942 and October 1944, Cronyn served as Executive Officer aboard the patrol vessel HMS Mallard, while in July 1945 he was to be found at HMS Hannibal, a Royal Navy Base in Taranto, before becoming the British Naval Liaison Officer on the French heavy cruiser Suffren. Cronyn's naval career, which had involved service in Britain, Italy, the North Sea and the Pacific, finally ended in April 1946, by which time he held the rank of Temporary Acting Lieutenant-Commander.

Later in 1946 he became Director of Art at the Architectural Association School of Architecture, remaining there until 1949 when he was appointed tutor of painting at Colchester School of Art, causing him and his family to relocate to Nayland in Suffolk. However, in 1975 they moved back to Hammersmith Reach on the Thames, from where Hugh Verschoyle Cronyn FRSA painted until his death on 25 July 1996 at St Peter's Wharf Artist Studio, Wandsworth in London at the age of 91.