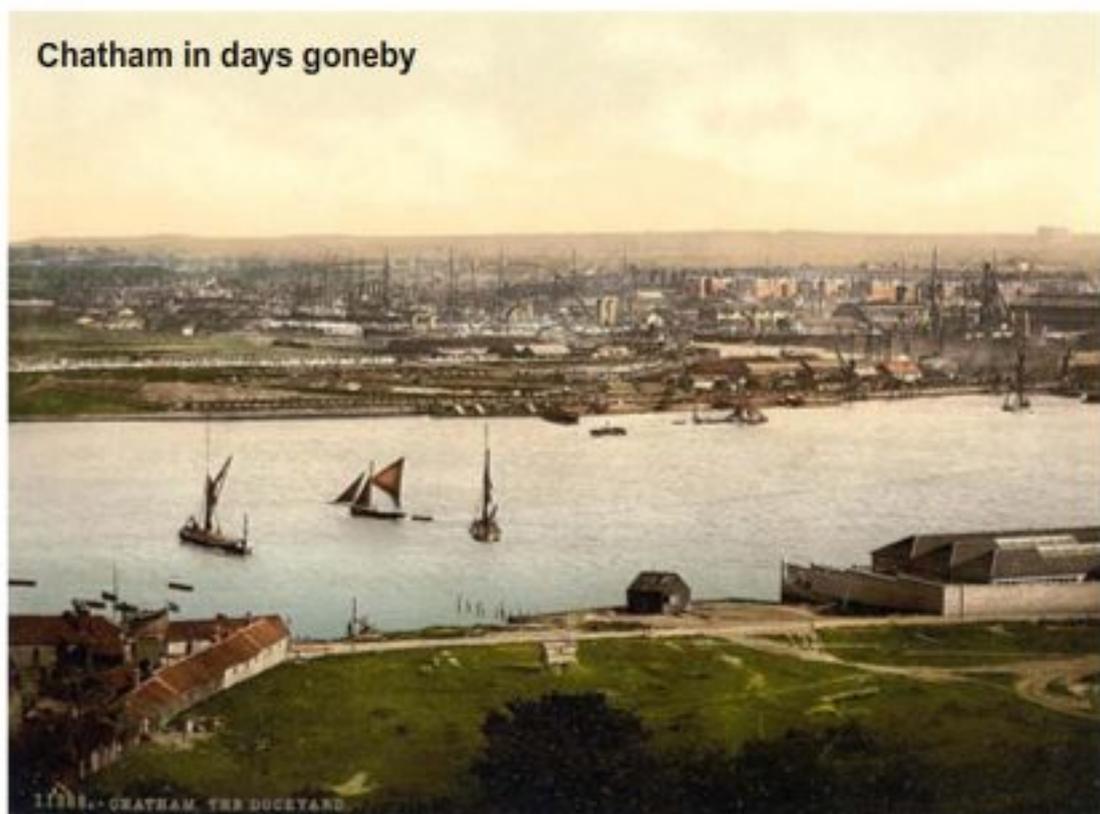


Chatham and Gillingham: Britain's Historic Ports

By: Karen Dabrowska

Chatham and Gillingham, only an hour's train ride from central London, are ideal for a glorious day out by the sea.

Chatham in days gone by



In Gillingham the High Street is just next to the station and offers visitors a variety of restaurants and cafes including the Thai cafe where the portions are more than generous at very reasonable

prices. The latest high profile development in the town is the regeneration of the Leisure Centre in Hardings Lane at the end of the High Street.

The marina has been operating a yacht repair facility since the 1970's and developed a reputation for quality workmanship and high standards of customer service. Catering for both leisure and commercial craft it is Kent's

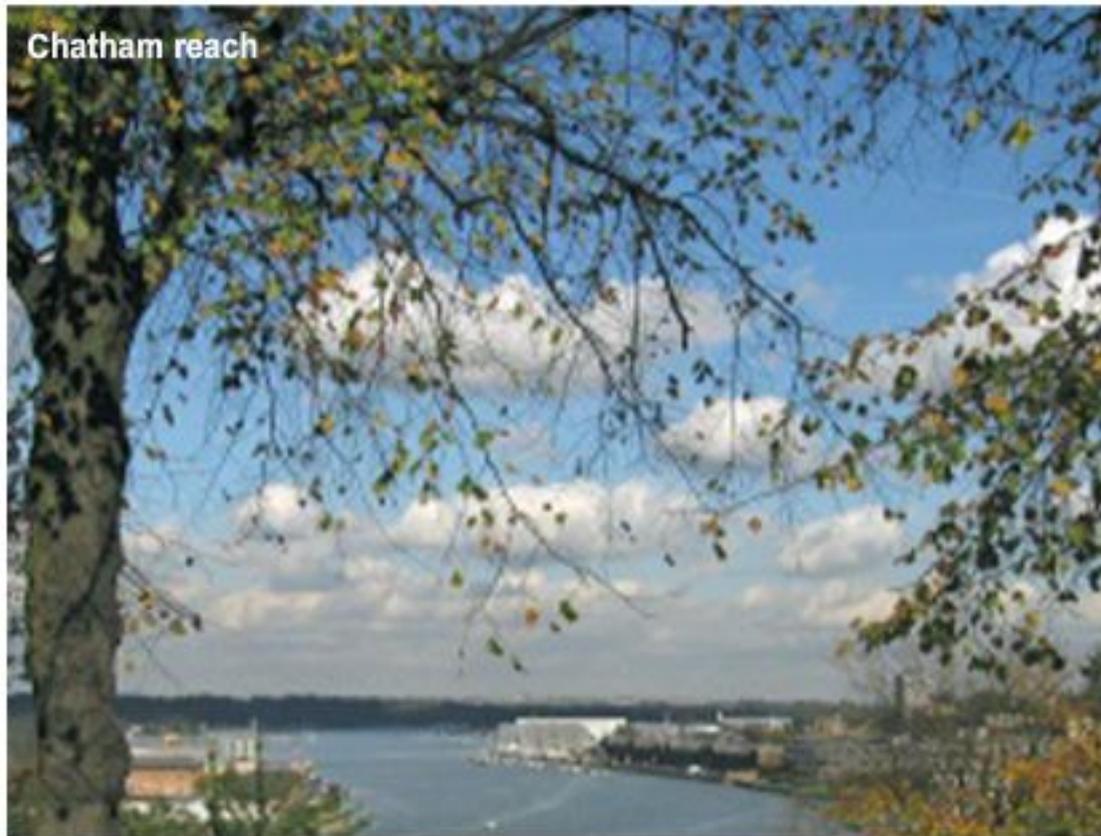
premier repair and refit facility. In 2000 the repair operation moved into new buildings, comprising of 18,000 square feet of modern purpose built heated workshops, including two climate controlled paint spraying booths. It can now accommodate vessels of up to 85 feet and 65 tons undercover.

For the family there is an adventure playground and an interesting walk along the coastal foot path

HMS Cavalier



Chatham reach



winding its way through woods and providing many ideal picnic spots.

In Chatham, the historic dockyard's stunning 80 acre site provides a great day out for all the family. Children love visiting the three historic warships with the opportunity to look through the periscope of the submarine Ocelot. It is also possible to clamber over the Second World War destroyer HMS Cavalier.

Interactive displays in each of the main attractions include opportunities to make rope in the ropery, fight a 17th century sea battle in the Museum of the Royal Dockyard and follow an external «brass-rubbing» trail. Indoor and outdoor children's play areas provide plenty of space to let off steam - as do the open areas of the dockyard itself.

Chatham Dockyard is found on the River Medway. It dates back to the Reformation when relations

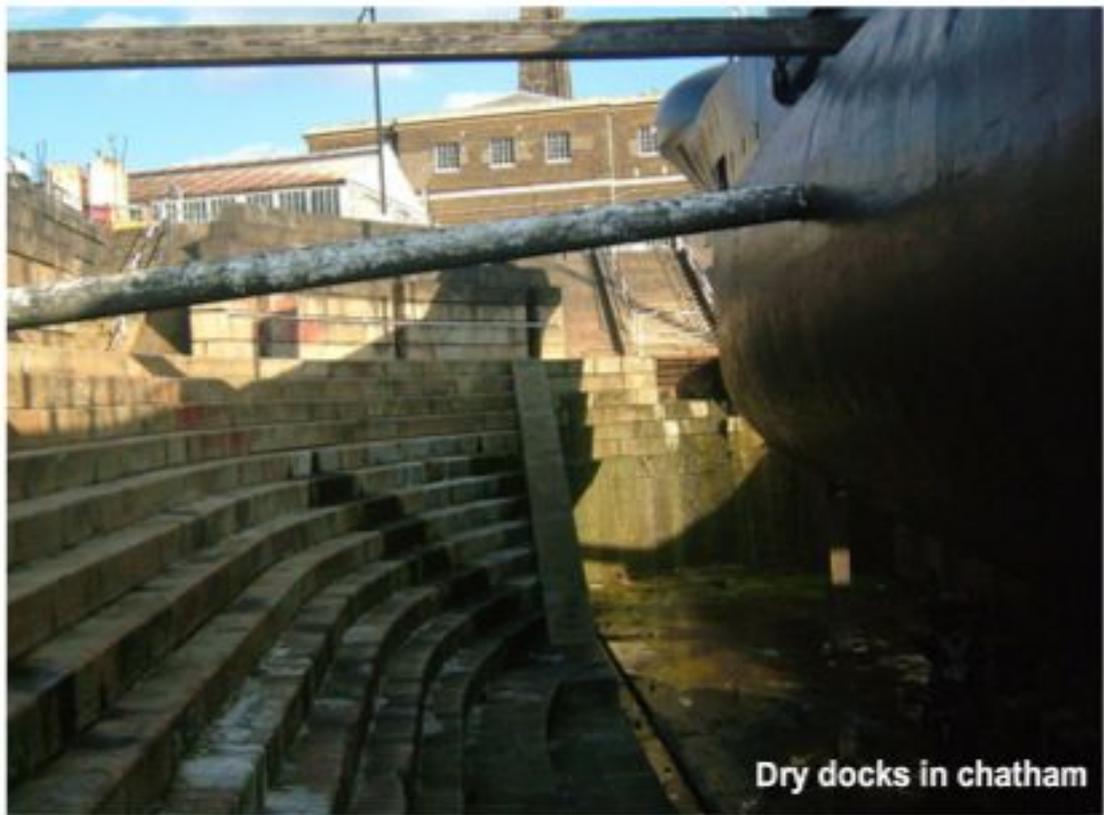
with the Catholic countries of Europe worsened, leading to a requirement for additional defences. For 414 years Chatham dockyard provided over 500 ships for the Royal Navy and was in the forefront of ship building, industrial and architectural technology. At its height it employed over 10,000 skilled artisans and covered 400 acres. Chatham dockyard closed in 1984 and today 84 acres are managed as a visitor attraction by the Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust.

In their article Gillingham Dorset – a potted history David Lloyd & Peter Crocker refer to the earliest known settlement in Gillingham dating back to 2500BC: Lake dwelling at Bay. From Roman times, around 200AD, a substantial farm settlement was established in the Commonmead Lane area. The museum displays Roman pottery, coins and roof tiles.

Evidence of Saxon occupation, probably from c. 660, is in the form of part of a Saxon Cross which is



Medway River



in St Mary's church, and the town's name Gillingham is of Saxon origin - Gylla being possibly the name of a local chief and ham is interpreted as a village or homestead. Edmund Ironside fought and defeated King Canute at nearby Penn and drove his soldiers down the hill to be finished off at a place still called Slaughtergate. Edward the Confessor was declared King at Gillingham in 1042.

In medieval times the part of

Gillingham known as Grange was a limb of the Cinque Ports, and the maritime importance of the area continued until the late 1940s. Indeed, a large part of Chatham Dockyard lay within Gillingham. The dockyard was founded by Queen Elizabeth I on the site of the present gun wharf, the establishment being transferred to the present site about 1622.

In 1667 a Dutch fleet sailed up the River Medway and having landed at Queenborough on the Isle of

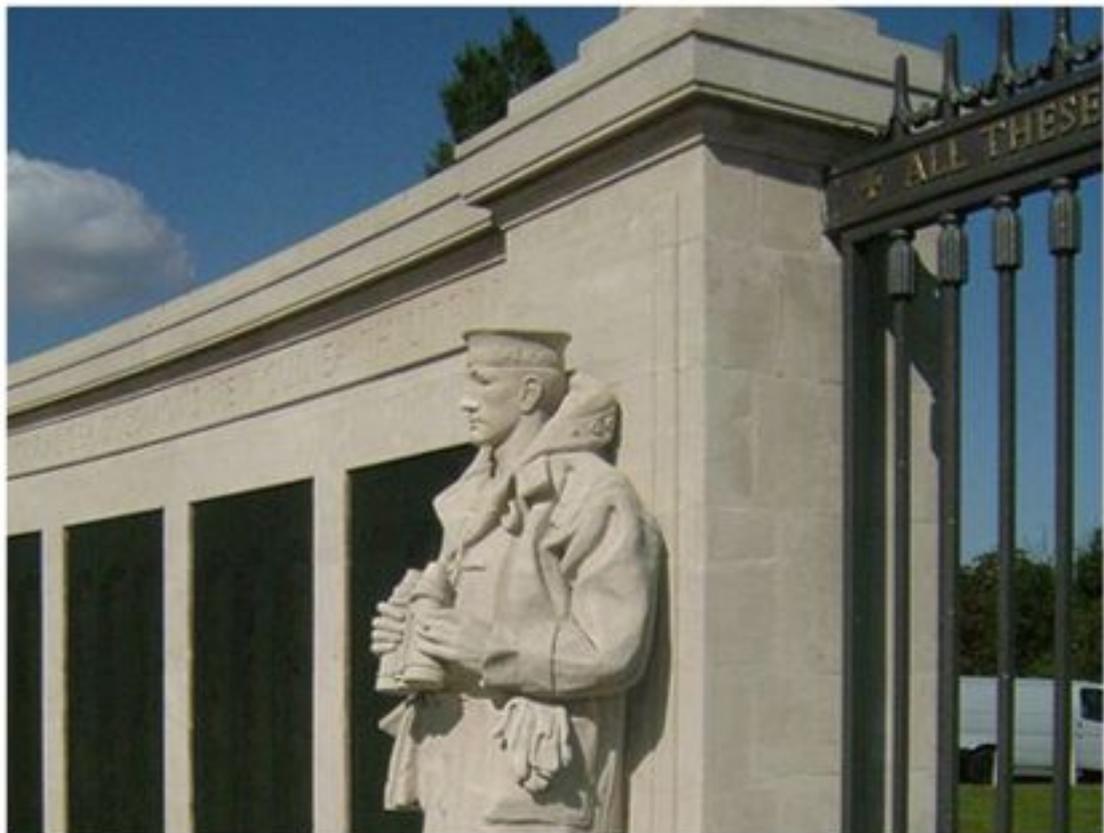
Sheppey, and laying siege to the fort at Sheerness, invaded Gillingham in what became known as the raid on the Medway. The Dutch, after some consternation and panic were eventually driven out, but the incident caused great humiliation to the Royal Navy. The Seven Years' War began in 1756. The government immediately gave orders for the defence of the dockyard, and by 1758 the Chatham Lines of Defence were built. Over a mile long, they

stretched across the neck of the dockyard peninsula, from Chatham Reach, south of the dockyard, across to Gillingham Reach on the opposite side.

All this work, and the expansion of the dockyard, meant that more homes were needed for the workers. The position of the Lines meant that this building could only happen beyond, and so New Brompton came into being. The population rose to 9,000 people by 1851. Gillingham was still only a

Entrance to Chatham dockyard





small village; eventually it, too, was swallowed up, and the name of the whole settlement changed to Gillingham.

The artist John Constable was a friend of the Reverend John Fisher vicar of Gillingham, and he visited Gillingham in 1820 and 1823 and produced five oil paintings of the area and four sketches.

Despite its rural setting, Gillingham could claim to be an industrial town. In 1769, the Gillingham Silk Co. established the silk-throwing

industry. In the early years of the 19th century, around 160 people were employed in the mill itself. Girl apprentices were often obtained from London workhouses. The railway arrived in 1859, closely followed by the Gillingham Pottery, Brick and Tile Co. in 1865.

During the first three decades of the 20th century, the prosperity of the town continued. A market was held every other Monday and the calf market was the second largest

in the country. There was a large dairy depot for manufacturing cheese and supplying milk to London, as well as Eden Shute's butter factory and Slade's mineral works. After 1945 there was a steady decline and the end of the market in the 1950s seemed to mark the nadir of industrial Gillingham.

However, by the late 1970s, the trend was reversing and new firms – such as Sherman Chemicals, Biokil, Sigma Aldrich, Dextra Lighting Systems, Wessex Fare

and Chester Jefferies – came to the town. Land was released for housing developments and the town started to grow again. Gillingham Waitrose store soon attained the position of the third busiest Waitrose in the country, and has since become the focal point for the regeneration of the town's retail trade.

Visitors to Chatham and Gillingham can combine shopping, a visit to the historic dockyards and a pleasant stroll by the seaside marine.



Gillingham High Street