

GRAVESEND SEA SCHOOL / NATIONAL SEA TRAINING SCHOOL, GRAVESEND, KENT

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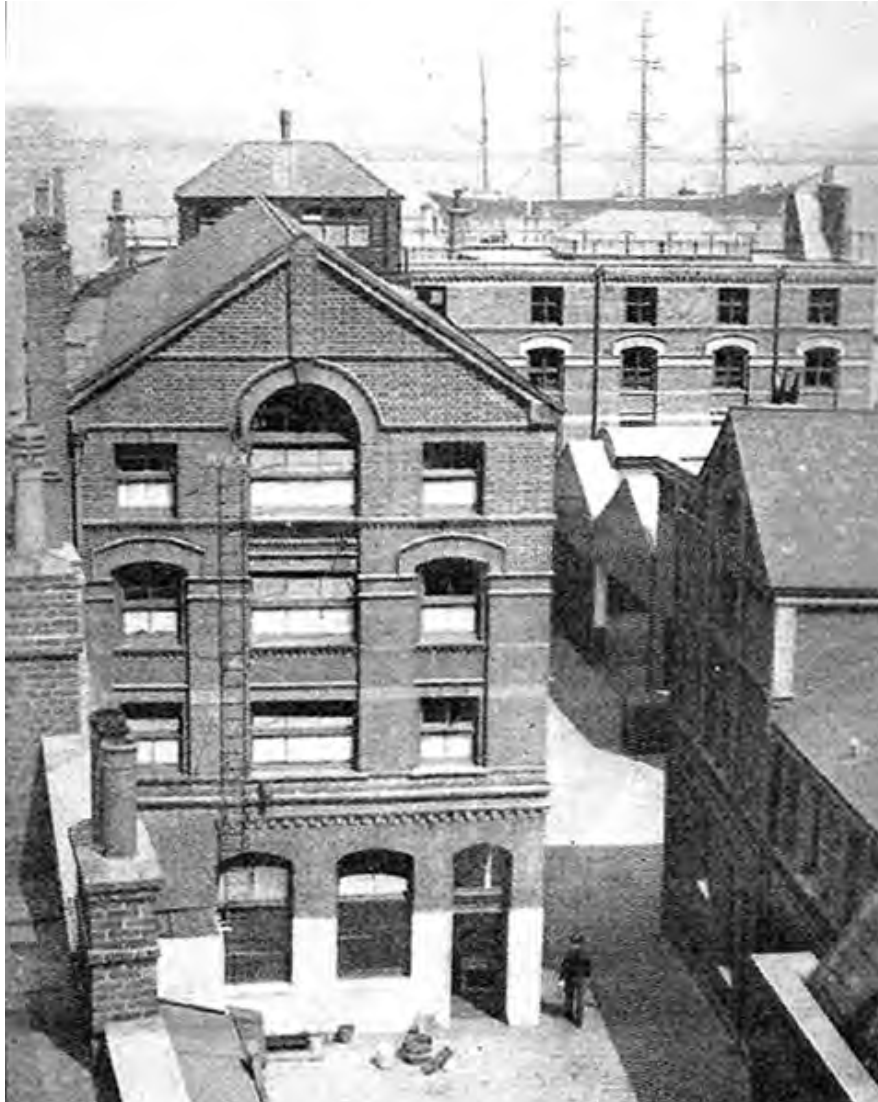
National Sea Training School, Gravesend, Kent

Gravesend Sea School once stood on the site of Wates Hotel, established in 1819 and situated at the western end of Gravesend Promenade. The hotel's most famous guest was Charles Dickens, who stayed there in 1856. By 1865 Wates Hotel was renamed the Commercial Hotel, and by 1882 the Hotel had become a Sailors' Home, acquired by the Destitute Sailors' Rest based in Whitechapel, London who provided food and shelter for shipwrecked and destitute sailors, and for sailors who were not destitute needing somewhere to stay when they were ashore. The premises were eventually handed over to the Government during the First World War and afterwards were sold to the Shipping Federation for their new sea school.

During 1918 the old building had been demolished and the Sea School extended to provide training facilities for the Merchant Navy. This arose owing to a shortage of trained seaman, due to many sailors having been transferred from the Merchant Navy to the Royal Navy during World War One. The school provided training for deck and catering boys for the Merchant Navy, and was initially funded by the Government. The school could accommodate 150 boys at a time and was the principal establishment of its type in the country, responsible for about two-thirds of the total national output, and was to become known as the best sea training school in the world.

A Committee of Management was established made up from representatives of the Board of Trade, the Ministry of Shipping, the Shipping Federation and the National Sailors' and Firemen's Union. In 1919 the Shipping Federation assumed financial responsibility for the School and in return received a grant from the Government for each successful trainee.

The Shipping Federation subsequently established other schools, for example; Training Schools for Firemen and “Seamanship” Schools. All these schools were eventually merged together to form “The National Sea Training School” for which the Shipping Federation received direct grants from the Government of approximately fifty per cent.



Gravesend Sea School 1930's

In 1939 the Gravesend Sea School was transferred to the Training Ship *Vindicatrix* at Sharpness, in Gloucestershire, the premises at Gravesend were loaned to the Admiralty, who renamed the premises HMS *Gamebird*, then changed to HMS *Gordon*, and finally in 1943 to HMS *General Gordon*.

The premises were used for training adults who had opted to serve in the Merchant Navy at the outset of World War Two, and although the premises were returned to the Shipping Federation in 1944, they continued to be used for training adults until 1945 when they reverted to their original purpose of training deck and catering boys.

The Gravesend Sea School was located close to the rivers edge with its own jetty, and perfectly situated for students to see ships working their way up and down the Thames. Generations to come would tell you the building was rumoured to have been a prison, because the accommodation block looked like a prison with landings which had rows of doors accessing rooms large enough to accommodate bunk beds for two men at a time, either side of a large hall. It was also rumoured to have been a peanut store, because the phrase 'peanut' was used by locals when referring to trainees, but originates from a time when a peanut vendor sold his wares close to the school.

A perspective view of the National Sea Training School in Gravesend.

1945 - 1965



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In 1963 the National Sea Training Schools became the National Sea Training Trust, and three years later a purpose built college was opened on Chalk Marshes at Gravesend, designed to replace both the old Gravesend Sea School and TS Vindicatrix at Sharpness. This new establishment was called the National Sea Training College. In December 1966 TS Vindicatrix closed and in 1975 the original Gravesend Sea School building was demolished.

The college finally closed its doors in 1996 due to a lack of students, which was partly due to the decline in use of merchant shipping when container vessels were introduced, and the increased use of cheaper crews from overseas. In 2003 the buildings were eventually taken over by the Metropolitan Police as their training college.

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