



The River Stour at Richborough looking downstream. The distant large buildings are the Pfizer chemical works which now occupy the site of the Port.

By early 1916, hostilities on the Western Front had stabilised to the set front lines that were more or less to remain thus for the next three years. A war of attrition between the Allies and the Central Powers had commenced, with thousands upon thousands of men and guns in static positions, entrenched and bunkered, facing each other along their respective front lines. Kitchener now had a million soldiers, conscription had been authorised by the British Parliament and supplies of munitions and guns were much increased. All these aspects tended to cause a gross overloading of the cross-Channel ports and boats and the French rail system. What was urgently required was a new and quicker way of transporting materials, supplies, ammunition and vehicles to the British Expeditionary Force and to the Royal Flying Corps who supported it.

In 1911, a syndicate of businessmen had formulated a plan to establish a harbour or haven on the River Stour at Richborough, some two and a half miles north of the Cinque Port of Sandwich in Kent. The Stour at this point flows

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into Pegwell Bay and therefore the estuary is tidal. With the outbreak of the Great War, the Royal Engineers looked at Sandwich Haven and in 1915 put in hand the development of this area as a reasonably large port, to initially handle seagoing barges carrying supplies to France. The Engineers named it Richborough Port. The barges were so designed that when they reached France they could continue onwards using the French canals, almost into the battle-line back areas.

The Richborough complement developed from a few hundred Army personnel at the start in 1916, to a final strength of over 19000 by mid-1918. The site contained over 500 buildings and also wharves, sidings, a railway system, camps, workshops, warehouses, stores and shipyards where the barges were constructed. A new wharf over 2000 feet long had been built, having mobile cranes and gantries. The River Stour at this point was widened from 120 feet to 300 feet and dredged to enable boats to manoeuvre. By 1918 at the north end of the site, an RAF Salvage Depot was established alongside the A256 at Ebbsfleet.

This Depot was developed late in the war in order to accept vast amounts of aviation salvage brought back from France. The Depot did not have a proper wharf, but barges were brought up to the banks of the estuary and became beached as the tide went out, whence they could then be unloaded manually by female labour, using long roller conveyors from the barges to railway wagons on the adjacent lines. Over 500 Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps personnel were stationed at Richborough and additional female workers were brought in each day by rail from nearby towns.

The Richborough RAF unit was listed as No 5 Port Detachment. During the months of the Port's operations, over 25000 tons of aviation hardware and supplies were transported to and from France by barge, including a pair of barges equipped as mobile hydrogen gas-production plants



Cross-Channel barges being unloaded into wagons by female labour. Items for the RAF Salvage Depot came in from France like this.

:Picture (left) and map opposite courtesy of Robert Butler

Below left: All that remains today! This was the port and starboard piling for the Train Ferry jetties. Pegwell Bay is in the background.



The Train Ferry loading gantry bases. The far bank of the river has now silted up again to its normal width.

