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Book Review

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Book review

Chatham Historic Dockyard, World Power to Resurgence

Neil Cossons. Historic England, Liverpool University Press, 2021,
ISBN-13 978-1800859494, ISBN-10 180085949X, 224 pp.

This book is worth reading for a lot of different reasons. To give a potted history of shipbuilding and dockyards, an explanation of naval strategy in the days of sail plus a selection of pictures and illustrations of historical architectural and engineering drawings. The opening chapters does each of the things admirably.

However, for many engineers the best reason for reading the book will be the chapters that describe how a redundant industrial facility was transformed into a high-quality mixed-use development that combines educational, commercial and a world class tourist attraction will be the key reason.

For those who don't know, Chatham Dockyard is the most complete naval dockyard for the building and maintenance of wooden warships in the world and the displays, exhibits and buildings illustrate how that was done. However, to transform the yard into the facility it is today wasn't an easy task nor was it an assured outcome.

The chapters that discuss the many masterplans, planning reports, consultation exercises and various project plans are worthy of study and reflection because, as Sir Neil Cossons, says '... it would be wrong to assume that its survival after closure was an inevitability' 'good fortune and serendipity, judicious strategic planning and the very best of professional management have all played their part'.

All too often a successful development is presented as the blindingly obvious outcome of the circumstances when the project commenced with perhaps a few minor blips along the way. Those who worked throughout know how false that picture is but after the work is complete its often hard to unpick the false starts and blind alleys that occurred along the way.

Its unfortunate that all too often the lessons learned log concentrates too closely on the minutiae of individual details of things that could have been done better but glosses over errors of strategy. This book is valuable in that it pulls few punches about competing visions and the work undertaken by a range of authorities, agencies and consultancies to work up a feasible and deliverable outcome. The role of the Kent county council planning officer, Harry Deakin, is highlighted as critical in the whole process.

The middle chapters that compare similar exercises elsewhere around the globe are valuable as is the closing chapters that list out the factors that led to a successful outcome in Chatham are especially valuable to practitioners elsewhere. None more so than the comments about managing stakeholder relationships, investing in in-house knowledge and expertise, early de-risking by exploratory enabling works and a shared understanding of everyone involved into the works being carried out.

Chatham Dockyard illustrates how a facility that has passed from glory days in the middle years of the eighteenth century. When the Royal Dockyards had become the largest industrial enterprises in the world driving financial and scientific advances in many fields. To a backwater of industrial dereliction in the final years of the twentieth century now, once more, has a valuable role in the twenty-first century. How this was achieved is a story that any engineer engaged in major redevelopment projects can usefully study.

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