



Call for Papers extended until 16 January 2026

Aftermath of the 1956 Suez crisis: Global Ramifications and Reflections for Dockyards and Shipyards



**Naval Dockyards Society 30th Annual Conference (hybrid)
National Maritime Museum Greenwich Saturday 28 March 2026**

Sponsored by the Society for Nautical Research

What immediate challenges did the governments concerned face for their dockyards and shipyards? What long-term impacts resonate for them today?



Signifying personal and international interest and legacy: USS *Salem*, US 6th Fleet flagship being lifted by AFD 35 in Grand Harbour Malta, 1956, just before the Suez crisis.

Decommissioned, now at US Naval and Shipbuilding Museum, Quincy, Massachusetts,

<https://www.uss-salem.org/>.

Photo Roger Bendall, 1956.

Writing a decade after the Suez crisis, one contemporary politician dismissed the affair as merely ‘the dying convulsion of the British Empire.’* This view is still widely held today, but how authentic is that interpretation in hindsight?

How did the Suez crisis redefine Britain’s international identity and economic profile and its relationship with former colonies and ongoing allies? And how did it influence attitudes among Britain’s allies, including France and Israel, who had taken part, and the United States who had forced an early end to the action?

Critically, how did the Suez aftermath and its often-bitter recriminations shape future British naval policy on home and overseas dockyards and shipyards and their communities?

Conference themes will include:

- Overview of how the Suez crisis shaped subsequent British and Allied naval strategy and deployment in the Cold War
- Analysis of the post-Suez impact on each of the major imperial Dockyards (see below)
- Political, local, social and economic effects of Suez on dockyards and shipyards globally
- Global strategic threats and opportunities arising from Suez
- Suez accelerated the global power shift from Britain to the United States – evidence?

Proposals could address:

- From end of Empire to a global network of purpose-built, imperial logistics hubs: a structure of continued UK home bases with reduced roles (Portsmouth, Devonport, Rosyth), national assets transferred to successor states (Bombay, Trincomalee, Simon’s Town), downsized or closed precincts repurposed for civilian/heritage use (Chatham,

* Nutting, Anthony. *No End of a Lesson*. Constable, 1967. p. 108. A noted Arabist, Nutting resigned as Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in protest at the invasion of Egypt.

Bermuda), and territories retaining strategic value but with a reconfigured political status (Gibraltar, Malta, Hong Kong).

- Economically and socially, dockyard communities across the Empire faced job losses, skill reallocation and identity shifts — from imperial industrial towns to local maritime economies and heritage economies. Strategically, the network's contraction mirrored Britain's movement from unilateral global actor to a state operating within alliance frameworks (especially US/NATO)

Summary of specific Dockyard post Suez-impacts and adaptations

Bermuda (Ireland Island)

- Imperial role: Western Atlantic fortress and dockyard supporting North America & West Indies Station — major logistics and repair facility.
- Impact of the end of Empire: Mid-20th century consolidation of imperial bases and changing global strategy led to closure or severe reduction of dockyard activities.
- Local/social/economic effects: Economic impact from downsizing of military employment; communities had to adapt via redevelopment, tourism and new commercial maritime activity.
- Reconfiguration: Former dockyard precincts were eventually repurposed for civilian uses, heritage tourism and local industry; the strategic imperial function ended.

Bombay (Mumbai, India)

- Imperial role: Major shipbuilding and repair centre on India's west coast, supporting the Royal Navy's presence in the Indian Ocean.
- Impact of the end of Empire: Indian independence transferred authority to a national navy; British dockyard prominence declined as local institutions expanded ownership and control.
- Local/social/economic effects: Skilled dockyard labour and technical expertise were retained locally but redirected to building the Indian Navy and civil shipping; the dockyard formed part of India's nascent maritime industrial capacity.
- Reconfiguration: Became integrated into the infrastructure of an independent Indian state and its navy, while civilian shipbuilding and repair flourished under local direction.

Chatham (UK)

- Imperial role: Important shipbuilding and fitting-out yard for the Channel/North Sea fleets and a long naval tradition.
- Impact of the end of Empire: Decline in strategic necessity and centralisation of facilities led to progressive run-down; industrial closures followed.
- Local/social/economic effects: Loss of skilled jobs, community disruption, and the need to find alternative employment pathways; later regeneration efforts focused on mixed-use redevelopment.

Devonport (Plymouth, UK)

- Imperial role: Major western fleet base, submarine and surface ship refit and repair; key Atlantic support hub.
- Impact of the end of Empire: Reduced overseas responsibilities led to rationalisation of dockyard infrastructure and workforce; focus moved towards submarines, nuclear support (later), and NATO tasking.

- Local/social/economic effects: Significant employment changes; local economy pivoted to diversified defence contracting, maritime services and civilian port activity.
- Reconfiguration: Remained a principal dockyard with specialised roles (e.g., submarine support); parts of the site repurposed for commercial and heritage uses.

Gibraltar

- Imperial role: Gatekeeper of the western Mediterranean — strategic coaling, repair and fleet anchorage guarding the Straits.
- Impact of the end of Empire: While strategic location remained important, the nature of the British presence shifted: reduced imperial patrols, more emphasis on regional NATO tasks and the political sensitivities of decolonisation.
- Local/social/economic effects: Continued military presence sustained local employment, but economic adjustment included diversification into civilian port services, tourism and international finance.
- Reconfiguration: Retained as a British Overseas Territory with a reduced but persistent military role and growing civilian maritime and tourism functions.
- Suggested speech title: “Gibraltar: Strategic Permanence and Post-Imperial Adaptation”
- Reconfiguration: Much of the historic yard was closed/transformed and large portions repurposed for civilian redevelopment, heritage museums and cultural use.

Hong Kong (Victoria Harbour)

- Imperial role: Principal Royal Navy base in the Far East — repair, resupply and regional command post for East Asian operations.
- Impact of the end of Empire: Political changes in East Asia and the eventual end of British sovereignty meant the imperial naval role wound down; dependence on alliance structures also altered operational priorities.
- Local/social/economic effects: The naval withdrawal had implications for dockyard labour and local economies but coincided with Hong Kong’s own dynamic economic transformation which absorbed much labour into commercial sectors.
- Reconfiguration: Former naval facilities were relinquished as sovereignty ended; many sites were redeveloped for civilian or commercial use, while the city’s maritime economy followed a distinctly local trajectory.

Malta (Grand Harbour, Valletta)

- Imperial role: Mediterranean lynchpin — deep harbour for fleet anchorage, repair and logistics; central to Mediterranean sea-power.
- Impact of the end of Empire: Loss of political control and shifting NATO imperatives reduced the utility of a British base; the island’s strategic value remained but Britain’s imperial maintenance role waned.
- Local/social/economic effects: Withdrawal of British forces created a mixed economic shock (loss of military spending) but also opportunities as Malta asserted sovereignty and developed local maritime industries and tourism.
- Reconfiguration: Transition from imperial naval base to a national port and commercial/heritage hub; military facilities were reduced or handed to Maltese authorities, later used for civilian purposes and tourism.
- Suggested speech title: “Valletta After Withdrawal: Malta, Sovereignty and the End of British Naval Primacy”

Portsmouth (UK)

- Imperial role: Principal home fleet base and administrative centre for the Royal Navy; major shipbuilding, refit and logistics hub.
- Impact of the end of Empire: Gradual shrinking of fleet size and global commitments reduced demand for shipbuilding and big-scale refits. Strategic emphasis shifted from imperial policing to NATO/European roles.
- Local/social/economic effects: Workforce reductions and industrial restructuring in shipbuilding and dockyard trades; communities had to diversify into civilian maritime industries, defence services and tourism.
- Reconfiguration: Continued as one of the Royal Navy's principal home dockyards, with extensive heritage and museum use (historic ships, public engagement) alongside ongoing naval functions.

Rosyth Dockyard (Scotland)

- Imperial role: Established in 1909–1916 as a modern Royal Naval Dockyard to support the Grand Fleet in the North Sea, Rosyth was designed explicitly for the era of global naval competition. Though not an overseas imperial base, it was integral to Britain's ability to sustain imperial sea power by protecting the North Sea approaches, countering German naval strength, and supporting capital ships essential to imperial defence.
- Impact of the end of Empire: After 1945, and particularly following Suez (1956), Britain's reduced global role and shrinking surface fleet altered Rosyth's strategic importance. As imperial commitments contracted, the dockyard's role shifted from supporting global naval dominance to maintaining a smaller, alliance-focused fleet. Large-scale shipbuilding ceased, and Rosyth increasingly specialised in refit and maintenance rather than construction.
- Local/social/economic effects: The post-imperial contraction of the Royal Navy led to periodic job losses and uncertainty in west Fife. Skilled industrial labour remained, but employment became increasingly dependent on defence contracts rather than continuous naval expansion. The community experienced the broader social transition from imperial-era industrial security to a more volatile defence-industrial economy.
- Reconfiguration: Rosyth evolved into a specialist refit, maintenance, and later decommissioning yard, operated by private contractors under Ministry of Defence oversight. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries it became central to aircraft carrier assembly work and nuclear submarine dismantling — a striking shift from imperial fleet support to post-imperial lifecycle management of naval assets.

Simon's Town (South Africa)

- Imperial role: Key base for the Cape sea route; coaling, repair and fleet support for Atlantic–Indian Ocean transit.
- Impact of the end of Empire: Political change and the emergence of independent states in the region forced renegotiation of basing arrangements; imperial control was ceded to local authorities.
- Local/social/economic effects: Transfer of facilities altered employment patterns — some continuity as local navies inherited infrastructure but imperial managerial and technical roles diminished.
- Reconfiguration: Dockyard functions were transferred progressively to the South African state; the site's role reframed within national defence priorities rather than imperial logistics.
- Suggested speech title: "Simon's Town and the Politics of Transfer: Empire, Sovereignty and Naval Infrastructure"

Trincomalee (Ceylon / Sri Lanka)

- Imperial role: Deep natural harbour in the Indian Ocean used for fleet anchorage and repairs; crucial for eastern sea-route operations.
- Impact of the end of Empire: Ceylonese independence and wider decolonisation reduced the British ability to sustain a permanent imperial presence; dockyard and base facilities were scaled back or negotiated with the new state.
- Local/social/economic effects: Loss of British garrison spending affected surrounding economies, but the facilities provided a foundation for the national navy and local maritime commerce.
- Reconfiguration: Reoriented to serve Sri Lanka's national defence and commercial maritime needs rather than as an imperial logistics node.

If your proposal is accepted, *you will present in-person or online.* We shall refund UK/European travel fares to the conference (other overseas: travel from UK airport to Greenwich), your fee, lunch and contribute to accommodation, publish your paper and give you a journal volume. Your talk will be c.30 minutes, the printed paper 6–10k words, due 31 June 2026.

Send your title, a 300-word synopsis and a 100-word biography by **16 January 2026** or earlier to Roger Bendall roger@rogerbendall.com and Dr Ann Coats avcoatsndschair@gmail.com **N.B.** The proposal should present original research.

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