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The Royal Naval School in Mottingham

Most of you know by now that the School for the Sons of Missionaries moved to Mottingham in 1912 and became Eltham College. That's why 2012 will be a year of centenary celebrations, including a new history book about the school, based on pictures, called *Our Century*. I should know; I'm writing it.

But the main buildings of our school are much older than 100 years. What was here before 1912? The answer is another school: the Royal Naval School. The building, originally known as Fairy Hall, has been there since about 1700; it was a private residence and a "country retreat" for people who otherwise lived and worked in London, which was several miles away. It became a school only in 1889 when the Royal Naval School moved from New Cross, vacating a building there which is now Goldsmiths College.

The official opening was on 17th July 1889. The *Kentish Mercury* described the school as follows:

A first floor gallery, which opens out to six dormitories, masters' and servants' apartments, and bedrooms; a central hall on the ground floor, with six large classrooms; a passage to a dining hall big enough for 200 boys; a quadrangle with two fives courts, a swimming pool and a gymnasium; through an arched passageway, the Headmaster's house and the Bursar's house.

The premises were altered and enlarged for the purposes of the school; the new buildings included a chemical laboratory

and lecture room. The 1891 prospectus refers to a detached Sanatorium, now the White House.

There are excellent pictures in the press of the time; these can be viewed in Lewisham Library, Archives Section, along with much more material about the Naval School, on which this article is based. It's best to make an appointment and the helpful staff will prepare for your visit.

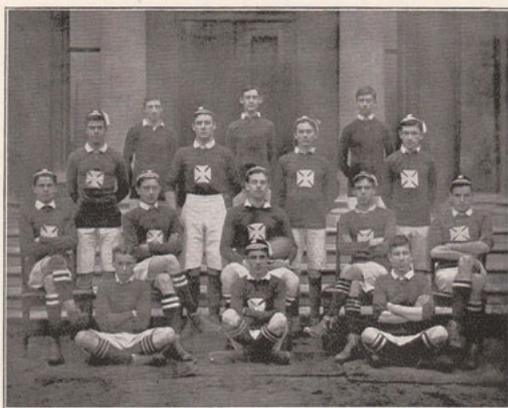
As the Eltham College Archivist, I sometimes receive queries about boys who attended the school around 1900. The problem is, which school? The Naval School used the term Eltham College, or Eltham College (Royal Naval School) as early as 1892, for example on the prospectus, the Prize Day programme and the Form Lists of that year. But much later, e.g. in 1908, it was not always used (see below left). All very confusing.

Prize giving in 1900 was carried out by HRH the Prince of Wales, soon to be King Edward VII. This was widely reported in the press. The Chapel foundation stone was laid on July 18th 1903 (see picture, below) and the Opening and Dedication Service was on June 2nd 1904. We were particularly fortunate that the Naval School built the chapel before leaving the premises. The story of the building of the Chapel requires more space than is available here.

What sort of a school was the Royal Naval School? To be honest, it was rather like our school. There were concerts and debates, much sport including rugby, cricket, swimming and fives, academic success including places at Oxford, prize day, a House competition and so on. Their Headmaster was in Holy Orders. OK, we don't have an annual "Assault-at-Arms", but otherwise their school, as reflected in their magazine, confusingly called the *Elthamian* (see previous page), was similar to ours and many others.

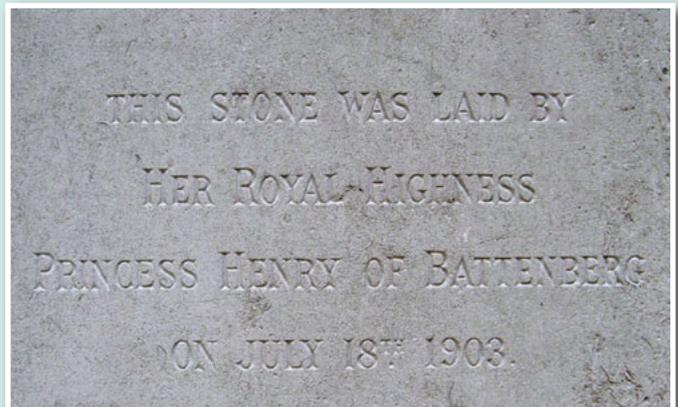
So why did the school close in 1910? Basically because of a lack of money. Try as they might, they couldn't attract enough pupils. Even extending the intake to sons of gentlemen who had nothing to do with the Navy didn't help. Osborne College on the Isle of Wight was more attractive. By 1910 there were just 53 pupils, of whom 13 were to withdraw at the end of the summer term. Funds were £191 with liabilities around £900. Subscribers were down from 569 in 1890 to 100 in 1910, of whom only 30 were naval officers. Two appeals in recent

Eltham College 1st XV. 1908-9



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years had hardly met their own expenses. Headmaster Rubie, who had waived part of his salary in order to help the school's finances, declared that no further economies could be effected without destroying the character of the school. There was also an "incident" in 1909, which did

not help. Never mind what that was all about.

But let us not be too sad about the demise of the Royal Naval School. On the contrary, their loss was our gain. For just £6,800 we purchased the buildings and a small amount of land in front of the main entrance. The playing fields were not part of the deal, as these were sold separately, eventually to the YMCA. When we moved in we had to erect a fence to keep trespassers out.

They moved out in July 1910 but we didn't move in until January 1912. There was much work to be done in the meantime, costing a further £7,500. The auction of the entire contents of the Royal Naval School took place on 13th and 14th September. We have the catalogue, which appears to indicate that the SSM purchased many practical items for use in situ, such as benches, cutlery etc for the dining-hall. The auction raised £982 4s 4d. From the Chapel, tablets with the names of Old Boys killed in action were removed to the Royal Naval College in Greenwich. Other tablets were to be removed by the families concerned, if they wished, at their own expense. One was not removed and is still there (see left).

We had someone on the premises for over a year before we moved in. Mr Sydney Moore, the wonderfully inspirational and successful French teacher (1902-15), had been living in the sanatorium since September 1910, showing visitors around and keeping an eye on the place. When we moved in, the modern facilities included electric light and central heating. But that's another story, told in *Our Century*. Make sure you get a copy in 2012.

Mark Stickings (College Archivist)

