

WW2 - Hamble Circus

During the Second World War many service personnel used the Victory Inn, particularly prior to D-Day. There are two mementos in the Victory from those days. On a wall is a table top with the names carved in it by the men who left Hamble for Normandy and some girls names who they left behind. The other is an illustrated list of tanker captains' signatures, headed "Hamble Circus 'D' Day 1944" with the Victory's sign underneath the title.

Local resident Dick Marshall wrote the following about the Hamble Circus:

Living in Hamble and working and being associated with the shipping and naval craft that were there at that time, I remember well the build-up operation of what was probably one of the largest coastal tanker fleets ever seen.

During late 1943 and early 1944 a jetty extension was built to the east of the existing jetty head at the Shell Mex and BP Oil installation at Hamble. This extension could berth and load up to 6 coastal tankers simultaneously. The Ranger Hall was taken from the Home Guard and made ready to be used as a victualling depot to supply the stores that the large numbers of crew on the tankers would require. A large motor launch was allocated to be used to distribute stores to tankers which were laying at anchor. The tankers that were to be used in the operation started to assemble in the late spring with most of them then laying at anchor in Southampton Water off Hamble.

The fleet eventually consisted of 13 US built British manned motor tankers of 1,200 tons, 30 of the 400-ton economy built British coastal tankers which were called 'Chants', some older, larger British tankers and some US Army and Navy owned and manned tankers were also involved. After the initial beach-head in Normandy was taken and consolidated supplies of petrol and diesel oil were first shipped over by dry cargo coasters carrying fuel in cans and barrels, the coastal tankers that were based at Hamble commenced to operate as soon as the French port of Port-en-Bessin was liberated and made operational with discharge and storage facilities. The larger tankers had to remain outside this harbour and discharge into offshore pipelines that were positioned as soon as possible.

When the operation was in full swing a trophy of a Golden Cockerel was introduced for the tanker making the best time for the round trip. This was flown at the masthead and the competition for it was very strong so that it was frequently changing ships. Most of the tankers, which became known as the 'Hamble Circus' were still running in the autumn in conjunction with the PLUTO pipeline which had proved to be very successful.

Unfortunately, during this period of operating one US tanker, the 'Y17', disappeared with all hands probably as a result of hitting a mine. There is a wall plaque in remembrance of her crew in St Andrew's Church, Hamble. Later in the war 3 more of the tankers that had been part of the Hamble fleet were lost. The 'Empire Roseberg' and 'Rousevill' hit mines and the 'Rio Bravo' was sunk by a German E Boat.

Many of the crew from the tanker fleet became friendly and well known to the villagers at Hamble during their time sailing from the Hamble oil installation. A commemorating document which most of the tanker Captains had signed hangs on the wall of the Victory Inn at Hamble.