

Going with the tide

Have a look at a Map of England, can you see the River Medway and where you live?

Why did Kings and Queens pick the River Medway to build their Royal Navy?

Henry VIII started to use the River Medway in 1547 and in 1586 the first warship was launched from a small dockyard at Chatham. It was then officially established as a royal dockyard by Elizabeth I in 1567. The King picked the River Medway because of its closeness to the Thames estuary. It was also difficult for enemy ships to come up the Medway due to its shape (it has many twists and turns) and narrowness of the channel.

How would you navigate the River?

The Medway is a tidal river with a difference of 6 metres in tide levels. The tides change twice in a day and, at its lowest level, provides a very narrow channel for only small ships to navigate it due to the mud banks both sides of the river. At its highest level the mud banks are covered and thereby provide a hazard for the larger ships which may ground on the mud and become unusable.

Therefore, every large ship which comes up the Medway needs a pilot (an experienced seafarer who knows the mudbanks and the channels) to guide its route and this also applied to warships which came to Chatham for refit.

In the days of sail it was very difficult to get the right wind in order to leave or enter the Medway. Large ships often needed small ships to tow them and this could involve using rowing boats. It is reported that large battleships in the days of sail sometimes took many weeks to get out into the open sea.

Modern warships still take an hour and a half to get from Chatham to Sheerness..