

TIN TABERNACLE

TIN CHURCH TO TRAINING SHIP



Illustration by Willesden Sea Cadet Unit Committee Member, Chris Price

WWII and the YMCA

At the outbreak of WWII the members of the religious community that had been occupying Cambridge Hall dispersed and the building closed. This marked the end of the Tin Tabernacle as a place of worship.

There's a local understanding that the building was used as an ARP (Air Raid Precautions) centre during the war and a legend that surplus gas masks and tin helmets were cemented into the concrete foundations of the Bofors Gun when it was installed in the 1960's. Though we've not yet located any records to confirm this, it would not be unusual for a building of this size to have been employed for such a purpose over this period.

By the beginning of 1943 the lessees of Cambridge Hall, Mr Reuben Jackson and Mr Ernest Bray, were in negotiations with the YMCA about disposal of the lease to them. This was approved by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners and a new lease to the YMCA to use the Hall, for the religious, mental or physical training of the youth of both sexes, was signed in July of that year. Though the building was in fact never used by them.

The Sea Cadets and Lord Lloyd Memorial Hall

In 1948 the lease was assigned to the Willesden Sea Cadets Unit. They renamed the building the Lord Lloyd Memorial Hall, after Lord Lloyd Dolobran, a politician with links to T.E. Lawrence, who became president of the Navy League (precursor of the Sea Cadets) in 1930 and passed away in 1941.

It was the practice of Sea Cadet units to fit out their halls to represent a naval ship and name it after a decommissioned vessel; in this instance it became the TS Bicester (Training Ship). The example here is an unusually elaborate and complete example of this practice. It is understood from the current Unit Committee that this was due to the extraordinary vision and creative zeal of past unit members Freddie Nunn and Doug Greathurst, who saw the potential of this large iron structure to house a detailed replica ship.

TS Bicester

The creation of the TS Bicester took place from the 1950's and continued through the 1960's. The subdivisions of the ground floor were constructed from steel sheeting said to have been recycled from Leyland bus panels and provided a series of small training and ancillary spaces. The bridge housed the wheel, communications tube and facsimile engine controls; a selection of naval maps was also amassed.

The 2 guns, the Oerlikon 20mm Cannon and the Bofors 40mm anti-aircraft gun, were installed at some point during the 1960's. A 1964 photograph of the Sea Cadet Unit indicates that they arrived after this date and it's possible that this is inked to the winding down of the Civil Defence Corps.

1964 was also the year that the film Becket, starring Richard Burton and Peter O'Toole, was released. It's not clear exactly when or why, but parts of the set were removed from Shepperton Studios in Surrey to create a ship's chapel, with authentic Oscar winning altar and stained glass.



The HMS Bicester, image © Imperial War Museum

The Tin Tabernacle Today

Little has changed since the TS Bicester was completed. The naval collections were added to and a small extension to house toilets and a new office behind the Bridge were constructed at unknown dates. But the building, as a complete replica naval ship, has been maintained by the Willesden Sea Cadets committee through to the present day.

Though the condition of the building has meant that the Sea Cadets are, at present, not able to operate here, they retain a strong connection to it. In more recent years, the building has had a broader community function, hosting a range of events such as cinema evenings and a folk club. In 2012 it hosted an art installation by Lindsay Seers and organised by Artangel and has been used by other groups as a rehearsal space because of the fantastic acoustics.

Willesden Sea Cadets' new H.Q.

Willesden Sea Cadets have now moved into their new headquarters at Lord Lloyd Memorial Hall, Cambridge Avenue, Kilburn and new recruits are being signed on weekly. The Commanding Officer, Lieut. R. E. Roberts, RNVR. Has returned after spending several weeks commanding 1,000 cadets in training with H.M.S Adamant reserve fleet.

While attending a course with H.M.S Excellent C.P.O Sullivan gained an insight into the latest naval training for the use of the unit during the coming season. He is confident that the unit will win the amateur boxing championships next February.

The Unit's pulling team took part on the area regatta at Raven's Court and in the final of the Whale Championship they were beaten by about a quarter of a length by Kingston.

Marylebone Mercury, Sat 2 October 1948

Research supported by Michael Copeman, Historic Building Specialist and Emily Abrehart, volunteering for London Historic Buildings Trust. Thanks to the project partners and project team for ongoing support and input.

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