

The former sailing ship *Vindicatrix* was moored in the Old Arm at Sharpness from 1939 to 1966 to provide a base for training boys as deck hands and stewards for the merchant navy. The courses lasted two or three months, and around 70,000 boys received their basic training here.

### The Sea School

Initially, the ship was the school's only accommodation, but later a camp of huts was built nearby, and then the ship was primarily used for tuition. Life on board was made a close reproduction of the conditions of sea service, with watches kept night and day, time signalled on the ship's bell and navigation lamps trimmed and lighted. The boys were taught ropework, boat handling, signalling, knowledge of the compass, cleaning and serving in the mess. When they left at the end of the course, they were found employment on a ship. Most of the boys came straight from leaving school, and for many it was their first time away from home. They found the life very hard, but they acknowledge that their short stay on board rapidly turned them into young men.



### Memories of Discipline

Peter Bennett was a catering boy in autumn 1964 (second from left with a white collar), and his best mate was the deck boy John Murphy (second from right with a blue collar). Peter remembers that discipline was very strict. One of the most important rules was that there was to be no fighting whatsoever. To be caught fighting meant instant dismissal, and the boys were all so desperate to go away to sea that this rule was almost always adhered to. Boxing was encouraged and did provide an opportunity for settling grievances, but prizes were awarded for style rather than victory, and when Peter and John met in the ring, they won the medal for the best bout of the evening. One bad memory which sticks in Peter's mind is the food which used to stick in his throat, and one good memory is that he particularly enjoyed being able to sail on the canal.



### Memories of Sailing a Lifeboat

Des Jenkins trained on the *Vindicatrix* in the summer of 1949 and remembers his time there as if it was only yesterday. The whole idea of the school was to instill seamanship, so the training was hard and the boys learned to obey the instructors to the letter. For the majority who had never been in a boat before, many of the words used initially sounded like a foreign language. Des remembers one occasion when a group were out in the lifeboat receiving sailing instructions on how to dip the lug if ever on a long tack. The fun started when the boat buried her bows into the bank, scattering boys everywhere with the embarrassed instructor Mr. Banbury screaming abuse at all and sundry. Fending off with a boat hook, the boys found themselves in the middle of the canal with the standing lug down and were falling over themselves in an effort to raise it. One boy got the ire of the instructor who screamed at him "GET OUT, GET OUT" which he promptly did, stepping over the side into the water, were he floated alongside in his life jacket with a big smile on his face. Any chance of getting sail up was doomed as



all the boys burst out laughing and gave a big cheer. Needless to say the boy in question ended up "Under the Clock" outside Captain Duguid's office awaiting whatever punishment was coming.

### October 1957

Ken Hughes sent this picture of his group in October 1957.



### Spider Tattoos

Billy Leatherbarrow joined the *Vindicatrix* in May 1962 on the day after his sixteenth birthday. In his hut was a lad from Gosport who did little tattoos in indian ink of a spider with a trail of tiny footprints. Most of the boys in the hut had one on their thumb or low down on their leg so that they would recognise one another if they ever met again in later life.

### Sing-Song

Wally Marshall sent this photo of the *Vindicatrix*, which he joined in the early 1940s having said he was older than his true age to get away from the bombing in London. He remembers that at the initial medical, the doctor put his hand on his forehead and said 'Yes. he's warm. Let him in.'

Wally used to play the piano at the local Missions to Seamen so the boys could have a sing-song. One favourite included the lines:

Oh they sent me off to join the *Vindicatrix*,  
And they told me it was absolutely it.  
The Quartermaster shouted to the Boatswain,  
And the Boatswain showed us where to store our kit.  
We went into the scuppers and spewed up all our  
suppers.  
And wished to Christ we'd never seen the sea.  
It's all right for a few, but not for me and you.



### Billy & His Mates

William (Billy) Williams, who trained on the *Vindicatrix* Nov-Dec 1957, has sent two photos. The group on the left are Tommy, Billy, John, Charlie and Terry. The aerial photo on the right shows the training ship in the foreground and the huts of the accommodation camp on the hillside behind.



### The Vindi Boys Live On

Although the *Vindicatrix* was broken up in 1967, her spirit lives on in the memories of the former Vindi Boys who are members of the [TS Vindicatrix Association](#). The Association has branches all over the world and they hold a reunion at Sharpness in August each year. They have erected a memorial at Sharpness to all those who passed through the school, and they have restored the figurehead of the ship and put it on display in the foyer of the National Waterways Museum at Gloucester. The figurehead is known as Mrs Drysdale after the wife of one of the directors of the company that had the ship built in 1893.

