

# Railway Coastal Museum History e-Bulletin: Volume XVII

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June 2008

## New Exhibit at the RCM: The St. John's Dockyard

One of the features of the Railway Coastal Museum is the sounds that are constantly playing in the background. The sounds of ship's whistles, trains traveling over the tracks, seagulls and telegraph operators are a part of the experience.

But several times a day, another sound can be heard, the loud blast of a whistle coming from outside the building. This is the whistle at the Newdock dockyard, located directly behind the Museum, and it is a sound that has been heard for decades.

The dockyard has been a fixture of St. John's harbour for well over 100 years, and it has long been associated with the Railway. Built in 1883-84, the dockyard was an impressive and expensive undertaking, costing \$550,000 to construct. The opening ceremonies were set for December 10, 1884, when the *HMS Tenedos* would become the first ship to enter the dock, and all the local media were duly prepared. Unfortunately, the ceremony was postponed, and one anxious reporter found himself in the embarrassing position of having published an

account of a ceremony that hadn't actually happened yet.

As so often occurred with large construction projects at this time, the original builder and operator of the dockyard went bankrupt in 1892. The dockyard was then operated alternately by government and several local firms, before becoming part of the Reid Newfoundland Company's holdings under the 1898 contract.

The Reid Company operated the dockyard until 1923, when the dockyard, along with the Railway, once again became the responsibility of the Newfoundland government. It would remain that way until 1949, when under the terms of confederation it was turned over to Canadian National Railways.

It was operated as a department of the railway and later as an independent subsidiary of CN Marine and Marine Atlantic until 1997, when it was sold to a private operator and became Newdock.

A lot has changed in St. John's harbour since the *HMS Tenedos* sailed into the dock in 1884. But still, the old whistle signals shift changes and break times for workers at the dockyard.



*HMS Tenedos*, the first ship to enter the drydock in December, 1884.

Photo Courtesy of CNS

## **New Exhibit at the Railway Coastal Museum!**

This summer, the Railway Coastal Museum will launch a new permanent exhibit dedicated to the St. John's dockyard. The exhibit will relate the history of the dockyard, and demonstrate the tools used and the type of work done by the men and women employed there.

The centrepiece of the exhibit consists two large models of ships' hulls, one constructed of wood and the other of steel. These models will allow visitors to understand the work that the dockyard did on both types of vessels, and how, over time, their jobs changed as the design and construction of ships evolved.

The exhibit will display tools and equipment used by workers at the dockyard, such as hammers, chisels, chaulking tools, and so on. Also on display is a diving suit used by Fred Chancey, who was a diver at the dockyard for many years. Mr. Chancey's knowledge and generous donations made the exhibit possible.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the St. John's Dockyard is that it is still in operation today. Long after the trains and most of the coastal service has disappeared, the whistle still calls men and women to work on the vessels that sail our waters.



The Newdock Facilities today, showing the drydock and the more modern SynchroLift system to the left. The three shadows to the left of the drydock are ships that have been lifted out of the water for repairs and maintenance.

**Do You Have a Story About St. John's Dockyard?  
We'd Love to Hear it!**

**Send Your Story to the Railway Coastal Museum!**

**We Appreciate any Feedback or Questions You May Have.**

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