



The new sign at the Royal Oak now shows the battleship.

A wave of change for the land-locked ex-sailors

SCOPE

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Next week SCOPE visits Basildon Park, a stately home between Wallingford and Pangbourne.



Jack Thwaite with a ship's bell.



Sailors' hat bands in a showcase at the Royal Oak

A wave of change is rippling through the ranks of ex-sailors now land-locked in the heart of the South Oxfordshire countryside.

Under the sign of the Royal Oak, a love of the sea acts as a bond for the men of the Wantage branch of the Royal Naval Association.

And it is a sign of the times that even the sign above their meeting place has changed.

Instead of the traditional oak tree on the sign above the Royal Oak pub, there is now a plush new sign, featuring more appropriately the Royal Oak battleship.

The friendly branch — where they still call each other "shipmate" — is also brightening up its image by changing its standard.

A link with the nuns from the Wantage Order of the Convent of St Mary the Virgin, led to the nuns offering to prepare the branch a new standard as it approaches its 20th anniversary next year.

Chairman Nobby Clark and treasurer Ernie Smart recently went to Alton, Hants, where the nuns are carrying out the work, and they expect the standard to be ready later in the year.

The shipmates always have stories to swap at their regular meetings, but a few new ones, or a different version of an old tale, would not go amiss.

"We are anxious to increase our membership. The population is growing all the time, and I am sure there are ex-Naval people who would be interested if they knew of our activities," said secretary Jack Thwaite.

He joined the navy as a boy in

1938 on HMS Ganges, and left in 1954 as a leading signaller.

Ernie Smart, well-known as chairman of Wantage Town football club, has just been made a life member of the RNA for his service to the branch since it was formed in 1961. "Shipmate" Smart, who joined the Royal Navy in 1842, and served as a gunner on merchant ships until 1946, has been treasurer of the branch since 1966.

The branch president is Capt. H. A. King, who now lives in Portsmouth. He joined up as a cadet in 1919 and retired in 1951. He received the DSO after the sinking of HMS Kashmir at the Battle of Crete, and was senior divisional officer, of the First Destroyer Flotilla, with Lord Louis Mountbatten as captain in HMS Kelly.

The branch also has two veterans of the First World War. During his naval career, Dick Pegler, who joined in 1917, was a chief motor mechanic in torpedo boats, and Fred Foxon, now living at Rowstock, was on the cruiser HMS Caroline between 1915 and 1919.

Although varying shift work often makes it difficult for all the shipmates to get together for meetings, the branch's fund raising and social activities continue to thrive.

Members help in regular house to house and street collections for the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, the British Sailors Society and Mission to Seamen charities, and donations are given to the Faringdon ward of the Fairmile hospital, where one of their number was a patient. They also co-operate with other ex-service welfare societies.



Henry Samuel (left), the landlord of the Royal Oak, and Mr Nobby Clark, chairman of the RNA, looking at naval mementoes.



Left to right are: Ernie Smart, Nobby Clark, Henry Samuel, and Jack Thwaite