



PORTLAND PORT PRESS RELEASE

PORTLAND PORT CELEBRATES FIRST TEN YEARS

On Wednesday 29th March, Portland Port Limited celebrates the 10th anniversary of the day that the company took possession of the former Royal Naval Base on 29th March 1996.

It has been estimated that 4,500 defence jobs were lost between 1994 and 1999 as a result of the closure of MoD establishments throughout the Borough of Weymouth & Portland. In reviewing what has been achieved since then, John Langham, Chairman of the Portland Port group of companies, said,

“We should pay tribute to the efforts made by the Portland Naval authorities for doing their best to help preserve jobs but the fact is that, when we took over, there was no ongoing business and we had huge overheads to meet. We started with two tenants, the Defence Research and Evaluation Agency (now QinetiQ), on two of the breakwaters, and Manor Marine who, by an agreement between us and the Ministry of Defence, had moved into the former Port Auxiliary Repair Unit buildings a few months earlier. Both are with us still. Much has progressed in the years since then, though not necessarily in the way that we had first envisaged. We have had to remain flexible in our planning, alert to new opportunities and as quick as we have been allowed in our response to emerging customer requirements.

“At the time, no one could have foreseen the arrival of HMP *The Weare*, now recently closed after 6 years successful use. The possible basing of cable ships was already under discussion but the present defence business is more substantial than we had anticipated. The success of Portland Bunkers International Limited’s use of the underground tanks for fuelling ships in the Inner and Outer Harbours is clear for all to see but planning delays and constraints have meant that we were unable to take advantage of the, above-ground, Mere Tank Farm’s considerable potential when potential customers were in the offing. Even allowing for the adverse effects of 9/11, the cruise ship business, after an encouraging start, has grown more slowly than we might have hoped but the signs for the future, working with Destination South West, in conjunction with local authorities and tourist destinations, are now very encouraging. Short-sea dry cargos are beginning to make an impact and development of the Port estate is picking up quickly. We now have some 25 companies located within the Port or in a commercial relationship with us, most of them marine related and most making their own particular contribution to the comprehensive range of services that the Port offers to ship owners. Ships are vital. The revenues they bring keep companies in business, keep people in jobs, and pay for such expensive public goods as breakwater maintenance and harbour management.

“The number of port-based jobs, currently at over 600 and increasing again, after a fall from a high of 800 (the difference can largely be explained by the closure of the prison ship), are pretty well in line with the levels we told the Government and local authorities to expect before completion of the Weymouth and Western Relief Roads - and that, of course, is the most serious issue which faces not just the Port but South and West Dorset as a whole. The Port itself is a huge county, regional and national asset. It is large, deep and sheltered, with exceptionally good access to open waters and extremely well located on the English Channel. But the county’s land communication infrastructure is, as is widely acknowledged, pretty frightful and it has a considerable adverse effect on all businesses – not just the Port – and on jobs, the level of wages and the future health of the local economy. It has accelerated the decline of Weymouth as a commercial port and largely explains why Portland’s ferry business has yet to get off the ground. It is seriously inhibiting, amongst other things, the movement of cruise ship companies to Portland, the growth of cargo handling, with associated value-added activity and, in an age of sustainable development, of the ability of the Port to contribute to the transfer of freight from roads to water.

“The past ten years have been an undisputable success. Demand for jetty space is beginning to outstrip the port infrastructure we inherited from the Royal Navy and we are working on a major development of berths and cargo handling areas. Since 1996, the Port has been the engine of economic regeneration. The potential for the next ten years is equally exciting but better roads are crucial if that potential is to be fully realised.”

Ends

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