

Freedom of Pacific

Significance of Singapore

It would be difficult to exaggerate the significance of the floating dock Singapore from the point of view of naval strategy (writes Hector C. Bywater, the naval correspondent of the "Daily Telegraph"). It will extend by thousands of miles the striking range of our battle fleet, and enable Great Britain to deploy her main naval strength in the Pacific Ocean.

Formerly our largest and most powerful fighting craft have been virtually tied to European waters. Now the largest ships of the navy will have the freedom of the Pacific.

Eastward of Malta there was no dock capable of accommodating such vessels as the Nelson and Rodney, the ten bulged battleships of the Royal Sovereign and Queen Elizabeth types, the battle cruiser Hood, or the big aircraft-carriers. Consequently these ships, representing the backbone of the fleet, could not have been sent to operate in Far Eastern waters, however urgently needed.

At Singapore is a dock spacious enough to house our mightiest fighting ships for overhaul and repair. A single dock, it is true, would not suffice for the needs of a whole fleet in time of war, and other docks are to be provided at the Malayan base under the development scheme. But the completion of even this one dock has immeasurably increased the strategic mobility of the British battle fleet.

The dock, built by Swan, Hunter, and Wigham Richardson Ltd., left the Tyne last June in charge of Dutch tugs. The sections were divided into two convoys, and the voyage of 8,500 miles was accomplished without untoward accident, the last convoy arriving safely in November.

The task of joining up the sections and assembling them as a unit was put in hand without delay. The dock is to be moored a few miles up the artificial harbour which has been created in the Johore Strait, on the northern side of Singapore, by the stone causeway that connects the island with the Malay Peninsula.

The dock has a lifting capacity of 50,000 tons, considerably greater than the full-load weight of H.M.S. Hood, the heaviest man-of-war now in existence or ever likely to be built. Inside the walls of the dock itself are splendidly-equipped workshops, capable of executing any save the most elaborate repairs to a damaged battleship.

Much work is to be done this year on the new graving dock, the quays, buildings, railways, and other appurtenances of the new Singapore base. Eight years have gone by since the scheme was first mooted, but owing to political difficulties—notably the Labour Government's temporary veto on the scheme in 1924—financial reasons, and the vast amount of preliminary labour involved in jungle clearance and dredging, little progress has been made to date on the permanent works.

Although tenders for these were invited in October, 1927, the main contract was not placed until nearly twelve months later. It was awarded to Sir John Jackson, Ltd., of 53 Victoria Street, Westminster, with a proviso that the work should be completed within seven years. Its value represents a substantial proportion of the £7,750,000 which the naval part of the scheme is estimated to cost.

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The new graving dock is designed to take two super-Dreadnoughts simultaneously, so that, with the floating dock, it will be possible to accommodate three of our largest warships at the same time. No other dockyard in the world will have such extensive docking facilities for great ships. If the time-table is observed the new base should be ready by 1934, fifteen years after the inception of the plan.

The estimated cost of £7,750,000 does not include any provision for the defences of the base, which will obviously have to be on a considerable scale. It is understood that the town of Changi, situated at the eastern extremity of the island and commanding the approach to the new harbour where the dockyard is being laid out, will be the headquarters of the defence system. This will be planned with a view to repelling attack from sea or air. The hilly nature of the land should facilitate the siting of gun batteries.