

After his death, I found pages and pages of handwritten autobiographical notes in my late father's brief case (not in any sort of order!) All related to his lifelong employment with the Medical Research Council.

Len had first started work in 1926 at the Medical Research Council's laboratory in Frognal, Hampstead at the age of 14 as a 'lab boy' [see links on main web page]. At the start of WW2, because of the nature of his work, he was not allowed to enlist in the Services, but initially he was an Air Raid Warden covering the

Medical Research Institute in Hampstead. Following his marriage and move to Finchley, he became an ARP for part of Church End Finchley.

I also found this newspaper clipping from the News Chronicle (year not known, but probably 1940) showing Len on the left in the top two photos:

I also remember him telling me that one of the tasks of the technicians in the early years of the war was to sample one of the cigars in every box of Havanas shipped to England from Cuba for Winston Churchill (I have no way of knowing if this is actually true – my dad was fond of telling yarns!! My mother just used to sigh and mutter 'swing a lamp').

Along with the notes were Identity cards, ration books, ARP passes and expired passports, and also his exercise book from the scientific technical course he studied at the Working Men's College in Kings Cross in his early years as a lab boy. A treasure trove of information.



The recollections below are transcribed from my father's notes, and relate to his time during WWII:

“... during the pre-war years, pay and prospects did not seem very encouraging. I was very interested in clinical work, and used to spend part of my leave with a friend of mine in a hospital laboratory at Paddington Green learning as much as I could about blood work and post-mortems. This is what encouraged me in 1942 to obtain permission from the (Medical Research) Council to join the Navy as a lab technician, where I obtained a great deal of experience finishing up as the Technician in charge of the laboratory at the Royal Naval Auxiliary Hospital at Dartmouth. [from photos in his albums, it looks as if his wife Mary was able to travel down to Dartmouth fairly regularly – she also told me about the wonderful cream teas served up by his landlady, saying that they didn’t seem to be affected by rationing down in Devon!]

This was fine until the Americans took over the College and Hospital, and I ended up in a hotel converted to Naval Sick Quarters with not much lab work. So when on leave and visiting Hampstead, G L Brown asked me if I wanted to join the fleet unit of the Royal Naval Personnel Research Committee, I jumped at the chance. Within days, I received a draft chit to HMS MRC and joined John Gray and others working out techniques for studying environment and metabolic studies of naval personnel in action.

After visiting a number of warships at various ports in England and Scotland, in 1945 we finally joined HMS Pioneer, a light fleet carrier on the way to the Far East, where the war with Japan was in progress.

We travelled in convoy via Malta and Mediterranean through the Suez Canal, to Ceylon and Sydney Australia, finally finishing up at Manus in the Admiralty Islands near New Guinea. The unit joined a Royal New Zealand cruiser which became part of the combined British and United States unit (?) which attacked Tokyo, transferring from ship to ship at sea [he had photos of the breeches buoy used for such transfers] to collect more information about conditions in gun turrets, magazines and production(?) rooms, etc closing up with the crews in action.

We rejoined the carrier at Manus and when finally the Japanese surrendered, the carrier proceeded at speed to Hong Kong. After a period in Hong Kong we took passage in a tank landing craft to Singapore where the Army gave us a laboratory in an empty building at the Singapore General Hospital.

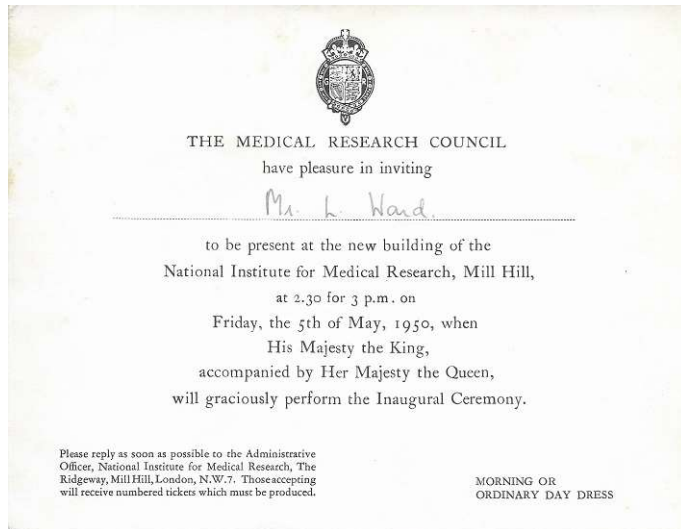
After clearing up the mess left by the Japanese, we spent some months collating all the results obtained and preparing a report for the RNPRC. We finally took passage in a repair transport to England where I was demobbed in August 1946 and resumed work in Biological Standards (at the Institute in Hampstead).

There had been quite a number of changes, Sir Henry (Dale) and Dr Hartley had retired and the new chief of Standards was Ashley Miles. Fortunately, we seem to hit it off together almost at once, and I was able to settle down and learn a lot from him.”

My father’s Service History from the Royal Navy shows that during his time in the Far East, he was posted on the following vessels:

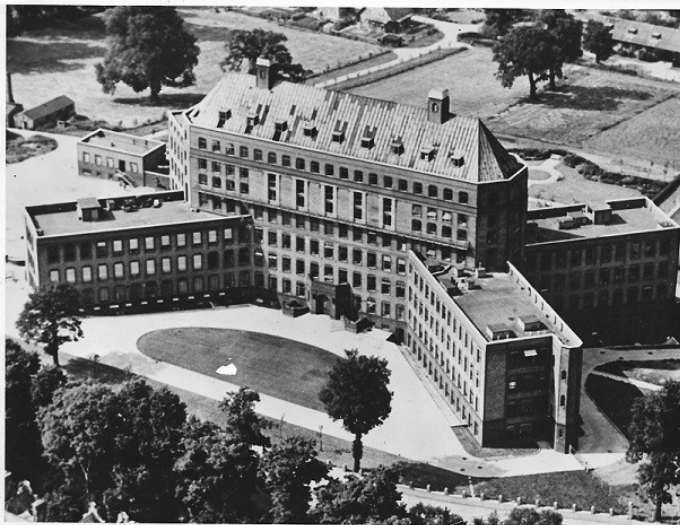
- HMS Pioneer
- HMS Gambia
- HMS Nizam
- HMS Sultan
- HMS President
- HMS Drake

The Medical Research Council had planned to move the NIMR to Mill Hill before WWII, but before the move was completed war was declared. The unfinished building was lent to the Admiralty as a training facility for the WRNS and dubbed HMS Pembroke. The Navy relinquished the building at Mill Hill in 1946, and after extensive refurbishment the staff finally moved in in November 1949 with the official opening taking place in 1950.



This is his invitation to the official opening ceremony, when the Inaugural Ceremony was performed by the King and Queen.

The photo below, which I discovered in his old briefcase, shows the NIMR building, which could be seen from miles around with its' green copper roof on the top of Mill Hill Ridgeway. I think it was very newly built when this photo was taken, as there don't seem to be any vehicles parked anywhere.



My father practically lived in this building – he took his responsibilities hugely seriously and generally called in most weekends “to check everything was alright” – often taking me along as well. We used to go up on the roof on fireworks night as you could see everyone's fireworks far into the distance.

He retired shortly before the Biological Standards Division moved to a new facility out in Hertfordshire, and he died before it was closed down and all the staff moved out. I drove past very recently and was shocked to discover the whole site has been flattened and they plan to build luxury flats there. My poor old dad must be turning in his grave.