

HOW WE MADE "LITTLE SHIPS"

Messrs. Elkins' War Effort

LARGEST CRAFT LAUNCHED ON "TWO RIVERS"

WITH the outbreak of war, the boating industry of Christchurch came to a sudden end, but the boat building yards at the Quay did not close down. In ever-increasing numbers, battleship grey craft—some of them the largest ships ever built on the local rivers—slid down the slipway, and were quietly, piloted away to Portsmouth Dockyard.

Later, in all parts of the world, at D Day and at all the major landing operations, British sailors and soldiers were able to bear testimony to the sterling construction of Christchurch boats, and Mr. E. F. Elkins, who with his partner, Mr. R. Yeabsley, owns the Quay Boat Yards, has received hundreds of letters of appreciation and thanks from the men who sailed in them. This is another story, hitherto unwritten, of the greatness of the Christchurch war effort.

It may seem a far call from pleasure yachts to invasion landing craft, but from a month before the war Mr. Elkins, acting under Admiralty instructions, began to make the change over.

"Everything went very smoothly from the first," Mr. Elkins told a Christchurch Times reporter. "The work we were doing—at any rate to begin with—was much the same as our peace time job."

Twenty-seven foot whalers was the first Christchurch contribution to the Navy, but this order was soon replaced by one for 25 foot motor cutters, which were really more suitable for a firm specialising in marine engineering. The cutters are general purpose craft carried by destroyers, corvettes, and other lightly armed warships. Eighty of these were supplied to the Admiralty during the course of the war.

In 1941 came the first order for the Harbour Defence M. L. They are 72ft. in length, and the largest vessels ever launched in the long history of boat building on the Avon and Stour. Used for convoy and harbour coastal defence work, for mine sweeping, and patrol purposes, two of the 6 M.L.s built in Christchurch went to Malta, one to Ceylon, and another helped to lay the smoke screen for the D Day invasion operations.

"Although they were the biggest craft built here," said Mr. Elkins, "We had surprisingly little trouble in getting them off. We waited for a high spring tide, and they were taken away under their own steam to Portsmouth, like all the other boats."

LANDING DRAFT—SOME OF THE FIRST .

When the technique of sea landings had been worked out by the statisticians. Elkins' was one of the first firms to receive orders for landing craft—that is why Christchurch built boats that participated in all the major landing operations from the first "try-out" on the Lofoten Islands, in Norway, to the final success at D Day. They carried our troops to North Africa, and landed them later at Sicily.

The landing craft are 40ft. by 10ft. and contain the large drawbridge in the bows, reminiscent of a car ferry. They were of armour plate construction, something of a novelty for an establishment usually working in wood, but the small difficulties entailed were soon overcome. Just over a hundred of these boats left the slip at the confluence of the Avon and Stour.

Among other ships built was a smaller M.L. of 45ft., and a few small boats, such as the 16ft. motor dinghies used for survey work.

Altogether 220 Admiralty vessels were built at the yard.

"Of course we started slowly," said Mr. Elkins. "Perhaps only two or three in several months; but before long we were turning out three of the big boats a month, beside the other smaller craft."

He paid a big tribute to the staff: "During peace time we must have employed about 25 men, and that figure rose to 85 at our peak period of war-time production. During those six years we never had one dispute, and the men were always keen and ready to learn. They backed me up

splendidly. I don't remember losing a minute for air raids.

ONE BOMB.

"We were very proud of our motor fire pump crew, too. We entered several of the competitions with it. In Sept., 1940, we had one fire bomb on the slip way just missing one of the boats. That was the last, but it started us fire watching—first Mr. Yeabsley and I, and later our trained crew. I don't remember anyone being late for a fire practice without a genuine reason."

Elkins' helped the war effort in another way. From Sept., 1940, to Sept. of this year, £9,459 were collected for National Savings, efficiently organised by their secretary. Miss Harper.

The firm is still handling big Admiralty contracts, and the change over to peace time status will probably be a slow one. However, Mr. Elkins is trying to obtain licences to build private craft and a certain amount of private maintenance work is now being undertaken.