

COUNCIL

17 JANUARY 2008

CORPS OF ROYAL ENGINEERS – HONORARY FREEDOM OF THE BOROUGH

Portfolio holder: Councillor Rodney Chambers, Leader

Report from: Neil Davies, Chief Executive

Author: Jane Ringham, Head of Members' Services and Elections

1. Summary

- 1.1 This report has been prepared at the request of the Leader and invites the Council to consider a proposal to confer the honorary freedom of the borough on The Corps of Royal Engineers.

2. Decision Issues

- 2.1 This is a matter for Council.

3. Background

- 3.1 The honorary freedom of the borough is the highest civic distinction that can be conferred upon individuals or collective bodies in recognition of outstanding service or particular civic association, ensuring the honourable perpetuation of their memory within the community.
- 3.2 Entry to the roll of freedom is usually accompanied by the presentation to the recipient of a scroll embodying details of the formal Council resolution and engrossed with the Council's corporate seal.
- 3.3 The power to award honorary freedom of the borough is contained in the Local Government Act 1972. Section 249 of that Act requires that an appropriate resolution is passed by not less than two thirds of the Members voting thereon at a meeting of the Council specially convened for the purpose. Those awarded honorary freedom are required to be persons of distinction or persons who have, in the opinion of the Council, rendered eminent services to the borough.

4. History of Corps of Royal Engineers and contribution to the life of Medway

- 4.1 No British Army regiment can claim continuous permanent service under the Crown further back than the formation of the standing Army in 1660 after the restoration of King Charles II. King Charles II ordered further extensions to the Chatham Naval base and its defences, which were constructed under the direction of military engineer officers. However, the origins of military engineering can be traced back to 1066 and William the Conqueror.
- 4.2 In 1415 Henry V raised an “office or Ordnance” with a permanent establishment of engineer and gunner officers and storemen. A Corps of Engineers was established in 1716, being given military rank in 1757. In 1787 the Corps of Engineers received a Royal Warrant from King George III and the Corps of Royal Military Artificers was formed. One of the first units was the “Chatham Company”. Between 1757 and 1807 barracks were built for the garrisons of the defences by the Royal Engineers and later in the 18th Century, Royal Engineer Officers were responsible for the design and execution of the great Chatham Dockyard extension projects.
- 4.3 In 1812 the Royal Engineer Establishment (RE Establishment) was set up in Chatham and the following year the Corps was renamed the Corps of Royal Sappers and Miners. In 1856 the soldiers of the Royal Sappers and Miners were absorbed into the Corps of Royal Engineers, combining the officers and soldiers for the first time. At this time the depot of the Royal School of Military Engineering was moved from Woolwich to Chatham and Chatham became the Headquarters of the Corps as we now know it. Except for a period during WWII when parts of it were housed temporarily elsewhere, Chatham has remained the traditional home of the Royal Engineers ever since.
- 4.4 During the 19th Century the Royal Engineers served in many parts of the world, in wars in India and Africa, and also building roads and other public works as new colonies were opened up. They have also excelled in many other fields, including Major General Scott who designed the roof of the Albert Hall. Gillingham balloons were used successfully in the African wars for observation purposes and this led directly to the eventual formation of the Royal Air Force. In 1828 Major Pasley discovered a method of manufacturing cement made from chalk and Medway blue clay on a commercial scale. From that discovery sprang the Portland Cement industry that flourished on the banks of the River Medway in Chatham. The Royal Engineers staged from time to time at Chatham demonstrations of siege operations that were watched by large numbers of civilians, and one of these was immortalised by Charles Dickens in an early chapter of “Pickwick Papers”.

- 4.5 During WWII some 26,000 enemy bombs were dropped on the UK and of these about 10 per cent failed to explode. The Bomb Disposal Unit, Royal Engineers has dealt with the clearance of many minefields and unexploded bombs and has served abroad to assist other countries such as Malaysia and Germany.
- 4.6 The Corps has enjoyed a long and close association with predecessor authorities. In 1953 Gillingham Borough Council resolved to confer upon the Corps the honorary freedom of the borough. Since then, a number of our predecessor authorities have also conferred honorary freedom to the Corps, and/or its units (see appendix 1 for full details).

5. Financial and legal implications

- 5.1 The power to confer the honorary freedom of the borough of Medway on persons of distinction or persons who have, in the opinion of the Council, rendered eminent services to the borough, is contained within section 249 of the Local Government Act 1972. Section 249 of the Act also empowers the Council to spend a reasonable sum for the purpose of presenting an address or casket to a person upon whom the honorary freedom of the borough has been conferred.
- 5.2 The cost of this special Council meeting and the scroll setting out the resolution of the Council that will be presented to the Corps will be met from existing budget provision within Customer First, Democracy and Governance.

6. Recommendation

- 6.1 That, in pursuance of the power vested in it by virtue of section 249 of the Local Government Act 1972, the Council consider whether to agree to confer the honorary freedom of the borough on the Corps of Royal Engineers in perpetuity, in the interests of cementing and fostering the close and longstanding bonds of friendship and mutual respect existing between the Corps of Royal Engineers, Medway Council and its predecessor authorities.

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Background papers

Working documents held in Lead Officer's office, Civic Centre
http://www.remuseum.org.uk/rem_his_freedom.htm (list of honorary freedoms conferred on the Royal Engineers)

Appendix 1

Corps of Royal Engineers: Honorary Freedoms conferred by predecessor authorities

Date	Authority	Type	Present Unit/Holder	Original Unit/Holder
1953	Gillingham Borough Council	Corps	Royal Engineers Headquarters Mess	
1954	Rochester City Council	Corps	Royal Engineers Headquarters Mess	
1961	Rochester City Council	Unit	221 Field Squadron (EOD) (V)	590 EOD Squadron (V)
1962	Chatham Borough Council	Corps	Royal Engineers Headquarters Mess	
1968	Strood Rural District Council	Corps	Royal Engineers Headquarters Mess	
1971	Rochester City Council	Unit	590 STRE (EOD) (V)	
1977	Medway Borough Council ¹	Corps	Headquarters Royal School of Military Engineering	
1986	Rochester Upon Medway City Council	Unit	69 Gurkha Field Squadron	

¹ Rochester Upon Medway City Council is the successor name for the Medway Borough Council