

History of the Ministry of Defence

The Ministry of Defence (MOD) is a relatively young organisation - it has only existed in its present form since 1971 - but its predecessors go back to the times of Henry VII in the 16th century.

Origins

That the MOD can seem complex and confusing is partly attributable to the variety of tasks we undertake, but another reason lies in the Department's origins. Today's MOD is a fusion of old ministries: from 1946 to 1964 there were five Departments of State doing what the unified MOD does now: the Admiralty, the War Office, the Air Ministry, the Ministry of Aviation and the Ministry of Defence itself. In 1964 the first three and the MOD were amalgamated, and the defence functions of the Ministry of Aviation Supply (as it had by then become) were absorbed in 1971, when the MOD took over responsibility for supplying military aircraft and guided weapons.

The Admiralty

The oldest of these Departments was the Admiralty, responsible for the Navy. In 1546 Henry VIII created a Navy Board to oversee the administrative affairs of the naval service; policy direction, operational control and maritime jurisdiction remained in the hands of the Lord High Admiral. From 1628 this post was more often than not filled by a "committee" of Lords Commissioners - the Board of Admiralty, whose head was the First Lord, the Minister who was the political master of the Navy. For 200 years the Navy was run by these two Boards, under a system devised largely by Samuel Pepys.

The organisation served well enough during the wars with the Spanish, Dutch and French, but relations between the two Boards were not always harmonious. In 1832 a reforming First Lord abolished the Navy Board, bringing its functions under the superintendence of "Their Lordships" - the Board of Admiralty.

In the eighteenth century the Department moved to the building in Whitehall still called the Old Admiralty. The Admiralty Board continues to hold meetings in the historic Boardroom in the Old Admiralty Building.

The War Office

The War Office, responsible for the Army, was originally the Secretary at War's office. The first holder of the post was killed in battle - at sea - against the Dutch in 1666. It was not at first a big spending Department; office expenses for six months of 1673 amounted to £14 9s 0d. It became however of increasing importance in the political control of the Army, although it was not the only Government Department involved - in 1815 there were fifteen.

This was not an efficient system, and finally in 1854 the War Office was set up to take over all political and financial control of the Army. Even that was not a complete success. Florence Nightingale, who was a friend of the Secretary of State and very interested in the cause of military reform after her experiences during the Crimean War, wrote to him in 1859, describing the War Office as "a very slow office, an enormously expensive office, a not very efficient office". After many years of gradual change the War Office was finally reformed in 1904 on the lines of the Board of Admiralty, with the Secretary of State chairing the Army Council, and a new office for it was built in Whitehall.

The Air Ministry

The Air Ministry was created in January 1918 to oversee the birth in April 1918 of the Royal Air Force from the amalgamation of the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service. The organisation was broadly similar to that of the Admiralty and the War Office, with a Secretary of State chairing the Air Council and the senior RAF member holding the post of Chief of the Air Staff. In 1919 the Air Ministry moved to Adastral House, then in Kingsway. In 1952 the central part of the Air Ministry moved to the new building in Whitehall Gardens that was later to become the Main Building of the Ministry of Defence.

The Procurement Executive

The supply of military aircraft, which had been the responsibility of the Air Ministry, was transferred in 1940 to a new Ministry of Aircraft Production, which in 1946 was amalgamated with the Ministry of Supply. In further reorganisations the task was switched to the Ministry of Aviation in 1959, to the Ministry of Technology in 1967 and finally to the Ministry of Aviation Supply in 1970. In 1971 the Government called on Mr Derek Rayner to advise on its relations with the aviation industry. One of his principal recommendations was the transfer to the MOD of the military aviation task, to be undertaken by a separate organisation within the MOD, which would also assume the responsibility for all other military procurement.

The Procurement Executive was born on 2 August 1971, with Mr (later Lord) Rayner as its first Chief Executive. In 1995, it collocated to the purpose-built Abbey Wood complex in Filton, north Bristol and in 1999 became an Executive Agency of the MOD.