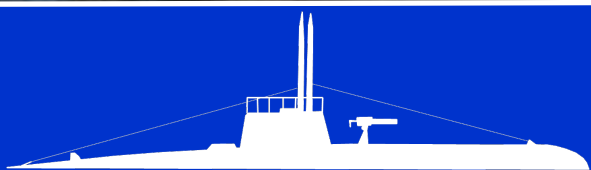


The U-boat War off the South Hams Coast 1915-18



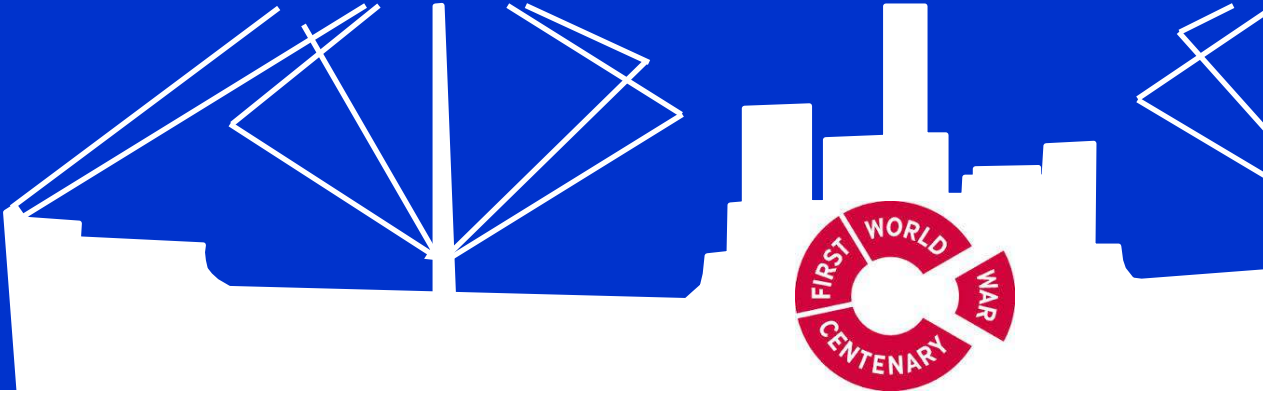
Willy Stower 1915



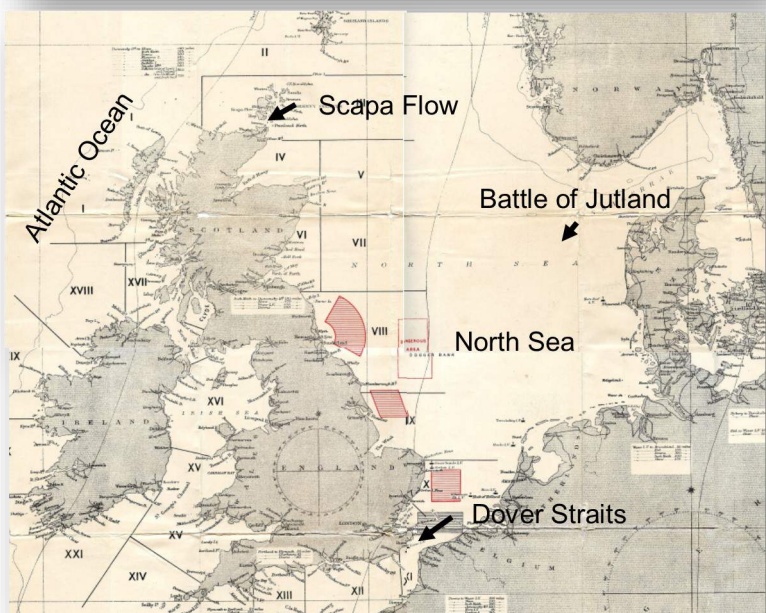
© Salcombe Maritime Museum
Design and text: Roger Barrett



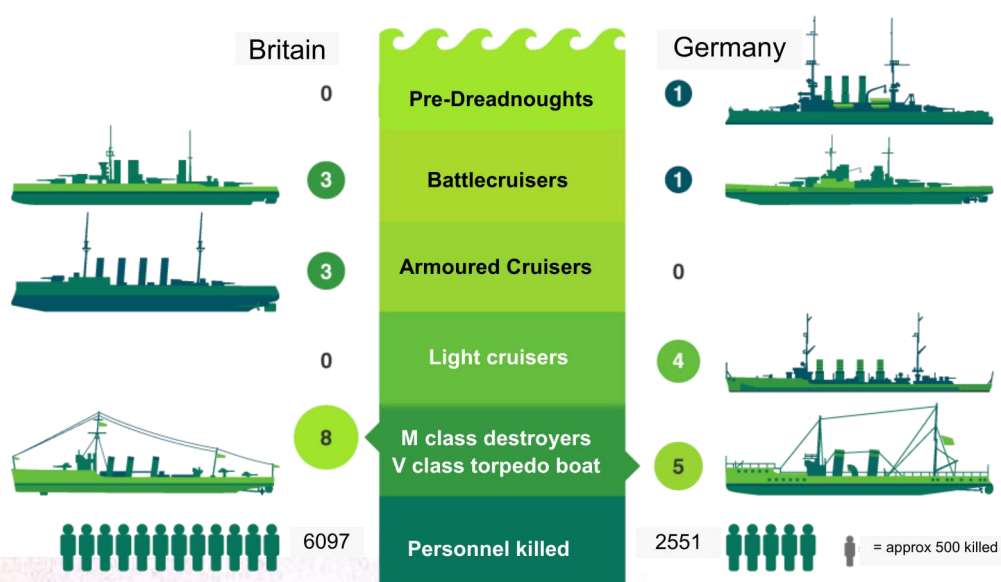
The U-boat War off the South Hams Coast 1915-18



The War at Sea 1914-16

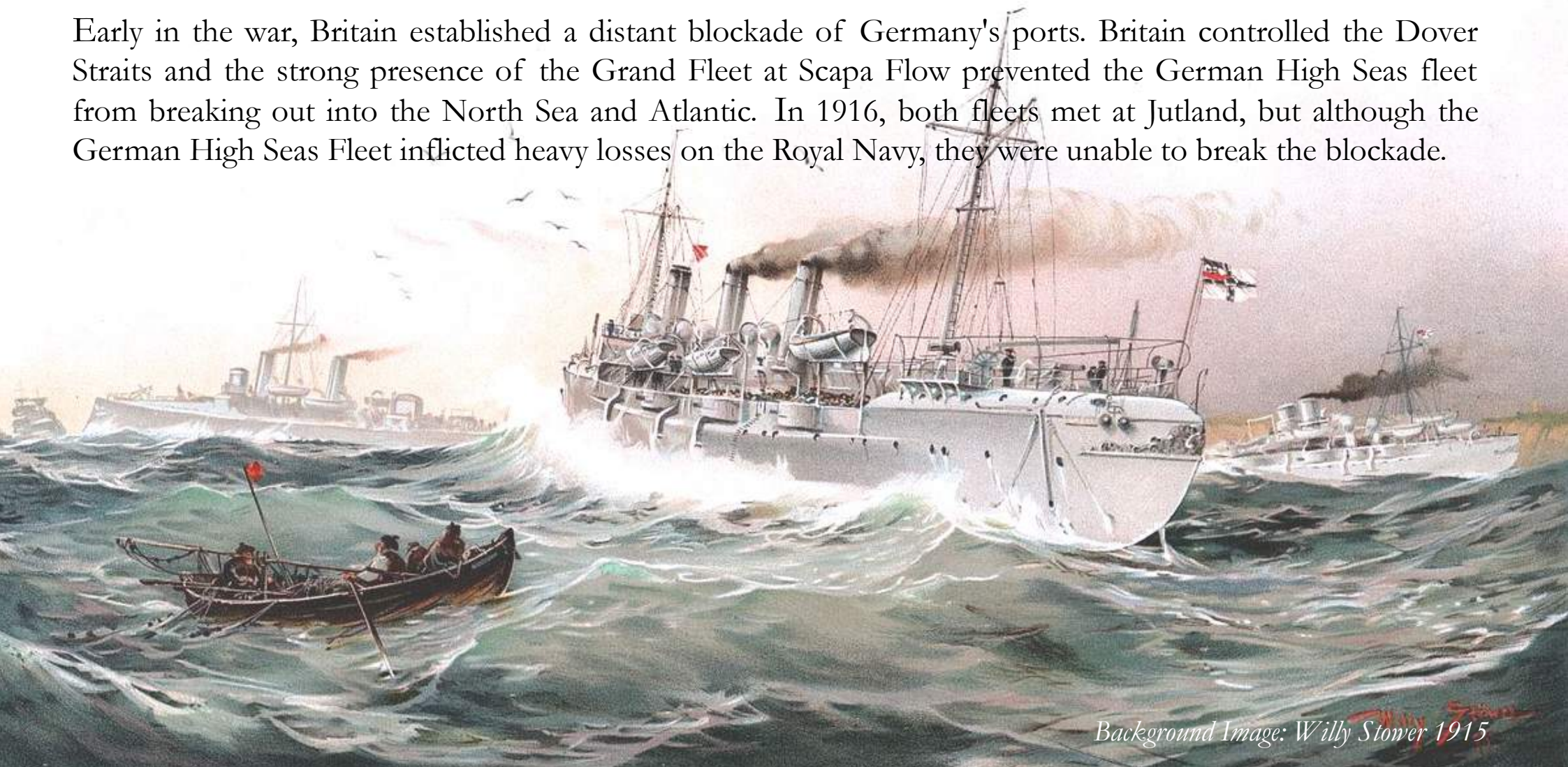


Throughout the First World War, the Royal Navy and the Imperial German Navy faced each other across the North Sea. With a stalemate on the Western Front, both sides sought to deliver a knockout blow to their opponents at sea.

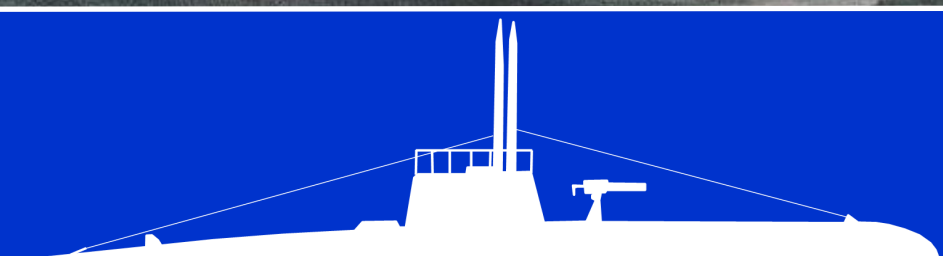


British and German Losses at The Battle of Jutland May 31-June 1 1916
(BBC website)

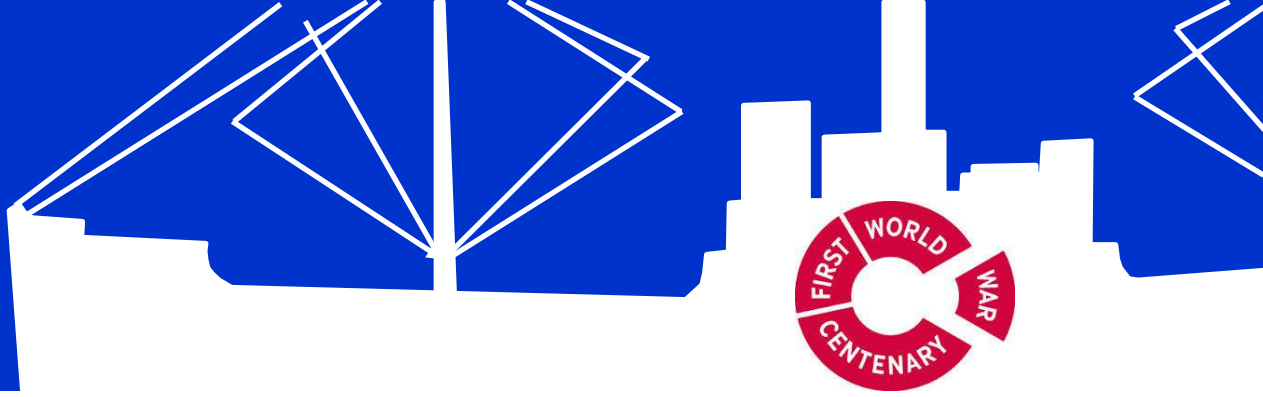
Early in the war, Britain established a distant blockade of Germany's ports. Britain controlled the Dover Straits and the strong presence of the Grand Fleet at Scapa Flow prevented the German High Seas fleet from breaking out into the North Sea and Atlantic. In 1916, both fleets met at Jutland, but although the German High Seas Fleet inflicted heavy losses on the Royal Navy, they were unable to break the blockade.



Background Image: Willy Storer 1915



The U-boat War off the South Hams Coast 1915-18



Britain Under Siege: The U-Boat Blockade

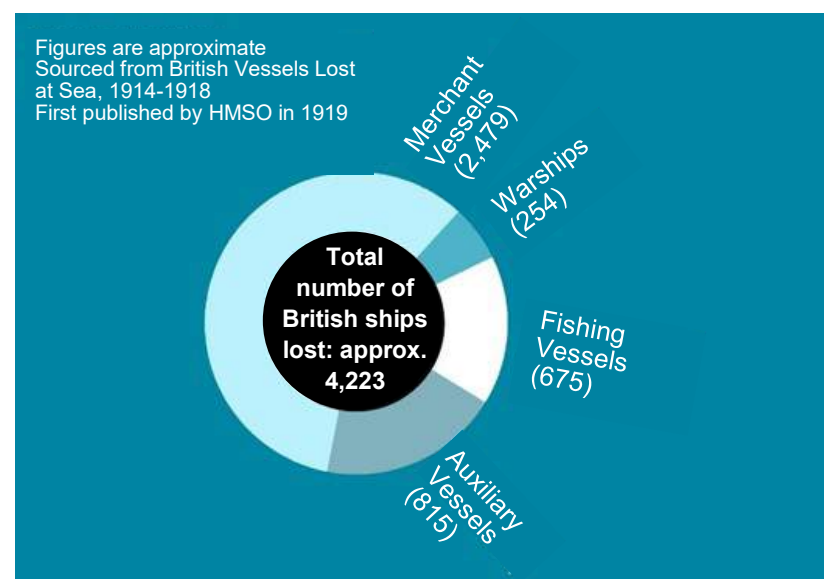
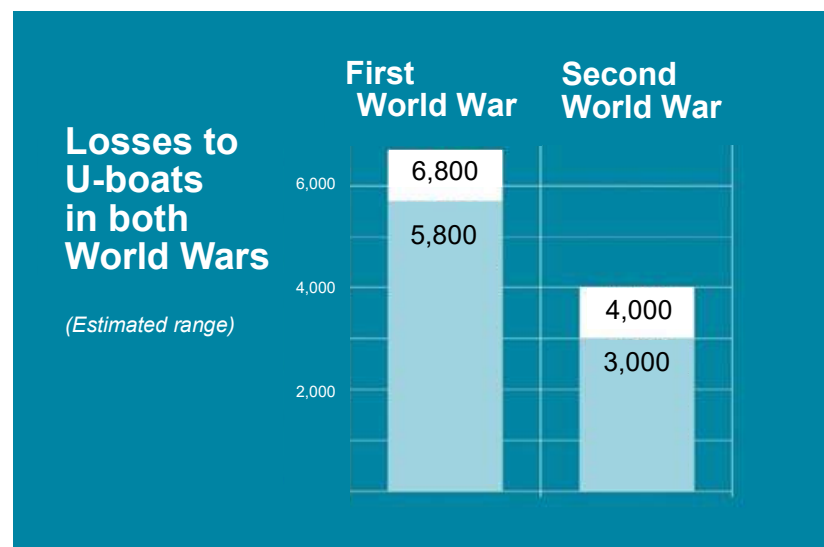
With their surface fleet trapped in the North Sea, Germany turned to a newer form of warship to create its own blockade of Britain - the U-boat. German U-boats slipped past the Grand Fleet and through the Dover Strait to attack Britain's lifeline - the merchant fleet - in the Atlantic and English Channel.



(U.S. Navy photo 19-N-10586)

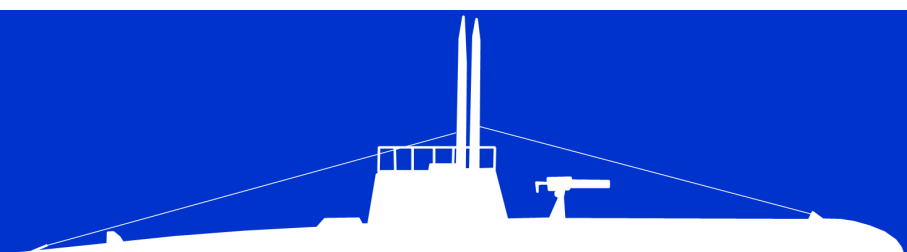


(Deutsches Bundesarchiv)



(Charts courtesy of the Maritime Archaeology Trust)

The U-boats inflicted severe losses on Allied shipping and even came close to starving Britain out of the war in 1917. U-boats sank far more ships during the First World War, than in the Second World War. Merchant shipping was particularly at risk. In addition over 30 Brixham trawlers were sunk by U-boats.

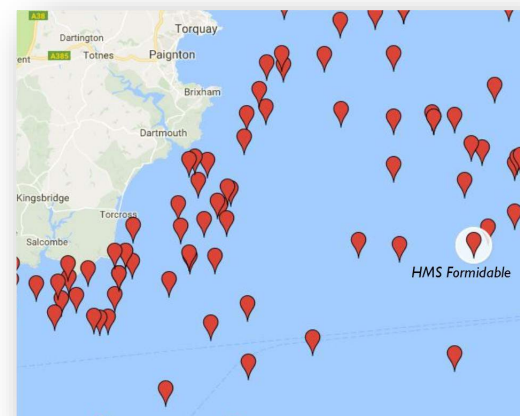


The U-boat War off the South Hams Coast 1915-18

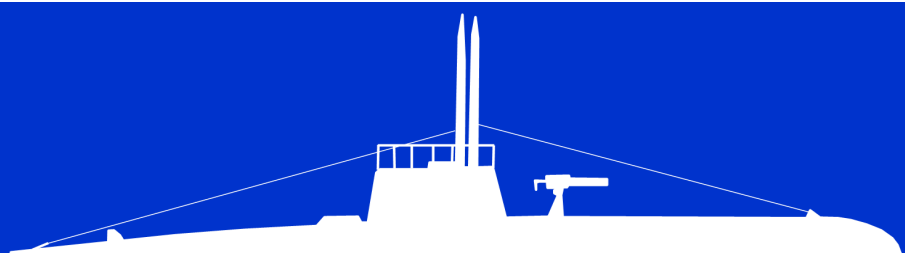


An Early Victim: *HMS Formidable*

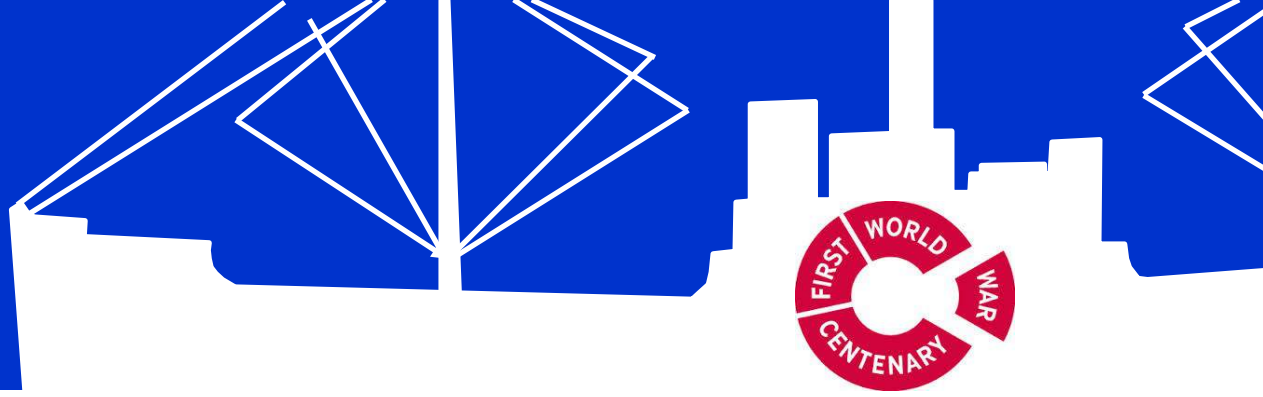
At 3am on New Year's Day 1915, the 15,000 ton battleship *HMS Formidable*, was cruising with the Channel Fleet in line ahead off Start Point, when she was hit by torpedoes from the German submarine *UB-24*. She sank within forty-five minutes. Of the 780 strong crew, only 233 survived. Among those lost were Captain Loxley and his dog Bruce who were last seen on the bridge.



Of the three boats that managed to get safely away, one, a pinnace, made for Lyme Regis with sixty survivors. By the time it arrived, nine of the men had died of exposure. Able Seaman John Cowan was 'presumed dead' on arrival at Lyme and was laid to rest in the cellar of the Pilot Boat Inn. The landlord's dog, *Lassie*, stayed beside him, nuzzling him and keeping his body warm. After half an hour Cowan stirred and later made a full recovery. *Lassie* was hailed as a hero and awarded two medals. The story is believed to have inspired the 1938 novel *Lassie* by Eric Knight and the subsequent films *Lassie the Wonder Dog*.



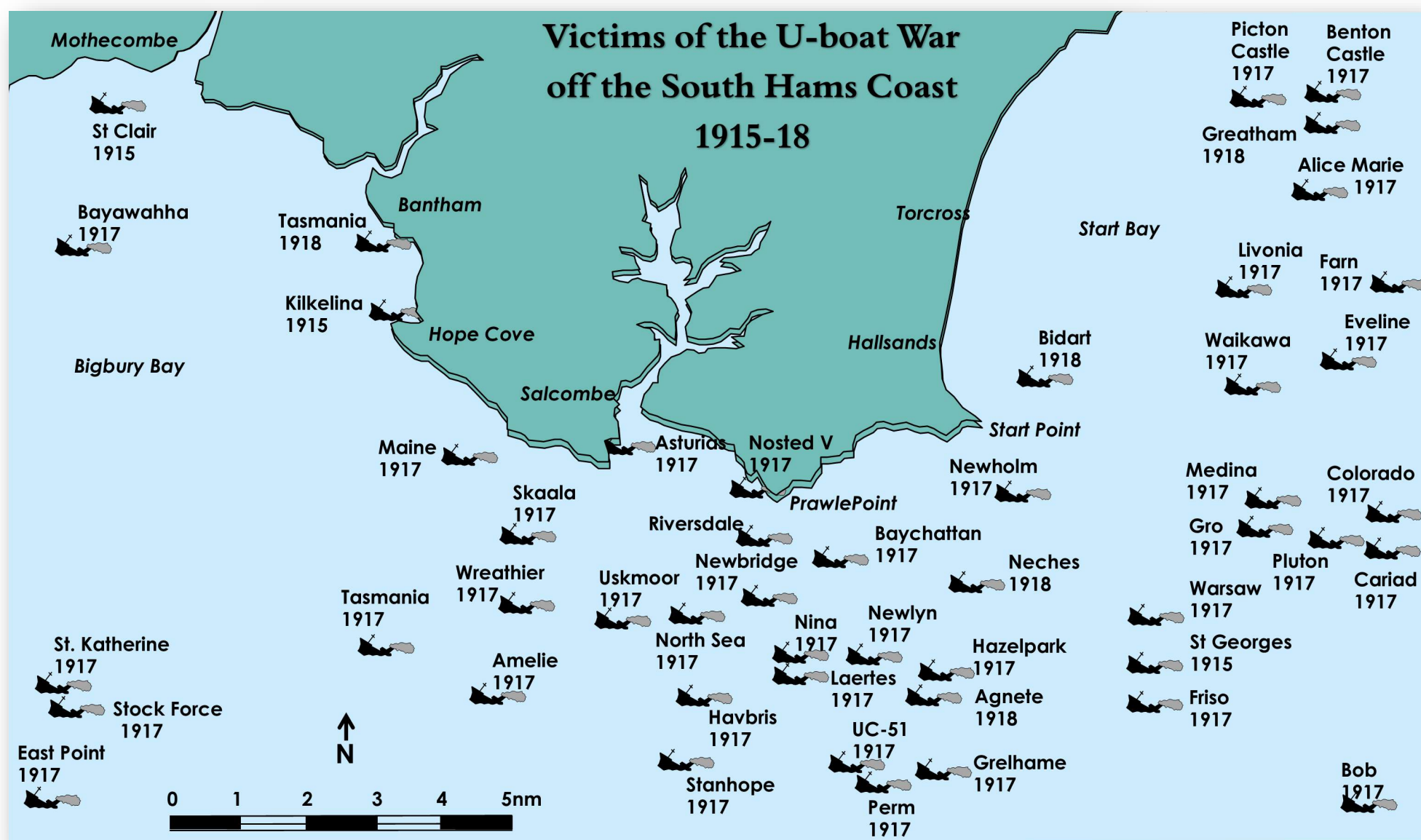
The U-boat War off the South Hams Coast 1915-18



The Sea off Start Point: A 'U-boat Killing Ground'

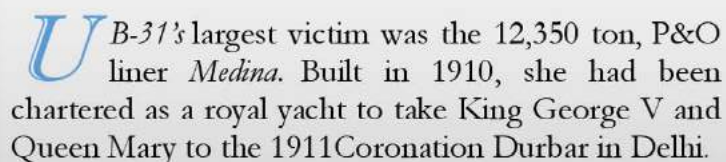


More than 700 wrecks dating to the First World War lie off the south coast of the UK. The majority were sunk by German U-boats or sea mines. The sea off Start Point was a notorious 'killing ground' for U-boats venturing into Channel waters, with at least 35 British or allied 'merchantmen' sunk, between 1917 and 1918, within 8 miles of the Point.



Two U-boat commanders, Oberleutnant Bieber of *UB31* and Oberleutnant Stoter of *UB35* were particularly active in the waters around Start and Prawle during the closing months of 1917, with Bieber accounting for eleven and Stoter four merchant steamers.

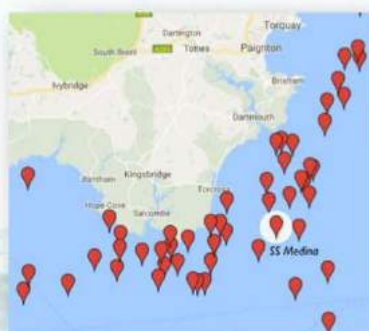




S.S. Medina as a Royal Yacht 1911



S.S. Medina returning from India 1917



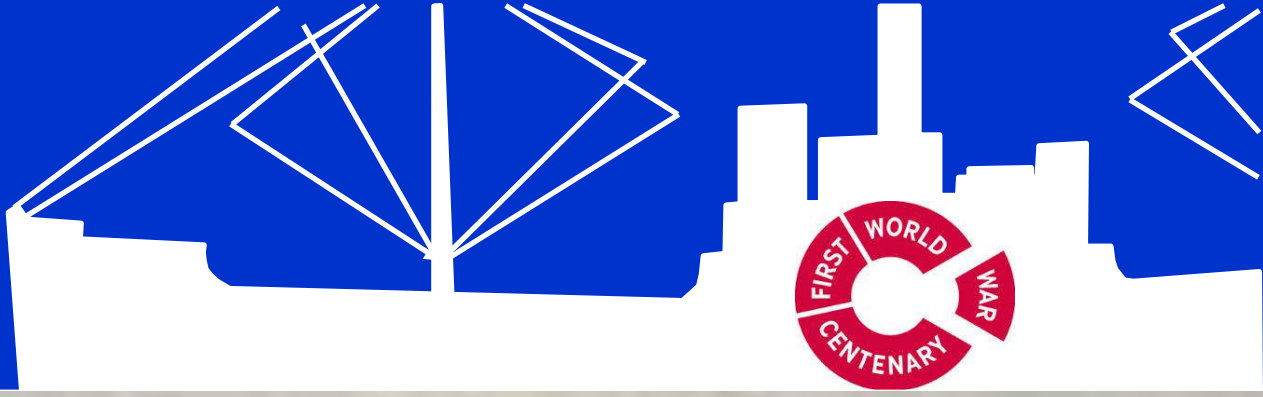
The *Medina* sank in sixty metres of water, taking with her Lord Carmichael's priceless collection of antiques. In 1986 the salvage vessel *Holger Dane* recovered some of the items. These were auctioned at Sothebys in 1988. Salcombe Maritime Museum has a number of the objects in its collection, including the vases pictured below.



Background Image: Ian Palmer



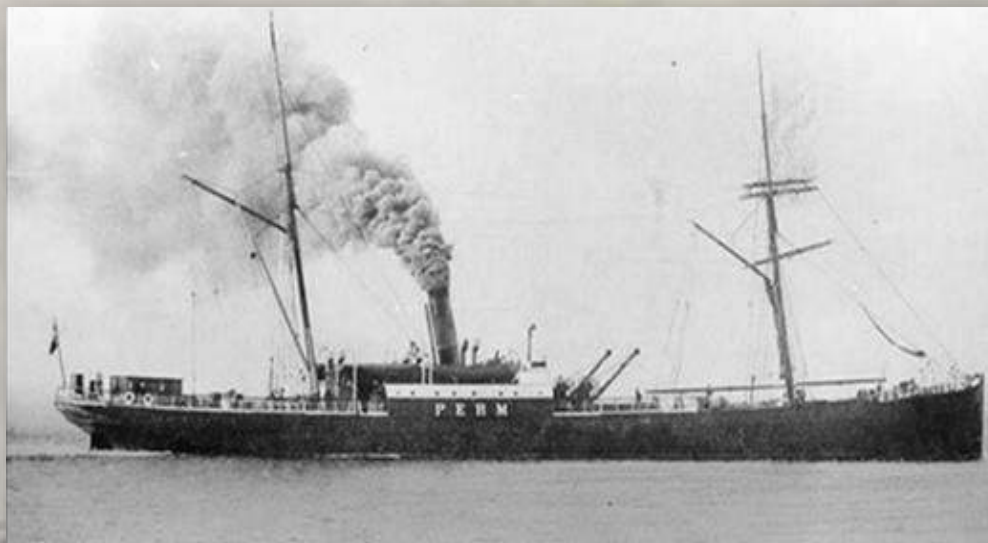
The U-boat War off the South Hams Coast 1915-18



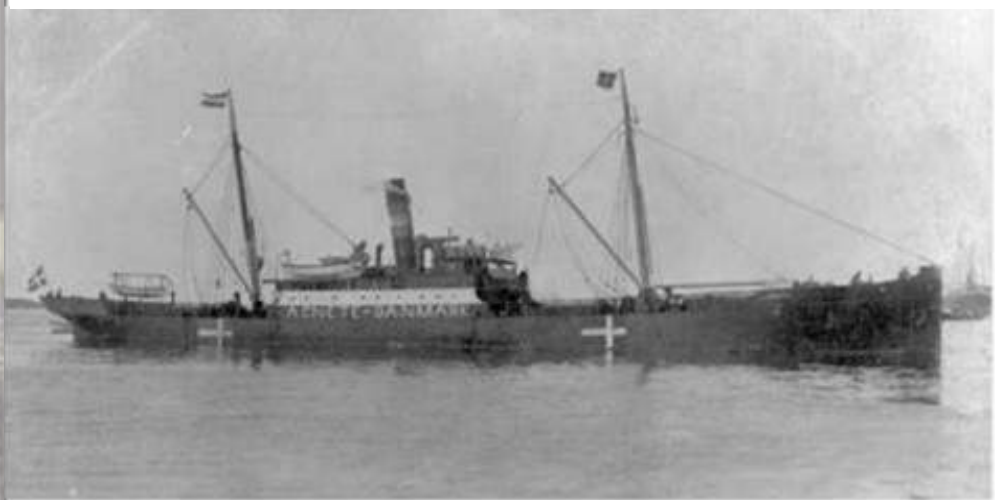
Some of the Victims



Havbris, Norwegian collier, torpedoed July 1917



Perm, Danish collier, torpedoed November 1917



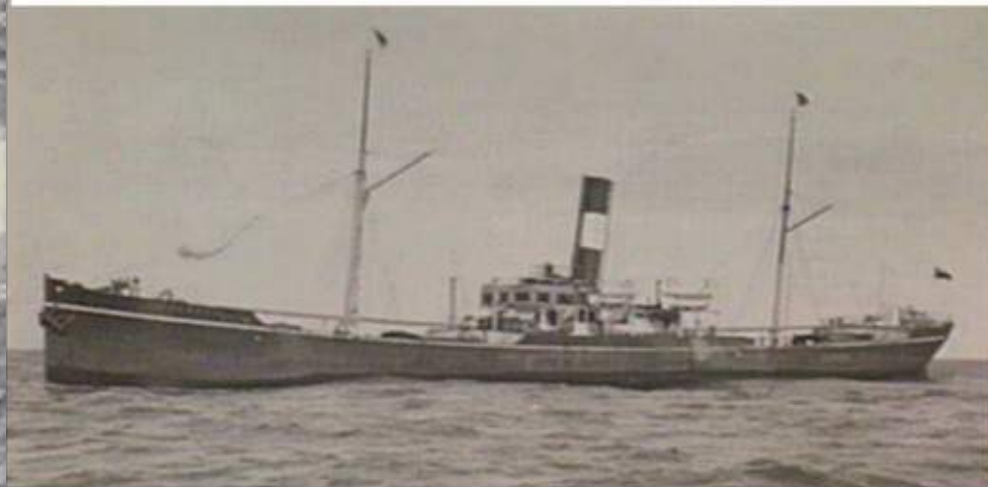
Agnete, British collier, torpedoed April 1918



Wreathier, British collier, torpedoed December 1917

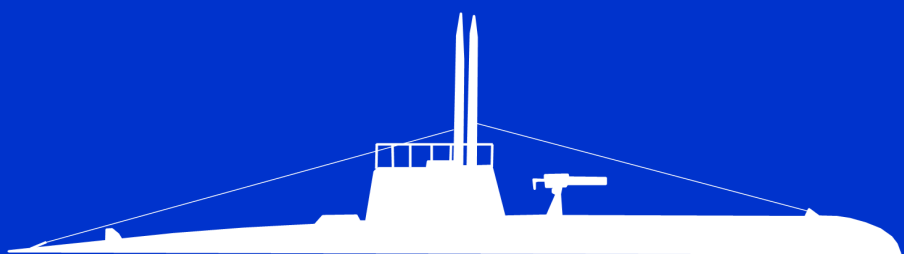


Laertes, British cargo ship, torpedoed August 1917



Uskmoor, British collier, torpedoed May 1918

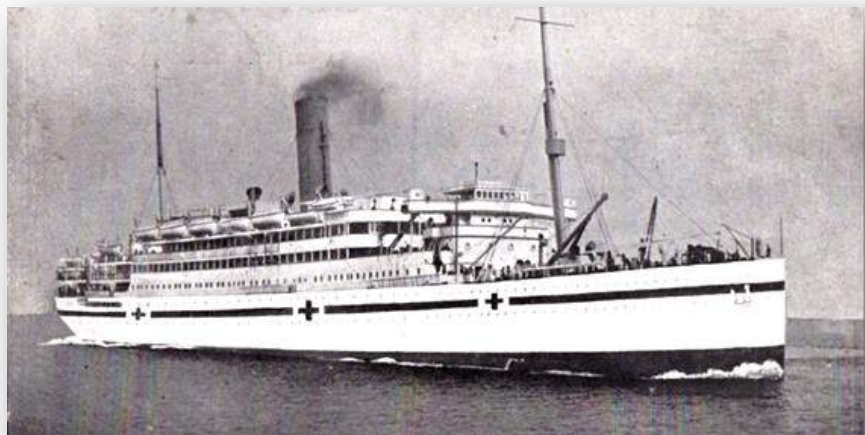
Many of the merchant ships sunk by U-Boats off Start Point in 1917-8 were British or allied colliers carrying coal from South Wales to English or French ports.



The U-boat War off the South Hams Coast 1915-18



The Hospital Ship *Asturias*



By 1917 no vessel was safe from the U-boats, no matter what its purpose. Showing her lights and an illuminated red cross, the hospital ship *HMHS Asturias*, was torpedoed without warning, on 20 March 1917, by U-boat *U-20* five miles south of Start Point.



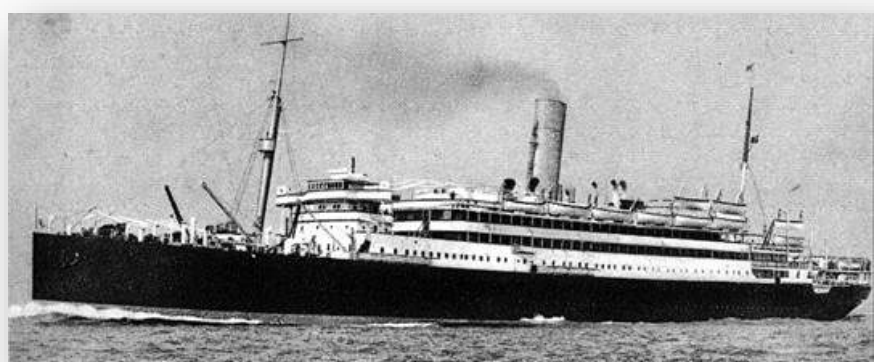
In total darkness the ship was abandoned, but many of the crew had been killed by the initial explosion while others drowned when two life-boats smashed together while being launched. The torpedo had lodged in a 3 ton stack of sulphur and deadly fumes enveloped the ship.



In an appalling state, the vessel went aground at Starehole Bay, near the entrance to Salcombe Harbour, the decks littered with bodies. The survivors were taken to the Salcombe Hotel, but eight more died there. Total casualties were 31 dead, 12 missing and 39 injured.



The attack caused an international outrage. This propaganda leaflet from a retaliation air raid over Germany bears the message '*As a reprisal for the sinking of the hospital ship Asturias.*'



Despite the extensive damage, *Asturias* was rebuilt after the war as a liner and renamed *Arcadian*.



The U-boat War off the South Hams Coast 1915-18



A Local Hero

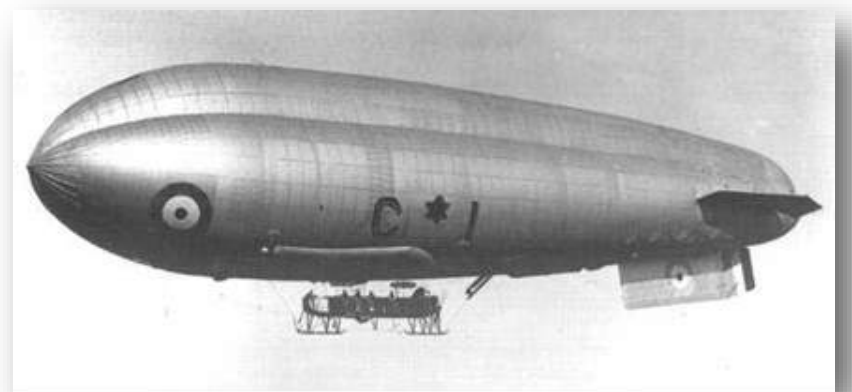


Ella Trout OBE

On 8 September 1917 a British steamer, the 3400 ton *S.S. Newholm*, was the victim of a German submarine one mile off Start Point. A local woman, 21 year old Ella Trout of Hallsands, was fishing in a small boat when she saw the explosion. She immediately rowed over a mile, through treacherous cross-currents, towards the sinking vessel and pulled a 'half drowned' sailor from the sea. For her courageous act, Ella was awarded the OBE.

Anti-Submarine Airship Patrols

In response to the U-boat threat anti-submarine patrols were carried out by airships from *RNAS Mullion* in Cornwall, but these met with little success and high losses. In July 1916 airship C8 crashed off Start Point killing three members of the crew.

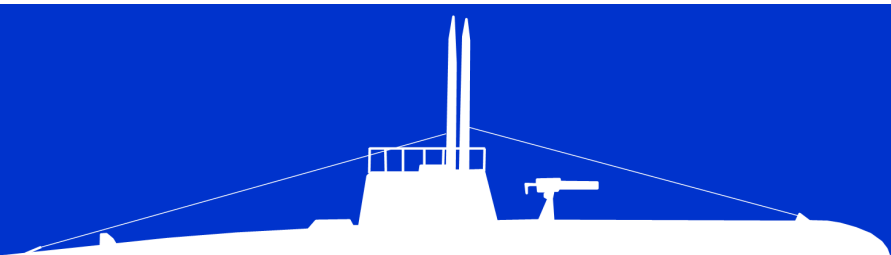


Coastal Class Airship

On February 28th 1916 alarm bells were ringing at Devonport naval base when Prawle Point War Signal Station reported, by telegraph, that Zeppelins had been seen heading towards Plymouth. It turned out to be a British airship which had failed to report its identity.



Prawle Point War Signal Station

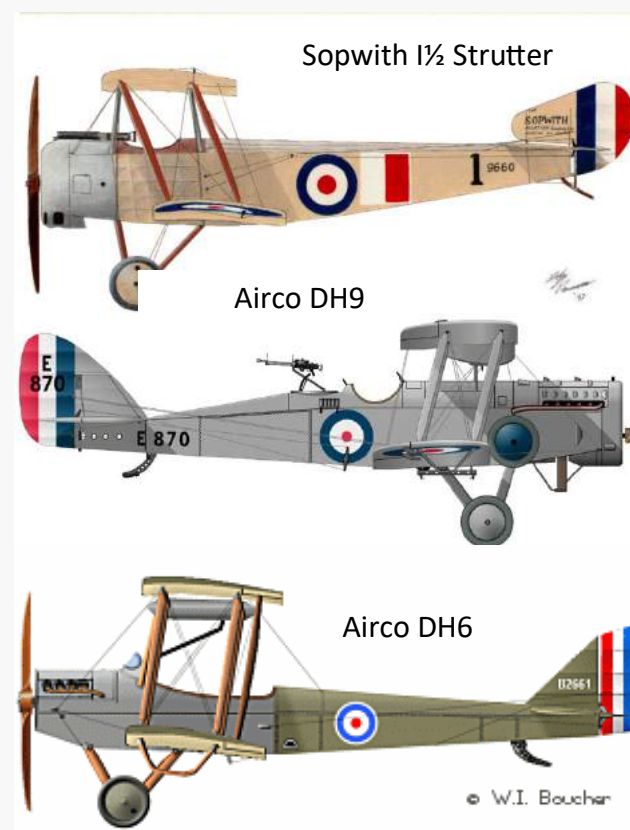


The U-boat War off the South Hams Coast 1915-18



Anti-Submarine Aircraft Patrols

In a further attempt to combat the U-boat menace, the Admiralty established the first airfield in the South-West of England for land planes. *RNAS Prawle*, was opened at East Prawle in April 1917, but within three months six of its Sopwith biplanes were involved in accidents. A month later, the remaining serviceable aircraft were withdrawn to the Western Front. When, in April 1918, the airfield re-opened as *RAF Prawle*, the flights of *DH6s* and *DH9s* also suffered from a high rate of accidental loss.



Aircraft based at RNAS Prawle in 1917 and RAF Prawle in 1918



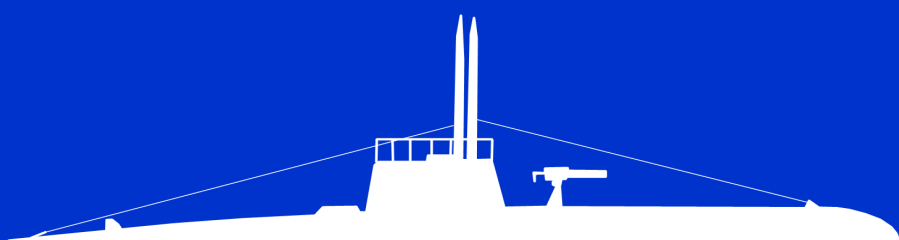
Anti-Submarine Mining

Between March and November 1917, four German U-boats were sunk off Start Point, all believed to be victims of anti-submarine mines. The Admiralty followed up these successes by posting three officers and seventeen marines from the Submarine Mining Service to the Lighthouse. They remained there until the end of the war, engaged in 'observation mining'.



The Convoy System

It was the belated introduction of the convoy system, however, that proved most effective in reducing the number of merchant ships lost to U-boats. The system was introduced slowly, and proved very successful and, although many ships still sailed independently, those in convoys were safe. Monthly losses were halved by the end of 1917.



The U-boat War off the South Hams Coast 1915-18



The Q ship *HMS Stock Force*



HMS Stock Force

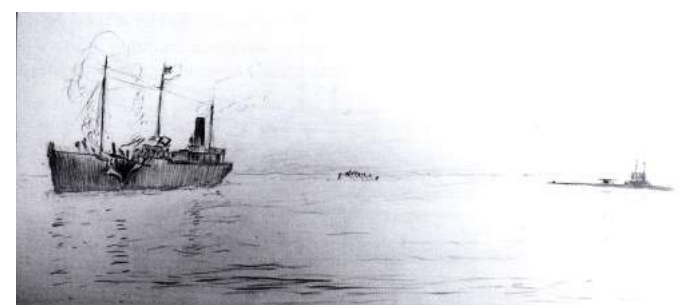


Hidden Guns

Towards the end of the war, decoy merchant vessels known as 'Q ships' were used to combat the U-boat threat. A Q ship appeared to be an easy target, but in fact carried hidden armaments.

On 30 July 1918, the 360 ton Q ship, *HMS Stock Force*, commanded by Lt. Harold Auten, was five miles off Prawle Point when she was struck by a torpedo from *UB-80*. The explosion wrecked the fore part of the ship and wounded five men.

A so-called 'panic party' immediately abandoned ship whilst the captain, the two gun crews and the engine-room staff remained at their posts, even though the ship was sinking. The submarine came to the surface and the men in the boat successfully lured it within range of the hidden guns. Lt. Auten withheld fire until both of his guns could bear. Shell after shell was then poured into *UB-80* until she sank by the stern.

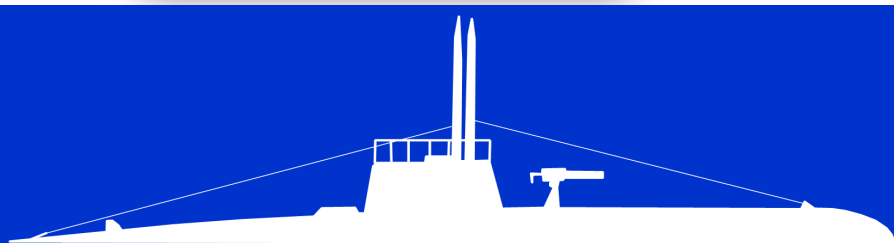


First appearance of submarine, as she sank. Bow torn by shell fire.

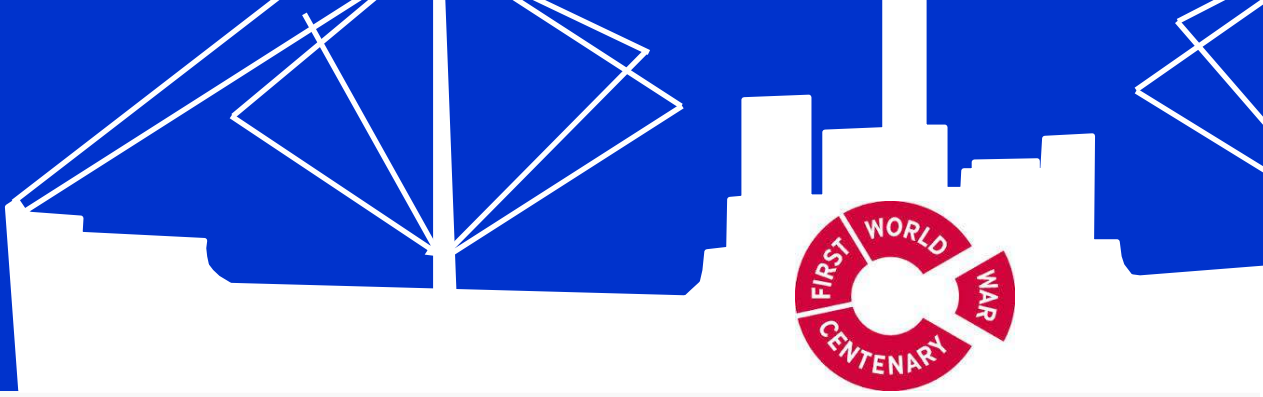
Lt. Auten's sketches of the U-boat sinking



The *Stock Force* was kept afloat for several hours. She then sank with her colours flying. Her crew was taken off by two torpedo boats and a trawler. For his courage and leadership under fire, Lt. Auten was awarded the Victoria Cross.



The U-boat War off the South Hams Coast 1915-18



About The Forgotten Wrecks Project



Online Ship Research Pack

The Maritime Archaeology Trust's 'Forgotten Wrecks of the First World War' project is aimed at raising the profile of World War One shipwrecks and is supporting volunteers to research wreck sites off the south coast of England. An Online Ship Research Pack has been produced to help volunteers undertake initial online research. There are approximately 1,100 wrecks dating to the First World War along the south coast and volunteers can use the pack as a guide to research a specific ship or ships. For further information go to:

forgottenwrecks.maritimearchaeologytrust.org/

Salcombe Maritime Museum is taking part in the Forgotten Wrecks project and is looking for volunteers to conduct online research of South Devon shipwrecks. If you interested in getting involved please email: info@salcombemuseum.org.uk



www.devonremembersheritage.org

to find out about how you can get involved with research and micro-projects, or contribute to the local studies archive and WW1 book collection throughout the centenary period, and also to find out about events and exhibitions that will be take place through to 2019.

