

# FORGOTTEN WRECKS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

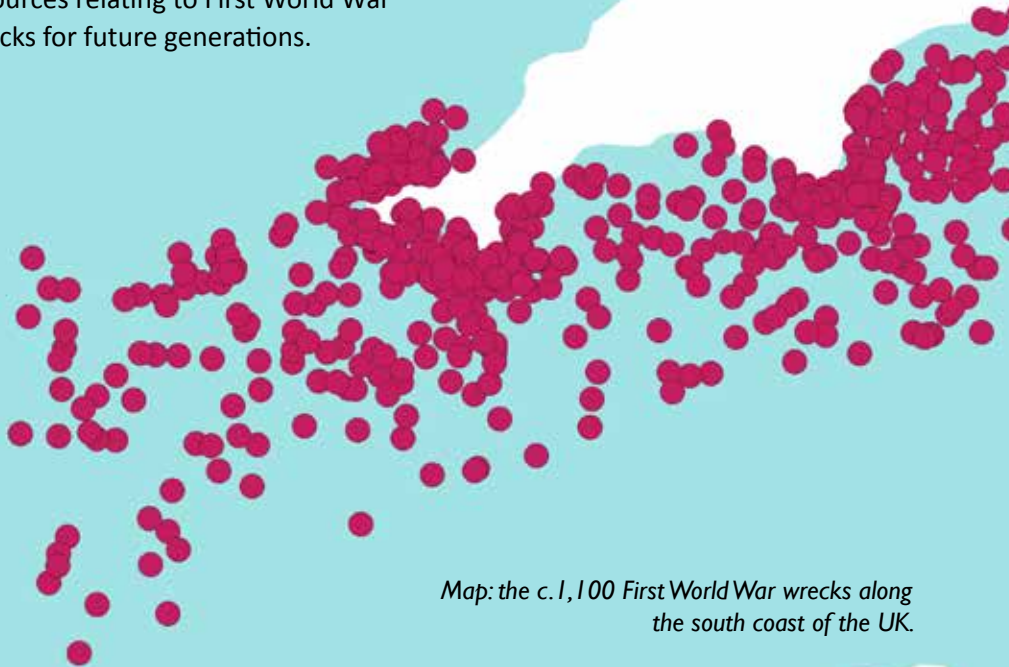


## Great War Shipwrecks of the Channel Crossing

# About the Project

Forgotten Wrecks of the First World War is a Heritage Lottery Funded (HLF) four year project devised and delivered by the Maritime Archaeology Trust to coincide with the centenary of the Great War. At the heart of the project is a desire to raise the profile of a currently under-represented aspect of the First World War. While attention is often focused on the Western Front and major naval battles like Jutland, historic remains from the war lie, largely forgotten, in and around our seas, rivers and estuaries.

With over 1,000 wartime wrecks along England's south coast alone, the conflict has left a rich heritage legacy and many associated stories of bravery and sacrifice. These underwater memorials represent the vestiges of a vital, yet little known, struggle that took place on a daily basis, just off our shores. Through a programme of fieldwork, research, exhibitions and outreach, the project aims to engage communities and volunteers and provide a lasting legacy of information and learning resources relating to First World War wrecks for future generations.



*Map: the c. 1,100 First World War wrecks along the south coast of the UK.*

# Underwater First World War Battlefield

Thousands of people cross the English Channel (or la Manche as it is called in France) every day, largely unaware that they are travelling over or under thousands of shipwrecks. Many of the wrecks are from the First World War: a hidden battlefield at the bottom of the sea. This booklet shines a spotlight on some of these wrecks, to explore how they came to be there and commemorate those that were on board.



*The wrecks of the John Mitchell (left) and the Gallia (above), both sunk during the war.*

# The War at Sea

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The First World War took place between 1914 and 1918. It was a global conflict on a scale never seen before. Sons, brothers, neighbours and cousins fought and died. There were only 53 'thankful villages' in Britain - villages from which all those that went to war came back alive. Many more men, women and children were not directly involved in the fighting but had a role in the war effort.

Seagoing vessels and their crew were involved both in conflict and in support roles, while others carried on the business of daily life. Actions were fought as far away as the Pacific and Indian Oceans, although the most significant actions were usually between British and German ships in the North Sea.

## **Ships: essential to the First World War**

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In the early 20th Century, both Britain and Germany raced to build as many big warships as possible. Soon, both sides had impressive fleets of battleships, cruisers and destroyers, and their navies became symbols of power and prestige. With a stalemate in the trenches of the Western Front, both sides hoped to deliver a knock-out blow to win the war at sea.

When the decisive blow at sea failed to materialise, Germany tried a new tactic: the U-boat. Submarines were not well thought of before the war, but Germany soon realised their power to sink vessels quickly and without warning. They used them to attack not only battleships, but merchant vessels too.

The merchant ships of the First World War were the only means of heavy transportation to the continent. Every single piece of equipment that the British and Commonwealth armies used in France, from huge artillery guns to toothbrushes, had to be transported by ship. Every day, hundreds of thousands of tons of food, equipment and people travelled across the seas.

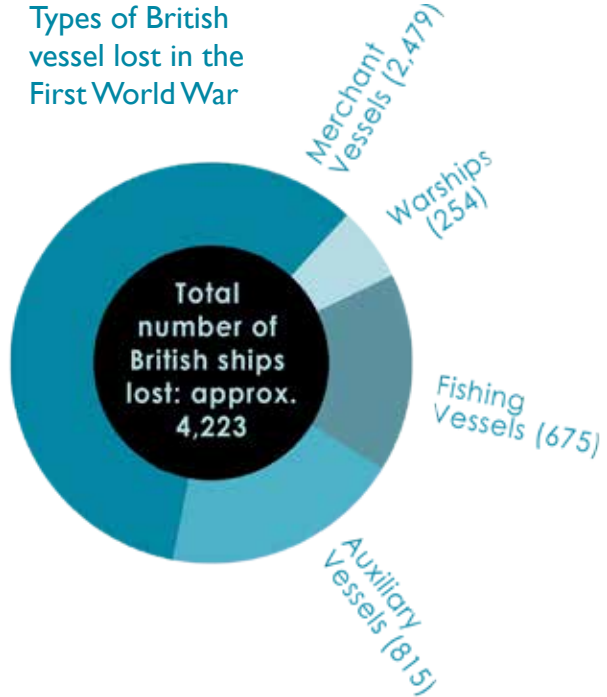
At the same time as supplies were being shipped to France, lots of food and materials that Britain needed to survive arrived in ports each day - without merchant ships, Britain's population would have starved and efforts on the

Western Front collapsed. By attacking them, Germany hoped to starve Britain out of the war within six months.

## How many ships were lost?

In total, Britain lost more than 4,200 ships to enemy action during the First World War. This number does not include those that were lost to the usual hazards of sailing such as bad weather or collision and wasn't just warships, but merchant ships, fishing vessels and even hospital ships. No vessel was safe.

Types of British vessel lost in the First World War



Figures are approximate. Sourced from British Vessels Lost at Sea, 1914 - 1918. First published by HMSO in 1919.

## The south coast's forgotten wrecks

The Forgotten Wrecks project area covers the whole south coast, from Kent in the east to the Isle of Scilly in the west and extends approximately half way across the Channel. There are approximately 1,100 wrecks dating to the First World War in this area, this includes those lost through accident or misadventure. Nearly 90% of these ships were civilian vessels; merchant ships or fishing vessels from more than 20 different countries around the globe.

# War in the Channel

The Channel was a battleground that brought the war right up to Britain's shores. An important place for maritime trade, transport and communication, the Channel saw ships crossing to and from Europe and arriving in Britain from countries all around the world.

In 1915, the German navy targeted this shipping with its U-boats (Unterseeboot – under sea boat – submarine). Initially hoping to force Britain to lift its maritime blockade of Germany, U-boats targeted merchant vessels all around Britain. But as the war dragged on, German tactics changed. In 1917 a new campaign sought to sink as much maritime trade as possible in the hope of starving Britain out of the war.



Top: *The Ponus*.  
Image courtesy of Mark Milburn.  
Middle: *SMS Emden*  
Bottom: *UB-148*.

Left: *Andromeda* in 1915.  
Image courtesy of the Morrab Photo Library.



# The Dover Straits

Today, the train and majority of Channel ferries travel between England and France across the Dover Straits. During the First World War, this was the fastest way for German vessels to reach the shipping lanes between England and France. The straits, however, are extremely narrow and full of sandbanks. Britain and France controlled both shores and were free to deploy defences from land as they wished.

The first defences were thick nets towed by fishing vessels. Later they became more elaborate and were moored in place across the straits. Mines were attached to the nets so that if an enemy submarine got caught in a net, they would detonate the mines and be destroyed. These defences became known as the 'Dover Barrage'.

German submarines continued to use the straits to get to the Channel. The Dover Barrage made it dangerous and many submarines were sunk, but some still got through - in fact they were able to get through the straits right up until the end of the war. The Germans also laid mines of their own. Special U-boats were laying minefields across the straits, hoping to sink as much allied cross-channel traffic as possible.

Today, the wrecks of all types of vessel that fell victim to these attacks and defences lie at the bottom of the Dover Straits.



# U-boats

While British submarines attempted to prevent supplies reaching Imperial Germany via the Baltic, German U-boats became the most effective weapon against allied and neutral merchant ships. The UC-types laid underwater mines that detonated on contact or when ships got close – whatever the nationality or purpose of the unfortunate vessel. The UB and U classes, not able to lay mines, carried torpedoes. In the early years of the war U-boat captains allowed time for crews to escape in boats before sinking a ship with gunfire, bombs or a torpedo. As the war progressed, torpedo strikes without warning became the norm.

In 1917 it appeared the U-boats might succeed in starving Britain to surrender, but new allied strategies like ship convoys and weapons such as the depth charge, turned the tables on the U-boats and by 1918, they had lost the battle.

Dozens of U-boats in the Channel and the Dover Straits were victims of the Admiralty's defences, including:

**U-8:** One of the first U-boat losses of the war. Caught in steel nets and forced to surface, *U-8* was spotted by a Royal Navy ship and fired upon. The entire crew managed to escape, and the remains of *U-8* now lie on the seabed 2 miles from the Varne Lightvessel. In 2016 *U-8* became a Protected Historic Wreck Site.

**UC-46:** A mine-laying U-boat, *UC-46* was trying to return home through the straits when it surfaced not far from the destroyer HMS Liberty. The U-boat was quickly spotted, and Liberty rammed *UC-46* before it could escape. Today the vessel lies 40 metres below the surface and is the grave of the entire crew.

**UB-55:** As *UB-55*, a coastal U-boat, dived under water to pass under the Dover Barrage, it scraped the mooring cable of one of the mines. The explosion flooded the stern of the boat and it sank even further under the water. Only six men managed to escape.



# Sweeping for Mines

Many of the forgotten wrecks, including those near the Channel crossings, were lost as a result of mines: ships unwittingly running into them or inadvertently setting mines off while attempting to clear them. A variety of vessels were used for minesweeping duties, to try and keep the shipping lanes safe for maritime traffic. This included fishing trawlers and drifters as well as paddle steamers.

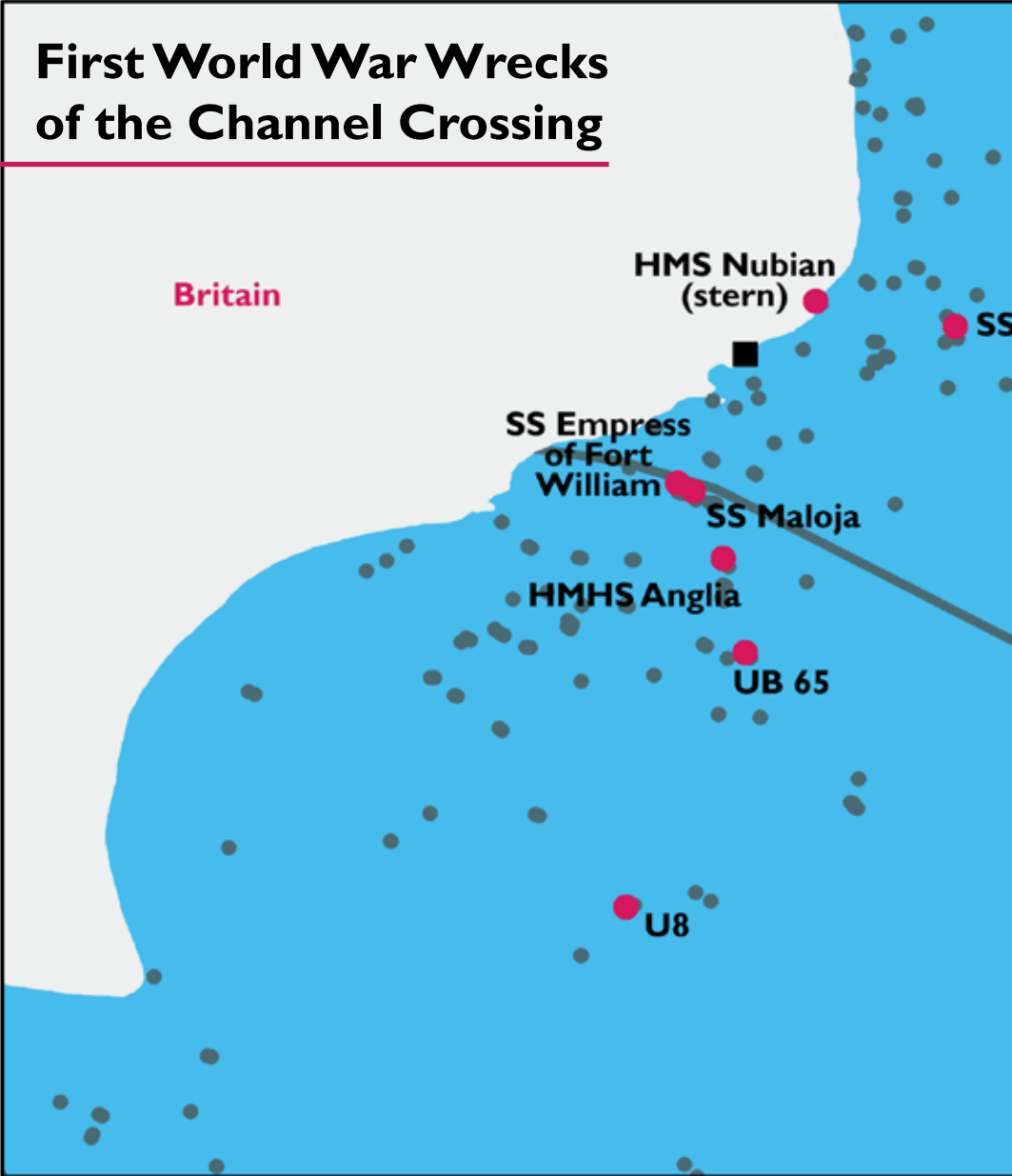


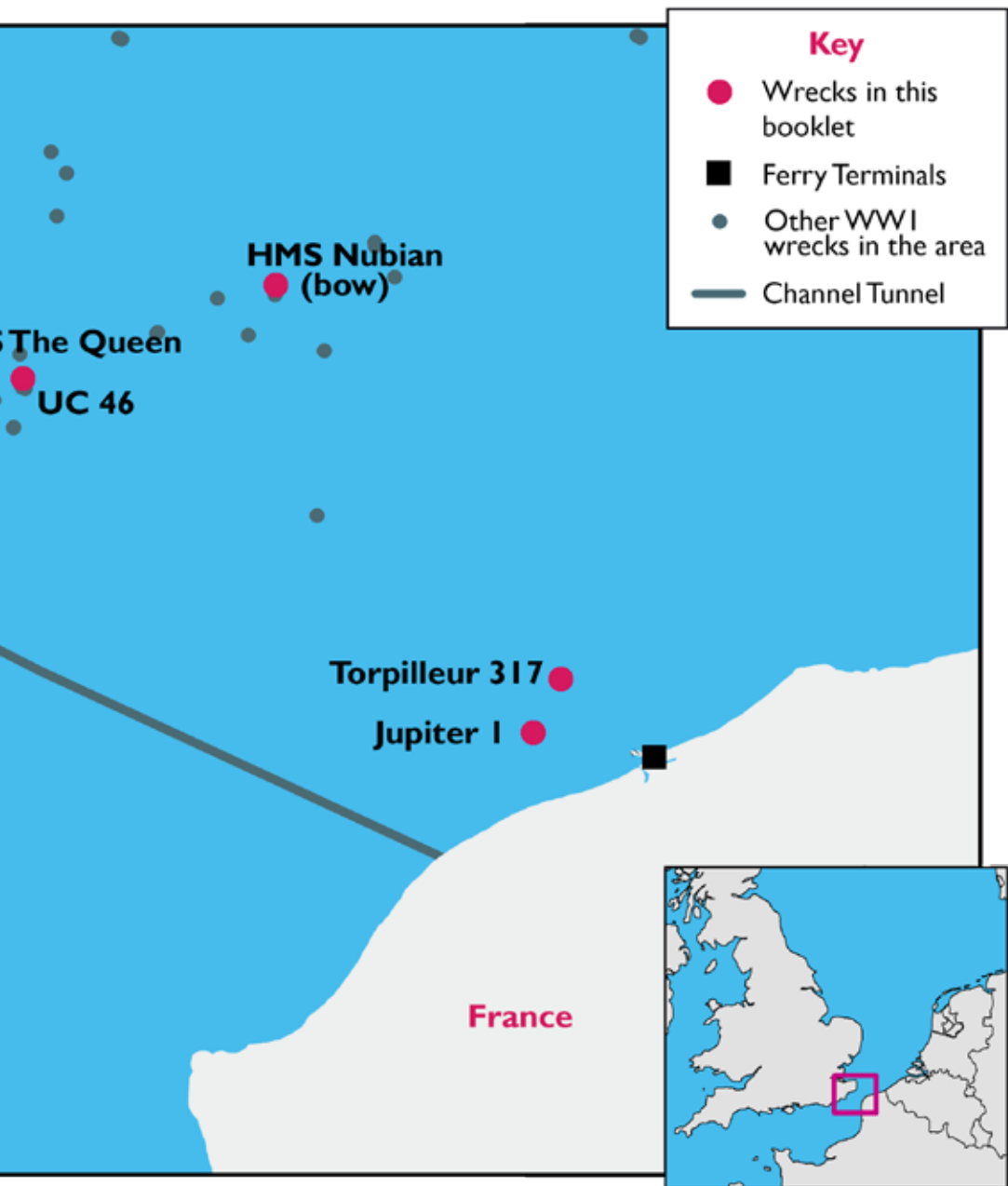
*A pair of steam drifters work together to clear mines. A sweep-wire suspended between the boats (beneath the water) could snag and cut a mine's mooring rope. The mine would rise to the surface where it would be detonated by gunfire from the drifter. Painting by Mike Greaves*

## Both sides of the Channel

The southern extent of the Forgotten Wrecks study area stretches approximately half way across the Channel but it should be remembered that similar maritime tragedies were also taking place on the French side of la Manche. *Torpilleur 317*, a French torpedo boat, hit a mine laid by a U-boat in the early hours of the 28th December 1916 whilst patrolling outside Calais harbour. The flash of the explosion was seen by several other torpedo boats that quickly set out to assist. They pulled wreckage and some survivors from the water, but 18 men were lost. Nearby, the fishing vessel *Jupiter I*, which had been requisitioned by the French Navy to patrol the Dover Barrage, struck a mine on the 10th July 1917 with the loss of 11 lives.

# First World War Wrecks of the Channel Crossing





# The Battle of the Dover Straits

A number of wrecks in the vicinity of the Channel crossings are the result of the Battle of the Dover Straits. On the night of the 26th October 1916, the German Flanders Flotilla – based in the captured Belgian city of Bruges – sent a large fleet of torpedo boats to attack the Dover Barrage. In the following battle, 9 British vessels were lost and a further 7 damaged. Here are the stories of just two of them.

## Speed Queen

SS *The Queen* was launched in 1903 and employed as a cross-channel steamer by the South Eastern & Chatham Railways Company. *The Queen* was actually the first cross-channel ship to be fitted with new turbine engines, which allowed a cruising speed of 21 knots and meant the vessel could complete the voyage between Folkestone and Calais in just under an hour. This was an advantage when war broke out as German U-boats could not match this speed. From 1914 *The Queen* was used as a troop transport, taking British and Commonwealth soldiers to the Western Front.

At 11pm, while returning from France with a cargo of mail on the night of the 26th October 1916, *The Queen* was intercepted by the German torpedo boats attacking the barrage defences. The German captain of V80 allowed *The Queen*'s crew time to abandon ship before sinking it and the crew all made it to safety in the ship's boats.

Today *The Queen* lies upright on the seabed, 30 metres below the surface.



Divers: Artwork  
by Mike Greaves.

## ***Nubian + Zulu = Zubian***

At the same time as *V80* stopped *The Queen*, the Dover Patrol – a squadron of Royal Navy destroyers – was called out and raced to engage the enemy. One of these was *HMS Nubian*. In the ensuing battle 15 miles east of Dover, a torpedo struck *Nubian* in the bow, blowing off the entire front section of the ship.

Incredibly, the back half of the ship stayed afloat and was slowly towed back to Dover. Unfortunately the tows broke and *Nubian* was washed up under the White Cliffs of Dover. Meanwhile the German torpedo boats escaped unharmed back to Bruges.

By a strange coincidence, another vessel of the same type, *HMS Zulu*, had its stern blown off by a mine the following month. The remains of both vessels were taken to Chatham dockyard, where they were successfully joined together. The resulting ship was commissioned as *HMS Zubian* in 1917 and went on to have a successful career – even sinking a German U-boat in 1918.

15 men died on board the *Nubian* during the explosion. The bow of the ship still lies in the Dover Straits, although it has not been conclusively identified.

*HMS Nubian:*  
Artwork by Mike Greaves.



## Double tragedy at Dover

On the 26th February 1916, the SS *Maloja*, a grand passenger liner, which had just left London for Bombay and Colombo with passengers and general cargo, struck a mine not far from the entrance to Dover Harbour.

After the initial explosion, the engines were put to full astern (backwards) in an effort to stop the ship as quickly as possible and allow the boats – now full with passengers and crew – to be lowered. The ship steadily lost speed but the engine room quickly flooded and it became impossible to totally stop the engines. The ship began to steam backwards and there was little choice but to lower the boats while the ship was moving. Many people were washed away as the ship dragged the boats through the water before they could be properly released. Amongst the dead were men, women and children.

Only half an hour after the *Maloja* sank, the steamer *Empress of Fort William* also struck a mine. The ship had been headed for Dunkirk with a cargo of coal, but changed course to help the *Maloja*. Fortunately, the rate of sinking was over hours rather than minutes, and all the crew were saved.

The *Maloja* now lies in about 18 metres of water; it was salvaged in the 1960s and the remains are now broken and scattered. The *Empress of Fort William* is deeper at about 30 metres, very close to a currently unidentified aircraft.

### Did you know?

More than 60 casualties on the *Maloja* were described as ‘Lascars’. European shipping firms employed sailors from all over the world and the term ‘Lascar’ was commonly used to describe sailors from the Indian Ocean region. They typically received poorer treatment and lower wages than European crew and many thousands served on merchant ships in both World Wars.

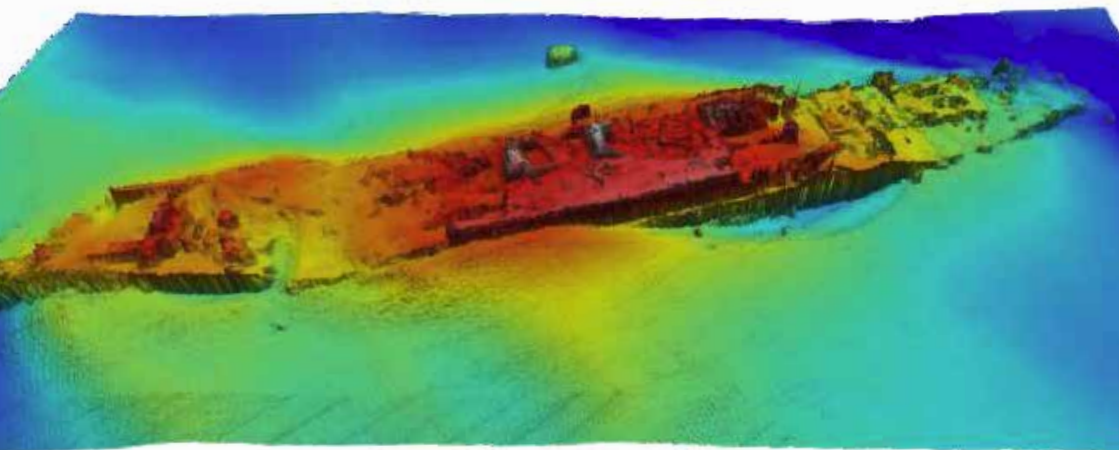
# HMHS *Anglia*

HMHS *Anglia* was a hospital ship carrying nearly 400 wounded from Boulogne, France, to Dover. On the 17th November 1915, whilst 4 miles off the western entrance of Dover Harbour, the *Anglia* struck a mine and sank in 45 minutes.

Vessels in the area quickly went to the aid of *Anglia* but although approximately 300 crew and patients were rescued, more than 160 lives were lost. 200 of the wounded men on board were cot-cases, strapped into beds on the lower decks. Many of them drowned, along with 10 medical staff and 25 crew, all from Holyhead, Wales.

*Anglia* was the first hospital ship casualty of the war. Today, the remains of the ship lie at a depth of approximately 30 metres within a few miles of Folkestone, Kent.

A geophysical survey of the wreck was carried out in 2014. As part of this, bathymetry data was collected and produced the image below. Bathymetry uses beams of sound - like sonar - to produce a depth map of the sea floor. The different colours represent different heights.



Bathymetry imagery of HMHS *Anglia*. © Crown Copyright, Wessex Archaeology

# Recording the Shipwrecks

The First World War shipwrecks that lie on the seabed around the world are hidden, underwater memorials representing a vital, yet little known struggle that took place daily, just off our shores during the Great War.

Some are the final resting places of those who were on them when they sank: watery, unmarked graves. Some still contain cargoes, essential for war or day-to-day living. Others constitute rare or unique examples of ship types, machinery or technologies, many developed because of the war. All of them are slowly and silently falling apart: succumbing to the waves and human interference.

Archaeologists, historians and volunteers from all walks of life are researching and recording as many of the sites as possible, to learn what we can from them before they are gone.

Using SCUBA equipment and cameras, divers collect video and photographs to record what is left of the wrecks on the seabed. A typical dive can last anything from 30 minutes to an hour and a half. The deeper the site, the shorter the time on site. Divers work in pairs, taking photos, video and measurements with a plastic open-reel tape, and making notes and sketches with a propelling pencil on waterproof paper taped to a board. Conditions vary from warm with excellent visibility, to cold, dark and disorientating.

Although the dives are relatively short and only two would take place on a single day, travel time (by car and boat), briefings, preparing and cleaning equipment and writing-up notes generally fills a long day.



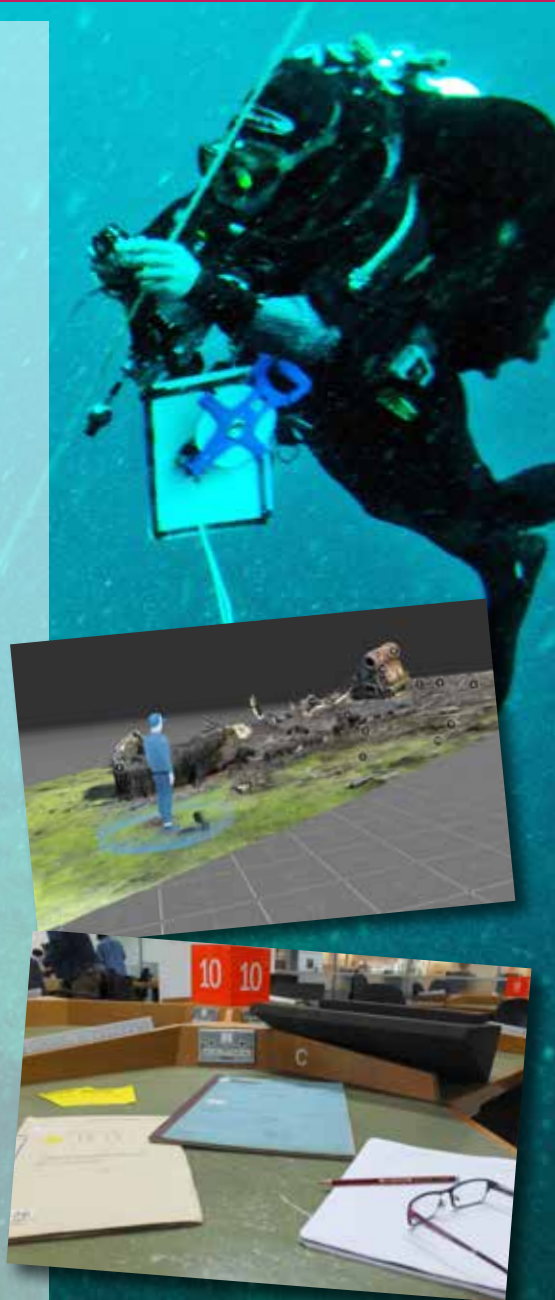


The footage, images, sketches and measurements are examined by staff and volunteers back at base, where they can reveal surprising details that confirm or contradict historical sources and help us understand how a wreck is surviving or not.

Photos and video are also used to reveal our hidden underwater heritage to the non-diving public. The Maritime Archaeology Trust is leading the way in creating digital 3D models of wrecks, enabling as many people as possible to 'virtually' visit and explore sites and artefacts, via PCs and mobile devices. You can even walk over and around a full-size wreck on the seabed using a virtual reality headset.

Meanwhile, historical research in archives and online can unearth details about the vessels' loss and where sites cannot be visited, geophysical survey data can enable remote examination of a wreck (see HMHS Anglia).

All of the information discovered about the wrecks will be freely accessible online at [www.forgottenwrecks.org](http://www.forgottenwrecks.org) to preserve a lasting record of the First World War beneath the waves.



# Underwater Graves

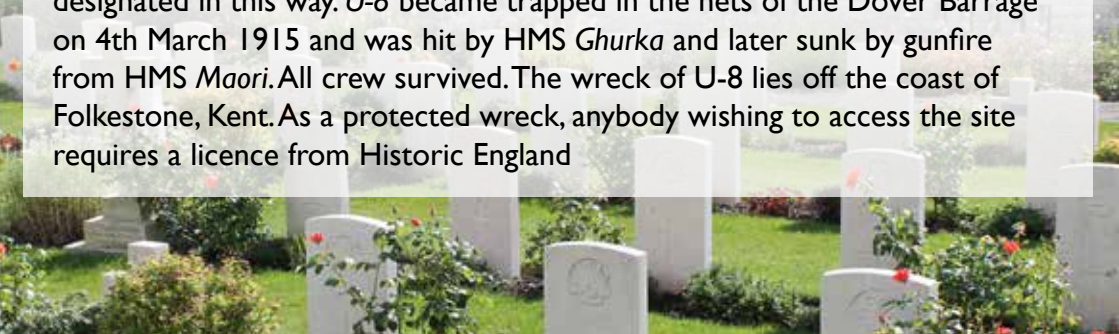
Very few of those who died at sea have burial places on land, and the remains of the vessels on the seabed serve as their graves. Time and tide have taken their toll on the ships since they sank and they are falling apart. Unfortunately, some have suffered further disturbance through the unintended impact of marine and leisure industries and the deliberate actions of salvors and divers. In the early decades of SCUBA diving the retrieval of material from wreck sites was a popular pursuit. While this still takes place to a limited extent, today's diving community promotes sustainable diving and encourages a 'look but don't touch' and non-intrusive recording approach to wreck diving.

Shipwrecks in UK territorial waters can be protected in a couple of ways:

The **Protection of Military Remains Act 1986**, administered by the Ministry of Defence, protects a small number of vessels that were lost on military service as 'war graves'.

HMS *Ghurka*, was a Dover Patrol vessel which struck a mine south of Dungeness, Kent on the 8th February 1917. Seventy four people died when the ship sank. It is now a Protected Place under the Protection of Military Remains Act, meaning it can be dived but must not be interfered with.

The **Protection of Wrecks Act 1973**, designates wrecks on account of their archaeological significance. In 2016 the wreck of a German U-boat was designated in this way. *U-8* became trapped in the nets of the Dover Barrage on 4th March 1915 and was hit by HMS *Ghurka* and later sunk by gunfire from HMS *Maori*. All crew survived. The wreck of *U-8* lies off the coast of Folkestone, Kent. As a protected wreck, anybody wishing to access the site requires a licence from Historic England



# Commemoration

We commemorate the losses from the First World War as a collective expression of gratitude and remembrance for the lives laid down during the conflict. It is very difficult to get an exact number of lives lost at sea during the war because different information sources record and report numbers in different ways. A minimum estimate for the number of lives lost due to enemy action on vessels from Commonwealth nations is 57,200. This does not include those lost to hazards of the sea such as bad weather or accidents, even if they were travelling on war business. A report published in 1920 suggested a figure of 24,112 deaths in the German navy, so the true number of lives lost at sea in the First World War is likely to be well in excess of 80,000 people.

This included people from all over the world: men, women and children. When the steamer *South Western* was torpedoed in the Channel without warning in March 1918, among those who lost their lives were a 15 year old Deck Boy, a 25 year old man from Trinidad and two Stewardesses, one of them a widow and mother of six. Amongst the 155 people that died when the *Maloja* (see page 14) was mined in 1916, were four children under the age of eight.

The Forgotten Wrecks project is remembering and commemorating those lost at sea during the First World War. This includes creating ‘Communities’ on the Imperial War Museum’s Lives of the First World War website, so crews from some of the forgotten wrecks can be ‘virtually reunited’ in the digital memorial now and into the future.



[www.forgottenwrecks.maritimearchaeologytrust.org/people](http://www.forgottenwrecks.maritimearchaeologytrust.org/people)

## Further Information



### [www.forgottenwrecks.org](http://www.forgottenwrecks.org)

Find out more about the project, explore the shipwrecks in through audio guides or 3D models, and discover educational resources.

### [www.maritimearchaeologytrust.org](http://www.maritimearchaeologytrust.org)

Discover more about the work of the Maritime Archaeology Trust.

### [www.livesofthefirstworldwar.org](http://www.livesofthefirstworldwar.org)

Remembering those who lived and served during the First World War.

### [www.centenarybattlefieldtours.org](http://www.centenarybattlefieldtours.org)

Learning about the First World War through tours of the battlefields.

# The Maritime Archaeology Trust

The **Maritime Archaeology Trust** is a registered charity with more than 25 years' experience in research, investigations and pioneering techniques for the study and promotion of marine cultural heritage. Originating in the south of England as the Hampshire and Wight Trust for Maritime Archaeology, we have grown from our regional roots to an internationally renowned authority on maritime archaeology.

Using money raised through the National Lottery, the **Heritage Lottery Fund** (HLF) sustains and transforms a wide range of heritage for present and future generations to take part in, learn from and enjoy. From museums, parks and historic places to archaeology, natural environment and cultural traditions, we invest in every part of our diverse heritage. The First World War Centenary is a chance to understand the war better, uncover its stories and explore what it means to us today. The Heritage Lottery Fund has already funded more than 1,000 First World War centenary projects up and down the UK and has been pleased to support the MAT's Forgotten Wrecks project.

From 2014 to 2018, across the world, nations, communities and individuals of all ages will come together to mark, commemorate and remember the lives of those who lived, fought and died in the First World War. The Imperial War Museum is leading the **First World War Centenary Partnership**: a network of local, regional, national and international cultural and educational organisations.

UNESCO are supporting commemorations of WWI around the globe, recognising that the centenary is a unique occasion to draw attention to the preservation of First World War underwater cultural heritage and to its message for peace and reconciliation.



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