



## The East Coast War Channels

The hundreds of shipwrecks of the East Coast War Channels are the standing remains of a critical battle and the monuments to east coast seafarers who have no other grave.



*An aerial photograph of an east coast convoy in the first world war. (Courtesy of Cross and Cockade International)*

Imagine that there were still bombsites from the first world war in Britain: the shattered remains of warehouses, factories and houses that had been hit in raids by Zeppelins and Gotha bombers. Imagine that there had been hundreds of raids and thousands of properties had been destroyed, spread around the country from north to south. Imagine that walls were still standing, with roofs tumbled in and the debris of everyday lives – possessions, goods, machinery – lying among the ruins. Imagine that when these raids took place not all the bodies were recovered; that these bomb sites are the last resting places of those – mainly civilians – who died.

Imagine that these sites might have been partially demolished but otherwise had grown into the landscape through a variety of natural and incidental human processes, and that although well-documented they were largely ignored, visited only by a few urban explorers and occasional souvenir hunters. Imagine that these places, despite all that they represent, were barely recognised by the public or heritage managers at the start of this centenary. Imagine that with all this on the doorstep, all commemoration was focused elsewhere.

Within a day of Britain's declaration of war, Germany started to lay mines off England's east coast. The minelayer *Königin Louise* was intercepted and sank, but the cruiser HMS *Amphion*, which had led the interception, struck some of the mines and was itself sunk with the loss of 150 crew, plus survivors from the minelayer. Within the month, further German minefields had been laid off the Humber and the Tyne, causing losses to both allied and neutral merchant vessels, to fishing boats, and to the minesweepers that sought to drag the immersed explosives from the seabed.

The Admiralty quickly concluded that it was not possible to remove all the mines, so coastal shipping was restricted to a narrow channel from Folkestone

to the Tees that could be swept each day. This became known as the War Channel, accompanied by swept channels into each port. As shipping was concentrated into these routes, they became the main target of further minelaying, predominantly by U-boats, which also sank vessels by gunfire or boarding to place explosives or open stopcocks. U-boats also made attacks on the east coast using torpedoes, especially in 1917 and 1918 with the advent of unrestricted submarine warfare in the North Sea as well as the Atlantic. And vessels were attacked by German aircraft, including early instances of vessels being sunk by aerial torpedo.

The attrition to merchant ships, fishing vessels and the minor warships that sought to protect them continued throughout the war; in fact stray mines continued to cause ships to be lost well into the 1920s. The fight to prevent trade by sea was by no means one-sided, however, but the battle over German trade was fought predominantly by Royal Navy cruisers intercepting cargo ships in the North Atlantic. The lethal effects were felt by the German population at home rather than at sea.

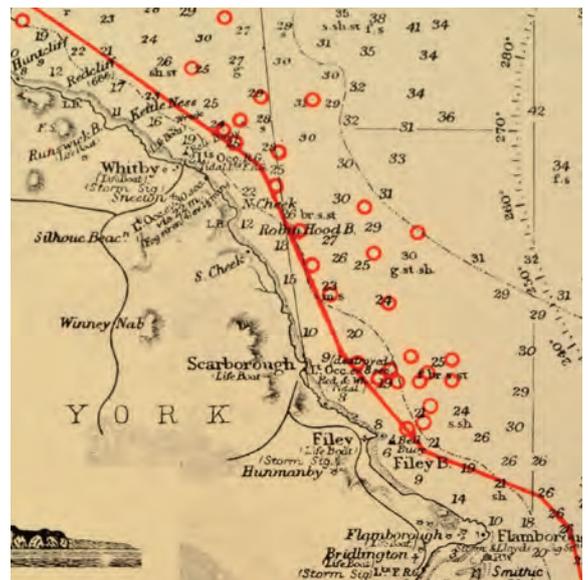
Without doubt the East Coast War Channels were a battlefield throughout the first world war. It is still strewn with the standing remains of the conflict. The number of wrecks on the seabed is not known for certain: over 550 are known and there are a further 800 recorded losses, whose remains are probably among over 1,200 wrecks on the east coast that have yet to be identified by name or date. Equally it is not possible to put a number on all those who died or were injured, let alone all those who experienced the battle but survived. It is clear, however, that the conflict on the doorstep was a global one, with many nationalities among the seafarers who plied the precarious waters of the east coast.

The quantities of losses on the east coast are not perhaps as great as those in the Atlantic or western approaches but they are certainly comparable, especially given the relatively concentrated area in which they occurred. The war channels – and most losses – lay within a few miles of the shore, a landscape that was visible from the coast then and still today. Hallam<sup>1</sup> gives a vivid sense of the war channels from a flying boat on an anti-submarine patrol. ‘After passing over the well-known buoys at the approaches to the harbour,’ Hallam writes, ‘we crossed a fleet of trawlers in the emergency war channel busily engaged in the pleasing task of sweeping up enemy mines laid the evening before... Fifteen minutes later we had the *Shipwash* four miles on our port beam, and were over the shipping channel which ran parallel with the coast. Here, as far as the eye could see in either direction, was a thick stream of cargo boats, of all shapes and sizes, ploughing along on their various occasions, a striking example of the might of the British Mercantile Marine.’

Hallam was patrolling from the Royal Navy Air Station at Felixstowe, trying to intercept U-boats not in the war channels but en route to and from Zeebrugge, Ostend and Bruges. The battle over the East Coast War Channels was not fought only at sea, but in the air, on land and over the airwaves. A very substantial infrastructure of naval bases, air stations and wireless stations was established up and down the east coast in the first world war, including other structures such as port war signal stations, anti-submarine booms, and the sea forts at Haile and Bull Sand in the Humber.

Like the wrecks, many of these have surviving remains also, but they have not received the same attention as second world war defences, and they seem isolated and divorced from the context of the war channel that they served. Huge effort went into patrolling and convoy escort from the air using land-based aircraft, seaplanes, balloons and airships which, because of their relatively limited endurance, needed a string of bases all along the east coast. Wireless stations were used to intercept messages and to fix the position of transmitting U-boats, and this information was collated with other sources of intelligence that could inform counter-attacks. An air war against submarines and the vital role of intelligence are things normally associated in the public mind with the second world war not the first, underlining again just how much we have failed to remember.

A recent study for English Heritage (downloadable from [www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/east-coast-war-channels-first-and-second-world-wars/](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/east-coast-war-channels-first-and-second-world-wars/)) has outlined the history of the war channels, the heritage assets that are associated with them and the sources of available data that could be mobilised in their investigation. Over the next two years, further work will seek to raise awareness of the war channels, working with existing initiatives associated with the first world war centenary to draw attention to the maritime dimension of the conflict. There are few examples of the vessels that typified the war on the east coast in preservation, nor does the war at sea lend itself to re-enactment and living history.



New ways are needed to overcome the superficial invisibility of the war channels. Exercising peoples’ imaginations to encompass the physical remains of the conflict so close to the coast is an important objective, as is providing context for sites and memorials relating to the war channels but situated on land. An enormous amount of data about the East Coast War Channels is available once you look, so it is important to enable people to reconnect disparate sources as they weave together stories of places, communities, families and events.

Hundreds of ships still lie where they were attacked off the east coast of England. They represent a huge effort organisationally, industrially and technologically to maintain trade along an essential seaway. Each wreck has an individual tale to tell of its construction, use and loss. As a whole the assemblage reveals all sorts of chronological, spatial and thematic patterns. The tragic losses present time-slices not only about the conduct of the war but also of the commerce, fishing and seafaring that pre-dated those first mines in 1914.

The shipwrecks of the East Coast War Channels – like their associated sites on land – are the standing remains of a critical battle. They are monuments to east coast seafarers from all over the world who have no other grave. Had they been bombsites on land, perhaps they would have been entirely erased within a decade or so. We should have the sense to recognise what we have inherited. After a hundred years, isn’t it about time we remembered them?

*The East Coast War Channel off North Yorkshire, December 1917 (S.058) from material held at UK Hydrographic Office ([www.ukho.gov.uk](http://www.ukho.gov.uk))*

*Filey Brigg and Flamborough seen from Scarborough Castle. The front line was on England’s doorstep. (Photo: Antony Firth)*

#### Reference

<sup>1</sup> Hallam, Theodore Douglas (P.I.X.) (2009) *Spider Web: Royal Navy Air Service Flying Boat Operations during the first world war by a flight commander*, Leonaaur. Originally published as P.I.X. (1919) *The Spider Web: The romance of a flying-boat war flight*, Blackwood, Edinburgh.

*Antony Firth is the director of Fjordr.*