

History in motion



Looking out towards the past: a project to introduce visitors to First World War shipwrecks

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One of the most striking aspects of Souter Lighthouse is – unsurprisingly – its amazing view of the sea.

You can see for miles – from the coast of Northumberland right round to the North York Moors. Rather closer lies the mouth of the Tyne to the north, and the mouth of the Wear to the south – both with harbour walls with their own lighthouse reaching out into the sea. You can often see cargo ships, ferries, fishing boats and yachts but otherwise the sea seems empty. Turning around, the history of this area is embedded in the landscape – Souter Lighthouse itself, lime kilns, the site of

the colliery village of Marsden, and the humps and bumps of former industry. In contrast, the sea seems timeless. Unlike the landscape, the sea changes by the second under the influence of winds and tide. It bears no trace of its history.

The team at Souter Lighthouse is working with my company, Fjordr Limited – a consultancy specialising in the marine historic environment – to enable visitors to rediscover a critical episode in the maritime history of the North East. Throughout the First World War, ships were being sunk by enemy action and other perils right on the

doorstep: over 40 vessels were lost within sight of the lighthouse between 1914 and 1918. Thousands more passed by safely because of the huge effort to defend east-coast shipping from attacks. Later in the war, convoys of up to 70 ships would have passed by in each direction, escorted by patrol vessels, aircraft and airships. Throughout the war, minesweepers – often requisitioned fishing trawlers – swept a safe route along the east coast to the Thames.

This swept channel gives its name to the project, East Coast War Channels: Souter and the Leas. The project is supported by a grant



The seas off Souter Lighthouse are still busy with shipping; but in the First World War this was a battlefield. © A. Firth/Fjordr

from the Heritage Lottery Fund under its 'First World War: then and now' programme. The project at Souter Lighthouse has developed from a broader project being carried out by Fjordr Limited for Historic England which is using the East Coast War Channels along their entire length – from North Foreland in Kent to Berwick-upon-Tweed – to examine the heritage of the conflict over civilian shipping on the east coast during the First World War.

Moving targets

The East Coast War Channels were introduced as a countermeasure to minefields laid by German ships in August 1914, including off the Tyne. Although they may have been intended to sink warships, the first casualties were cargo ships and fishing boats. The Admiralty decided that it could not sweep up all the mines but instead would concentrate on clearing a single channel along the east coast, with spurs off to each of the east coast ports on one side and to the North Sea trade routes on the other.

The War Channels became a focus for attacks by German U-boats, which targeted the north east heavily in 1917 and 1918. Ships

were sunk by torpedo and by surface gunfire from U-boats, but specialised U-boats also came very close inshore – to within a few hundred metres of the mouth of the Tyne and the Wear – to lay deadly mines.

One of the principles of the project is to use the stories of individual wrecks to paint a much broader picture of the conduct of the First World War at sea on the east coast. The shipwrecks do not represent just random misfortune. Rather, they point towards key themes that connect directly to the history of the region. For example, many of the ships wrecked off Souter were built in the region, reflecting the huge importance of shipbuilding and repair in the north east, especially in wartime. The heritage of this industry now lies on the seabed, and this project is one way to draw people's attention to a sector whose history is now much less evident in the local landscape.

Another key theme in the region is coal-mining. The cargo ships off Souter were predominantly carrying coal – or returning empty 'in ballast' for more coal – when they were sunk. The transport of coal from the north east to London and the south coast, including for gas and electricity supply, was a major wartime flow. Often ships were travelling to France, which had lost access

to many of its own coalfields when Germany first attacked, rendering it dependent on north-east coal. Coal from Whitburn Colliery at Marsden, adjoining Souter Lighthouse, would have been transported by rail down to the coal staithes in South Shields and onto ships that would have passed the lighthouse heading south. The vital role of shipping in the supply of energy is represented by wrecks of ships such as the *Ravensbourne*, mined in January 1917, and the *Firelight*, torpedoed in May 1917.

New engagement on land

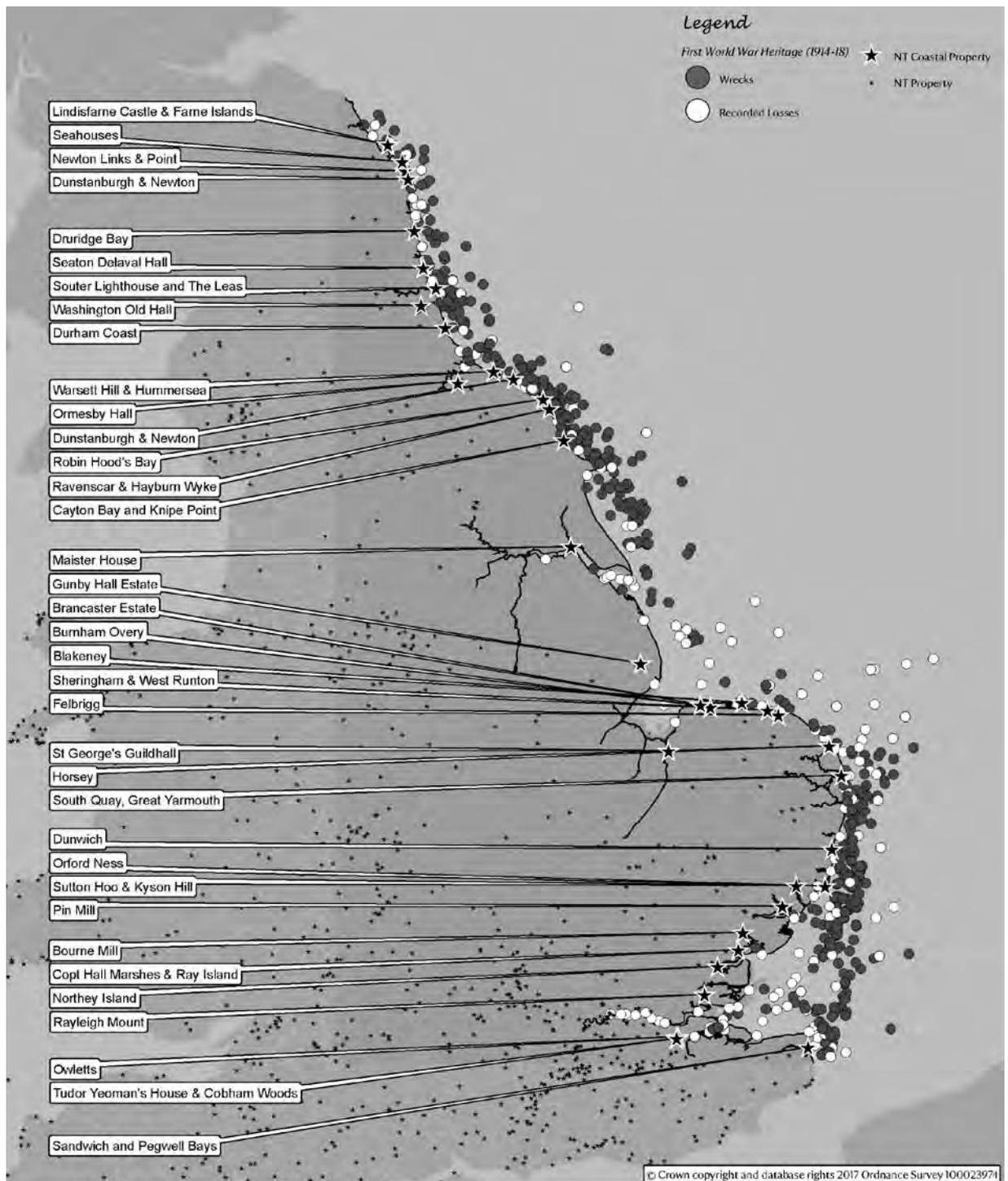
The project at Souter Lighthouse is bringing attention back to the War Channels through various activities. Training has already been provided for Trust staff and volunteers so that they can include the War Channels in their interaction with visitors, as well as running their own activities. A series of 'wreck walks' is also being developed; some of which will be guided by Trust staff and volunteers while others will be self-guided and available for download. To support these – and to reach members of the public who come onto the property without necessarily visiting the lighthouse –

Convoys were introduced on the east coast from the end of April 1917. All along the coast they would have been a striking reminder of the fight against U-boats on England's doorstep. © Cross & Cockade International

The mouth of the Tyne (marked by the stone pier in the mid ground) is about the same distance from Souter Lighthouse as the War Channels offshore. U-boats sank ships just off these piers. © A. Firth/Fjordr



The record of wrecks (grey) and recorded losses (white) in 1914-18 forms a key element of First World War heritage all along the east coast. © Fjodr/ National Record of the Historic Environment © Crown copyright and database rights 2017 Ordnance Survey 100023974



additional signage and waymarks are to be installed. As mentioned earlier, the walks and signage will tell the stories of individual wrecks but also link them to the broader themes and circumstances that caused ships to be lost in this place. A mobile exhibition and materials both online and in print will provide further detail.

An initial Family History Workshop has been held at Souter Lighthouse to explore the connections between local families and the East Coast War Channels, and further events are planned at The Word, a cultural venue in South Shields. Feedback from the first event indicated that this was a dimension of local history with which the participants were not familiar, and they

appreciated the guidance they were given on sources of information about the First World War at sea that they could use in their own research. Information about local connections to the War Channels gained through these workshops will be used, with permission, in the walks, signage and exhibition that are developed over the course of the project.

One particularly innovative aspect of the project is a series of Creative Writing Workshops being run in conjunction with a poet, Winston Plowes. Engaging with shipwrecks that lie hidden beneath the waves always requires the exercise of imagination. These workshops will combine creativity and historical research to shine a new and

different light from Souter Lighthouse onto its maritime landscape.

The story of the War Channels could resonate with Trust properties along the entire east coast. The details of individual shipwrecks create specific, local interest; but they also provide connections to much broader themes associated with the First World War. The project is also serving as a case study in engaging with heritage that lies just offshore, which might assist other coastal properties focusing on other periods. The East Coast War Channels project is clearly showing that Trust properties like Souter Lighthouse are exceptionally well-placed to help visitors rediscover neglected facets of their maritime past.