

# A Thousand Wrecks: The First World War on England's East Coast

## The East Coast War Channels 1914-1918

by Antony Firth Fjodr Limited

We are in the midst of the First World War centenary, which is being commemorated with all manner of projects, both national and local. Much of the focus is on the carnage on the Western Front and campaigns such as Gallipoli, and on how their impact was felt at home. Other than the clash at Jutland [see Feature on page 16], the First World War at sea is receiving relatively little attention. Consequently this project, which is being carried out by Fjodr Ltd, for Historic England, is trying to make a difference to our knowledge and appreciation of the largely forgotten conflict over merchant shipping on the east coast of England.

It is no surprise that there are lots of wrecks on England's east coast. From their wrecking onwards, they have posed a hazard to navigation so they have been surveyed in varying degrees over much of the last century. Nor is it a surprise to hear that many of these wrecks were lost during either the First or Second World War. There are plenty of books and records that will give you the basic details of what happened to each one.

Are the wrecks on the east coast just a tragic testimony to innumerable unfortunate events, best thought of (if at all) wreck-by-wreck? The answer is plainly 'no'. In each of the World Wars, huge effort was directed to ensuring that coastwise shipping was maintained up and down the east coast. Equally, German forces did their best to halt and disrupt the flow of ships.

In both wars the focus of this conflict was the War Channels: a channel roughly parallel to the coast between the Thames and the Tyne (and beyond), accompanied by inshore channels connecting the coast route with each port, and by further channels providing links to trade routes across the North Sea and beyond. These channels were created to deal with mines. At the outset of the First World War, the German navy laid mines across the main shipping route off East Anglia, and subsequently off the Tyne and Humber. The Admiralty quickly concluded that it could not sweep up all of the mines on the east coast, and therefore concentrated on narrow channels.

As a result, the War Channels became the focus of the conflict over east coast shipping throughout the First World War. Minesweeping was carried out mainly by requisitioned trawlers and paddle steamers crewed by fishermen and other reservists. It was a hazardous task and many were lost. Although mines were laid initially by German surface vessels, mine-laying U-boats were used from 1915. Mines were in fact the main cause of loss on the east coast during the First World War. Ships were also sunk by U-boats using gunfire and by sending crews across to lay charges and open seacocks. Torpedo attacks became more common from February 1917 when Germany removed its restrictions on submarine warfare. Marine hazards also took their toll, particularly with collisions exacerbated by confined channels and dimmed lights.

The maintenance of east coast shipping was critical, not least for the supply of coal from the North East to Southern England, and France which had lost access to many of its coalfields as a result of early German advances. With fishing important as a source of food, fishing vessels from east coast ports also found themselves targeted by U-boats. Over a thousand ships and boats were sunk between North Foreland and Berwick-upon-Tweed from 1914 to 1918: cargo vessels, fishing boats and the minor warships – mostly requisitioned craft – that sought to protect them as escorts and sweepers.

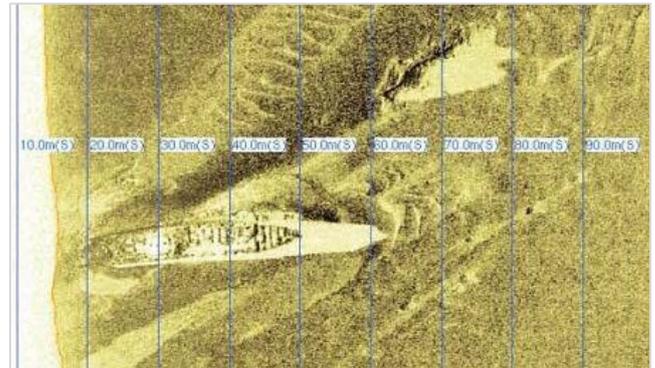


Figure 1: Wrecks thought to be SS *Dulwich* and HM Trawler *Hirose*. Found on the perimeter of the Galloper Offshore Wind Farm development area, they sank as a result of mines laid by U-boats. *Dulwich* sank in June 1917 with the loss of five crew. *Hirose* was lost in June 1916 with ten of her crew, all Royal Navy Reserve.

Source: Survey was carried out by Bibby HydroMap for SSE Renewables and RWE Innogy UK; report downloaded from The Crown Estate's Marine Data Exchange

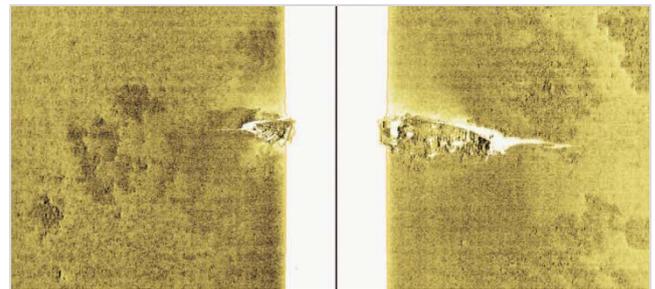


Figure 2: SS *Princess Maud* a passenger/cargo steamer torpedoed off the Northumberland coast in June 1918 en route from London to Leith. Three crew were killed.

© Wessex Archaeology, courtesy of EDF Energy Renewables

Source: Wreck identified in a survey by EGS for the Blyth Offshore Demonstration Project, interpreted by Wessex Archaeology; report downloaded from The Crown Estate's Marine Data Exchange

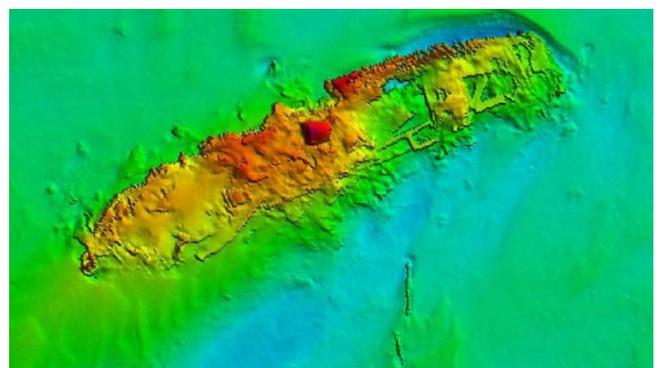


Figure 3: *Lady Salisbury* a Sunderland-built cargo ship carrying coal en route from Hartlepool to London struck a mine laid by a U-boat near the Sunk Light Vessel in June 1915. Three people were lost.

Maritime and Coastguard Agency © Crown copyright

Source: Surveyed by EGS for the Civil Hydrography Programme.

It is not easy to say how many people died in the East Coast War Channels. The biggest losses from individual vessels tended to be from warships – including the crews of the U-boats that were sunk. The crews of merchant ships and fishing vessels were generally small and not all were killed when a ship was lost. Nonetheless, casualties of the East Coast War Channels number in the thousands, and many more were injured or had to endure tough conditions in inhospitable waters in the course of being rescued. Of those who died, many have no grave but the sea. Large numbers are commemorated at the Tower Hill Memorial in London, but others are to be found elsewhere. It was a world war on the east coast: not only were ships of various nationalities lost, but seafarers of various nationalities too. For example, sailors of the Indian Merchant Service are commemorated in Mumbai, far from the places where they served and died.

So, First World War wrecks on the east coast are not just an inconsequential scatter of seabed features. They are monuments to those who died, as much as the headstones and memorials of the Western Front, Gallipoli, and every town and village. They are also the standing remains of a hard-fought battlefield just off our shores; they have few parallels amongst the tidied-up land-based battlefields. Individually, and as a whole, these wrecks provide insights into how the war at sea was conducted. They also offer a time-slice through many aspects of life on the east coast in generations past: seafaring; shipbuilding; fishing; maritime trades and coastal communities. Whether it is about the War or about life in general, there are all sorts of documentary, photographic and anecdotal evidence held privately and in public collections from which these histories can be regained. However, it is often dispersed and fragmented, severed from the ships that still lie wrecked on the seabed.

This all proves that information about the wrecks themselves is immensely important. The basic knowledge about each is often limited or ambiguous. The National Record of the Historic Environment (NRHE) maintained by Historic England lists over 500 known wrecks on the east coast, which are identified by name and can be attributed to the First World War. A further 500 which are known to have been lost during the First World War but have yet to be associated with a particular seabed wreck are listed; many will coincide with almost 1,200 features thought to be wrecks but unidentified, with their names and ages currently unknown. Even amongst the wrecks that are listed, the positions, extents and attribution of identities and periods may be open to question.

For the losses that have been named, even provisionally, other records may be drawn upon to establish where they were built, how they were used during their lifetime and how they were lost, including the names of casualties. But the wrecks themselves are usually shown only as a dot, with little information about form or condition. Owing to previous efforts at salvage or dispersal, many wrecks are represented on the seabed only by a mess of plates or a few major components, such as boilers. This will have reduced their evidential value though they may still be important in illustrating a key event or theme, or as a place of commemoration. Some wrecks are still relatively coherent; given that so few larger vessels have survived in preservation, they are amongst the last physical remains of this facet of our industrial and maritime heritage.

The importance of hydrography in exploring, understanding and commemorating the First World War on the east coast should already be plain. Hydrographic data is critical in establishing what is present on the seabed, to re-connecting historic records to places of loss and to communicating all of this to the general public. Hydrographic data can render the war at sea visible again, reminding us of what we owe to those who fought on the east coast and providing a focus for families and communities carrying out their own research.

As part of the East Coast War Channels 1914-1918 project I have been looking at the scope for re-using hydrographic and geophysical data acquired for other purposes. For example, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency's Civil Hydrography Programme routinely involves detailed wreck investigations for navigational safety within its survey areas. Information and images derived from multibeam data can enable identities to be established or confirmed, as well as indicating form and condition. Similarly, reports of geophysical surveys held in the Crown Estate's Marine Data Exchange, acquired in connection with offshore renewable energy projects, are potentially important sources of re-usable information.

However numerous or mundane the wartime wrecks of the east coast may seem, hydrographic data is always going to make a useful contribution to our knowledge of the conflicts that took place there. The availability of high-resolution surveys over the last decade or so is contributing to a digital revolution that encompasses underwater photography and online access to archival material. Survey data can make a real difference to the identification and characterisation of wrecks whose significance we have been slow to recognise. On the basis of survey data, wrecks can be reconnected to the histories from which they have been severed.

As well as wrecks, there may be opportunities to identify some of the other debris of the First World War around our coasts. The War Channels were buoyed along their length by Trinity House, so it is possible that moorings, and even sunken buoys associated with the channels, can be identified. Thousands of mines were laid, not only by the Germans but also by the British defensively mining the outer fringe of the channels and laying 'deep mines' as traps for U-boats. The sinkers from these mines are of a size that could be identified using modern survey techniques. Other physical obstructions were also deployed off the east coast, such as nets, that might also be represented by moorings and cables still on the seabed. Formerly secret charts, held in the archives of the UK Hydrographic Office, indicate their position. It would be interesting to know if there are seabed features still in these locations. Amongst the most ephemeral and enigmatic remains that might be identified in hydrographic surveys are those of First World War aircraft. Air power played a significant role in overcoming the threat from U-boats, using land-based planes, seaplanes and airships. Although First World War aircraft might be thought too flimsy to survive on the seabed, finds recovered by fishermen suggest otherwise. It would be remarkable, but not impossible, to discover an aircraft from 1914-1918 during a seabed survey.

If you can offer any images of east coast wrecks or other features to the East Coast War Channels project, please contact [info@fjodr.com](mailto:info@fjodr.com). For further information about the project visit Historic England at [www.historicengland.org.uk](http://www.historicengland.org.uk) or follow [#WarChannels](https://twitter.com/WarChannels) on Twitter. Additional information on earlier work on the War Channels, in both World Wars can be found at [www.fjodr.com/downloads](http://www.fjodr.com/downloads).

### The Author

**Dr Antony Firth** is the Director of Fjodr Ltd, a company specialising in marine and historic environment consultancy. He has been involved in marine archaeology since the mid-1980s, initially as a volunteer diver and then as a member of the Archaeological Diving Unit. He led the coastal and marine team of Wessex Archaeology for nearly 16 years, working on a wide range of projects especially in the development-led sector. He extended the archaeological use of marine geophysics, through collaboration with industry. In 2012 he established Fjodr, enabling him to focus more directly on innovative projects and strategic research.

