

# The East Coast War Channels: Uncovering a forgotten First World War battlefield in The National Archives

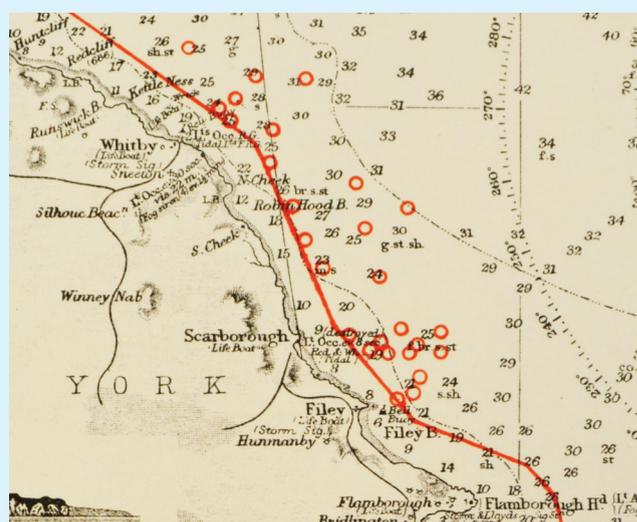
Antony Firth examines the documentary trail of wartime shipping to gain a better understanding of the conflict and the losses inflicted.

Over a thousand ships were sunk off the east coast of England during the First World War, often within just a few miles of the coast. Many of those who died have no grave but the sea. They were the casualties of a battle that is all but forgotten, despite a rich seam of information held in the country's archives. A project funded by Historic England is seeking to reconnect the physical remains that still lie on the seabed with the records that make sense of the battlefield.

From the outbreak of the First World War, Germany started laying mines off the east coast of England. Even if the intention was to sink the warships of the Royal Navy, merchant ships and fishing vessels were amongst the first casualties. Trawlers had already been requisitioned to sweep for mines and, in such a hazardous role, soon suffered casualties too. The Admiralty concluded that it was not possible to clear all the minefields and that their efforts would concentrate on maintaining a channel up and down the east coast that merchant ships and fishing vessels could use. These were the East Coast War Channels, with branches into each of the east coast ports and out to the trade routes to the Continent, Baltic and Scandinavia. These swept channels were of vital importance to the maintenance of coastwise shipping, both allied and neutral, which was itself vital to the survival of Britain and indeed France, dependent on the UK for fuel once its own coalfields had been overrun.

Keeping a flow of ships up and down the east coast was a focus of huge effort throughout the duration of the war. Equally, halting that flow was a focus of German effort, often centred on the channels themselves. Although the first mines had been laid by German surface vessels, U-boats became the main source of attacks – especially after Germany gained additional access to the North Sea through Ostend and Zeebrugge. U-boats attacked on the surface using their deck guns, or by sending sailors across to scuttle their targets by opening seacocks or setting off explosives. Germany also developed mine-laying submarines, which were particularly effective; more ships were sunk by mines on the east coast than by any other means. The U-boats also fired torpedoes, which became a particularly important weapon against civilian shipping in 1917 and 1918 with the resumption of unrestricted warfare, when submarines would attack without warning.

Surface ships and U-boats were not the only dangers, however. A small number of ships on the east coast were



*A section of Chart S. 058 from December 1917 showing the red line of the War Channel off the Yorkshire coast. AJ Firth Fjodr from material held at UK Hydrographic Office*

sunk by torpedoes dropped by German floatplanes, a deadly innovation that was to become much more important in the Second World War. Many more ships were lost to the usual hazards of a naturally difficult coast – foundering in poor weather, grounding on sandbanks or wrecking on the shore. Such hazards were no doubt exacerbated by wartime conditions, as navigation aids such as buoys and lighthouses were dimmed. There were also losses to collision amongst shipping concentrated in the war channels; this became a particular hazard when the convoy system was introduced to the east coast in April 1917.

As a consequence, the East Coast War Channels are a battlefield that is still strewn with hundreds of wrecks. Historic England has a record of over 500 named wrecks dating to 1914-1918. It has a record of a further 500 vessels that are known to have been lost in the same period, whilst there are over 1200 wrecks on the east coast that have yet to be identified. This constitutes a huge physical legacy, monuments not only to all those

who died but to all those who endured and survived. They are also monuments to the efforts and sacrifices of thousands more who participated in the battle over east coast shipping in ports, shipyards, lifeboats, airfields, wireless stations and countless other places along this watery front line.

The battle over the East Coast War Channels is difficult to comprehend from what is known about the physical remains of the wrecks alone. Although work has been done – especially by enthusiastic divers and researchers – to provide firm identifications of some wrecks, archaeological records are still relatively poor. An appraisal conducted for English Heritage in 2013-14<sup>1</sup> concluded that this was not due to an absence of information, but because information had been severed from the wrecks themselves and dissipated amongst the numerous organisations that had interests in the East Coast War Channels and the shipping there. English Heritage – now Historic England – commissioned a project to start remaking the links between wrecks and the information that relates to them.

The appraisal also underlined the need to see the East Coast War Channels not only as a large number of individual wrecks, but also holistically as a series of overlapping systems. This certainly seems to have been the way that it was conceptualised at the time: there was a 'big picture' that is apparent in the patterning of the physical remains, but also in the documents of the time. Whilst it is important not to lose sight of the individual tragedies of attacks and casualties it is also important to pursue the big picture, because it has the potential to provide insight into how Britain fought and eventually won the First World War. Persistence, bravery and technical innovation played an important part, but so did intelligence, organisation and administration. It is for these reasons that the documents held in The National Archives and other repositories are so important to understanding the East Coast War Channels.

Over the period of the First World War centenary it is hoped that both individual stories and broader narratives can be reconnected to the physical remains of the East Coast War Channels. As indicated above, the points of contact between paper and twisted metal are numerous. Details of the losses to enemy action of individual merchant vessels are held in ADM 137/2959-2964. They are ordered by vessel and date rather than geographical area, so those relating to the east coast are mixed with reports of merchant ships lost all over the world. The details are quite brief, but informative nonetheless, including a description of the loss and what happened to the crew. Losses to HM vessels are set out in various subseries in ADM 1. These records encompass vessels requisitioned by the Admiralty, including the numerous fishing vessels commissioned as minesweepers

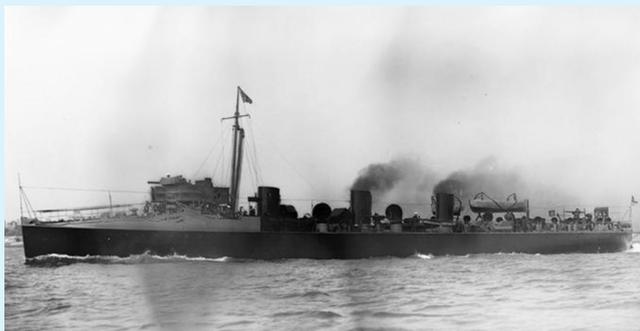
and patrol boats, which were particularly hazardous roles. Again, these are not indexed by area, so the starting point is the vessel's name. The third main class of vessel engaged in the battle over the East Coast War Channels were fishing boats still engaged in fishing, which were targeted by U-boats on many occasions. Fishing vessels feature in the ledger of vessels subject to War Risks Insurance still held by the Department for Transport and in the aggregated figures in the Official History.

The convoy records of the East Coast Convoys in ADM 137/2640-2643 are a particularly interesting set of records relating specifically to the East Coast War Channels. These are volumes of telegrams detailing the departure and arrival of each convoy, numbered in repeating sequences of one hundred, prefixed by the convoy route (MT/TM between Methil (Firth of Forth) and Tyne; TU/UT between Tyne and Humber). The telegrams include lists of vessels in each convoy and where they were bound, plus details of escort vessels. These documents help make the point that for all those vessels that were wrecked, many more sailed without loss. Although the German threat to trade was intense, it was not successful.

For many convoys the telegrams in ADM 137/2640 are routine reports, but in some cases they contain details of incidents and losses. For example on the 30 October 1918, a matter of days before the Armistice, Senior Naval Officer Tyne informed the Admiralty that a north-bound armed trawler, the *Thomas Cornwall*, had been sunk in collision with a ship from the south-bound

COPY OF TELEGRAM.		IN
From	V.A. East Coast	DATE 11.6.18
To—	Admiralty.	SENT 10.33 a.m.
	TU 40	RECD. 11.30 a.m.
N.		
423. H.M.S. BOYNE and escort force T.U. 40 arrived		
0600 convoy correct except British steamer LOW TYNE		
torpedoed and sunk off Whitby at 2100		
Sent to Admiralty 60 62 61a		
1010		
1st S.L.		
D.C. 2		
D.M.M.2		
I.D. 25 B		
A.S.D.		
D.M.S.		
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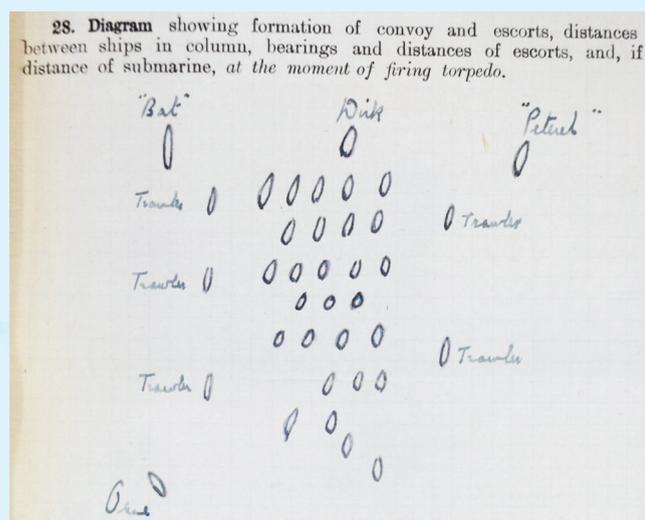
ADM 137/2640: Telegram reporting arrival of southbound convoy TU 40 on 11 June 1918, except for the loss of SS Low Tyne off Whitby



Q 38854 (© IWM): HMS Fairy was one of the small warships used to escort convoys in the East Coast War Channels. She was sunk off Hornsea after ramming and sinking U-boat UC-75 whilst escorting a convoy on 31 May 1918.

convoy TU 24. The telegram names the other ship as the 'French Steamer *Ranee Hyafil*' and this spelling is also used in other accounts of the loss. However, the list of ships that sailed as TU 24 on 29 October – bound alongside the telegram – lists the vessel *Renee Hyaffil* from the Tees for Treport. Two survivors of the *Thomas Cornwall* were landed at Tyne but 20 men were lost; the wreck lies about 14km north east of Filey Brigg.

One evocative set of documents seems to have been bound with the TU convoy reports by mistake. The documents relate to the loss of HMS *Dirk* and SS *Caroline* in TU 25 and 26 and includes handwritten accounts by the commanders of escorts HMS *Bat* and HMS *Petrel* plus a completed pro forma 'I.D. Form A.C. 1 – Form for reporting Submarine Attacks on Convoys'. HMS *Dirk* exploded at 1.35 am without it being clear whether a mine or torpedo was the cause, though HMS *Ouse* – also escorting – appears to have subsequently sighted a submarine. The convoy scattered and SS *Caroline* was lost due to a collision with SS *Merida*, also in the convoy. Twenty men died from *Dirk*, but two survivors and all those from *Caroline* were picked up by the escorting trawler, *Strathclunie*. The wrecks of *Dirk* and *Caroline* still lie 800m apart about 12km off Flamborough. The



ADM 137/2640: Diagram from I.D. Form A.C. 1 showing HMS *Dirk* at the head of the convoy when lost off Flamborough Head.

pro forma – complete with a sketch of the convoy when it was attacked – gives few specific details of the event because it happened in darkness, but it does indicate the factors that I.D. (Intelligence Division) considered important to record.

As with all these documents, they provide an insight that goes beyond facts that might have been transcribed into secondary sources; copy lists, stamps and annotations all indicate the administrative connections that tied the system together. The original documents are also artefacts themselves, providing a tangible link to the people through whose hands they passed on yet another day of a war whose duration and outcome – personally and for the country – they could not know.

There are many more documents within The National Archives and elsewhere that can be expected to shed light on the East Coast War Channels. Routine communications were handled by Port War Signal Stations strung along the east coast, whilst a series of naval bases operated escorts and minesweepers. Defensive mines and obstructions were laid to seaward of the channels – and in some cases 'deep mines' were laid with the specific intention of trapping U-boats. Details of operations are likely to be captured in the individual logs of the minor warships that fought on the east coast, and personnel records might add to the insights. The National Archives online search Discovery reveals a huge variety of records relating to First World War shipping in the correspondence and papers of the Transport Department of the Admiralty (MT 23) and after 1917 in the Ministry of Shipping (MT 25) that touch upon the east coast.

However, the war at sea was not only fought on the water. Across the airwaves, wireless stations on the east coast intercepted U-boat communications and used their transmissions to calculate locations, using direction-finding methods. In the air itself, huge effort from over a score of air stations was directed to patrolling the east coast and escorting convoys using land planes, seaplanes and lighter-than-air craft developed specifically to counter the threat from U-boats.

Many of these different aspects of the conflict are likely to have left paper trails in The National Archives. Some such trails may already be being pursued by Friends of The National Archives and others. If you would like to help commemorate the East Coast War Channels by reconnecting historical documents to the wrecks that still lie offshore over the course of the First World War centenary, then please get in contact.<sup>2</sup>

#### Notes:

1. Firth, A., 2014, 'East Coast War Channels in the First and Second World War'. *Unpublished report for English Heritage*. EH Project Number 6586, Fjordr Ref: 16131. Tisbury: Fjordr Limited.
2. Please contact: editor@friendsofthenationalarchives.org.uk