



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

UNDERWATER CULTURAL HERITAGE FROM WORLD WAR I



PROCEEDINGS OF THE SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE ON THE OCCASION OF THE CENTENARY OF
WORLD WAR I
BRUGES, BELGIUM, 26 & 27 JUNE 2014

Published in 2015 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization,
7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France
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ISBN 978-92-3-100111-6



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Graphic design: Lucas Simonds

Cover design, final proofreading and layout: Thomas Van Damme



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The Protection of the
Underwater Cultural Heritage

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B R U
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The East Coast War Channels in the First World War

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The East Coast War Channels were the routes used by merchant shipping up and down the East Coast of the United Kingdom throughout the First World War (Figure 1). Coasting traffic was vital to both Allies and Neutrals from 1914 to 1918, so a great deal of effort was directed to its organisation and defence. With such a concentration of shipping, the War Channels became a major focus of German activity in the North Sea. In consequence, the War Channels are preserved physically as a variety of different types of cultural

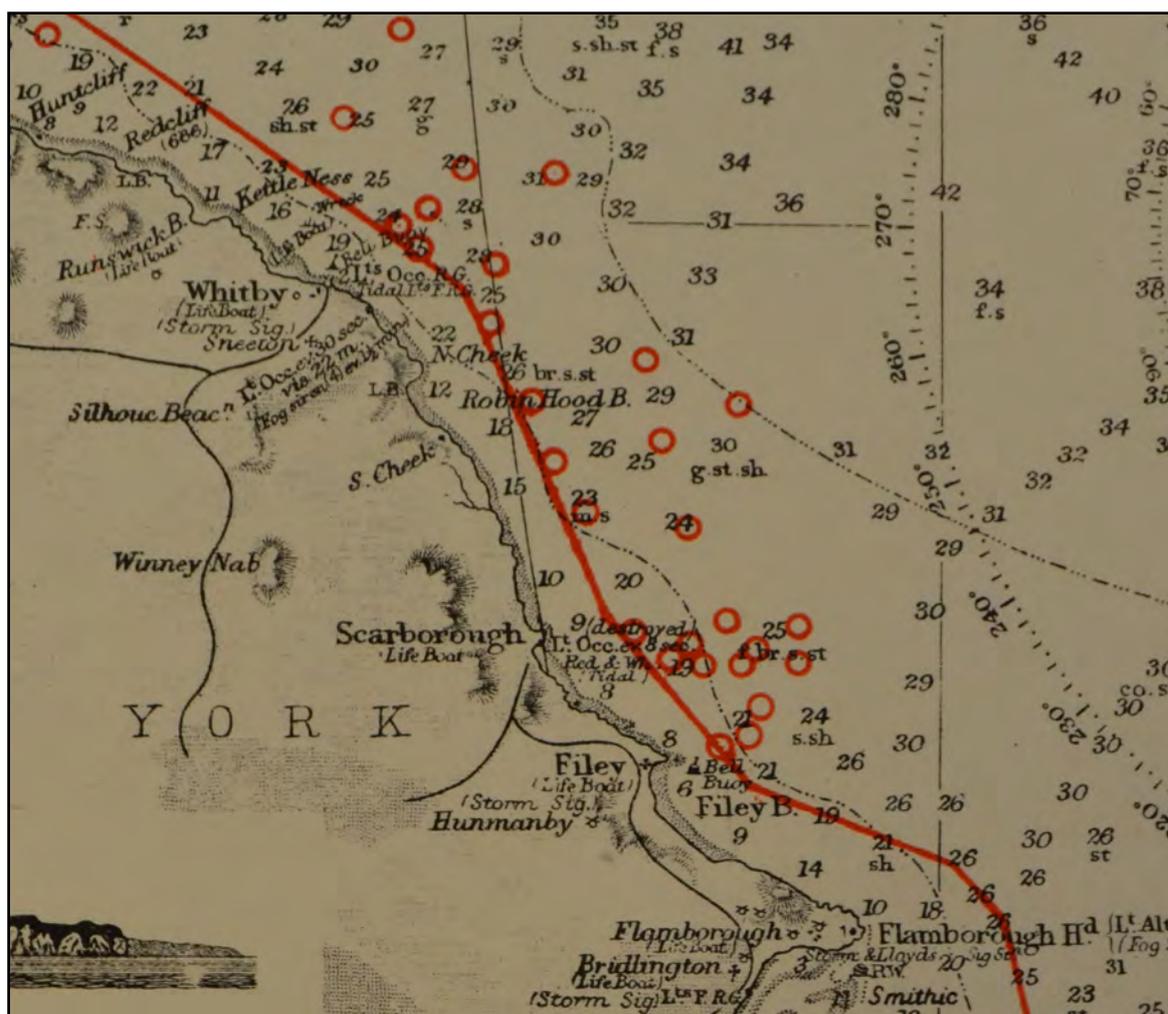


Figure 1. Extract of Chart S. 058 from August 1917 showing the red line that indicated the War Channel, off Yorkshire. © Courtesy of UK Hydrographic Office

heritage onshore, and in the form of large numbers of shipwrecks offshore.

Building on recent work carried out for English Heritage,¹ this paper illustrates the character of the War Channels as an archaeological resource, and outlines the approach towards their investigation over the next few years. However, this work also prompts a wider reflection on the role of marine archaeologists in commemorating the First World War.

The First World War is recent history, about which there is a great deal of public interest in the UK and elsewhere in terms of family and community connections to the conflict. With such a surge of public interest, what can archaeologists possibly add? Can we simply join in the ceremonies, silences and personal researches as members of the public with our own family and community connections, or do we have broader responsibilities?

There are three reasons why archaeologists ought to be taking a proactive, guiding role in the public commemorations of the next four to five years; three reasons that are informing the approach taken to the East Coast War Channels:

- First, archaeologists can challenge how people think about the First World War, based on physical evidence of the conflict.
- Second, archaeologists can take steps to ensure the survival of this physical evidence not just for this centenary, but for centenaries far into the future.
- Third, archaeologists can engage people not only through what they know but through how they know. They can enable others to explore for themselves the heightened sense of the historical threads that still weave through our environment today.

In sum, archaeology associated with the centenary of the First World War should challenge peoples' understanding, should be concerned with the conservation of physical evidence and should enable public participation.

These wider reflections on the role of archaeologists can be illustrated by the SS *Storm* (Figure 2). The *Storm* was a small steamship built in Goole on the Humber in 1875 as the *Rosa*, registered in Sligo and lost on 9 September 1917 while carrying a cargo of coke from Newcastle to Dunkirk. Of the eight crew, three – a Fireman, Mate and Chief Engineer – were lost. The wreck lies in the outer Thames in 18 m of water about 12 nautical miles off Felixstowe. The wreck of the *Storm* challenges our understanding in that the ship was reportedly

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.

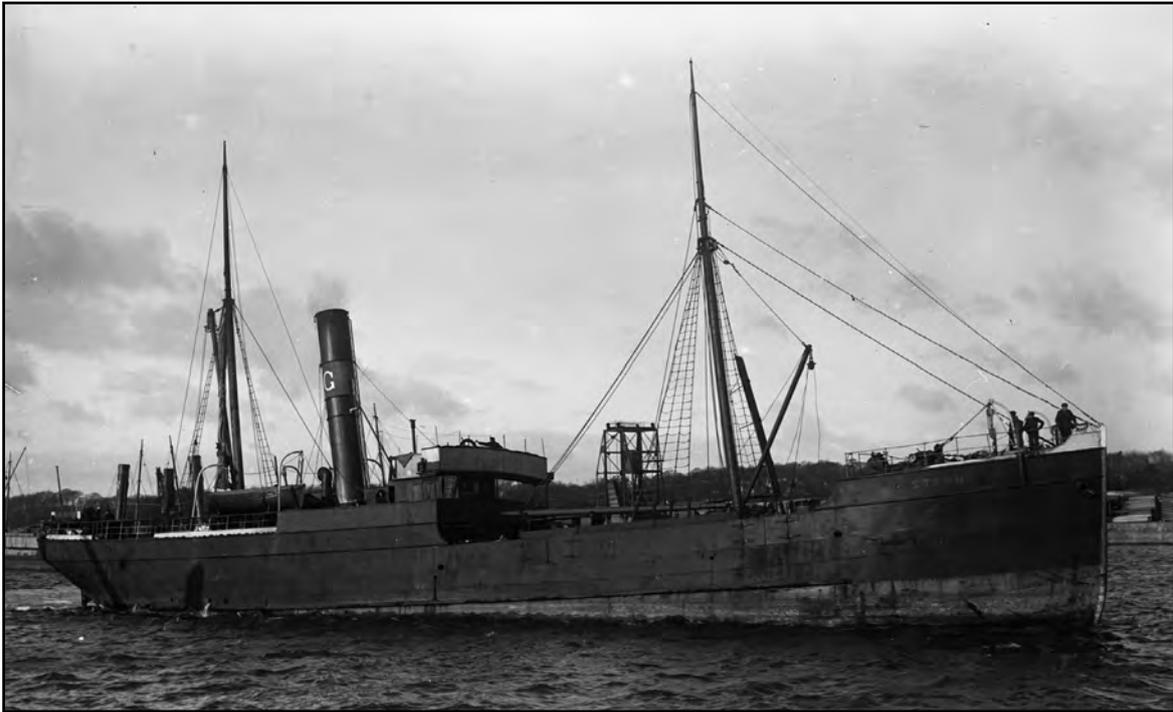


Figure 2. SS Storm, built in Goole in 1875 and sunk in the outer Thames Estuary in September 1917 by a torpedo from a German aircraft. © J and M Clarkson

torpedoed by a German seaplane. As such, it was one of a small number of losses that demonstrate the relatively little-known use of aerial torpedoes by Germany in the southern North Sea in the First World War. This development in warfare at sea is important not only in considering the specific conflict, but also in the broader history of torpedo bombers and their role in the Second World War. In terms of physical evidence, the *Storm* was implicated in plans for dredging the approaches to the Thames Estuary in connection with the new port at London Gateway, and was surveyed using multibeam as a consequence (Figure 3).² Reports suggest that the *Storm* was subject to demolition activities as recently as 2003. The wreck of the *Storm* can also be a focus for the public to engage with archaeological records through the stories of the 3 men who were lost, the community that built the ship, the 40-year biography of the vessel prior to its loss, the important wartime coal trade between North East England and France, Germany's development of anti-shipping aircraft, the history of the wreck since its loss and so on. As with so many of the vessels lost in the East Coast War Channels, the *Storm* has many tales yet to tell that all can be explored by the public and archaeologists alike.

Understanding

As illustrated above, the East Coast War Channels can challenge our understanding of the First World War in several respects:

² Firth, A, Callan, N, Scott, G, Gane, T & Arnott, S 2012, London Gateway: Maritime Archaeology in the Thames Estuary. Wessex Archaeology, Salisbury, UK.

The War Channels are largely forgotten. The war at sea is greatly overshadowed by the war on land. Where the war at sea is remembered, it is usually in terms of engagements by major warships rather than day-to-day attrition. Even the concern for merchant shipping is dominated by losses in the Atlantic and

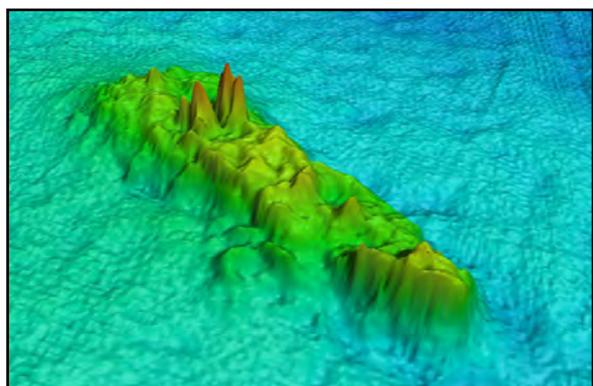


Figure 3. A multibeam image of the wreck of SS Storm, surveyed in 2006 as part of investigations preceding dredging for London Gateway Port. © Wessex Archaeology; Multibeam Data Courtesy of London Gateway

other oceans. The War Channels demonstrate that the war at sea did not only occur far from shore; they draw attention back to a significant theatre that was very close to home, in which many died and thousands more endured.

The War Channels also challenge the idea that maritime archaeology is made up of single sites, and that shipwrecks only become significant places by accident. The Channels require a landscape-scale approach.

First World War shipwrecks need to be addressed collectively as a group whose spatial and chronological patterning points directly to key changes in the conflict. Viewed as a whole, the East Coast War Channels represent a hard-fought battlefield. As such, the Western Front should be seen not only as a system of trenches from Switzerland to the Belgian coast, but rather as a front line extending, through minefields and physically-marked routes, all the way up the UK's North Sea coast. The watery no-man's-land often started within a mile of England's coastal towns and villages.

The War Channels also help to underline the scale and depth of the mobilisation of the UK economically, industrially and socially. The transformations wrought on society by the First World War amongst those that survived are perhaps more important than detailing those who died; it is absolutely the case that a wholesale reworking of production, commerce and normal modes of organisation took place in the East Coast War Channels, just as elsewhere. In addition to merchant ships being brought increasingly under state control, and eventually into the convoy system, large numbers of civilian vessels were incorporated as minor warships into British naval forces – including fishing vessels and their crews that were used to sweep for mines at great risk and frequent loss.

The conflict in the East Coast War Channels also presents challenges to our understanding of the First World War in technological terms. The East Coast battle was fought at the forefront of the new technologies of war at sea – mines, submarines, torpedoes and their countermeasures. The conflict saw extensive use of wireless in direction-finding, signal interception, the deployment of aircraft

and in the integration of intelligence into operations. In these respects, the East Coast War Channels presaged approaches that are more often associated in popular understanding with the Second World War rather than the First.

Two-thirds of ships sunk in the War Channels were British, but the conflict was distinctly multinational in its impacts. Ships from a variety of states used the War Channels, and they were equally susceptible to mines and unrestricted submarine warfare. Irrespective of a vessel's flag, the crews were also multinational. As an example, the SS *Audax*, torpedoed in September 1918, lies at 42 m about 4 nautical miles off the coast of North Yorkshire. The *Audax* was built in the Netherlands, owned for much of the war by a Norwegian company and was managed by a Newcastle company when it was lost on passage from Rouen in France. Of the three men killed, one was born in Sweden and two - Ghaus Muhammad and Muhammad Abdul - were of the Indian Merchant Service, and are commemorated in Mumbai, far from the North Sea where they served and died.

Conservation

Thinking as archaeologists about the future survival of the heritage of the East Coast War Channels, we can be grateful that many sites have survived - at least to some degree - for the first 100 years. The question remains, however, what can we do to assist their survival to the next centenary?

Unlike battlefields on land, the battlefield of the North Sea is still strewn with the standing remains of the conflict, often lying where the action actually occurred, and providing the last resting place of those who have no grave but the sea. A sense of these standing remains is provided by charts published after the war that refer to coastal waters as being 'one mass of wrecks.' Although subject to extensive salvage and clearance efforts to reduce the hazard to shipping, the remains of many wrecks still survive on the seabed. As such, the legacy of War Channels is manifest in literally hundreds of known wreck sites (Table 1). There are hundreds more ships known to have been lost but not yet found, and hundreds of known wrecks that are as yet unidentified, but are likely to date from 1914 to 1918.

Known, identified wrecks	551
Recorded losses not yet ascribed to a known wreck	819
Known but unidentified wrecks	1,216

Table 1. 1914-18 Wrecks and Losses within 12 nautical miles of the East Coast of England (National Record of the Historic Environment English Heritage)

Clearly, many of the as yet unidentified wrecks may correspond to losses that are recorded in documentary sources, whilst some of the identified wrecks will date to other periods, including the Second World War, when there was again a huge conflict on the East Coast. Nevertheless, the overall numbers suggest a battlefield represented by the surviving physical remains of a thousand vessels or more.

These many hundreds are not a diffuse or random scatter; they are clearly patterned both spatially and chronologically (Table 2). Just to take one example, the cause of loss for known wrecks can be queried year-by-year, showing the importance over the course of the war of losses to mines rather than torpedoes. Mines were the most frequent cause of loss from 1914 to 1916, growing year by year. Torpedoes were a major cause of loss in the East Coast War Channels from 1917 and 1918, reflecting the advent of unrestricted submarine warfare. Mines became less important in those years, perhaps reflecting a switch in emphasis by Germany, but perhaps also showing the increased effectiveness of

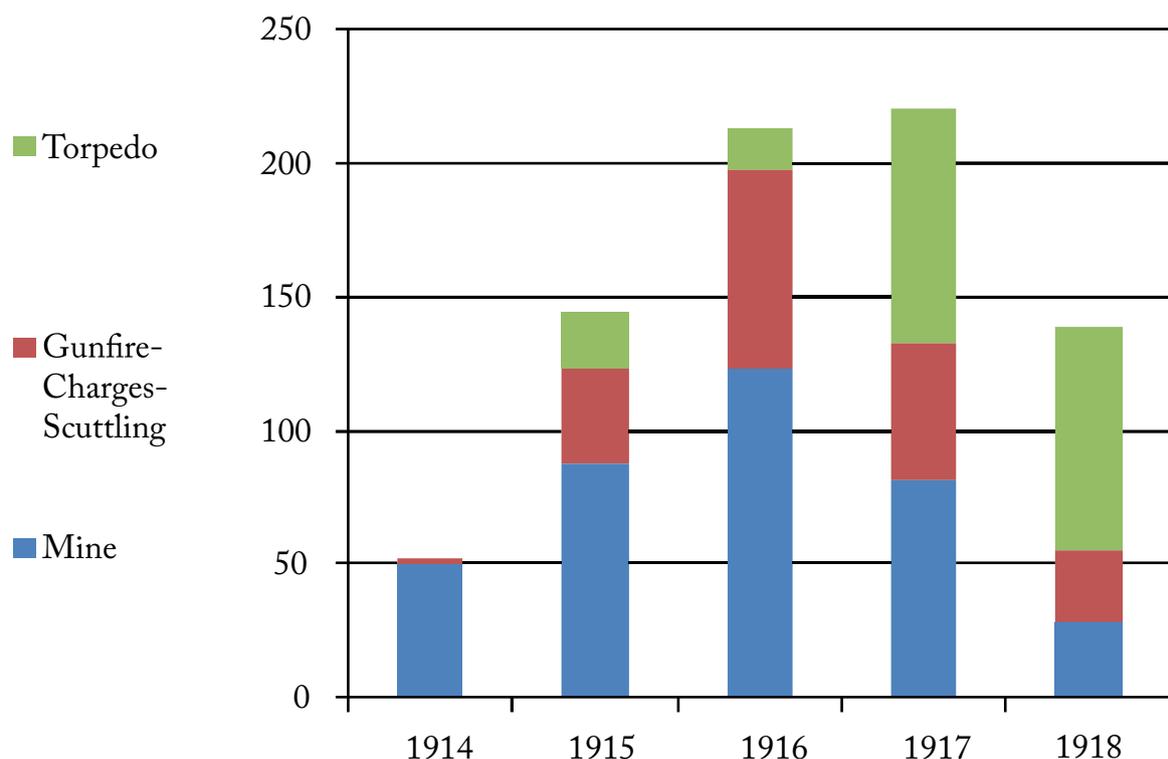


Table 2. Cause of loss of East Coast War Channels wrecks in 1914-18

countermeasures. Other causes of loss to military action – by surface gunfire and by attackers coming on board to lay charges or to scuttle vessels – are a smaller, though still important factor, from 1915 to 1918.

Although these shipwrecks exhibit spatial, chronological and thematic patterning, they have received virtually no archaeological attention. This mass of shipwrecks forms a rich and unexplored source of evidence of merchant shipping and the war at sea, and an evocative landscape that has no parallel.

How should we seek to conserve a monument of this scale?

As a monument, the East Coast War Channels consist principally of steel offshore and concrete onshore. Although these materials are relatively robust, they are intrinsically unstable and susceptible to degradation, more so in fact, than stone or buried wood. Natural processes augmented by human impacts have had major effects, even though the degree of survival is considerable compared to the remains of the First World War on land. In the UK, First World War remains currently receive little direct protection; there is no automatic legal protection for sites over 100 years old in the UK. Nonetheless, the majority of sites forming the East Coast War Channels are within the UK territorial sea, and we are lucky to have a series of selective mechanisms capable of protecting sites both singly and collectively.

These mechanisms depend, however, on recognising the significance of these sites. Attributing significance is hampered by the degree to which these sites have been severed from their historical context, each appearing as just another mass of crumpled metal. Nevertheless, the War Channels are extremely rich in data – documentary, photographic, oral history and even survey data. The conservation issue facing the war channels is not that we have no information – we have a vast amount of information – the problem is that this data has been dissipated, disconnected and hidden away.

Participation

The emphasis of the next stage of work on the War Channels, again with the support of English Heritage, is on enabling public participation in the archaeology of the First World War at sea. The word ‘participation’ indicates that this is not just about disseminating the results of archaeological work. Rather, the intention is to enable the public to see the past from the inside, as archaeologists do, and to make their own explorations. This is a benefit in itself, but it will also generate advances in research and in conservation of the sites themselves as they become reconnected with their context, so that their significance becomes apparent.

The East Coast War Channels are very accessible to large numbers of people. Not only sport divers, but thousands more who visit these sites as sea anglers or pass by on recreational boats. Many thousands more look onto the War Channels when they visit or walk along the coast; coastal tourism and recreation are important considerations on the East Coast; most of the battlefield is in easy sight of land, if only attention can be drawn to it.

As well as being physically accessible, a great deal of the East Coast War

Channels is already accessible from armchairs and mobile devices around the world. As noted earlier, there is no shortage of data, and much of the data is already online; the problem is the lack of connection of this data to the heritage sites themselves.

The intention, therefore, is to work with a variety of third-parties to help as many people as possible to re-make connections with the East Coast War Channels, whether their interest is in a place, a ship, a community or a family. Discovery is not just about finding physical things, it is also about finding out what physical things mean. As a result, the East Coast War Channels are capable of being explored online as well as in the field.

A key aspect of the project is to reach new audiences. Reference has already been made to people who use the sea recreationally who are not divers. Mention has also been made of the connections between a variety of communities both in the UK and around the world who might not have previously considered the East Coast War Channels to have any relevance to them. However, there are yet other audiences to consider.

Underwater cultural heritage and the archaeology of ships and warfare can be very technical in its content, and superficially unappealing to many people. It is worth emphasising, therefore, that archaeology underwater requires acts of imagination – to find ways of seeing what is normally unseen – as well as technical skills. As noted above, the sources of online data relating to shipwrecks of the East Coast War Channels are quite varied. Large numbers of contemporary photographs and even newsreel clips can now be found online. In addition to more formal ‘ship portraits’, these photographs include images of ship-related activity, such as the work of the Women’s Royal Naval Service, first formed in 1917 (Figure 4). Other sources of illustration range from the technical – such as contemporary ship models – to the more artistic. As with photographs, there are formal painted ship portraits of vessels lost from 1914 to 1918, but as on land there are also striking sketches, studies and paintings by war artists depicting the lives and activities of those who served in the East Coast War Channels.



Figure 4. Ratings of the Women’s Royal Naval Service (WRNS) wiring together glass floats for an anti-submarine net, possibly in Lowestoft, under the supervision of a WRNS officer in 1918. © IWM (Q 19640)

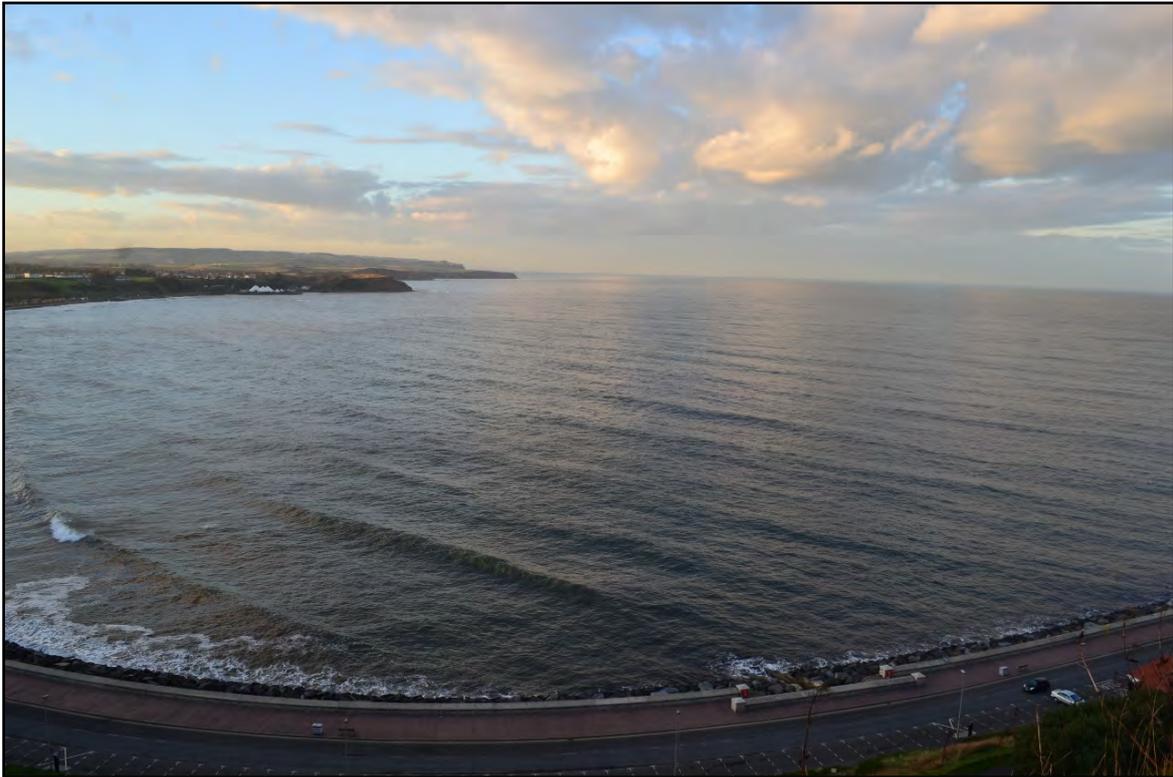


Figure 5. North Bay, Scarborough, where the SS *Madame Renee* was sunk in August 1918 with the loss of 17 men including Iwai Sutoe from Kobe, Japan. © AJ Firth/ Fjodr Ltd

The exercise of imagination that is needed in addressing a battlefield which is invisible at first sight has provided a basis for working with a poet on ways of exploring underwater cultural heritage through creative writing. Research into specific sites has been combined with approaches that can evoke and engage audiences who might otherwise pale at archaeologists' beloved dimensions and statistics. One example of the poems is presented below. It concerns the wreck of the SS *Madame Renee*, a small Norwegian-built steamship carrying a cargo of copper pyrites from London to the Tyne, which was sunk on 10 August 1918. The *Madame Renee* was torpedoed by the submarine *UB-30*, about a mile offshore from North Bay, Scarborough (Figure 5). As the *Madame Renee* was struck on the port side whilst heading north, the U-boat must have been waiting in the bay, very close to the coast. The approximate position of the wreck can be seen from the cliffs of Scarborough Castle, as there is a buoy marking the end of a nearby outfall. Of the 17 crew, 10 were lost and have no grave; they are commemorated on memorials at Tower Hill, Chatham and Plymouth. The poet, Winston Plowes, picked out just one of those lost, Donkeyman Iwai Sutoe, age 26, recorded as having been born in Kobe, Japan:

In His Mother's Arms

From Thames to Tyne that day in '18
he tended every stroke of her

up the eastern channel.

Till UB-30, languid in the bay
roused and spat its charge.
Torpedoed her side with a single strike
from that clear calm crescent.

Madame Renee broken backed
rocked him down like a mother.
6000 miles as the whale sings
from his home in Japan.

She drifted still, and now
all 500 tons of her lay sleeping
with Sutoe in her arms.

A buoy still floats above their heads
permanently tethered.
Marking the dreams of Kobe.
 Coddled by this sea.
 Crossing off the years.
 Osaka Bay still listening.

- *Winston Plowes 2014*

Conclusion: the Archaeology of Warfare and Reconciliation in the Twenty-First Century

The assets that make up the East Coast War Channels can be regarded as a monument to total war – warfare that mobilised and engaged entire populations in violence whose endpoint was the survival or obliteration of whole societies. If it is such a monument, then it is only one half at best, because the horrors along England’s East Coast reflected an equally deadly effort to prevent Germany’s seaborne trade through a naval blockade, which is considered to have caused three quarters of a million civilian deaths through starvation. Despite the magnitude of its consequences, the blockade of German shipping has left little archaeological trace where it took place – in the Northern Atlantic between Scotland, Iceland and Norway – because merchant ships were intercepted and inspected rather than sunk. There are, however, a few wrecks of cruisers and auxiliaries that struck mines or were themselves intercepted by submarines,

such as HMS *Hawke*, which was torpedoed with the loss of over 500 crew off Aberdeen on 15 October 1914. Although beyond the scope of the East Coast War Channels, such wrecks represent a further aspect of the First World War at sea that was of critical importance, but is little remembered.

Archaeologists are entitled to a long view. The East Coast War Channels date to a period of total war in Europe that did not end in November 1918. The War Channels were reinstated and became a zone of intense conflict over merchant shipping again in 1939-45. Elements of the War Channels went on to feature in the Cold War also. It might be appropriate, therefore, to think about the War Channels in terms of a conflict that started in August 1914 and ended not in November 1918, but in November 1989. The direct evidence of the scale of Europe's appetite for destruction in the First, Second and Cold Wars has largely been erased from the land, so the mass of wrecks just off our shores is a unique reminder. Long overlooked, we can make them visible again as a tangible expression of the causes, conduct and consequences of total war.

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