

First World War Shipwrecks

Background paper for
British Academy & Honor Frost Foundation Policy Forum

January 2014

Introduction

Boats and ships lost in the First World War encompass vessels operating under the flags of each of the belligerents and of neutral countries too. They are to be found in all the seas and oceans of the world: in the territorial waters of the countries that were fighting; in international waters; and in the territorial waters of countries that had no part in the action. In a departure from earlier conflicts, merchant vessels as well as warships were sunk intentionally in very large numbers. Many ships were sunk as a result of some form of military action, but the usual hazards of the sea – collision, fire, going aground, stress of weather – resulted in shipwrecks too, sometimes exacerbated by wartime conditions.

The overall number of boats and ships lost around the world that were lost in the course of the First World War is difficult to estimate. The same difficulty is true of the number of seafarers that were killed, of whom some were buried on land whilst others have ‘no grave but the sea’ having been buried at sea or lost completely when vessels were sunk.

People serving at sea did not only die from shipwreck; casualties occurred in many circumstances in which the vessel itself was not lost. As well as those who lost their lives, thousands more were injured, often grievously. For all those that died or were hurt, there were yet thousands more who were participants in the war at sea. Indeed the wrecks themselves represent thousands of other vessels that took part in the conflict and survived.

It is worth noting that for all the wartime effort, civilian or military, irrespective of country there are relatively few vessels – especially warships and merchant ships – from the First World War to be found in preservation. Many of the vessels that survived the First World War were scrapped or lost subsequently. As a result, First World War shipwrecks are often the only surviving remains of all that happened at sea and represent much bigger processes in which they played but a part.

Jurisdiction

From a UK perspective it is helpful to think of two main classes of First World War shipwreck (see Appendix I). First, the shipwrecks that lie within the UK Marine Area irrespective of nationality or interest. Second, shipwrecks beyond the UK Marine Area in which the UK still has an interest, by virtue of their status as warships, ownership, nationality of the crew, and so on.

Shipwrecks in the UK Marine Area can be divided between those in the territorial sea and internal waters of the UK where the UK has sovereignty; and those outside the territorial sea but within the UK's Continental Shelf or Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) where the UK has sovereign rights that may constrain peoples' activities. UK sovereignty or sovereign rights will apply in respect of all shipwrecks in the UK Marine Area irrespective of their nationality or origin. Other states and citizens may also have rights with respect to shipwrecks in these zones that need to be respected.

Shipwrecks outside the UK Marine Area in which the UK continues to have an interest can also be sub-divided, as follows:

- shipwrecks in which the UK has an interest that lie in waters beyond the maritime boundaries of any state, often referred to as 'The Area';
- shipwrecks in which the UK has an interest that lie within waters over which another state exercises sovereign rights, such as that country's Continental Shelf or EEZ;
- shipwrecks in which the UK has an interest in waters over which another state may have sovereignty (i.e. the territorial sea or internal waters of another country).

Jurisdiction or legal interests in shipwrecks can also be claimed on grounds other than the maritime zone where the wreck is situated, either through domestic law (in zones where a country has sovereignty or sovereign rights) or through international law. Jurisdiction may arise because the wreck was a state vessel when it sank, was in military service, operated under the flag of a particular state, is owned by a country or its citizens, because of the nationality of crew members and so on. Other characteristics of a wreck can give rise to jurisdiction too, if the wreck is a danger to navigation or presents a risk of pollution, for example.

The law that applies to shipwrecks in these different circumstances are complex and not subject to universal agreement. These rules are not elaborated further here though it is anticipated that they will be a source of discussion at the Policy Forum. The only intention here is to make clear that the need for a coherent approach to investigating and safeguarding First World War shipwrecks must encompass all these different circumstances.

Warships, merchant ships, fishing vessels and others

As noted above, a key characteristic of the First World War is that many of the vessels that were lost were not warships but civilian vessels of some form. Even amongst military vessels, many losses were amongst minor warships (smaller than corvettes) because of the heavy use of smaller craft in minesweeping and patrolling.

The distinctions between warships and civilian ships and their crews can appear hazy in some circumstances due to the large numbers of civil vessels that were requisitioned into the armed forces and due to the defensive arming of others.

Fishing vessel wrecks from the First World War are particularly numerous. As indicated above, many fishing vessels were requisitioned into hazardous military roles, especially minesweeping and patrolling. But large numbers of fishing vessels continued to be engaged in fishing and were regarded as legitimate targets, or were sunk by mines that did not discriminate.

In addition, it should be noted that a variety of what might be referred to as service vessels were used in the First World War and were also subject to losses. Examples include Trinity

House vessels, pilot cutters and tugs. Some of these vessels were quite sizable and could result in significant casualties if lost.

Numbers of Shipwrecks

As noted above, there are no consolidated figures for the numbers of ships and boats sunk around the world during the First World War. However, there are various figures that at least indicate the overall scale of losses.

A search of Wrecksite¹ for the period 28 July 1914 to 11 November 1918 gives a total of 11,309 wrecks of which 4,485 are recorded as having British nationality. These figures include a mix of known wrecks and recorded losses but it is not known whether they include all documented casualties.

The Royal Navy Loss List maintained by MAST² gives 1,056 RN ships lost between 1914 and 1918 around the world, of which 478 are recorded as being in UK waters and a further 81 in the UK EEZ. The Official History of the Merchant Navy records a total of 2,479 British Merchant Vessels and 675 British Fishing Vessels as being lost up to 11 November 1918³.

Wrecks of all nationalities in UK waters are recorded in national inventories maintained by the heritage agencies of each home country. Consolidated figures are not readily available, but a figure of about 1800 known wrecks dating to the First World War in the national inventories can be estimated⁴.

A search of the national inventory maintained by English Heritage (National Record of the Historic Environment (NRHE), formerly the National Monuments Record) in 2011 gave 1075

¹<http://www.wrecksite.eu/Wrecksite.aspx>.

²<http://www.thisismast.org/index.html>.

³ See Hurd, A., 1929, *The Merchant Navy*. Volume III. London: John Murray. Appendix C.

⁴ See Firth, A. 2011, 'Underwater Cultural Heritage: character and significance' in Yorke, R.A. (ed.) *Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage in International Waters Adjacent to the UK: proceedings of the JNAPC 21st Anniversary Seminar, Burlington House November 2010*, Portsmouth: JNAPC and NAS. <http://www.jnapc.org.uk/UNESCO-Seminar-2010-final.pdf>.

known wrecks for the period 1914-1918⁵. The NRHE is limited predominantly to the territorial sea off England, i.e. not the Continental Shelf / EEZ.

The relationship between known wrecks and documented losses can be illustrated by reference to the east coast of England in the First World War. A total of 551 known wrecks and a further 819 documented losses – a combined figure of 1370 – are recorded in the NRHE⁶. Many of these documented losses are represented by wrecks that are located but have yet to be identified.

Aircraft

As well as shipwrecks, it is worth remembering that numerous aircraft were lost at sea in the First World War. Examples of First World War aircraft wrecks found underwater are rare compared to the many sites of Second World War aircraft that are known. However, there are at least some instances of First World War aircraft engines and machine guns being recovered in fishing trawls, so the possibility of future discoveries cannot be discounted.

Numbers of War Dead at Sea

It is unlikely that any figures exist for the number of people who died at sea in the First World War. Even establishing the number of those lost in UK services is difficult. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) provides a central source of information that can be examined online, but whether someone died at sea is not always easy to establish. To take the number of war dead from the UK services for example (see Appendix

⁵ See Wessex Archaeology, 2011, Assessing Boats and Ships 1914-1938. Ref: 70861.02.

http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archiveDS/archiveDownload?t=arch-1044-1/dissemination/pdf/Assessing_Boats_and_Ships_1914-1938.pdf.

⁶ See Fjordr Ltd. 2014, East Coast War Channels in the First and Second World War: a report for English Heritage, ref. 16131. <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/east-coast-war-channels-first-and-second-world-wars/>.

II), the total of over 62,000 includes large numbers who died on land in the Royal Naval Division, especially from the Royal Marines and Royal Marines Light Infantry.

Nonetheless, even these figures indicate the quantity of lives lost in the war at sea, including the high proportion from the Mercantile Marine, the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve and the Royal Naval Reserve. The large number of dead from the Indian Merchant Service includes many who died whilst serving in merchant ships in UK waters as well as on the oceans of the world.

The figures provided in the Official History of the Merchant Navy are 14,287 lives lost on British Merchant Vessels and 434 lost on British Fishing Vessels⁷. These figures may include different nationalities; they probably do not include fishermen serving in the armed forces on requisitioned vessels.

Particularly high loss of life is associated with a relatively small number of warships that had large crews and were lost in catastrophic circumstances, and with passenger liners and troop ships. The greatest loss of life attributable to a single wreck in the First World War was the Italian troopship SS *Principe Umberto*, torpedoes in the Adriatic in 1916 with the loss of almost 2,000 lives. The greatest loss of life on a British vessel was the HMS *Queen Mary* which exploded at the Battle of Jutland with the loss of 1,266 men. A total of 1,198 lives were lost from RMS *Lusitania*, the second highest for a British vessel. The losses associated with individual merchant ships and fishing vessels are much lower, though they might still amount to the entire crew.

Legal Frameworks

The main legal frameworks for First World War shipwrecks are heritage protection legislation, the Protection of Military Remains Act 1986, the Merchant Shipping Act 1995, and the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009.

Heritage protection legislation applies within internal waters and the territorial sea. First Word War wrecks could be designated under, variously, the Protection of Wrecks Act 1973

⁷See Hurd, A., 1929, *The Merchant Navy*. Volume III. London: John Murray. Appendix C.

(PWA 1973), the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979 (AMAA 1979), as Historic Marine Protected Areas (HMPAs) under the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010, and under the Historic Monuments and Archaeological Objects Order 1995 (HMAO 1995) in Northern Ireland. The only First World War shipwrecks designated under heritage protection legislation are the three battleships and four cruisers of the German High Seas Fleet in Scapa Flow under the AMAA 1979, and HMS *Campania* in the Firth of Forth as a HMPA.

The Protection of Military Remains Act 1986 applies in the UK, in UK waters (the territorial sea) and in international waters. It can be used to designate a protected place or a controlled site, and it also makes it an offence to excavate at any place in UK waters for the purpose of discovering a vessel sunk in military service. In international waters an offence is only committed if it is conducted from a British controlled-ship or by a British citizen or company. A key criterion is that the vessel was in military service at the time of loss, which has been a point of contention. Twenty-nine First World War shipwrecks have been designated as protected places under the PMRA 1986 (including 14 from the Battle of Jutland) and a further eight are controlled sites.

The provisions on wreck and salvage in the Merchant Shipping Act 1995 apply generally to wreck originating from vessels sunk in the First World War, both military and civilian. The Merchant Shipping Act 1995 applies to wreck found within UK waters (the territorial sea) or brought within those waters.

The Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 applies to a variety of activities within the UK Marine Area (encompassing the UK Continental Shelf) for which a licence is required. Licensable activities include removing a substance or object from the sea bed using a vessel, and any form of dredging.

A number of First World War shipwrecks fall within the scope of other legal frameworks, including marine protected areas introduced for nature conservation purposes, and port and harbour jurisdiction.

Policy

UK policy towards all aspects of the marine historic environment in the UK Marine Area – encompassing First World War shipwrecks – is set out in the UK Marine Policy Statement⁸ (UK MPS). The UK MPS is binding on many decisions by public authorities by virtue of the MCAA 2009, the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010 and the Marine Act (Northern Ireland) 2013. A very wide range of decisions by public authorities must be taken either ‘in accordance with’ or ‘having regard to’ the UK MPS.

Section 2.6.6 of the UK MPS is concerned with the historic environment. The first part contains statements of general policy with respect to the historic environment that are applicable to decision-making by public authorities. Key statements include:

- The view shared by the UK Administrations is that heritage assets should be enjoyed for the quality of life they bring to this and future generations ...
- ... and that they should be conserved through marine planning in a manner appropriate and proportionate to their significance.
- Opportunities should be taken to contribute to our knowledge and understanding of our past by capturing evidence from the historic environment and making it publicly available, particularly if a heritage asset is to be lost.
- The absence of designation ... does not necessarily indicate lower significance ...
- ... the marine plan authority should consider [significant non-designated assets] subject to the same policy principles as designated heritage assets based on information and advice from the relevant regulators and advisers.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Ministry of Defence have recently published guidance on how existing policies and legislation apply to historic military wreck

⁸ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/69322/pb3654-marine-policy-statement-110316.pdf.

sites⁹. The guidance applies to military wrecks found outside the UK territorial sea. It applies to the UK Continental Shelf / EEZ, to the Area, and to the Continental Shelves and territorial seas etc. of other countries. The guidance states that:

- It is UK Government policy to ensure our historic military wrecks are offered appropriate protection and management.
- If a military wreck is discovered it should remain undisturbed and a 'look but don't touch approach' respected until options have been determined.
- In no circumstances should any artefacts be recovered without the written permission of the MOD.
- All military shipwreck discoveries should be reported to the MOD.
- When assessing options for protection, MOD will consult with DCMS or the appropriate Devolved Administration, and other Government Departments and their agencies, including the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.
- Management options will be decided on a case by case basis according to the wreck's location and other relevant factors such as historic interest, archaeological significance, potential threat to the wreck site and whether there was loss of life.
- Anybody wishing to investigate an historic military wreck must agree to uphold the general principles of the UNESCO Annex.
- A suitably experienced archaeologist should be appointed to manage the project and to comply with current policies, legislation, standards and guidance ...

The guidance does not define 'military wreck' but it might be expected to encompass at least all major and minor warships. 'Military service', which is the term used in the Protection of

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https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/307961/Protection_and_Management_of_Historic_Military_Wrecks_outside_UK_Territorial_Waters_April_2014.pdf.

Military Remains Act 1986, has a broader scope than ‘warship’ and includes merchant vessels in the control of or being directed by the Admiralty, for example.

The guidance on historic military wrecks re-states the Government’s overall position that the UK’s underwater cultural heritage policies have been developed in line with the Rules set out in the Annex to the 2001 Convention, and that the UK Government has adopted the principles set out in the Annex as best practice in the archaeological and cultural management of underwater sites and artefacts. This commitment gives a degree of commitment with respect to the standards to be applied on all investigations of First World War shipwrecks authorised by the UK.

Appendix I: Matrix of Maritime Zones and State Interests in FWW Wrecks

		FWW wrecks with UK Interests						FWW wrecks with non-UK Interests					
		Warships / Merchant Vessels/ Fishing Vessels / Service Vessels						Warships / Merchant Vessels/ Fishing Vessels / Service Vessels					
		State Vessels	Military Service	UK Flag	UK Ownership	UK crew	Other UK interests	State Vessels	Military Service	Flag	Ownership	Crew nationality	Other interests
UK Marine Area	UK Internal Waters and Territorial Sea												
	UK Continental Shelf / Exclusive Economic Zone												
Beyond UK Marine Area	The Area												
	CS / EEZ of other States												
	Internal Waters and Territorial Sea etc. of other States												

NB: UK and non-UK interests may be mixed on a single wreck.

This matrix does not encompass British Crown Dependencies (Channel Islands and Isle of Man) or British Overseas Territories.

Appendix II: CWGC Casualties for 'First World War'

Row Labels	Count of regiment
Royal Navy	24,885
Mercantile Marine	13,525
Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve	7,164
Royal Naval Reserve	6,764
Royal Marine Light Infantry	5,241
Indian Merchant Service	1,838
Mercantile Marine Reserve	1,774
Royal Marine Artillery	766
Royal Naval Air Service	705
Royal Indian Marine	516
Royal Marines	355
Royal Australian Navy	245
Royal Naval Canadian Volunteer Reserve	198
Newfoundland Royal Naval Reserve	189
Royal Marine Band	156
Royal Marine Labour Corps	146
Newfoundland Mercantile Marine	114
H.M. Dockyard	105
Admiralty Civilian	102
Royal Naval Auxiliary Sick Berth Reserve	78
H.M. Coastguard	68
Lighthouse and Pilotage Authorities	53
Royal Marine Engineers	45
Nigerian Marine	39
Royal Canadian Navy	38
Canadian Merchant Navy	35
Port Administration and River Conservancy Department	34
Women's Royal Naval Service	27
Royal Australian Naval Reserve	13
New Zealand Navy	12
Royal Australian Naval Bridging Train	11
Queen Alexandra's Royal Naval Nursing Service	10
Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (South Africa)	8
Australian Mercantile Service	5
Australian Sea Transport Services	4
Royal New Zealand Naval Reserve	2
Royal Canadian Naval Air Service	1
Total	65,271

Notes:

1. Queried 04/12/14: Combined results from queries of 'Navy' and 'Merchant Navy' and selected 'Miscellaneous'.
2. Some of these categories include people who served and were lost on land – especially amongst Royal Marines / Royal Marines Light Infantry.
3. The total of 65,271 can be split into 62,003 from UK units and 3,268 from non-UK units.
4. A query against 'First World War' (all forces) results in a total of 1,059,713 names.