

# The Wreck of HMS *Falmouth*

First World War 'Town Class' light cruiser  
and Jutland veteran sunk by U-boats off the  
Yorkshire coast on 19–20th August 1916



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Historic England



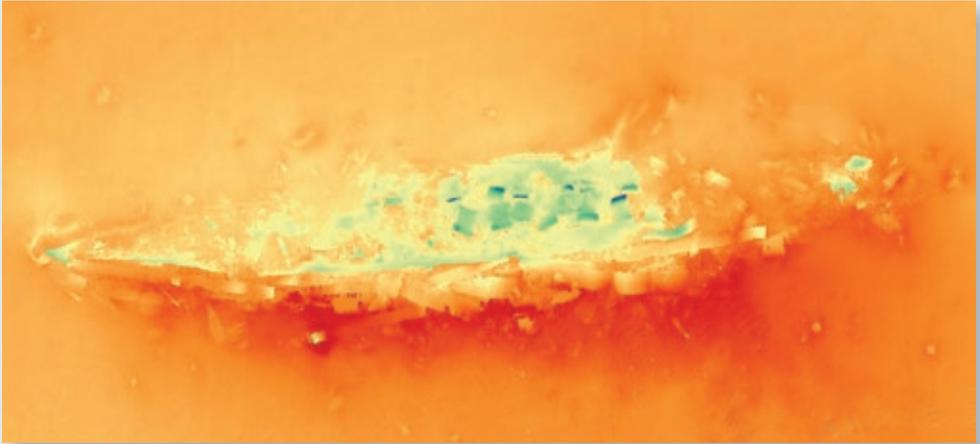
*I have no heart to write... For the present, the loss of that ship, the symbol to me of my home, my work, my play, my life, my companion in danger, hits me too hard without enlarging on the grit and pluck and refusal to acknowledge defeat which she displayed.*

**Arnold Pears, Gunnery Lieutenant, HMS *Falmouth***

## THE WRECK OF HMS *FALMOUTH* TODAY

*My Lords have approved of the payment of a bonus of £5 to each of the divers concerned in these operations, and £2 to each of the tenders.*

Admiralty letter following recovery of HMS *Falmouth's* guns



*A new, highly detailed survey of the wreck has been commissioned by Historic England and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency as part of this project. Contains Maritime and Coastguard Agency data © Crown copyright.*

The wreck of HMS *Falmouth* lies off Skipsea on the Holderness coast of Yorkshire, about 8 miles south east of Bridlington.

HMS *Falmouth* sank whilst being towed towards safety in the Humber after being hit repeatedly by torpedoes from German U-boats. Salvage work started within days but it was quickly concluded that the ship could not be saved. Most of the guns were recovered before salvage was abandoned in October 1916 due to bad weather.

The wreck was re-discovered in the early 1930s by RAF personnel attached to RAF Catfoss (near Hornsea) who were based at Bridlington to monitor the offshore bombing ranges. The RAF crew recovered a lobster pot covered in rust, which led to commercial salvage operations.

The wreck was found again in 1973 by local divers. HMS *Falmouth* is a popular dive site and divers have explored the wreck extensively over recent decades. Artefacts recovered from the wreck are on display at Bridlington Harbour Heritage Museum.

No record has been found of the fate of eight of the men killed when HMS *Falmouth* was torpedoed. It is possible that there are human remains still present on the wreck.

## TOWN CLASS LIGHT CRUISERS

*The under-publicised and under-estimated 'Towns' were arguably the best cruisers of the First World War.*

David Lyon, author of 'The First Town Class 1908–31'

HMS *Falmouth* was built in 1910–11 on the River Clyde, just one of 21 Town Class light cruisers. The Towns were built in a series of sub-classes laid down in 1909–15 known as the Bristols, Weymouths, Chathams, Birminghams and Birkenheads. *Falmouth* was one of the Weymouth sub-class.

Town Class light cruisers were sufficiently fast, armoured and well-armed to work with the battlefleet in home waters. The Towns could also carry a large amount of fuel, crew and stores so that they could work around the globe, protecting merchant ships from enemy raiders and carrying out attacks of their own.

This combination of being capable enough to serve with the battlefleet at home but with the range and numbers to protect British interests around the world meant that the Towns were very active during the First World War.



*The distinctive V-shaped boilers of HMS Falmouth are one of the most prominent features of the wreck. © Mike Radley.*

## THE TOWN CLASS AND THE DREADNOUGHT REVOLUTION

*It was directed that the present vessels shall carry a uniform armament of eight 6-inch guns ... arranged so that three guns can fire right ahead or astern, and five on either broadside.*

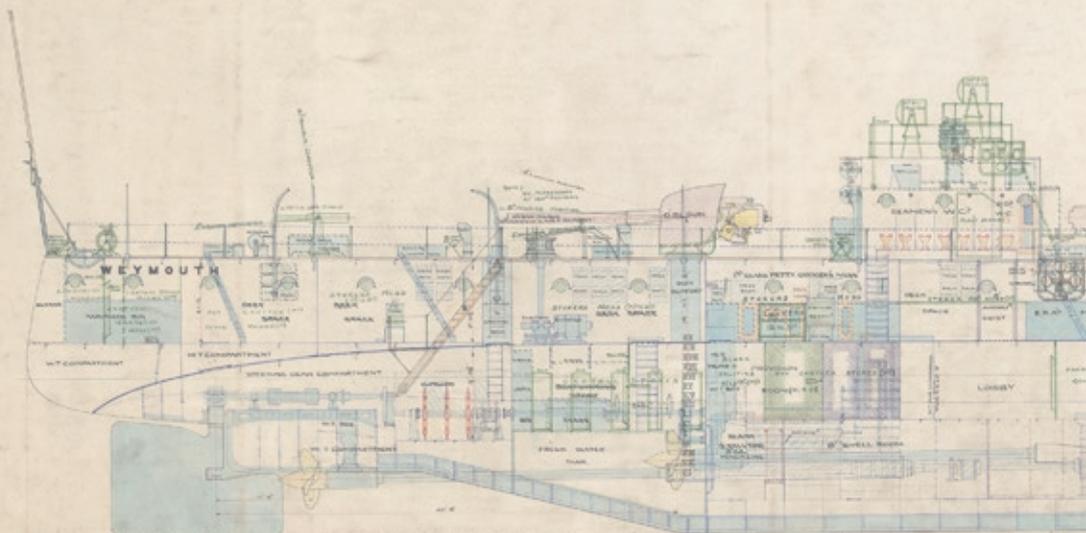
### Design and construction papers ('Cover'), Weymouth Class

In 1906, the launch of HMS *Dreadnought* caused a revolution in the design of warships. HMS *Dreadnought* had an 'all big gun' armament and steam turbines that provided much greater speed than previous ships. These same innovations can be seen in the Towns: they were fitted with steam turbines and most of the Towns also had a uniform 'all big gun' armament.

There were significant differences between the five sub-classes of Town Class light cruisers in terms of their armament, armour and hull features.

The Bristol sub-class had a short forecastle with only a single 6-inch gun mounted upon it; all the broadside guns were mounted on the main deck. The Weymouth sub-class – including *Falmouth* – had an extended forecastle providing more accommodation, which was fitted for an Admiral and his staff so that they could serve as flagships. The subsequent sub-classes of Towns had a forecastle that extended around two thirds of the length of the ship.

A range of smaller cruisers was constructed before and after the Towns, as 'scouts' and to lead flotillas of destroyers in the North Sea. These scouts and destroyer leaders – the Boadicea, Arethura and 'C' Classes (such as HMS *Caroline* preserved in Belfast) – were smaller than the Towns, carried a lighter, mixed calibre armament and had a much shorter range.



1911 construction drawing of HMS Weymouth, sister ship of HMS Falmouth. © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.

## SPEED, ARMOUR, ARMAMENT

*The ship developed more horsepower than she was designed for,  
30,000 HP built for 22,000*

**Victor Rayson, Stoker, HMS Falmouth**

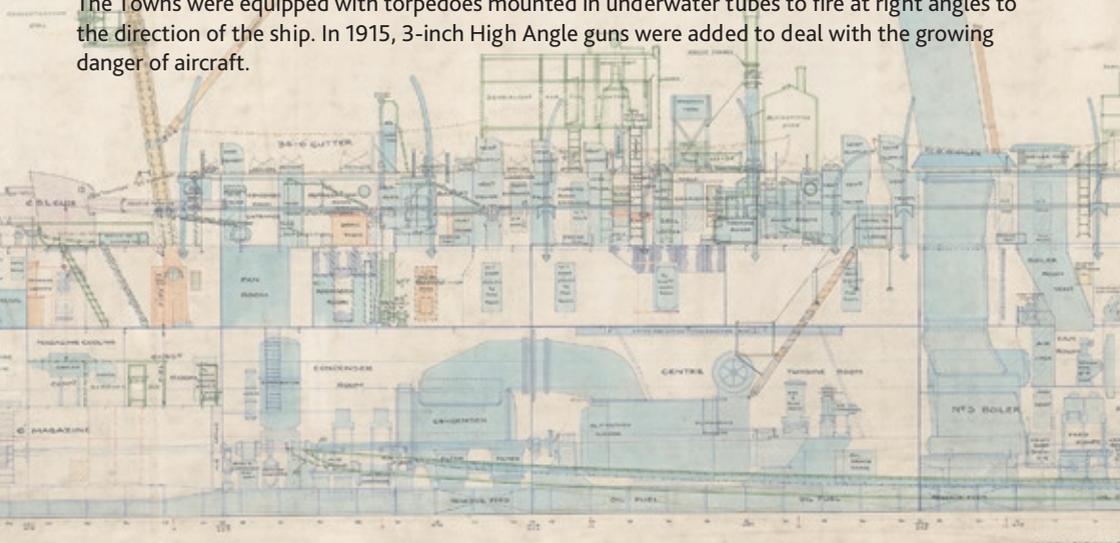
HMS *Falmouth* had an armoured deck running the entire length of the ship a little above the waterline. This armour was intended to prevent plunging shells from reaching the ship's machinery. The hull of the earlier Towns, including *Falmouth*, curved inwards towards the deck – known as 'tumblehome'. Later Towns also had armour on their sides, which meant that their hulls had to be straight sided.

The introduction of steam turbines increased the design speed of light cruisers from 20 to 25 knots, although actual speeds were often higher. Like almost all the Towns, *Falmouth* was equipped with Parsons steam turbines, which powered four propellers.

HMS *Falmouth* burnt coal sprayed with oil. The coal bunkers on the Towns formed part of the ship's protection, as they were placed over the armour deck to help absorb impacts.

*Falmouth* and the other Weymouths were the first Towns to have an 'all big gun' main armament. The earlier Bristols had two 6-inch guns at bow and stern and a broadside of four 4-inch guns on each side. The Weymouths had all 6-inch guns but only three on each broadside. The Chathams had the same armament but the Birminghams had one extra gun, making up a pair of guns side-by-side in separate mountings at the bow. The Birkenheads had ten 5.5-inch guns – one forward, one aft and four on each broadside. All the Towns had gun shields that were open at the rear and there was a gap between the bottom of the shield and the deck, resulting in leg injuries to gun crews in action.

The Towns were equipped with torpedoes mounted in underwater tubes to fire at right angles to the direction of the ship. In 1915, 3-inch High Angle guns were added to deal with the growing danger of aircraft.





## THE TOWN CLASS IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

...*exceptionally beautiful ships*

Gilbert Bickmore, Clerk, HMS *Falmouth*

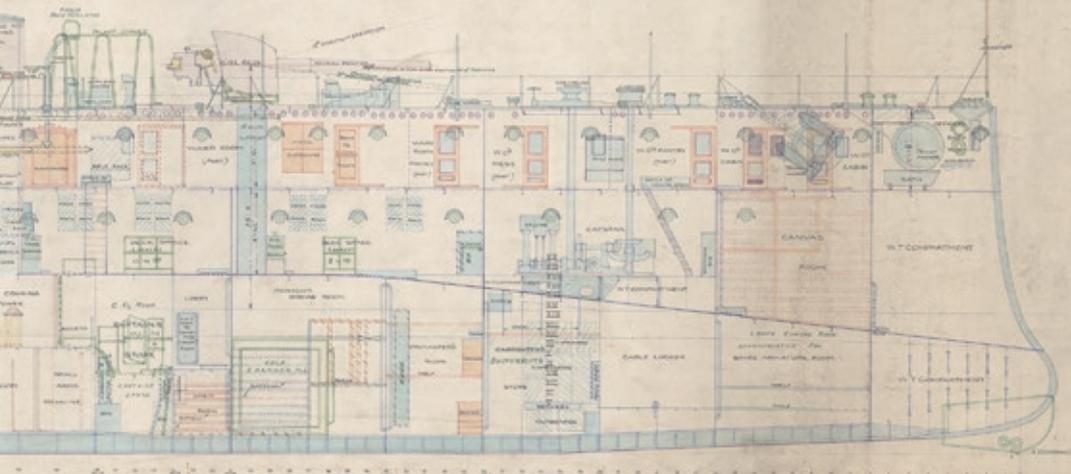
The Towns were built with both a global and a battlefleet capability. When war broke out, the Towns fulfilled both roles, taking part in many of the key engagements of the conflict.

- HMS *Glasgow* was part of Craddock's Squadron engaged in the Battle of Coronel off Chile; took part in the destruction of SMS *Leipzig* in the Battle of the Falklands Islands; and helped intercept the cruiser SMS *Dresden* in the Juan Fernandez Islands in the Pacific.
- HMS *Chatham*, *Dartmouth* and *Weymouth* tracked down and blockaded the cruiser SMS *Konigsberg* in East Africa.
- HMAS *Sydney* defeated the raiding cruiser SMS *Emden* in the Cocos Islands in the Pacific.

Towns Class light cruisers also served extensively in the Mediterranean and Adriatic, including in engagements at Gallipoli and in the battles of Durazzo and the Strait of Otranto.

Serving as part of the Grand Fleet in home waters, the Towns were involved in both routine activities and major actions. HMS *Birmingham* was the first warship to sink a U-boat, ramming U-15 off Fair Isle while accompanying HMS *Falmouth*. The Towns played important roles in the First Battle of Heligoland Bight, the Battle of Dogger Bank, and the attempted interception of the raid on Scarborough, Whitby and Hartlepool. At the Battle of Jutland, Jack Cornwall was awarded his posthumous VC for his service aboard HMS *Chester* when it sustained major damage, and HMS *Southampton* sank SMS *Frauenlob*.

Various Towns attacked Zeppelins with anti-aircraft fire in the course of their wartime careers. HMS *Yarmouth* was the first cruiser from which an aircraft took off, using a 'flying-off' platform mounted over the forward gun. Aircraft launched from the Towns had several air-to-air successes against German aircraft.



## HMS FALMOUTH IN THE NORTH SEA

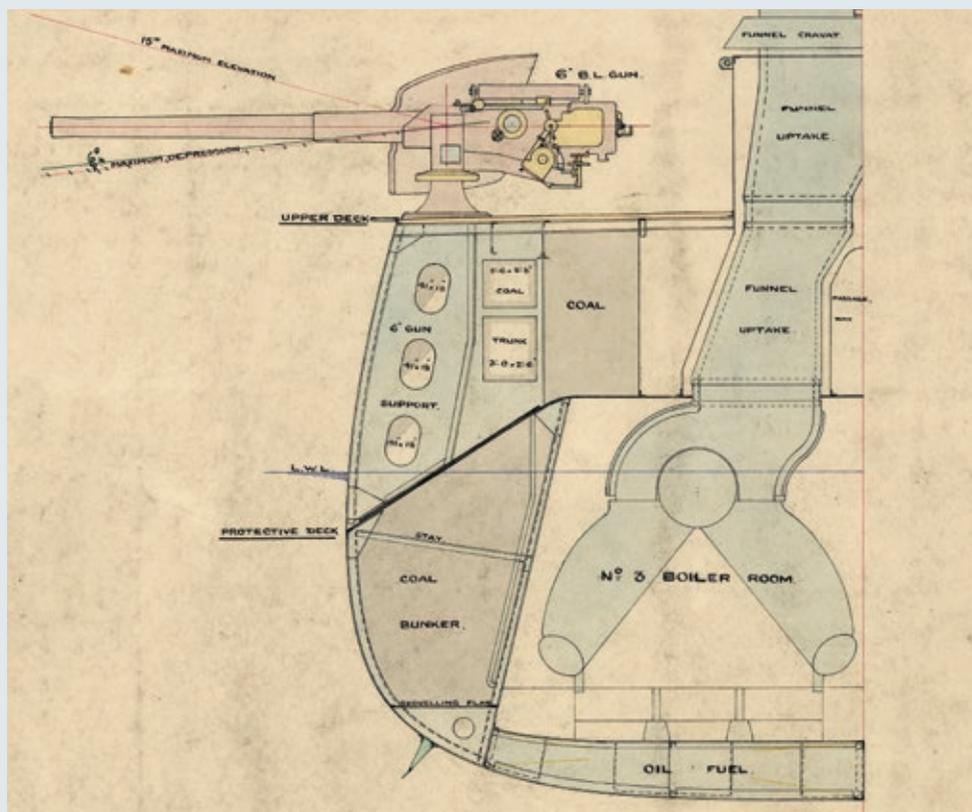
*Oct 13th. Scouting off the Dogger Bank and proceeded to the coast of Norway to intercept German merchantmen*

**Victor Rayson, Stoker, HMS Falmouth**

HMS *Falmouth* had an eventful career, principally in home waters in the Light Cruiser Squadrons attached to the Grand Fleet.

In August 1914, *Falmouth* intercepted a series of German fishing vessels, inspecting them, removing their crews and sinking them. On 5th August, the first full day of the war, three crew from *Falmouth* were lost from a sea boat and only one was recovered; the two men who were lost – Leslie Albert Green and Stanley Gerald Wilson – are probably the first British operational casualties of the First World War.

Whilst sinking fishing vessels on 23rd August, a dog aboard a trawler was rescued and – named Kaiser Bill – became *Falmouth's* mascot.



1911 construction drawing of HMS Weymouth, sister ship of HMS Falmouth, showing 6" gun, armoured deck, coal bunkers, tumblehome and V-shaped boiler. © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.

## THE BATTLE OF HELIGOLAND BIGHT

*At this moment the Light Cruiser Squadron appeared, and they very speedily reduced the 'Mainz' to a condition which must have been indescribable*

Commodore Tyrwhitt, commanding Destroyer Flotilla

HMS *Falmouth*'s first major engagement was in the Battle of Heligoland Bight on 28 August 1914. This started as an operation by submarines, destroyers and their supporting cruisers based in Harwich to attack a German destroyer patrol relatively close to the home bases of the German fleet. Admiral Jellicoe provided reinforcements from a Battle Cruiser Squadron under Vice-Admiral Beatty and the First Light Cruiser Squadron (LCS) – including *Falmouth* – under Commodore Goodenough.

The operation was confused and nearly went seriously awry, but the appearance of the First LCS and the Battle Cruisers resulted in a victory for the Royal Navy. *Falmouth* – with *Liverpool*, *Southampton* and *Birmingham* – finished off the light cruiser SMS *Mainz*, which subsequently sank. A sequence of photographs taken from one of the Light Cruiser Squadron – possibly *Falmouth* – shows SMS *Mainz* at close range shortly before sinking.

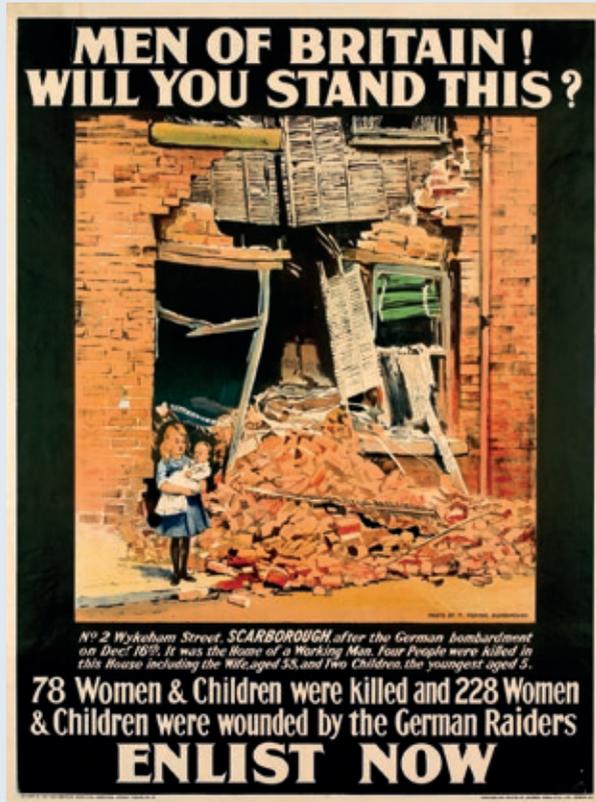


*Images courtesy of Adrian Crotty*

## THE RAID ON SCARBOROUGH, WHITBY and HARTLEPOOL

*We could never admit for fear of compromising our secret information...  
how near the German raiding cruisers had been to their destruction*

Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty



*Falmouth* was with *Nottingham*, *Birmingham* and *Southampton* in the effort to intercept the German ships that raided Scarborough, Whitby and Hartlepool in December 1914.

Although the target of the German raiders was not known, the Admiralty knew that warships from the German fleet were operating in the North Sea, and made plans to catch them as they returned.

*Falmouth* was the most northerly of the four light cruisers, steaming on parallel courses westward back towards the Yorkshire coast to trap the German ships. Although *Southampton* spotted and briefly engaged German light cruisers, contact was lost due to a sudden spell of poor weather and a signalling error. What looked likely to be a major engagement dissipated with the opposing forces perhaps only 15 minutes from each other.

The failure of the interception was a major embarrassment to the Admiralty as the Royal Navy appeared incapable of preventing a German raid on British soil.

## THE BATTLE OF THE DOGGER BANK

*Steaming Full Speed for Heligoland.  
Had signal 10am to say our Battle Cruisers were in action*

**Victor Rayson, Stoker, HMS Falmouth**

*Falmouth* became Napier's flagship commanding the Second Light Cruiser Squadron (LCS) on 28 December 1914. At the time of the Battle of the Dogger Bank in January 1915, *Falmouth* was attached to the Battle Cruiser Fleet but at Cromarty rather than Rosyth. As a result, it was the First LCS, not the Second, that accompanied the Battle Cruisers into action.

*Falmouth* seems to have been despatched subsequently, missing the battle but helping to protect HMS *Lion* after it had been badly damaged. HMS *Falmouth's* log notes that *Falmouth* made a course to join the First LCS and at 4pm took station astern of HMS *Lion* as part of a defensive screen while *Lion* was towed back to Rosyth.



The officers of HMS Falmouth, including Napier, Edwards and the ship's mascot, Kaiser Bill. Image courtesy of John McDonald.

*No other target presenting itself, fire was directed at the leading Battle Cruiser*

**Rear Admiral Trevelyan Napier, commanding the Third Light Cruiser Squadron aboard HMS *Falmouth***



*Falmouth and Yarmouth under fire at the head of the Grand Fleet at Jutland. From a drawing by H.L. Boyle, courtesy of Brian Nicholls.*

*Falmouth* was still Napier's flagship, but commanding the Third LCS, at the Battle of Jutland on 31<sup>st</sup> May – 1<sup>st</sup> June 1916. HMS *Falmouth* and the Third LCS left Rosyth as part of Beatty's Battle Cruiser Fleet. They were providing a screen to the south east of the battle cruisers when contact with German forces was first made at about 1420. After repositioning to the north of the battle cruisers, *Falmouth* and the Third LCS, together with the First LCS, shadowed and attempted to engage four German light cruisers during the 'run to the south'.

When the battle cruisers turned 180 degrees to draw the German fleet towards Jellicoe's Grand Fleet – in what became known as the 'run to the north' – *Falmouth* and the Third LCS also turned in order to stay ahead. During the run to the north, Napier notes seeing 'the wreckage of a sunken ship', which may have been the remains of the HMS *Indefatigable* or the *Queen Mary*, which had both exploded during the run to the south.

At 1733 *Falmouth* was the first to sight the cruisers screening Jellicoe's main force, enabling the fleets to combine while the action continued. The complex movements of the deployment at this stage are known as 'windy corner': Napier reports 'Here we were much restricted for room'.

*We were surrounded by splashes and bursting shell,  
but the long slim shape beneath me slid unharmed through it all.*

Arnold Pears, Gunnery Lieutenant, HMS *Falmouth*

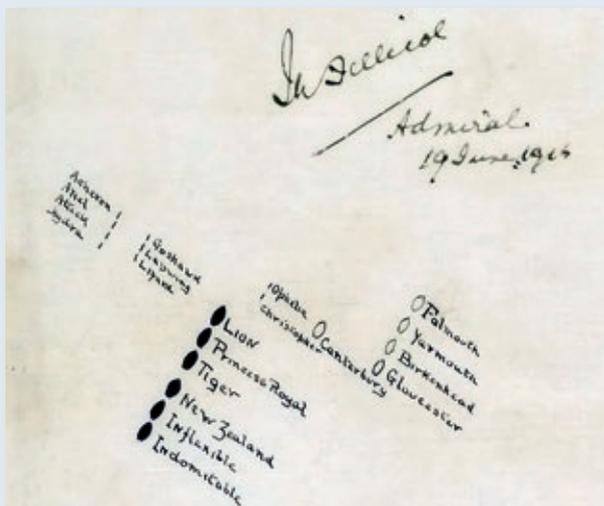
The combined British fleet now formed a single line, cutting across the approaching German fleet. HMS *Falmouth*, leading the Third LCS, was at the very front of this unparalleled force. Napier reports engaging a German light cruiser, probably *Wiesbaden*, which was severely damaged. *Falmouth* shifted its fire towards two other light cruisers that turned away.

The Third LCS then engaged two German battle cruisers heading east. The Third Battle Cruiser Squadron, led by HMS *Invincible*, joined the firing while the Third LCS continued its action against the leading German battle cruiser, SMS *Lützow*. Napier continues: '*Falmouth* and *Yarmouth* both fired torpedoes at her and it is believed that *Falmouth's* hit, as an underwater explosion was distinctly visible'. However, at about 1830 *Invincible* blew up. Napier records 'My impression is that it was the result of a shot into her magazine. There was certainly no sign of water in the explosion'. *Lützow* had itself been severely damaged and was subsequently scuttled.

At about the time *Invincible* blew up, the German fleet turned away. The Germans then turned back towards the British fleet at around 1900 and staged a torpedo attack using destroyers accompanied by battle cruisers in what became known as the 'death ride'. This enabled the main force of German ships to turn away again behind a smoke screen.

A little later, *Falmouth* encountered the German fleet again. Napier records that 'five enemy cruisers were sighted W. by N. and fire was opened at 8.18 pm... the enemy replied but their fire was erratic... at 8.38 we lost sight of the enemy in the mist, and fire was checked'.

*Falmouth* stayed at the front of the British fleet as it headed south during the night, whilst the German fleet managed to turn west through the British line and away. Being at the front, *Falmouth* missed the sometimes intense fighting at the rear during the night action. However, Napier reports that they did drive off a Zeppelin at 0315 with shrapnel fire. Although they were unable to bring it down, Napier notes a subsequent report that L.24 'in a badly damaged condition, succeeded in reaching the coast... but then came down, and broke in two places'.



Close-up of a diagram signed by Jellicoe showing HMS *Falmouth* leading the Grand Fleet at 6.40 pm. Image courtesy of The National Archives. © Crown copyright.

*I was in the decoding office down aft when the torpedoes hit. The first blew me off my stool and the second slammed me down on the deck...*

Gilbert Bickmore, Clerk, HMS *Falmouth*



*Falmouth under tow, from the album of Dr H.V. Edwards aboard HMS Porpoise. Leeds University Library, Liddle Collection, LIDDLE/WW1/RNMM/085*

HMS *Falmouth* sank on 20 August 1916 after being torpedoed during a fleet action that largely took place on 19 August. This action was a further instance of the German fleet trying to draw out discrete elements of the British fleet, in this case through a raid planned on Sunderland. The Admiralty, informed by wireless intercepts, knew of the German activity and sought to bring the German fleet to action with the whole British fleet.

The German fleet had planned for the operation by stationing U-boats in lines across the anticipated route of the British fleet. The German fleet

withdrew without a major engagement taking place, but the U-boat lines caught first *Nottingham* and then *Falmouth*.

Although there was no major engagement on 19 August, it was to prove a turning point. The danger from torpedoes and mines was considered too great a risk to major warships, and neither side sought again to bring about a fleet engagement in the North Sea. Germany switched its U-boats back to attacking merchant ships as the only way to combat Britain's maritime supremacy.

This change in strategy came too late for HMS *Falmouth*. At 1615 on 19 August, about 60 nautical miles east of Scarborough, *Falmouth* attacked a scouting Zeppelin. *Falmouth* was just regaining its station at about 1640 when a spread of three torpedoes fired by U-boat U-66 was seen. The first torpedo missed but the second and third hit the stem and stern respectively. Two men – Maurice Edward Coe and William Howells – were killed in the initial attack and were buried at sea.

Five officers and 340 men were taken off *Falmouth*, leaving a skeleton crew to work the engines and four of the guns. During the transfer to the trawler *Cooksin*, one man – Walter James Mallaby – fell between the side of the ship and the trawler and was lost. A further man – Norman Stanley Fry – died of his wounds aboard *Cooksin* and was buried at sea.

Two further torpedoes were seen approaching *Falmouth* at 1710 and 1830 while the men were being transferred to *Cooksin*. Luckily, both torpedoes passed beneath the ship.

During the night, *Falmouth* was able to make 2 knots towards the coast. Tugs arrived in the morning but they were still only able to achieve 2–3 knots.

*I cannot help thinking that if more powerful tugs had been available the ship would have been brought safely into harbour...*

**Captain John Douglas Edwards, HMS Falmouth**

At midday on 20<sup>th</sup> August, heading for safety in the Humber but still about 30 nautical miles due east of Scarborough, *Falmouth* was hit by two further torpedoes fired by U-63. One hit the stern and the other hit between Nos. 2 and 3 boiler rooms. Eight men were killed in No. 3 stokehold: Collier; Harner; James; Rawbone; Hewitt; McWalter; Sanderson and Jones.

*Falmouth* remained afloat and under tow, but when Captain Edwards believed sinking was imminent the ship was abandoned and the remaining officers and crew were picked up. A third tug arrived and the speed increased to 4–5 knots. A fourth tug arrived. Although settling slowly, the ship remained buoyant and it was hoped that they could reach the Humber. At about 1720 a volunteer party re-boarded the ship to search for the eight missing men, but without success.

*Falmouth* was towed clear of the War Channel that ran along the coast but took a heavy list to starboard at 2000. The tugs were ordered to head west in an unsuccessful attempt to beach the ship as *Falmouth* sank by the stern.

*Falmouth* had certainly proved a strong ship. After the initial two hits, Edwards noted: 'the remainder of the ship was water-tight and all bulkheads held well, this I attribute largely to the good construction of the ship'. *Falmouth* took four torpedoes before sinking, and even then after a further eight hours.

Both Napier and Jellicoe formally recorded that Captain Edwards had done all that was possible to save his ship. The volunteer party who returned to the ship was particularly commended. Napier further recorded 'That the Officers mentioned should have distinguished themselves is what I should have expected from my experience of them when my Flag was in *Falmouth*... and the men named deserve great credit'.



The Sunday, heard the news on Monday that the ship had two more torpedoes hit her Sunday while in tow & sank about 9 1/2 Sunday Evening. The last two explosion killed all the hands in No 3 stokehold & making the casualties up to 11 killed so it will

Stoker Victor Rayson, who kept a diary throughout his time aboard HMS Falmouth. Images courtesy of Neil Fisher.

## THE HMS FALMOUTH PROJECT

Research on HMS *Falmouth* has been funded by Historic England as one of a number of projects to commemorate the First World War on the Home Front.  
<https://www.historicengland.org.uk/whats-new/first-world-war-home-front/what-we-already-know/sea/hms-falmouth/>

Find out more information about the First World War at sea on Historic England's webpages:  
<https://www.historicengland.org.uk/whats-new/first-world-war-home-front/what-we-already-know/sea/>

The HMS *Falmouth* project has been carried out by Fjodr Ltd, a company specialising in the provision of high quality consultancy in the fields of marine and historic environment management [www.fjodr.com](http://www.fjodr.com).

If you have any information about the wreck of HMS *Falmouth* please get in touch via [info@fjodr.com](mailto:info@fjodr.com).



*This image shows a 3D scan of the original builder's model of HMS Falmouth in relation to a survey of the wreck on the seabed. 3D scan by Historic England. Access to ship model courtesy of Imperial War Museums. Contains Maritime and Coastguard Agency data © Crown copyright.*

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