

# FORGOTTEN WRECKS DEVON

The only warships that the German Imperial Navy could get into the English Channel were their U-boats. The first U-boat passed through the Dover Strait only a few weeks after war was declared and submarines continued to make their way through the defences there right up until the end of the war.

The danger posed by the U-boats was graphically illustrated in 1915 with the loss of HMS *Formidable*. The Royal Navy realised that battleships weren't a suitable weapon with which to fight back, and a new type of warship began to appear in the Channel.

## HMS *Formidable*

HMS *Formidable* was a pre-dreadnought battleship. Launched on 17th November 1898 and commissioned on 10th October 1901, she served with the Channel Fleet from 1908, after a stint in the Mediterranean. Although her design had been rendered obsolete by HMS *Dreadnought*, she was still a powerful vessel and the lead ship of the *Formidable* class.

### Loss

During the early stages of the war HMS *Formidable* served with the 5th Battle Squadron. The squadron was based in the English Channel to guard against possible German invasion and, after a period at Sheerness, they relocated to Portland in December 1914.

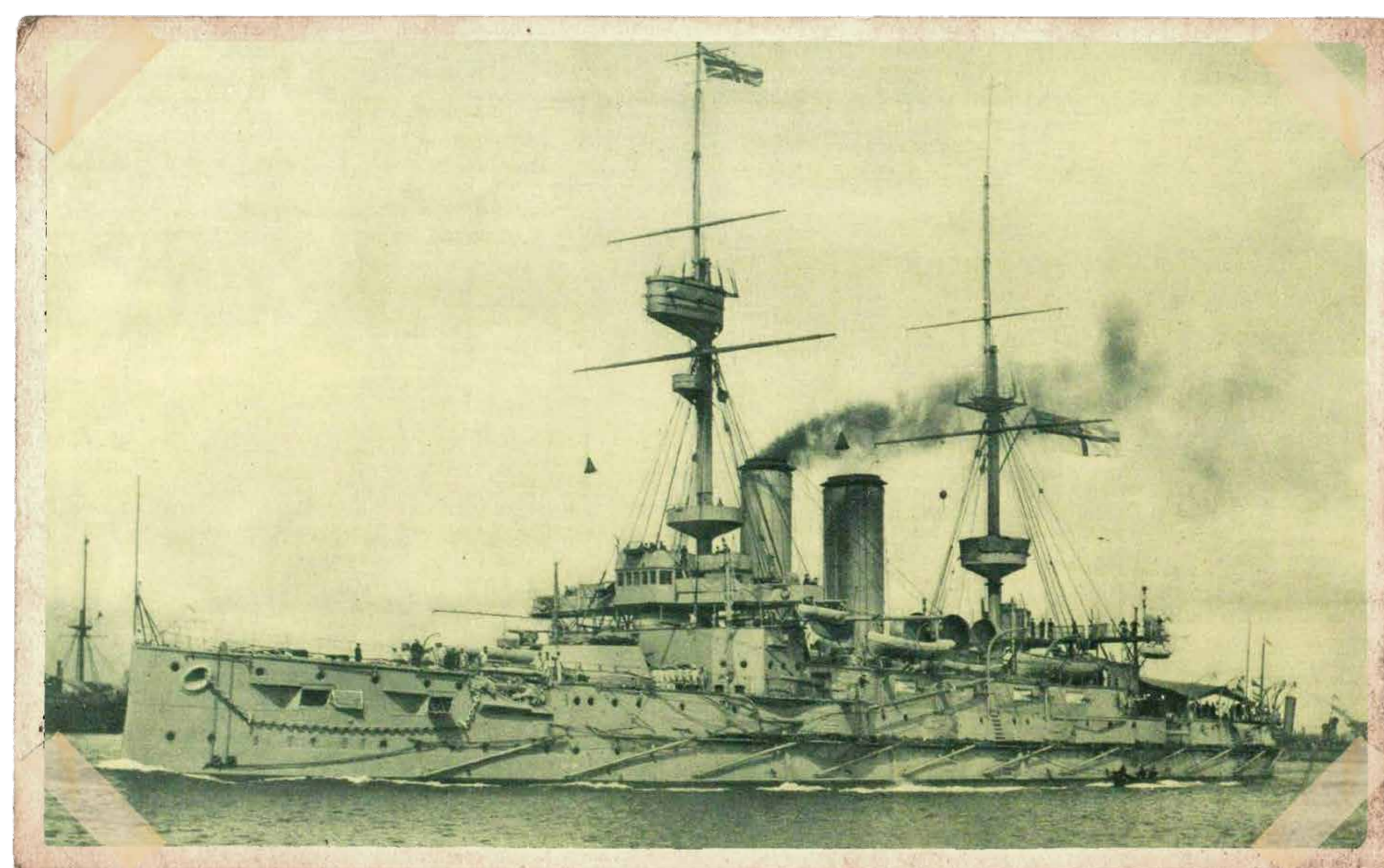
On Thursday 31st December 1914, the squadron was conducting firing exercises off the south coast. Unknown to them, they had been spotted by Rudolf Schneider, the commander of the German U-boat U-24. Biding his time he tracked the squadron and at 2.20am, New Year's Day 1915, a torpedo struck *Formidable* and she immediately began to take on water.

Standing orders dictated that if submarines were detected, unaffected vessels must make for port immediately and *Formidable's* sister ships made for Portland. The two light cruisers *Topaze* and *Diamond* stood by to take survivors, but any hopes that the ship might be saved were dashed when a second torpedo struck just after 3am, sealing *Formidable's* fate. The crew abandoned ship, but in rough weather several of the ship's boats were lost. It is even alleged that a piano was thrown overboard as a makeshift raft.

HMS *Formidable* finally sank at 4.45pm. Most survivors were picked up the following morning at sea, although one lifeboat wasn't found for 22 hours. Some boats managed to row to shore, but many men died of exposure before they could be rescued. Of the 780 strong crew only 233 survived. Among those lost were Captain Loxley and his dog Bruce who were last seen on the bridge. Bruce's body was later washed ashore and is commemorated by a headstone in Abbotsbury Gardens in Dorset.

### The Wreck Site

*Formidable* lies upside down on the seabed, almost cut in half by a large hole towards the bow. However, the vessel's thick armour means that most of the hull is still intact. The wreck is designated as a Controlled Site under the *Protection of Military Remains Act 1986*, meaning that diving on it is prohibited.



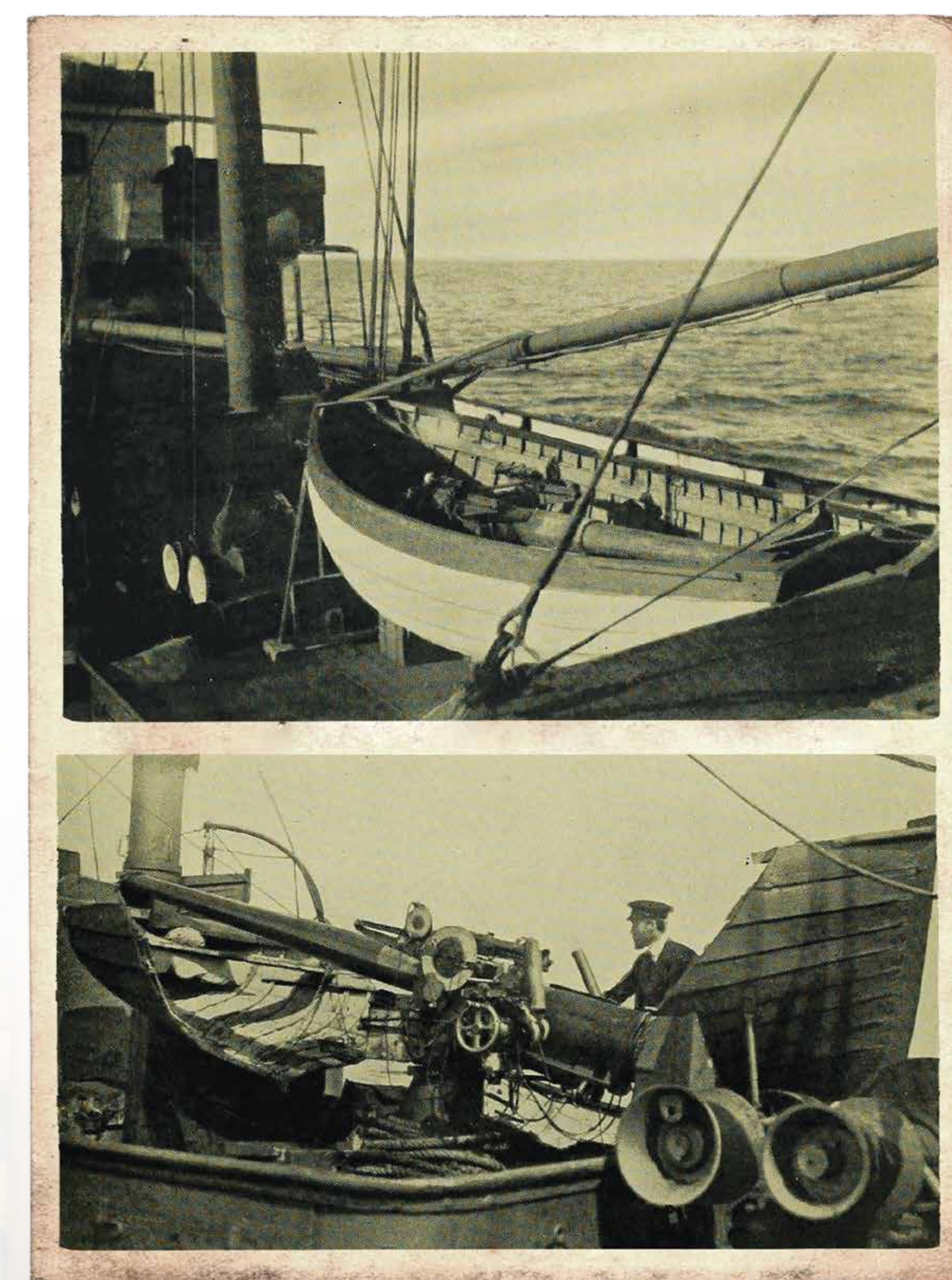
Above: HMS *Formidable*. Originally published in the *Illustrated London News* in January 1915.



Left: during the war, this lifebelt from *Formidable* was washed up on the Dutch coast, several hundred miles from the scene of her loss. It was later donated to the Imperial War Museum. © IWM (MAR 66).

## SM UB-19

The story of how UB-19 became one of the *Forgotten Wrecks* provides an interesting insight into the complex network of anti-submarine activity off our shores during the First World War.



Above: These two photographs show how *Penshurst* expertly disguised its true purpose. This dummy boat can be quickly pulled aside, allowing the hidden 12-pounder gun to be brought to bear on an enemy target in a matter of seconds. Originally published in the *Q-Ships and their Story* by E Keble Chatterton, 1922.

To an untrained eye, the 1,191 ton *Penshurst* looked like many other merchant ships that transported vital goods to and from the UK during the Great War. In reality, however, *Penshurst* had multiple identities and a hidden secret.

Sometimes going by the name of *Manford*, *Penshurst* was in fact Q-7: a Mystery, Decoy or Q-Ship intended to lure U-boats to the surface where they could be attacked and destroyed. Q-Ships operated around the British coast throughout the First World War.

Disguised as merchant seamen, their officers and crew had a carefully rehearsed 'performance' for approaching U-boats which involved launching a 'panic party' into the ship's boats, to row away from the Q-Ship. While it appeared that the vessel had been abandoned, in fact, more men and armaments were hidden within the ship. They had the unenviable task of waiting in hiding, often under fire, until the U-boat was close enough, before revealing themselves and their weaponry to attack the submarine.

### Loss

On 29th November 1916, *Penshurst*, under Commander H. F. Grenfell, R.N., had a close encounter with a U-boat and, fearing their identity compromised, the crew changed the vessel's appearance overnight, by lowering one of her three masts and repainting parts of the ship.

On 30th November, the new-look *Penshurst* observed a British seaplane from Portland carrying out anti-submarine duties from above. The Q-Ship signalled for the seaplane to come alongside and Grenfell agreed with the airmen that the plane would act as a 'spotter' and the ship would drop depth charges at the indicated position.

Unfortunately, soon after taking off, the seaplane crashed back into the water. As *Penshurst's* crew rescued the airmen, UB-19 commenced a surface attack. The plane had to be abandoned and must therefore be another of the south coast's *Forgotten Wrecks*.

The Q-Ship reverted to playing its well-rehearsed role as the defenceless merchant ship. The 'panic party' abandoned ship and UB-19 closed in, firing all the time. At 4.26pm, with the U-boat a mere 230 metres away, *Penshurst* revealed her deadly secret. More than 80 rounds were fired from the ship's 3 and 12-pounder guns. Within 10 minutes, UB-19 sank, bows first. Approximately 7 of the U-boat crew were lost with the submarine and sixteen survivors were picked up by *Penshurst*, including the commander Oberleutnant zur See Noodt.

### The Wreck Site

Today, the wreck of UB-19 lies in approximately 65 metres of water, near the middle of the English Channel, south of the Devon/Dorset border. A survey by Dr Innes McCartney in 2006 identified that, while the wreck of UB-19 has deteriorated significantly since 1916, it can be seen that the conning tower hatch is open and the attack periscope is in the retracted position.

Background image: L. A. Shafer, 1918



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