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

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 HMS Formidable and she immediately began to take on water.

Standing orders dictated that if submarines were detected, unafflicted vessels must make for port immediately and Formidable’s sister ship made for Portland. The two light cruisers rigged as Diamond would not be taken survivors, but only that the ship might not be damaged when a second torpedo struck soon after. So making Formidable’s bow. The two abandoned ships but the ships boats were lost. It was alleged that a piano was thrown overboard as a makeshift raft.

HMS Formidable finally sank at 4.5pm. Most survivors were picked up in the following morning at sea, although a few were washed ashore and are 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 trim mooring 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.

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.

To an untrained eye, the UB-19, i.e. 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 Maryl, Penshurst was in fact Q-7. A Mystery Destroyer or Q-Ship intended to lure U-boats to the surface where they could be attacked and destroyed. Q-7 was a former British destroyer which was taken over by the Germans in 1914 to use as an anti-submarine ship. The ship's boats 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 1914, 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 above the area. 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 as the identified position. Unfortunately, the seaplane took off awake and was unable to locate Penshurst. The Q-Ship dropped its couple of hundred weight return as the false enemy ship and the ‘spotter’ and the ship would drop depth charges as the identified position.

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

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 Linus McGrow in 2006 confirmed that, while the wreck of UB-19 has deteriorated significantly since 1916, it can be seen that the wooden bow hull is intact and the stern remains in the restricted position.