

FORGOTTEN WRECKS

HAMPSHIRE AND ISLE OF WIGHT

Merchant vessels make up the majority of wrecks in this stretch of the Channel and most of those were sunk by U-boats. The deep water to the south of the Isle of Wight proved an ideal hunting ground for submarines.

As merchant vessels travelled between Britain and France, U-boats of the Flanders Flotilla that had slipped through the Dover Straits, lay in wait for them. Losses escalated throughout the war until 1917 and 1918, when ships were lost on an almost daily basis.

SS Eleanor

Targeted by a U-boat, this merchant ship sank with the loss of all but one officer.

Loss

The merchant ship *Eleanor* had been chartered for service in the Mercantile Fleet Auxiliary and was carrying a cargo of sea mines and depth charges to the Mediterranean via Falmouth. At approximately 4 am on the 12th February 1918, when she was south west of the Isle of Wight, a massive explosion shook the vessel. The *Eleanor* had been torpedoed by SM UB-57, commanded by Oberleutnant zur See Johannes Lohs, one of Germany's most highly-regarded First World War submarine commanders.

The ship sank almost immediately and of the crew of 35, only one man escaped. Second Officer Barton Hunter rushed onto deck after the explosion and quickly found himself in the water as the vessel sank beneath him. He found some debris to cling to and as he waited in the darkness, a vessel approached from the gloom. Lohs had come to interrogate the survivor and, after obtaining the name of the ship and information about its cargo, SM U-57 slipped back into the darkness.

The Survivor

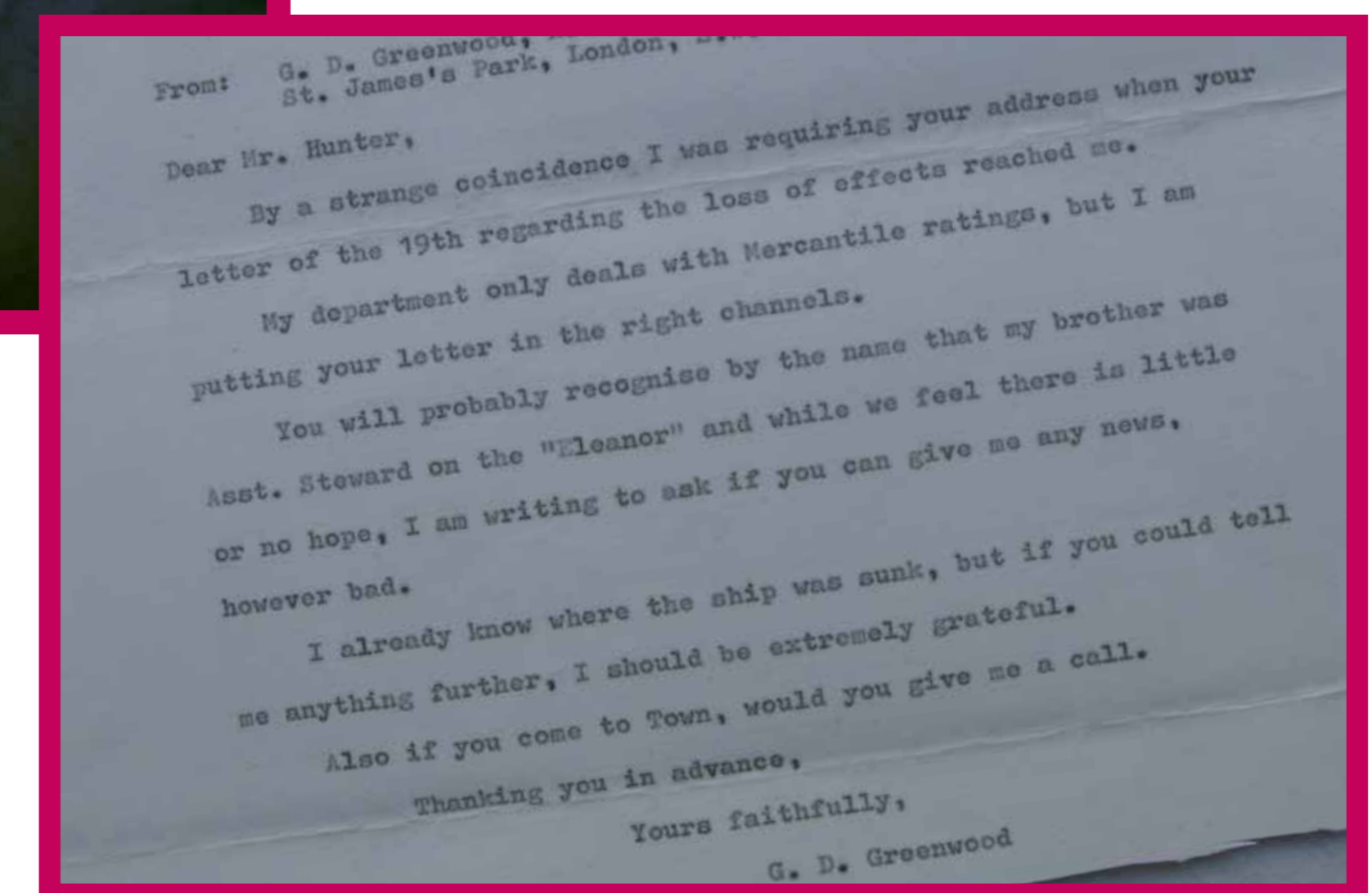
Barton Hunter survived the war and in the months and years that followed he received numerous letters from the families of his crewmates, desperately seeking information about their loved ones.

The Wreck Site

Today the *Eleanor* lies approximately 9 miles off St Catherine's point, the most southern point of the Isle of Wight, in 40 metres of water. The cargo of mines and depth charges still remains stacked in the areas of the cargo holds, although their explosives have been washed away.



Left: depth charges on the SS *Eleanor*. A depth charge is an anti-submarine weapon which detonates when it reaches a specific depth. They were made from steel canisters about the size of an oil drum and filled with TNT.
Photo courtesy of Mike Pitts.



Right: one of the letters received by Barton Hunter after the sinking of the *Eleanor*. As the last person to see the rest of the crew alive, Hunter was a source of information and closure. Letter courtesy of Mrs Jean Rudden, daughter of Barton Hunter.

SS Londonier

A lucky spot on a dark night led to the loss of the *Londonier*.

Loss

The *Londonier* was a British built, Belgian owned ship that had been chartered by the French government. In 1918 she was employed carrying cargo from Britain to France and on the 12th March 1918, was returning to Bristol from Calais.

In the early hours of the 13th March, as she passed south of the Isle of Wight, the *Londonier* was torpedoed by SM UC-71. The ship began to founder immediately; there was no time for the crew to man the deck gun or make evasive manoeuvres. The ship sank at the bow, raising the stern vertically in the air. Within minutes she had slipped beneath the surface.

Of the 25 strong crew, 11 men were killed by the explosion or, unable to reach the deck, drowned in the bow of the ship. 14 men clung to wreckage in the water and were picked up by an Admiralty tug shortly afterwards. They were taken to Haslar in Gosport, although by the time they landed, another crewman had died of exposure.

Confusion

In a later investigation, the Admiralty suggested that the *Londonier* may have been silhouetted by the light of St Catherine's Point lighthouse, making it easier for the U-boat to spot. They were also surprised to learn that the ship's master believed the *Londonier* was under the protection of Royal Navy escorts during the voyage. In fact no escort vessels were in the area - *Londonier* was on her own.

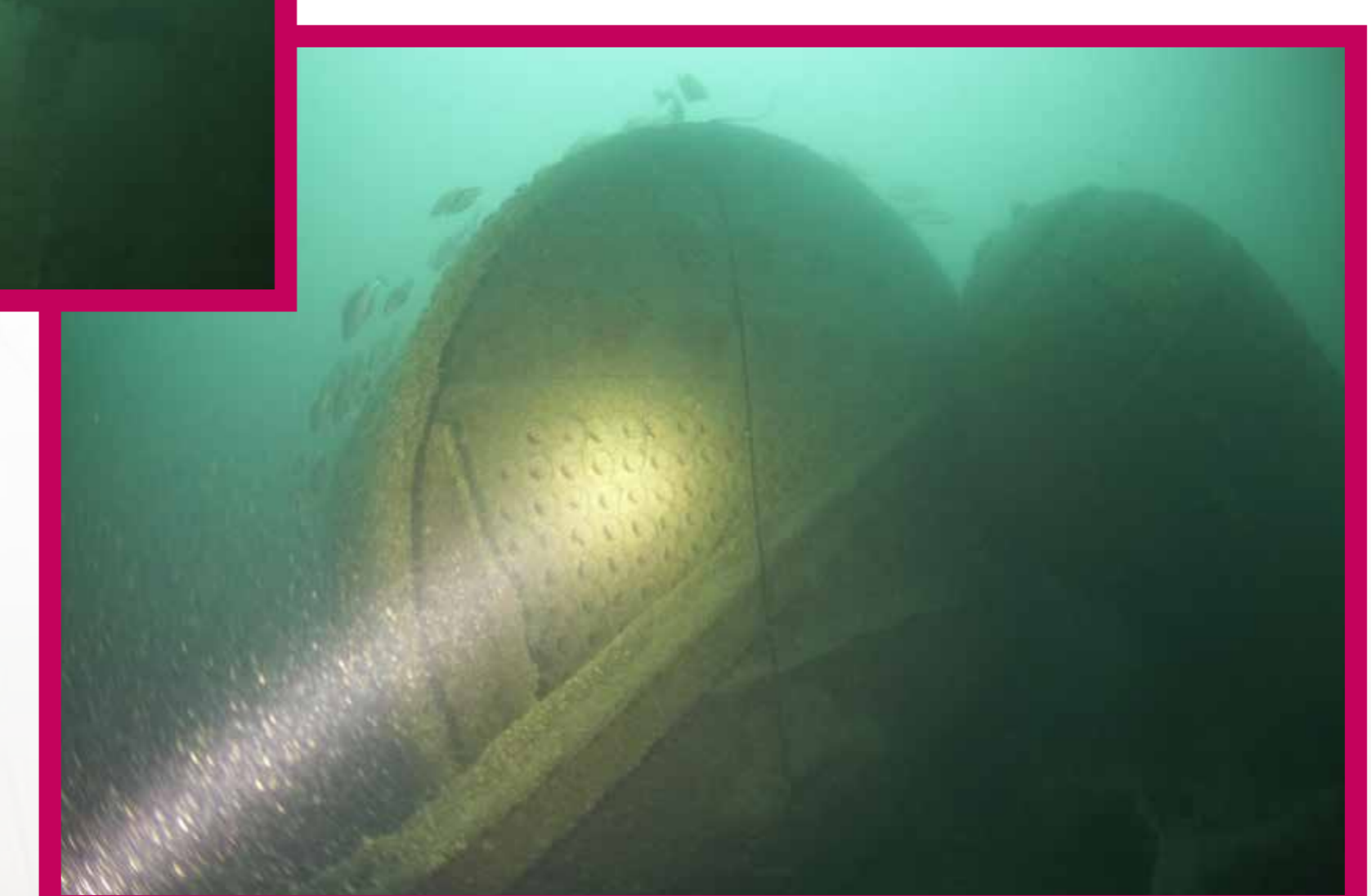
The Wreck Site

The wreck of the *Londonier* is in 40 metres of water, approximately 8 miles south of the Isle of Wight. Although the ship's hull has collapsed, the engines and deck gun are still clearly identifiable.

Although 11 men died on the *Londonier*, and this wreck is their final resting place, this is one of the hundreds of wrecks that has no official protection. Although it is essentially a war grave, there is no such official designation for maritime sites. Only military vessels benefit from the Protection of Military Remains Act.



Left: a diver swims across the wreck of the SS *Londonier*. The structure of the propeller, hull and rudder can be seen to the bottom left of the diver.
Photo courtesy of Hamish Morrison.



Right: the boilers of the SS *Londonier*. The *Londonier* had a triple expansion steam engine: steam was fed through three successive cylinders of increasing size and decreasing pressure. They were the most common type of engine seen on steam ships during the 'golden age' of steam.
Photo courtesy of Hamish Morrison.

The Maritime Archaeology Trust is indebted to Dave Wendes of Wight Spirit Charters who has generously shared decades of his research into the wrecks off Hampshire and the Isle of Wight with the Forgotten Wrecks project.



Background image: L. A. Shafer, 1918



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