The Dover Strait was an important area of water during the war, as combining it did the shortest crossing between Britain and the front line of the Western Front with the dangers of being the nearest piece of coast to the German U-boat bases in Belgium.

U-boats began to pass through the strait only a few weeks in to the war and for years were able to outwit the Royal Navy and wreak havoc in the narrow waterway. A few years later the tide had turned, however, and few U-boat crews took the risk of passing through the straight and survived to tell the tale.

SS Lusitania

The loss of RMS Lusitania, the British ocean liner torpedoed off the southern coast of Ireland on 7th May 1915 is perhaps one of the better known incidents of the First World War at sea.

In fact, this was not only the only ship of that name to be lost during the conflict. The loss well known SS Lusitania was sunk off Folkestone, Kent some six months after its more famous namesake.

The Final Voyage

A British merchant ship, SS Lusitania was built in 1903 in Blyth, Northumberland. On 11th November 1915 the vessel was travelling from London to Cadiz with a general cargo when it became another victim of the underwater minefields laid by German U-boats off Kent.

The Lusitania’s story is intimately linked with that of HMHS Anglia, a hospital ship carrying nearly 400 wounded from the Boulogne to Dover when it struck a mine and sank, in just 15 minutes, near Folkestone Gate Off Kent.

Anglia was the first hospital ship casualty of the war; more than 300 of the wounded on board were cut apart, smashed into beds on the lower decks. Vessels in the area quickly went to the aid of the Anglia and one of those was the SS Lusitania, lowering two rescue boats into the water and picking up survivors before also hitting a mine and sinking.

All of Lusitania’s crew (approximately 352 survivors, including 14 year old Assistant Steward Herbert Scott) who were the last to leave the stricken ship.

Approximately 300 people were rescued from the Anglia, with the tragic loss of more than 160 lives, including 16 medical staff and 25 crew, all from Holyhead.

The Wreck Site

Today, the remains of both ships lie at a depth of approximately 30 metres within a few miles of Folkestone. They are not protected and many artefacts have been taken from them by sport divers over the years. Recent calls for the Anglia to be protected by legislation are currently being considered by the Ministry of Defence and Historic England.

SM UB-31

After a successful career, this U-boat was lost in a graphic demonstration of the Royal Navy’s new anti-submarine technology. Or was it?

Loss

On May 2nd 1918, after successfully sinking a ship in the English Channel, the German U-boat UB-31 began its difficult journey through the Dover Barrage. As it headed east, approximately three miles south of Folkestone, the submarine’s periscope was sighted by the Admiralty Drifter Lord Leitrim. A depth charge was dropped, UB-31 dived deeper, more charges joined Lord Leitrim. Guided by a Royal Naval Air Service airship, they were able to track an oil leak and after firing more depth charges, UB-31 was destroyed.

The Wreck Site

A U-boat wreck, lying close to the reported position of the drifter action, has been commonly assumed to be UB-31.

Is it though? Recent research by Dr Innes McCartney has identified a number of historic and archaeological clues that cast doubt on the version of events.

Recent research by Dr Innes McCartney has identified a number of historic and archaeological clues that cast doubt on the version of events.

Dr McCartney compares the archaeological evidence on the seabed with relevant historic documents and demonstrates how archaeology can both support and contradict commonly held theories from our relatively recent history.