

## Harwich Railway Ships that went to war: WW1 to the Falklands War – David Whittle

For our November meeting David Whittle from the Harwich Museum joined us to tell us about the ships from Harwich that had been involved in WW1, WW2 and the Falklands War. Many ships from the town having been taken by the government for war use, every ship had a story and many did not return to Harwich.

During WW1 David told us how the SS Newmarket which was taken over and used as a minesweeper was torpedoed in 1914 and of the loss of life on the HMS Amphion which had chased and sunk a German minelayer which had been spotted off of Shotley but had then unfortunately hit a mine and sunk with the loss of about 130 lives and was now a war grave.

Another intriguing story David told was of the disappearance in 1913 of Dr Rudolf Diesel from the SS Dresden whilst travelling from Antwerp to Harwich when it was found on arrival that his bed had not been slept in and he could not be found and was believed lost at sea.

The SS Brussels from Harwich working for the Great Eastern Railway as a passenger ferry between Harwich and Antwerp attempted to ram a German U-boat in 1915. The ship was later captured by the Germans and her captain, Captain Fryatt, although a civilian, was subjected to a naval court martial and was executed by a firing squad in 1916. The rest of the crew were interned in a prisoner of war camp and the ship was renamed the Brugge and used at the port of Zeebrugge.

During WW2 Harwich ships were once again called into service with The Prague being used as a troop and then hospital ship and taking part in the evacuation from Dunkirk in 1939, rescuing over 3 thousand soldiers. On the second day the ship was dive bombed and suffered serious damage but was repaired and went on to carry out further dangerous missions during the war. In 1940 HMS Badger from Parkeston took part in the Channel Island evacuation. The train ferries that had been brought to Harwich in 1924 to transport trains across to Zeebrugge played an important part in the D-Day landings being used to transport heavy equipment to the beaches.

David noted that some of the ships, such as the SS Felixstowe, that were used had previously been very well appointed ferries which had been used to transport passengers from Harwich to the Hook of Holland before being pressed into military use.

Harwich ships also made the news later and David played us a Pathé News clip which reported the collision between the Harwich ship The Duke of York with an American ship in 1953. It was reported that 500 had been saved with only 4 lives lost. The ship had subsequently been repaired and continued in service on the Hook of Holland route for many years before being sold and moving to Greece.

Later during the Falklands War the St Edmund a Sealink ship arrived at the Islands as the Argentinians surrendered and then went on to service in the Mediterranean.

David finished his talk by telling us of the exhibition taking place at the Harwich Museum, commemorating the centenary of the opening of the train ferry service from Harwich to

Zeebrugge, which provided an illustrated history of the early days of construction of the terminals, the ferries involved and their careers.

Lorna Fraser. 0170