



## **FREDERICK GAUNT & THE SINKING OF HMS FORMIDABLE**

The Formidable was launched in 1898 and first commissioned in 1901. From the start she had problems and gained a reputation as an ‘unlucky ship’.

During her trials there was concern about the efficiency of her new style of boilers and this was going to continue, necessitating several de-commissions, refits, questions in Parliament and an enquiry.

She also had a series of accidents, the first not long after launching when a man was lost overboard. She then had a collision with a steamer in harbour. The Admiralty dismissed this saying “The Formidable suffered little damage”. The steamer lost her stern and there is no mention of the fate of her crew.

Next she had a coaling accident resulting in three men being injured, two were attended to in the ship’s sick bay but it was necessary to divert to a naval hospital for the third. This was followed by a horrific accident caused by a derrick collapsing as a boat was being lowered. There were two instant deaths – the gunnery officer was thrown down a hatch and landed head first on a stanchion and a petty officer was cut in half. A third man died shortly afterwards. (Strangely, when the new Formidable, an aircraft carrier, was launched in 1937 she mysteriously launched herself, resulting in one death and several injuries. A superstitious sailor could begin to think it was the name and not the ship that was suspect).

She was in dock again before the 1914 Naval Review. Her boiler problem caused her to fall behind when sailing in a squadron. In peacetime this was an inconvenience; in wartime it was lethal and it raises the question – in their anxiety to keep ahead of Germany’s shipbuilding did the Admiralty send to war a ship they knew was unseaworthy?

She survived for four months. On the 1st January 1915 she was sunk by two torpedoes about 37 miles off Start Point, Dorset, with the loss of 547 officers and men.

One witness at the subsequent Enquiry spoke of the rapid deterioration of the weather but also mentioned that before the U-boat attack there was “Not much way on the ship”, which infers she was once again experiencing the usual problems with her boiler.

Great courage was shown by all the crew, particularly as the damage caused prohibited the launching of all the boats and it was obvious that only a minority would be able to escape. However, 70 men on one pinnace had a remarkable experience being rescued by the trawler *Provident* which had a crew of three men and two boys (one aged nine, the nephew of the skipper who was always allowed to accompany his uncle during school holidays. No doubt if the change in the weather and the difficulties it would cause had been foreseen he would not have been allowed to do so. As it was he must have thought he was having a great adventure).

The trawler had great difficulty in getting a line on the pinnace but eventually succeeded in rescuing all the men just 15 miles off Berry Head. There was a sequel to this - it was decided the fishermen should be awarded with medals and also have a monetary award. The skipper duly received a letter from Buckingham Palace instructing him that he and his crew should attend on a Tuesday. He wrote back saying it was impossible; he and his men worked. Only a Saturday would be convenient – and he gave a date. He received a reply that the King had other arrangements for that day but giving him another Saturday date, which was found to be mutually convenient. The picture of the King and the fisherman consulting their diaries provides a brief moment of amusement in this tragic episode.

It is what follows that is dubious. Admiral Bayly expected to be court martialled, a normal procedure, but this did not happen. During the Enquiry he received letters from the First Sea Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill at that time, the tone of which is astonishing, questioning why he was so “stupid” as to take his squadron into waters known to be “infested with U-boats”; why had he dismissed the destroyers; why did he carry out the exercises he had, why in that area etc? He replied that the Admiralty supplied the map showing the area to be clear of U-boats, he went to the area to carry out the exercises under orders from the Admiralty and he did not dismiss the destroyers, the Admiralty took them from him. Also he had arrived at the designated spot as another Squadron was leaving, having completed the exercises he was about to do, which would infer the area was safe. He was told he had “Lost their Lordships’ confidence and that of the men who served under him”. He asked for a Court Martial so that everything could be debated openly as was the usual procedure but was told the Admiralty “was not prepared to grant one”. He had to take down his flag and was sent to the Royal Naval College at Greenwich.

An eighty year restriction was placed on the documents relating to this case. They can now be read at the National Archives. The above is a short summary of contents of the files. With regard to the destroyers, questions had already been asked in Parliament regarding the Admiralty’s practice of sending ships into the Channel without destroyers – a habit which exposed the German attempt at propaganda when they issued a statement purporting to come from U24 that the Formidable had been sunk and the submarine “pursued by destroyers” but had been able to elude them.

As for the Admiralty it was very conscious of itself as the Senior Service on whom the public had always relied for protection against an enemy and it had been 'The Greatest Navy in the World' since Nelson, but things were changing. In its race to keep ahead of Germany's shipbuilding it had overlooked two other important areas – mines and submarines. It had already had some serious reversals. The sinking of the Formidable meant the loss of another battleship which it could ill afford. Perhaps the furore regarding Admiral Bayly was to divert attention from its own failings, as was the strange disappearance from maritime history of the sinking itself despite the fact that it was one of the major naval tragedies of the war.

Frederic Roy Gaunt, son of Charles and Rachel Gaunt of Wellfield, 12 Vicarage Road, Lingfield, was lost with the ship and he is commemorated on the Naval Memorial at Chatham. He joined the Navy in 1911 and was a cook's mate. His body was not recovered for burial but his name is included on his mother's gravestone in the churchyard of St Peter and St Paul – a poignant reminder of private tragedy amid all this hundred year national and global remembrance.

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Sources:

National Archives

Surrey History Centre

British Newspaper Archives

Mark Potts & Tony Marks: *Before the Bells Have Faded*

Burton Bradstock Museum

Ancestry.co.uk

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