

1st Class Boy Seaman, William Durow, J/29940

HMS Formidable

With my interest in history I have since moving into Stanley Village been intrigued by the inscription on the War Memorial and the plaque to 1st Class Boy, William Durow Royal Navy of HMS Formidable and a recent publication has prompted me to delve further with the following results. When I served in the Royal Navy any man under the age of 20 was classified as 'UA' (Under age) even though man service started at the age of 18 when I joined the Royal Navy in 1966. On your 20th Birthday you were classified as 'G' for Grog or 'T' for Temperance and had an extra 3d per day pay – not an option taken up by many! It would seem the practice in the early 1900's was under 20 was considered boyhood thus the rank of Boy as commemorated on the three separate memorials in Stanley Village.



ST ANDREWS CHURCH

Stanley Village

The WWI
Memorial Porch
and Plaque
commemorating
William Durow



However interestingly the Royal Naval Memorials in Chatham, Plymouth and Portsmouth all list the 'boys' as Ordinary Seamen though whether this was to recognise that they had died as men is not known, and only my own supposition. There are some who feel 'Remembrance Sunday' glorifies war, an opinion very few who have served in the Armed Services will subscribe to; and to me war is summed up by Rev Geoffrey Kennedy MC, an award won in WWI as chaplain and who was later chaplain to George V. His pseudonym for several publications was 'Woodbine Willie' and this poem was published as 'Waste' in 'More Rough Rhymes of a Padre' in 1918, and a most appropriate poem to this article.

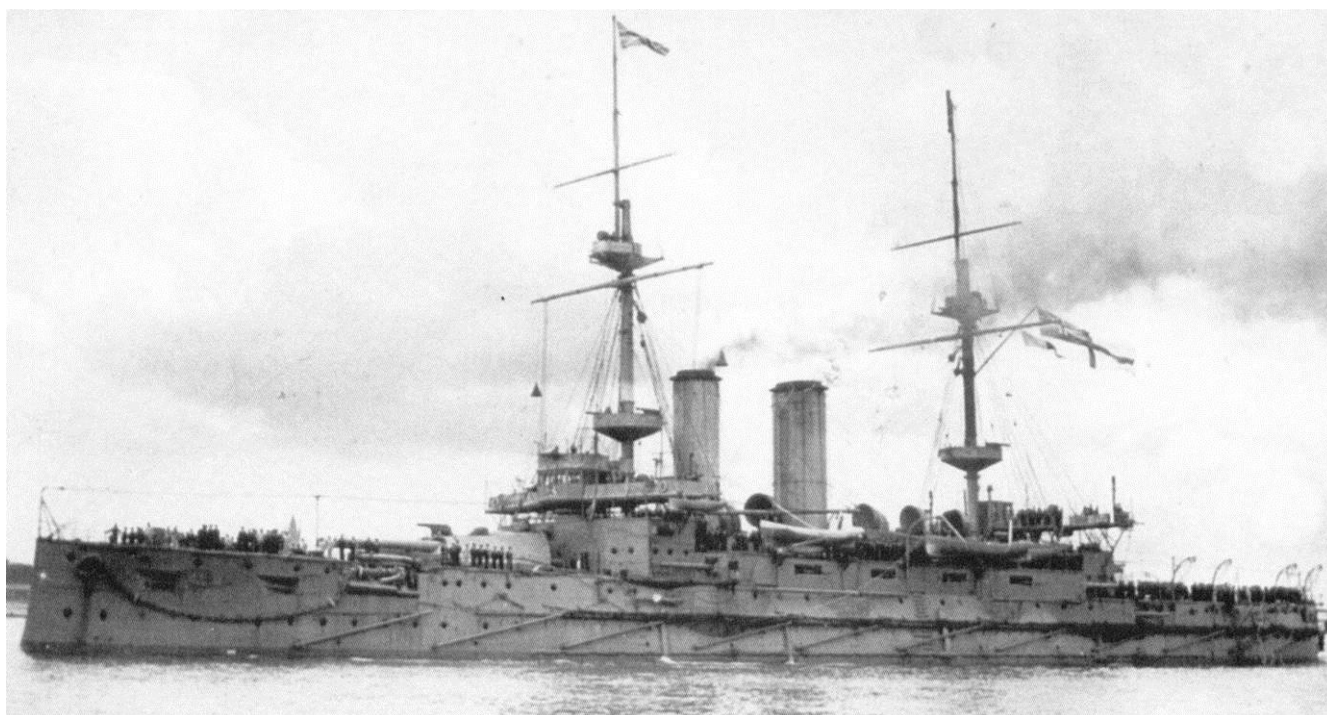
WASTE!

***Waste of blood, and waste of Tears,
Waste of youth's most precious years,
Waste of ways the Saints have trod,
Waste of Glory, Waste of God,
War!***

On 1 January 1915 with the New Year only a couple of hours old the Fifth Battle Squadron of the Channel Fleet of HM Royal Navy was steaming westwards after exercising the previous day off Portland Bill. Lying in wait was the German Submarine U24, which struck at 2:20 am by torpedoing the last battleship of the line, HMS Formidable, the first Battleship to be sunk in WWI

On this ship there were at least two local men to this area. **1st Class Boy, William Durow, J/29940, Aged 18**, Parents, Joseph and Mary Durow of 132 Station Road, Stanley Village, Derbyshire. Young William is commemorated on a brass plaque inside St. Andrews Church in the village, his name is on the WWI Roll of Honour for the Parish and the plaque to those who did not return in the Porchway to the Church which is a War Memorial built in the 1920's and his name is inscribed on the Parish War Memorial in the village.

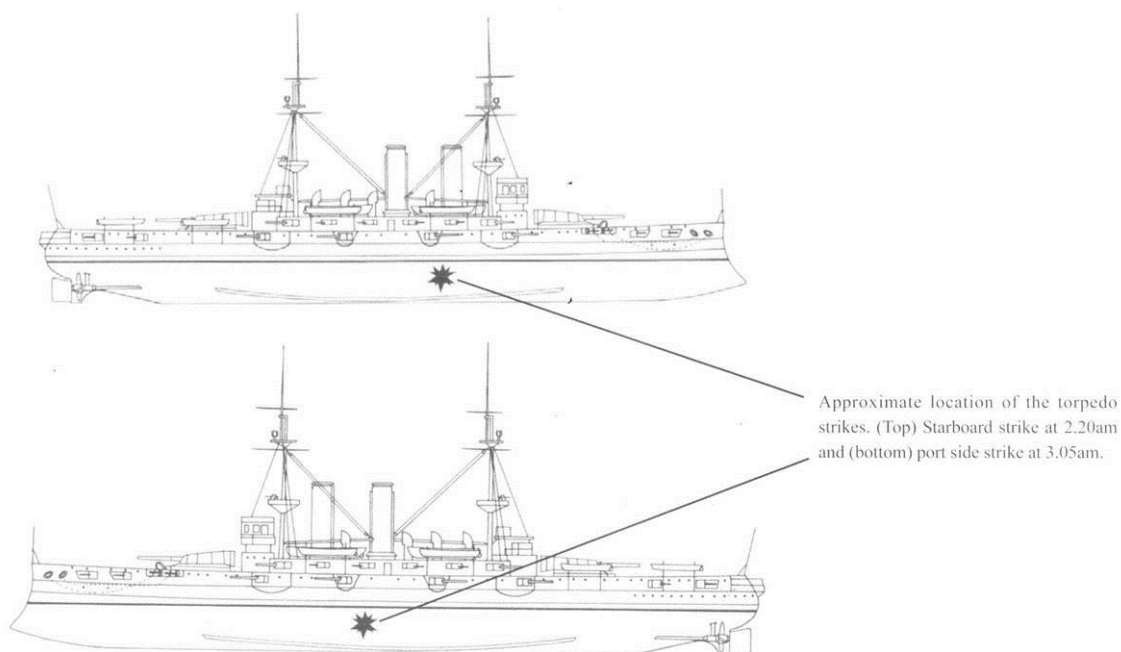
As was the custom during WWI & WWII, for those with no known grave he is also commemorated on Panel 6 of the main Plymouth Naval War Memorial. 'Billy' as he was known locally, was an only son and a choirboy at St Andrews Church and had two sisters, Stella, and Nancy who married Wilfred Cooke. Some time after WWI the family moved to 2 New Street off Station Road. George Horsnall (99) of Stanley Common attended and remembers the Commemoration Plaque to Billy being unveiled in the Church by Mrs Harper Sharpe but has no information as to why this task was undertaken by the Durow's next door neighbour. He remembers Billy as one of the older choirboys, and they were advised he had drowned at sea when HMS Formidable went down.



Also listed as a casualty was Mechanician Harry Phipps, 295127, Aged 41 and whose parents were Enoch & Annie Phipps of Yew Cottage, Victoria Avenue, Borrowash and Harry is commemorated on panel 11 of the Chatham Naval Memorial in Kent. Prior to our Royal Navy shrinking to almost non-existence we were all allocated a base port and though this was not always relevant to our service it is assumed would have influenced the difference of recording on different area naval War Memorials.

Of the crew of 758; 547 officers and men did not survive; the death toll was so high as the other ships in company were ordered not to stop and assist following the tragic loss of HMS Aboukir, Hogue and Cressy (Sept 1914) all within an hour, with the loss of 1,400 British sailors, caused by each ship being torpedoed in turn when they stopped to pick up survivors. The change of rules engagement in WWI were being learnt at a terrible cost of lives. As HMS Formidable was torpedoed in the early hours of New Years day in 1915, and sank at 4:40am many of the men found themselves on the upper deck clad only in their 'fearnoughts', a one piece flannel night garment of the time. When the Captain's final words went out "Lads, this is the last, all hands for themselves and may God Bless and guide you to safety" the only option was to jump into the cold winter sea or go down with the ship. The Captain, his faithful dog 'Bruce' and Commander were seen on the bridge of the doomed ship waiting for the inevitable to happen in true Royal Navy Tradition of the time!

Captain Arthur Loxley RN, was the son of the Rev. Arthur Loxley the former curate of St. Mary's Church, Northcliffe. During WWI the family would lose two further sons, Capt Vere Loxley RM killed in action on the Somme 13/11/16 and Captain Reginald Loxley RAF who lost his life 18/10/18 only weeks before the Armistice, amply demonstrating the pain of war and loss on an unimaginable scale.



The ship's Chaplain, Rev. George Brooke Robinson showed great bravery and care of his flock by venturing down below decks to fetch cigarettes for officers and crew despite the fact the ship was due to capsize at anytime. As a Chaplain of the fleet he had visited many parts of the world so it was quite a coincidence he should go down with the Formidable within miles of West Bay, Dorset where he resided.

The suffering of those who did not go down with the ship is recorded in a book on the Formidable, **'Before The Bells Have Faded'** by Mark Potts and Tony Marks* and I thank them for their kind copyright permission to use extracts from their book. They are from Crewe and were inspired by four names including twins on their local war memorial. The book is to commemorate the 547 men who lost their lives and to rectify a historical oversight that this fine battleship and crew had no literary legacy recorded until now.

There were many acts of bravery and no doubt prayers and one such incident of a prayer (Miracle?) being answered was one of the open boats which spotted a brief light



accidentally shone from shore which enabled the boat to head for Lyme Regis and land safely whereas it would have been smashed up on the rocks and all lost. When this boat reached shore all the occupants were in a very bad way with exhaustion and hypothermia. The dead bodies of the sailors were laid out in the Pilot Boat Inn where 'Lassie' a rough haired cross bred collie took a particular interest in Able Seaman John Cowan who was thought to be dead. For half an hour the dog continued to lick and nuzzle the body and incredibly he began to show signs of life and willing hands completed his recovery. According to local folklore the incident inspired the Hollywood creation of the immortal 'Lassie' on film and TV. The men in the overloaded Pinnacle were at sea for 22 hours in very rough inhospitable

weather with no food or water and of the 72 or 73 who started out only 33 survived and all in a poor way. Only 200 survivors are listed and this was one of the greatest number of men lost on a ship during WWI.

Young Durow in the prime of his life is one of many young seamen lost at sea on the Formidable and his family's loss is reflected by the Brass Plaque in St Andrews Church and the very poignant sailor's prayer.

***There are no flowers on a sailor's grave, No lilies on an ocean wave.
The only tribute is the seagulls sweep, And the tear drop on a loved one's cheek.***

Today the Formidable lies 60 Metres deep (Approx 200 foot) in position 50-13-12N, 03-03-58W and is an official War Grave under the protection of the Military Remains Act and Sea Graves Act 2001 to which HMS Formidable is a controlled site to prevent further disturbance and trophy hunting by an irresponsible minority of divers. Thankfully sixteen wrecks are now protected and diving prohibited unless a specific licence is obtained. (My personal feeling is all wrecks should be treated as the grave of those who were lost, and left undisturbed) Despite lobbying by various ex Service Associations for many years it took until 2001 to get some form of protection for these brave men's graves, too little far too late.

WE WILL REMEMBER THEM.

* **'Before The Bells Have Faded'** by Mark Potts and Tony Marks - (ISBN 0-9528760-6-10) first published 2004 and available from Maritime Books, Liskeard, PL14 4EL – Tel: 0159 343663 or web site www.navybooks.com.