More than 1,000 wrecks dating to the First World War lie off the south coast of the UK. These underwater memorials represent a vital, yet little known aspect of the Great War. Each day of the conflict, people of many nationalities, ages and backgrounds worked, served, travelled and sometimes died on the vessels just off our shores.

Co-inciding with the First World War centenary, the Forgotten Wrecks of the First World War project will discover and tell the stories behind the fates of the vessels and the people who were on them. The project has been generously funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. It was devised and is being delivered by the Maritime Archaeology Trust.

Where?

The project is focusing on the UK’s south coast from Portland Bill to beyond the Isles of Scilly in the west.

What?

The First World War wrecks of the south coast include just about every type of vessel that went to sea at the time, including:

- Liners and Hospital Ships
- Battleships
- Trawlers
- Merchant Ships
- HMS Chieftain, Kent, Protected Place
- A Dover Patrol vessel that was mined with the loss of 74 lives.
- A Royal Navy battleship, torpedoed on 1st January 1915 with loss of more than 540 men.
- U.S. Navy Photo NH 19-N-10586.
- A former warship that sank in a storm while being towed from Portsmouth to Sgos Flore for use as accommodation. 41 lives were lost including a number of Portsmouth dockyard workers. Top left U.S. Navy Photo AI-148.
- Fisgard II, sister ship to UB-148, by a patrol boat and sank with the loss of 29 lives. Bottom left:
- A brand new German U-boat that struck a mine and was hit by a depth charge with the loss of 49 lives. Bottom right:
- U.S. Navy Photo NH 52617.
- U.S. Navy Historical Centre Photo.

Why?

The remains of the sites, both under water and on the foreshore, are extremely fragile and in many cases this will be the last opportunity to record them before they are lost forever.

This project will:

- Involve as many people as possible through our volunteer programme.
- Research the wrecks and the stories behind their loss.
- Record remains on the seabed/foreshore and relevant artefacts in collections.
- Raise the profile of the wrecks via website, exhibitions, schools resources, geocaches, audio-articles and publications.
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- To find out more visit www.forgottenwrecks.org

Underwater War Graves

Very few of those who died at sea have burial places on land and the remains of the wreck on the seabed are often their only grave. Time and tide have taken their toll on the ships since they sank and they are falling apart. Unfortunately some have suffered further disturbance through the inadvertent impact of marine and leisure industries and the deliberate actions of salvors and divers. In the early decades of SCUBA diving the retrieval of material from wreck sites was a popular pursuit. While this still takes place to a limited extent, today’s divers commonly appreciate the need to preserve and encourage a ‘look but don’t touch’ and non-intrusive recording approach to wreck diving.

The Protection of Military Remains Act (PoMRA) administered by the Ministry of Defence protects a small number of wrecks that lie on military service. There are four such wrecks within the project area. Two of these are Protected Places, meaning they can be dived today’s diving community promotes sustainable diving and encourages a ‘look but don’t touch’ and non-intrusive recording approach to wreck diving.

The majority were sunk by German U-boats or sea mines but many were lost to the everyday hazards of the sea, collisions, poor weather just plain bad luck or a combination of both.

How?

How do we know the wrecks are there? Wrecks are recorded in a number of databases.

We’ve looked at historic records in English Heritage’s National Record of the Historic Environment (NRHE) and potential hazards to navigation in the United Kingdom Hydrographic Office (UKHO) wreck data, focusing on vessels dating to the First World War. These record approximately 1,000 wrecks around the British Isles.

Some shipwrecks are well known to sport divers and have been identified through what remains on the seabed. Some have been tentatively identified through remotely gathered information such as sonar. Others are known to have been lost in a particular location but nothing more has been found of them. Using all this information we aim to create an accurate record of First World War wrecks along the south coast.

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