The Great War at Sea
Simon Hancock

The unique geography of Pembrokeshire - with such a long coastline – dramatically affected the people's experience of the Great War. Even before the start of WW I there were strains of what was to come when, in 1912, a Cruiser of the Imperial German Navy docked in Milford Haven on a 'good will' visit only for it to be revealed after the outbreak of War in 1914 that an officer, in 1912, had said "Goodbye till we come back to stay"!

Pembroke Dock was the largest naval shipyard in Wales, providing employment for 3.5 thousand men – and women – responsible for building 136 ships (including HMS Essex Monmouth Class Armoured Cruiser built by Pembroke Royal Naval Dockyard 1914). Established in 1814 (the outbreak of war coincided with its centenary) the threat from the French resulted in the construction in 1850 – at enormous expense - of the Palmerston Forts across the entrance to Milford Haven (though they never fired a shot 'in anger'!) All 13 of the Palmerston Forts across Pembrokeshire were garrisoned after the outbreak of war, as Pembrokeshire needed to be defended and the population thought they were in imminent danger of being attacked. The fortification was not limited to military sites but even remote farmhouses became defended … and even trenches were constructed for defence in Cosherston in 1914. Pembrokeshire became one vast military camp – with the 4th Welsh Division (of mainly former seamen) regularly patrolling the coasts. The Dockyard always had to be guarded after the start of the war and HMS Goliath, an old pre-war Dreadnought, had this tour of duty (later in the war being sunk with the loss of 500+ lives). Throughout the war the Dockyards aimed to launch at least 1 Light Cruiser each year. Many Pembrokeshire-built ships were involved in the Battle of Jutland – 30 Pembrokeshire men died in a single day. Women provided an important contribution to the War Effort – not just serving in the largest naval hospital in the country but also in ammunition and working the boiler shop. By 1918 there were 500+ women serving in Pembroke Dockyard.

In 1888 Milford Haven had the largest fishing industry in Wales (5th in the entire UK) and steam trawlers were constantly offloading their catches at the newly constructed docks. 45 thousand tons of fish were processed in 1914 and warranted the industry's own factories, warehouses, ice-house, box manufacturer and railway. It had its own naval base (HMS Idaho) complete with barracks and an admiral and after the outbreak of war the trawlers became part of the Royal Naval Reserves and subsequently were armed (many, like the Roach Castle, were sunk with the loss of 90+ their crews – amongst the many dead buried in Pembrokeshire cemeteries). Many of the serving trawler men received the Royal Maritime Medal for their valiant service after the end of the War.
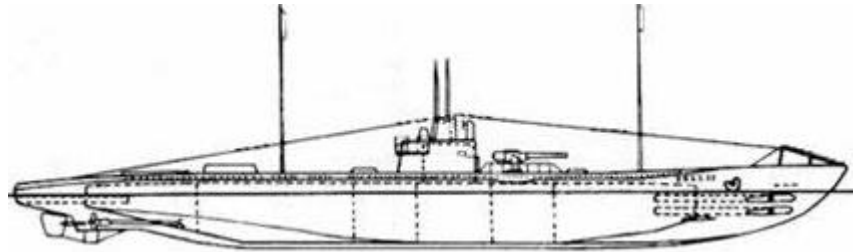
As the Germans swept across Belgium the fishing fleet of 25 trawlers and crews were sent from Ostend to remain in Milford Haven until the end of the war – to keep them out of German hands. 1,500 refugee Belgians descended on Milford Haven and kept the fishing industry alive whilst the Welsh boats served in the Reserves. Alongside the trawlers was the SS Ibis – a Belgian training ship that was crewed by Belgian orphans, learning a trade! By 1919 95% of the Belgians had left to return home with their trawlers – leaving the 'Belgian Monument' in their memory.

U-boats were launched into St George's Channel and the Irish Sea from 1915 (after the British Blockade of Germany) to conduct unrestricted warfare against British and neutral vessels -   effectively making Britain's Western Approaches (the triangle of sea Cornwall-Ireland-Pembrokeshire) as deadly as the French trenches. The German U

boats were able to operate just 10 miles off The Bishop's Light unchallenged – lying in wait for convoys heading to and from British ports.

Over a 2-day period in March 1915 U-28 sank a number of ships of the Pembrokeshire coast, including the SS Aguila with considerable loss of life – with survivors coming ashore at Milford Haven and Fishguard. In June the 'Crown of India' and tanker 'Teakwood' were sunk (the tanker by the U-boat commander 'Von Trapp' of 'Sound of Music' fame)! By 1917 American ships had joined British vessels in Milford Haven – escorting convoys to the Mediterranean. The threat from U-boats was so great that Q-boats were employed … merchant ships that were heavily armed and could go on the offensive if required e.g. HMS Elsie. Of around 148 shipwrecks around the Pembrokeshire coast during the Great War many of the survivors received the hospitality of the Sailor's Rest, Charles St. Milford Haven. The crews of the merchantmen came from all over the world … of every race and ethnicity and all were made welcome by the seafaring communities. Many of the shipwrecked crews could not get home after their vessels had been sunk so Pembrokeshire became the temporary home to Swedes, Norwegians … and even Mexicans … in addition to men from Africa, China, Caribbean, Philippines ….. Timber-camps were established in Slebech 'homing' mostly Jewish ex-mariners employed in cutting timber for shipping to the Western Front!

The U-boats did not just attack military targets and merchantmen … they attacked hospital ships (claiming that they were carrying military supplies!) as a result in 1916 Carew became the home for British airships (including 50 serving members of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force) flying to Ireland to spot U-boats to directed naval vessels to sink them. Fishguard also boasted a RN airship station – with crews billeted in the Fishguard Bay Hotel!
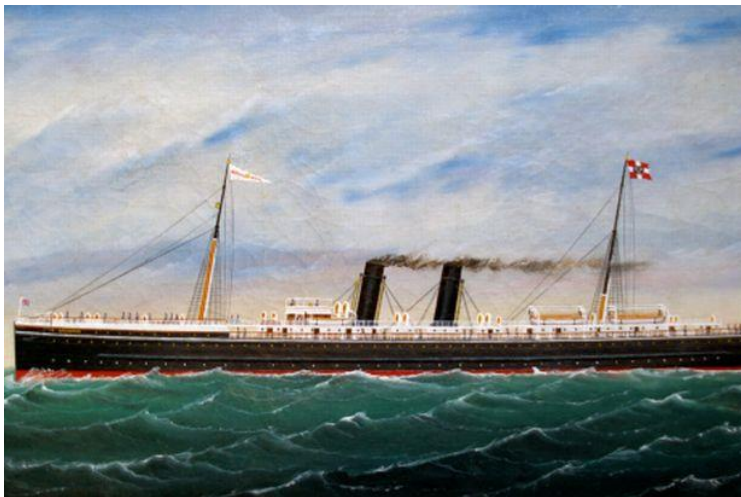
Early in 1918 *RMS Leinster* was sailing to Holyhead carrying 77 crew and 694 passengers (including more than 100 British civilians, 500 military personnel as well as a contingent of nurses). She was torpedoed by a German U-boat and more than 500 lost their lives, making it the largest ever loss of life in the Irish Sea. Just months earlier, when steaming from Liverpool to Milford Haven to form a convoy, the *SS Mexico City* hit by a torpedo about 15 miles from Holyhead. The ship's lifeboats boats were immediately launched and it was *RMS Leinster* who picked up many of the crew! *SS Mexico City* herself had survived an earlier U-boat attack in 1916! October 1918 the 7700-ton merchant ship *Hirano Maru* sailed from Liverpool for Yokohama she was torpedoed by the German UB 91, 200 miles south of Ireland (despite being part of a convoy escorted by American destroyer the *USS Sterett).* She sank so quickly that her few undamaged lifeboats could not be launched and only 29 of the 320 aboard survived. Following the sinking bodies washed at Dale – who erected a memorial cross over the graves – whilst other bodies were washed ashore at Freshwater West (buried in Angle churchyard – varying in age from 24-40 years of age, all male except for one female, washed up at St Ishmaels).

The trawlers taken by the military during the war caused devastation to the fishing fleets of the Haven – and places like Neyland never recovered. With the end of the war the dockyards also became redundant – hastened by the vast National Debt incurred by the war. By 1926 the closure of the dockyard put 1200 men out of work and one-third of the population were un-employed. This led to massive outward migration – leaving the area for good.