

CAPTAIN CHARLES ALGERNON FRYATT

A WW1 MERCHANT NAVY HERO SALUTED ON TEYNHAM STATION



This postcard was shared with us by Society Member, Beverley Smith, as it shows how a war-time drama came ‘close to home’ for the schoolchildren of the Parishes of Lynsted and Teynham.

The reverse of the card is inscribed:

“July 8th 1919. School children at Teynham Station to see the train pass which contained Captain Fryatts body who was brutally tortured by the Germans”.

The life and death of Captain Fryatt was the stuff of legend. The story would have been well-known to adults and children alike through wartime and post-war newspapers. Teynham Station was just one of many scenes marking the passing of a national hero.

The war-time story begins with an escape from a German U-boat in 1915; a capture, one year later; a very quick court martial when a confession to ‘complying with Admiralty instructions’ was reported by the German authorities; his immediate execution; and, finally, the national salute on the return home of Captain Fryatt’s body.

Urgent diplomatic representations, through the neutral American Embassy, failed to make an impression with the German court martial.

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Beginnings

Charles Algernon Fryatt was born on 2 December 1872 in Southampton, the son of Charles and Mary Fryatt. He attended Freemantle School, Southampton, and then at Corporation School, Harwich.

On leaving school, in 1892, Fryatt entered the Mercantile Marine, with the Great Eastern Railway, as a seaman on SS Ipswich rapidly rising through the merchant marine service. Up until 1916, he made 143 passages between Harwich or Tilbury and Rotterdam.

He and his wife, Ethel, had seven children; six girls and one boy. At the time of her husband's death, Ethel lived in Dovercourt, Essex.



A Story told through contemporary newspaper accounts

Newspaper records of the day help explain how a tale of personal pride turned bitterly sour.

1915 – The Story of civil merchant ship's escape

BRITISH STEAMER IS CHASED¹. By German Submarine For Two Hours. Exciting Dash for Safety. Rotterdam, Wednesday.

The British steamship **Wrexham** arrived here last night from Harwich after a thrilling adventure with a German submarine, which chased her for two hours at top speed pursuing her almost into Dutch waters.

The **Wrexham's** escape is due to the pluck of Captain Chas. Fryatt, who sent his entire crew of 22 men into the stokehold.

The result of this was that the steamship, which has a normal speed of thirteen knots, developed sixteen knots, against the submarine's fourteen. She arrived with her funnel blistered and the crew looking like sweeps, but full of jubilation.

Captain Fryatt states that the submarine was sighted at 12.35 p.m. about half-way across coming north-west on the port beam.

He decided to make a run for it, and all hands were turned to coaling and oiling. The captain took the wheel, and alone on the deck watched the frantic efforts of the submarine to lessen the distance.

The funnel of the **Wrexham** became red-hot, and the ship quivered like a living thing.

Captain Fryatt saw the submarine trying to force him on the Schouwen Bank. He tried a zigzag course, which was difficult because the **Wrexham** has only a single screw.

The submarine maintained the pursuit until within a mile and a half of the

¹ Thursday 4th March 1915, (Evening Telegraph)

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Maas Lightship, when it turned and disappeared, whereupon the crew of the **Wrexham covered with coal dust, came on deck and gave three hearty cheers. Captain Fryatt saw six floating mines during the chase.”**

Later the same year, a similar event was described by Captain Fryatt involving his command of **ss Brussels** - Spotting the submarine manoeuvring to a position to torpedo his ship, Fryatt turned towards the submarine to force it to dive and so give him a chance to stay afloat. “The submarine passed under the **Brussels**’ stern, and came up against the pole rigging, with the periscope right along the port side. “You could easily have hung your hat on the periscope as she was hung up alongside us. Then she disappeared and was not seen again.” This close encounter was later represented by the Germans as an attempt at ramming the U-boat, which then led to his execution. It is arguable that Captain Fryatt was travelling at full steam to escape, rather than manoeuvring to deliberately ram. But his voice was drowned out by the political need to demonstrate to the Dutch and British that they meant business on the high seas.

It is true that these and other close encounters gave Captain Fryatt a reputation for great daring and expertise.

His employers and the Admiralty rewarded Captain Fryatt with inscribed watches.



Great Eastern Railway Co. Inscription Reads:

“Presented to Capt. C. A. Fryatt by the Chairman and Directors of the **Great Eastern Railway Coy** as a mark of their appreciation of his courage and skilful seamanship on March 2nd, 1915”



Admiralty Watch

Three weeks later, the Lord Commissioners of the Admiralty presented **Captain Fryatt** with a hunter gold watch, suitably inscribed, and gold watches were also presented to the chief officer (**Charles Stiff**) and chief engineer (**Robert Smith**)². The inscription read: “Presented by the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to Chas. Algernon Fryatt Master of the s.s.

‘Brussels’ in recognition of the example set by that vessel when attacked by a German submarine on March 28th 1915.” These watches were donated to the Imperial War Museum by Captain Fryatt’s grand-children.

² 21st June 1915, (Evening Telegraph)

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1916 - Almost exactly a year later, Captain Fryatt's success contributed to his undoing.

BRITISH CREW OF ABOUT FORTY³.

The Great Eastern Railway Company confirm the capture of the *Brussels*, and believe that she has been taken into Zeebrugge, but otherwise they have no information as to the movements of the boat since she was signalled at the Hook of Holland.

The *Brussels*, built in 1902 for the Great Eastern Railway Antwerp-Harwich passenger service, was a boat of 1,380 tons. Since the beginning of the war the ordinary passenger service has been suspended, but a limited service of three boats a week has been maintained for traffic in perishable goods, principally food.

The boats have also been used for the conveyance of Belgian refugees who have found temporary shelter in Holland.

There were some Belgians on board the *Brussels* when she left Rotterdam on Thursday afternoon for Tilbury, via the Hook of Holland, but otherwise no passengers, so far as is known. Captain Fryatt, who is well known on the North Sea route, is believed to have been in charge, and the crew, all British, numbered about forty.

The cargo consisted chiefly of foodstuffs, including a consignment of margarine. There were also on board many parcels, destined for German prisoners of war in England, which had been sent from Germany by way of Holland.

The *Brussels* was fitted with submarine telegraphy and wireless apparatus, but there is no report of any vessel receiving a call for assistance."

More of the story emerged through several newspapers.

"CAPTURE OF THE S.S. BRUSSELS⁴. Pirate's Story. Captain Threatened with Revolver.

The war correspondent of the Berlin "*Lokalanzeiger*" relates that while visiting Zeebrugge he had a conversation with the naval lieutenant who brought in the Harwich liner *Brussels*.

Questioned about the capture of the steamer, the Lieutenant said:- "We had been on patrol duty on June 23. The following day at 2.30 in the morning we saw a black vessel before us, which showed side lamps only, with the apparent object of giving the appearance of being a sailing vessel. Later we asked: "Are you the Brussels?" and soon the warning came, "We shall board you."

A German Prize

"I and two men went on board. One of the men at once made the wireless apparatus unworkable, whereupon, after taking off my cap and disclosing my identity, I declared the vessel to be a German prize.

As many Belgians were on board the lieut. Ordered all the men to board

³ The Taunton Courier, and Western Advertiser reported on Wednesday 28th June 1916

⁴ The Aberdeen Evening Express, 6th July 1916.

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the German destroyer with the exception of the engine crew. The German prize crew consisted of three men-commissioned officers, five sailors, and six stokers.

According to the lieutenant the captain of the Brussels was determined to delay the vessel as much as possible, because soon the report reached the lieutenant that no stokers could be found. It was soon established that most of them had left the Brussels and had gone aboard the German destroyer.

Pressed for Time.

“Time flew,” said the lieutenant, “and the danger was increasing. The British ships would arrive.” Then the German lieutenant pointed a revolver at Captain Charles Fryatt. “Obtain the men,” he ordered. Three stokers then came forward, and the captain remarked he also had 24 Russians. These were all sent to the engine-room. In spite of all the efforts of the German the engineer of the vessel did not move until finally the lieutenant said to him:- “Do what you can. If the British come in sight we shall blow up the vessel.”

Slowly the vessel moved. Four boilers with 12 fires were working. At last the Brussels ran at 15 knots per hour.

Captain Fryatt appeared on the bridge and asked what course the vessel was steering. He suggested a course towards the Noordhinder.

Many incidents occurred during the voyage. Electric light failed, but that was repaired. Smoke appeared on the horizon, and the course was altered. Then machines ran full of water, but this also was stopped. On reaching the Schonwen Bank the German flag was hoisted at the masthead.

The captain was placed under arrest, and the Brussels passed the outgoing mailboat.- Press Association War Special.”

A darker and more final mood followed soon after.....

BRITISH CAPTAIN CHARGED WITH SINKING A U-BOAT⁵.

Representations have been made to the Foreign Office by the Imperial Merchant Service Guild in the case of Captain Fryatt, who was recently captured whilst in command of the steamer Brussels.

In the first place he was sent to Ruhleben Camp, but was subsequently taken back to Ghent to stand trial on a charge of sinking a German submarine.

The Foreign Office have requested the United States Ambassador to take all possible steps to secure the proper defence of Captain Fryatt, and every effort will be made on his behalf.”

⁵ Liverpool Echo (28th July 1916).

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Darker still, the next day reports came out about the death of Captain Fryatt..... Notice of his execution was given in German, Dutch and French.

The translation reads: “NOTICE. The English captain of the Mercantile Marine, Charles Fryatt, of Southampton, though he did not belong to the armed forces of the enemy, attempted on March 28th, 1915, to destroy a German submarine by running it down. This is the reason why he has been condemned to death by judgment this day of the War Council of the Marine Corps and has been executed. A perverse action has thus received its punishment, tardy but just. Signed VON SCHRODER, Admiral Commandant of the Corps de Marine, Bruges, July 27th, 1916.”



TEXT OF THE GERMAN OFFICIAL REPORT⁶.

An official telegram from Berlin announces that Captain Charles Fryatt, of the Great Eastern Railway Company’s steamer Brussels, has been tried by Court-Martial at Bruges and shot for having, as was alleged, tried to ram a German submarine.

“On Thursday at Bruges, before the court-martial of the Marine Corps, the trial took place of Captain Fryatt, of the British Steamer **Brussels**, which was brought in as a prize.

The accused was condemned to death because, although he was not a member of a combatant force, he made an attempt on the afternoon of March 28 to ram the German submarine U33 near the Maas Lightship. The accused, as well as the first officer and chief engineer of the steamer, received at the time from the British Admiralty a gold watch as a reward for his brave conduct on that occasion, and his action was mentioned with praise in the House of Commons.

On the occasion in question, disregarding the U-boat’s signal to stop and show his national flag, he turned at a critical moment at high speed on the submarine, which escaped the steamer by a few metres only by immediately diving. He confessed that in so doing he had acted in accordance with the instructions of the Admiralty. The sentence was confirmed yesterday (Thursday) afternoon, and carried out by shooting. One of the many nefarious franc-tireur [*guerrilla fighter*] proceedings of the British merchant marine against our war vessels was thus found a belated but merited expiation. – Press Association War Special.”

This death sentence was confirmed by the Kaiser and the execution took place at 7pm that evening.

⁶ 29th July 1916, Newcastle Journal

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With Captain Fryatt's execution, newspapers also record the man

“THE PIRATES' TERROR.” CAPTAIN FRYATT'S SERIES OF HEROIC EXPLOITS⁷.

The news of the execution of Captain Charles Fryatt caused a profound sensation in Harwich when it became known. Rumour had been current early in the afternoon, but it was hoped that these might prove unfounded. Official confirmation of the fate of the gallant captain was, however, forthcoming later, and a wave of indignation and horror swept over the town, in which he was an immensely popular figure.

Captain Fryatt has lived all his life at Parkeston, an outlying district of Dovercourt. He was married to an East Anglian woman, and leaves several children.

When the shocking news was communicated to Mrs Fryatt she wept, and was overcome with grief. At first she refused to credit it, but the official announcement removed all doubt as to the tragic fate which her husband had met at the hands of an implacable enemy.

A business man to whom Captain Fryatt was well known described him as a very gentle and inoffensive man. “I have enjoyed his friendship for many years,” said this friend, “and there is no man in the Great Eastern service who was held in higher esteem. He was the soul of honour, a cool, level-headed man, and a most fearless navigator. We are genuinely sorry to hear of his terrible end. Let's hope it will soon be avenged.”

Captain Fryatt was nicknamed locally “The Pirates' Terror,” because of the artful and skilful fashion in which he had more than once eluded the U boats. The unlucky capture of the Brussels was the end of a series of heroic exploits. Captain Fryatt was one of the most daring commanders in the Great Eastern Service. He knew every inch of the North Sea, and had made innumerable voyages between England and Holland. An intrepid seaman, he had given frequent evidence of his contempt for the Kaiser's tin fish.

A tall, fairish man, in the early forties, he looked the typical sailor. In conversation he spoke little of his adventures at sea, but his speedy promotion in the G.E.R. service was eloquent testimony to his seamanship.”

⁷ 29th July 1916, Dundee Courier

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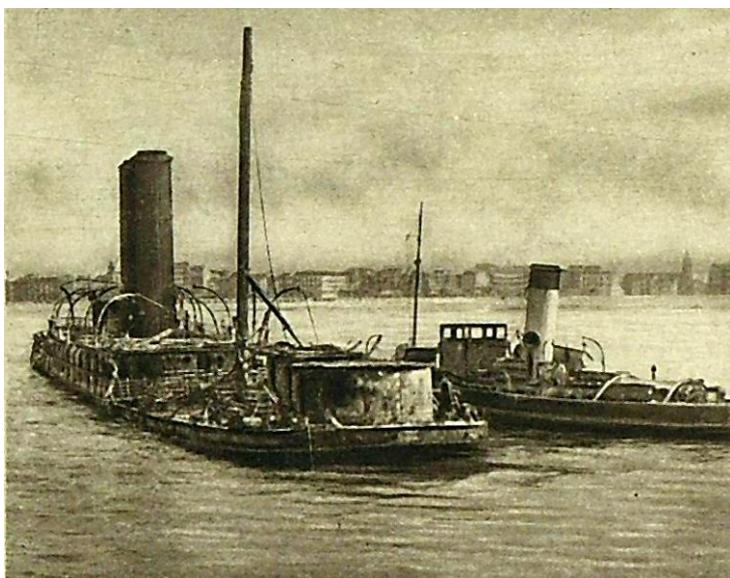


REMEMBRANCE. Only after the end of the War were measures taken to repatriate the body. There were memorial ceremonies at Bruges and Antwerp in his honour before his body was transferred to the British destroyer “Orpheus” to Dover on July 7th. The next day, the body was transported from Dover, through Teynham to London for a service in St. Paul’s Cathedral where the pall-bearers were master

mariners, colleagues of his in the Merchantile Marine. Capt. Fryatt’s three daughters, his brother, Mr. W.P.Fryatt, and sister-in-law, were present in St.Paul’s. The widow met the coffin at Dovercourt where he was laid to rest. Mrs Fryatt received an annual pension of £250 (supplemented by a further £100 per annum from the Government) and she received the posthumous Order of Leopold that had been conferred on her husband by King Albert.



Captain Fryatt’s memorial in Liverpool Street Station.



Symbolism of Captain Fryatt’s ship. The ‘**Brussels**’ was scuttled by the Germans at Zeebrugge as the War came to its close. Later it was salvaged – reported in Illustrated London News in August 1919.