

The Last Voyage Of the Cruiser H.M.S. Fox

Now that the fascinating diary account of the cruise of H.M. Armed Merchantman "Kinfauns Castle" has been completed, members may be interested to read of the eventual fate of H.M.S. Fox which was one of the British warships actively engaged in blockading the ports of German East Africa in 1914-15.

After the First World War she was declared surplus to requirements by the Admiralty and sold for scrapping to a South Wales shipbreaker, Cardiff Marine Stores Co. Ltd. in 1919. This company intended to break up the cruiser at a berth in Cardiff but was unable to do so due to a lack of space.

The firm looked for alternative premises close to Cardiff and eventually the local Council at the small port of Watchet in Somerset was approached with an offer to lease the West pier and adjacent yard for shipbreaking, the sums offered being £90 per annum plus £20 for each ship broken up. The Council accepted these terms, apparently on the understanding that several small or medium sized ships would be broken up.

Imagine the amazement of the harbour fraternity when word was received that the first ship due for scrapping would be H.M.S. Fox, a light cruiser of 7,000 tons! She was towed across the Bristol Channel from Cardiff by three tugs and delicately eased through the narrow harbour entrance on a high Spring Tide in July 1920 (see photo).

Watchet harbour dries out at low tide, and even at high Neap Tides it is doubtful whether a ship of this size would have floated, so the cruiser lay aground for most of the time while she was being broken up. It is not certain exactly how the breaking up procedure took place, but as there would have been only one steam crane at the West Pier, and this capable of lifting no more than 50cwts, I would guess that the shipbreakers must have installed additional cranes or else rigged heavy swinging derricks on the quay.

Many local men were employed in the operation, but with lack of facilities it was a slow and laborious job. Every part of H.M.S. Fox had to be broken down into small pieces, loaded into lorries or carts and then taken around to the East Pier. From there it was either loaded into coasters to be taken to South Wales furnaces, or into railway trucks for carriage to various destinations, the local G.W.R. branch line having a siding which ran to the East Pier only.

Members will not be surprised to hear that the cruiser took nearly three years to completely break up and was judged to have been a financial failure, at least from the Cardiff Marine Stores Company point of view. To many local men, having returned from the First World War and finding themselves unemployed, she was doubtless a godsend.

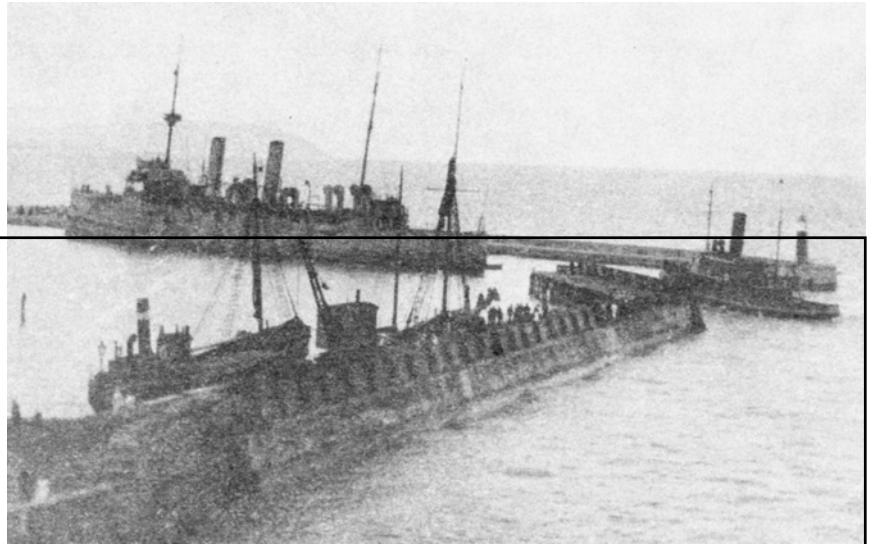
The Company nevertheless persevered, and when the West Pier was clear again, they brought in the three masted steel barque "Dova Rio" of 2,000 tons for breaking up in 1923. She took two years to dispose of, and when completed in 1925, the Cardiff Marine Stores Company ceased trading.

The port continued trading into the second half of the 20th century, mainly sustained by imports of pulp and esparto grass for the local Paper Mill and coal for the gasworks. After a resurgence of foreign trade in the 1970's and 1980's including containers, Watchet became uneconomical to operate and closed as a commercial port in 1995. A tidal marina with lock gates has been built in the Eastern part of harbour and is home to about 60 yachts and fishing craft.

H.M.S. Fox was and still is the largest ship to enter Watchet, although it was a one way journey!

Terry Winsborough

Photograph reproduced by kind permission of Mr W.H. Norman, retired Watchet seaman and author of the book "Tales of Watchet Harbour" 1988. It should be noted that the caption under the photograph is in error as the ss "Rushlight" and the ketch are in fact lying alongside the East Pier.



The cruiser H.M.S. "Fox", July 1920. The largest ship ever to enter Watchet Harbour. The ss "Rushlight" and a ketch lay alongside the West Pier.