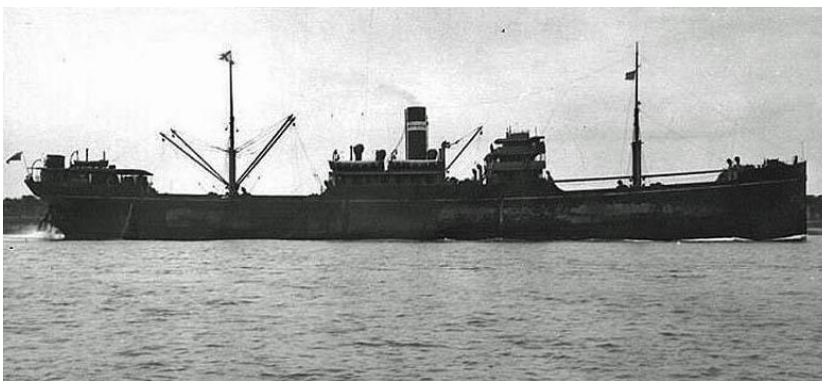


Sinking of the SS Gairsoppa 1941

Breaking into the national news on Monday 26th September 2011 was the story of an, until then, unremarkable vessel shown here in her British India colours. SS Gairsoppa was built in 1919 by Palmers at Newcastle.



She was originally launched as War Roebuck for the Ministry of War Transport but completed as Gairsoppa for British India. She was 5,237 grt, 339ft 3ins (121,69 mtrs) in length with a beam of 52ft 2ins (15.9mtrs) and a draft of 25ft 8ins (7.82mtrs).

In 1941 she was returning to the UK from India with a cargo of silver ingots, pig iron and tea. As instructed she joined the 4 knot convoy in Freetown, Sierra Leone and all went well until the convoy encountered a heavy storm on approaching the coast of Ireland. By this time Gairsoppa was running short of coal fuel so she left the convoy and set a course for Galway Harbour to replenish her bunkers. Soon after leaving the convoy she was circled by a German Focke-Wulf FW200 at 0800 hours on the 16.2.1941. At 2230 hours she was spotted by the German U-Boat U101 commanded by of Ernst Mergerson.

Mergerson ordered torpedoes to be launched and one struck Gairsoppa by way of number 2 hold on the starboard side causing her to sink in 20 minutes. Her last reported position was 50 00 N 14 00 W, about 300 miles (480km.) SW of Galway Bay. The wreck presently lies 4,700 metres (15,400ft) below the surface. It is thought that 3 life boats were launched but that only one, under the command of 2nd Officer R H Ayres, 31, with eight Europeans and 31 Lascars aboard got away safely. The rest of the crew of 88 were lost, some possibly machine gunned trying to flee the stricken vessel.

Ayres and his boat reached the Cornish coast some two weeks later after a passage of 300 miles, at Caerthillian Cove near the Lizard, by which time all but seven aboard had perished. Approaching shore the lifeboat capsized and four crew were drowned. The other two survivors, Radio Officer Robert Hampshire (18) and Gunner Norman Thomas (20), subsequently lost their lives trying to get ashore.

These two lie buried at St. Wynwalloe's Church at Gunwalloe, Cornwall. Ayres, who was awarded an MBE and War Medal for his bravery, made it ashore with assistance from three little girls who had alerted a member of the Coast Guard. He lived until 1992. Eleven of the crew members are commemorated on the Tower Hill Memorial in London and the names of 70 Lascar Seamen are on the Chittagong War memorial.

In 1989 the British Government invited tenders to salvage the Gairsoppa's cargo and received only one from an American Company, Odyssey Marine Exploration. The 2-year contract was to salvage the cargo of silver ingots which in 1941 allegedly was worth £600,000. Remarkably the wreck was located on 26th September 2011 at a depth of 4,700 metres.

Next spring divers will attempt to recover the haul. The silver to be recovered is now thought to be worth £155 million at today's prices, of which the firm will keep 80 per cent, and the British Government, the original owners of the cargo, keeping the rest.

You can read the full dramatic story on the Daily Mail website here: [Gairsoppa salvage](#).

