

## Visit of a famous Battleship

From Golden Strands by Maurice McAleese

*“ Many were the exclamations of wonder and admiration at the sights which met the gaze of visitors at every turn”.*



HMS Drake (Credit United States Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs)

In the early summers of the last century, the sight of warships at anchor off the Skerry Roads was not all that unusual and, naturally enough, they attracted a lot of interest among visitors and townspeople.

It was something which the local Council was always keen to arrange with the Admiralty because such visits were of no small benefit to the local economy and were a huge tourist attraction; as one commentator noted, they “brought joy, and a good deal of money, to many people in the town.”

The summer of 1907 was no exception but it was particularly noteworthy because one of the warships making a courtesy visit to Portlough in July was the gigantic – and as it turned out, ill fated – Armoured Cruiser, H.M.S. “Drake.” Some 10 years later, the visit would be recalled sadly and poignantly by many of the townspeople and visitors who were able not only to view the ship from the shore but were also able to board her and be taken on conducted tours by members of the crew.

A veritable flotilla of small boats – and one paddle steamer, the “Royal Norman” - set out from the harbour to be given a close-up view of the Drake and although in the earlier part of the day, it was a Sunday, there had been some rain and a thick haze, in the evening the sun came out.

Thus, according to one Press report “the crowds who made this shortest of seavoyages did so under pleasant auspices.”

Another reporter wrote: “Being one of those who had to wait until Sunday for a holiday, I ran the risk of offending my Sabbatarian friends, and journeyed by rail and sea to view the cruiser. It wasn’t a work of necessity; but my conscience stretched in proportion to my admiration for the British Navy. That’s the best excuse I can make and I know it’s not up to much!” A little bit of wrestling with the Sunday observance code for that gentleman of the Press. Nevertheless, he travelled in some comfort on board the Royal Norman out to the Drake and he declared that it was “an excellent means of getting across.” In his report, he also made this observation: “Every available boat in the place was engaged in carrying interested sightseers to and fro, and sometimes they were loaded to an extent which made me thankful I had chosen the steamer.”

Fortunately, there was a very calm sea that day so there were no mishaps. For the local fishermen who deployed their boats, it was a welcome boost to their incomes and they operated continuous trips throughout the day, mostly from the small Portandoo harbour.



Portandhu Harbour courtesy of John Moore Collection

The guided tours of the battleship were impressive. The same reporter wrote: “Too much could not be said of the opportunities and facilities which were accorded visitors in going over the ‘Drake,’ this magnificent leviathan of the deep. Many were the exclamations of wonder and admiration at the sights which met the gaze of visitors at every turn.”

A nice tribute was paid to the crew, who were described as “models of civility and courtesy” and very willing to answer the many questions they were asked although, apparently, some of the sailors had quite a struggle to keep a straight face at some of the queries put to them. It was all

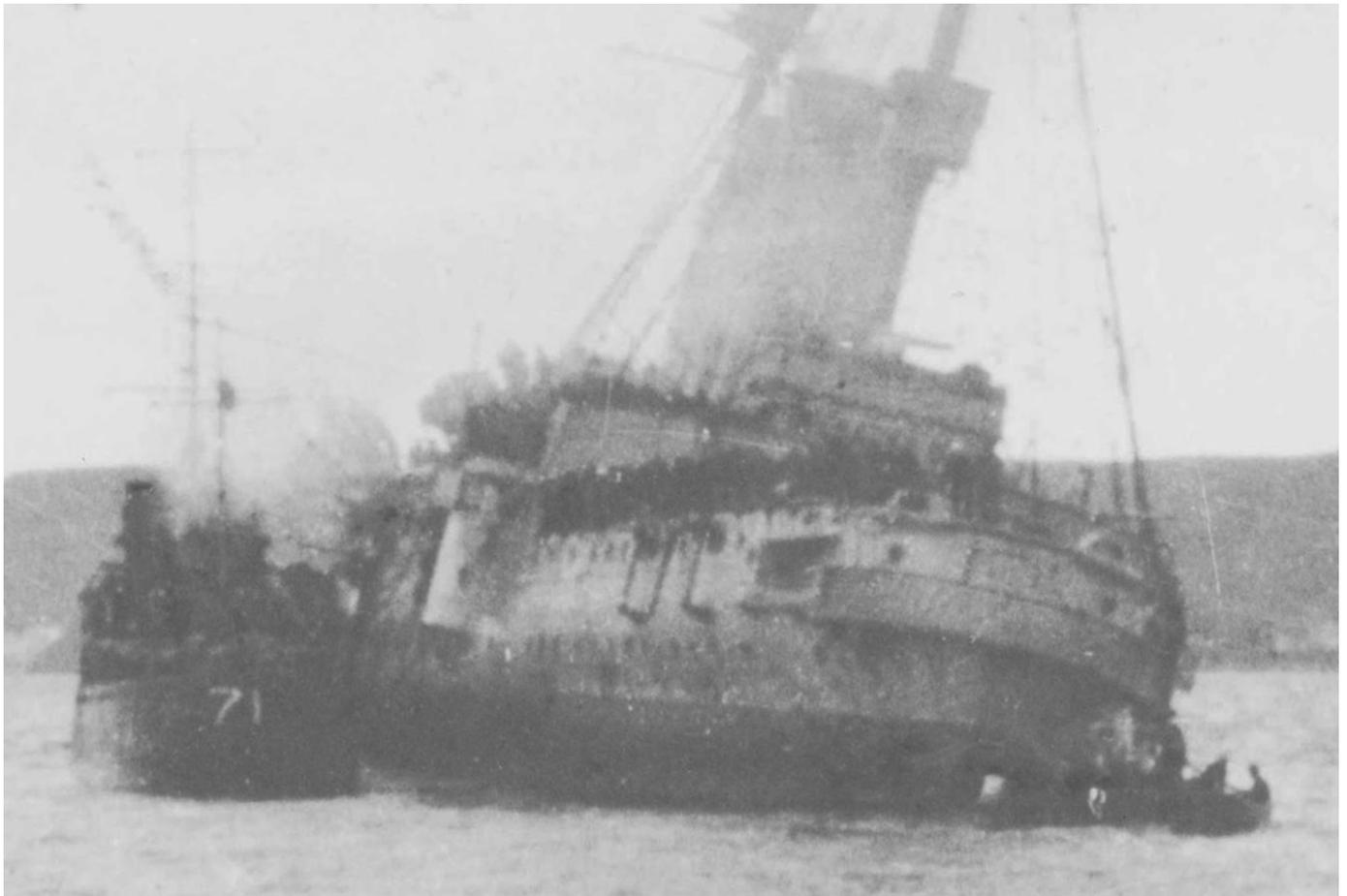


summed up neatly in this little bit of journalistic scepticism : “I question, however, if after an elaborate explanation of the action of the guns and the other great and mysterious machinery of the boat, many of the visitors were much wiser when they came away.”

The visitors may have been perplexed by the technicalities relating to guns and machinery but neither could they get their heads round the accommodation logistics for a crew of 900 men. “How they all stow away their hammocks and pick them out again, for one thing, caused some wonderment...”

Be that as it may, they had been given a unique insight into what life was like on board a British man-of-war and no doubt it would have been a topic of conversation for a long time afterwards.

That would have been especially so when they heard the news that the armoured cruiser had been torpedoed by a German U-boat off the north-west tip of Rathlin Island on the morning of October 2, 1917. Nineteen members of the crew were killed. The crippled cruiser remained afloat after the attack and was subsequently escorted into Church Bay by HMS Martin and other auxiliary ships. A short time later she listed badly, capsized and sank in 18 metres of water.



**Sinking of HMS Drake (Tommy Cecil family collection)**

It was a sad end to a proud ship which had been in service since 1902 and which, in the summer of 1907, had provided so much pleasure and excitement for thousands of people while she lay at anchor in the peaceful waters of the Skerry Roads.

Our thanks to Maurice for allowing us to reprint the above text from his excellent book *Golden Strands*. 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2021