

# Charles Bruce Gear

Born: 23 Aug 1883 Brough, Nesting,

Died: 1 Jan 1915 At sea

Seaman in the Royal Navy, Royal Naval Reserve, H.M.S. "Formidable."

Service no: B 4626.

Awarded 1915 Star, British War Medal and Victory Medal.

Father: Magnus GEAR, b. 1844, Brough, Nesting, d. 1938, Aberdeen, (Age 94 years)

Mother: Charlotte WILLIAMSON, b. 1848, Catfirth, Nesting, d. 19 Feb 1926, Brough, Nesting, SHI, SCT (Age 78 years)

Married: 10 Jan 1871 Nesting.

HMS *Formidable*, the third of four ships of that name to serve in the Royal Navy, was the lead ship of her class of predreadnought battleships. Commissioned in 1904, she served initially with the Mediterranean Fleet, transferring to the Channel Fleet in 1908. In 1912, she was assigned to the 5th Battle Squadron, which was stationed at Nore. Following the outbreak of World War I, the squadron conducted operations in the English Channel, and was based at Sheerness to guard against a possible German invasion. Despite reports of submarine activity, early in the morning of 1 January 1915, whilst on exercise in the English Channel, *Formidable* sank after being hit by two torpedoes. She was the second British battleship to be sunk by enemy action during the First World War.



## Technical characteristics:

HMS *Formidable* was laid down at Portsmouth Dockyard on 21 March 1898 and launched on 17 November 1898. She was completed in September 1901, but due to difficulties with machinery contractors her readiness for service was delayed, and she was not commissioned for another three years. *Formidable* had the same-calibre armament and was similar in appearance to the *Majestic* and *Canopus* classes that preceded her. She and her sister ships are often described as improved *Majestics*, but in design they were effectively enlarged *Canopuses*. The *Canopuses* employed Krupp armour in their construction, which possessed greater strength for a given weight compared to that of the *Majestics*' Harvey armour; this allowed the *Canopuses* to be lighter and faster without sacrificing protection. In *Formidable*, however, Krupp armour was used to improve protection without reducing the size of the ship. *Formidable* thus was larger than the ships of the two preceding classes, and enjoyed greater protection than the *Majestics* and the higher speed of the *Canopus* class. *Formidable*'s armour scheme was similar to that of the *Canopus* class, although the armour belt ran all the way to the stern being 215 ft (65.5 m) long, 15 ft (4.6 m) deep and 9 in (23 cm) thick. It tapered at the stem to 3 in (7.6 cm) thick and 12 ft (3.7 m) deep, and at the stern to 1.5 in (3.8 cm) thick and 8 ft (2.4 m) deep. The main battery turrets had 10 in (25 cm) of Krupp armour on their sides and 8 in (20 cm) on their backs. *Formidable* improved on the main and secondary armament of previous classes, being up-gunned from 35 calibre to 40 12 in (305 mm) guns and from 40 calibre to 45 6 in (152 mm) guns. The 12 in (305 mm) guns could be loaded at any bearing and elevation, and had a split hoist with a working chamber beneath the turrets to reduce the chance of a cordite fire spreading from the turrets to the shell and powder handling rooms and to the magazines. *Formidable* had an improved hull form that endowed better handling at high speeds than the *Majestics* and inward-turning screws which allowed reduced fuel consumption and slightly higher speeds than in previous classes, but at the expense of reduced manoeuvrability at low speeds. With the appearance of the new dreadnought-type battleships and battlecruisers beginning in 1906, predreadnoughts such as *Formidable* were outclassed; however, they still performed some front-line duties during the early part of the First World War.

## Operational history

### Pre-World War I

*Formidable* commissioned on 10 October 1904 at Portsmouth Dockyard for service in the Mediterranean Fleet. She began a refit at Malta in 1904 which lasted until April 1905, and in April 1908 transferred to the Channel Fleet. Paid off at Chatham Dockyard on 17 August 1908, *Formidable* began another refit and recommissioned on 20 April 1909 for service in the 1st Division, Home Fleet stationed at the Nore. On 29 May, she transferred to the Atlantic Fleet. In May 1912, *Formidable* was reduced to a nucleus crew and transferred to the 5th Battle Squadron in the Second Fleet, Home Fleet, again at the Nore, where she served until the outbreak of war in August 1914. Hard steaming during this service led to her developing serious machinery problems.

### World War I

At the beginning of the First World War, *Formidable* and the 5th Battle Squadron were based at Portland and assigned to the Channel Fleet to defend the English Channel. After covering the safe transportation of the British Expeditionary Force to France in August 1914, *Formidable* took part in the transportation of the Portsmouth Marine Battalion to Ostend on 25 August. On 14 November, *Formidable* and the other ships of the 5th Battle Squadron were rebased at Sheerness because of concern that a German invasion of Great Britain was in the offing. The squadron was relieved by *Duncan*-class battleships of the 6th Battle Squadron and transferred to Portland on 30 December.

### Loss

Under the command of Vice-Admiral Commanding, Channel Fleet, Sir Lewis Bayly, the 5th Battle Squadron spent 31 December participating in gunnery exercises off the Isle of Portland, supported by the light cruisers *Topaze* and *Diamond*. After the exercises, that night the fleet remained at sea on patrol even though submarine activity had been reported in the area. With rough sea conditions and the wind increasing, submarine attacks would have been difficult to carry out and so were not thought to be a significant threat. *Formidable* was steaming at 10 knots (19 km/h; 12 mph) at the rear of the squadron off Portland Bill just 20 nmi (37 km; 23 mi) from Start Point, when at 02:20 on 1 January 1915 a torpedo from *U-24* struck the number one boiler port side. It was thought that she might be saved by reaching the coast but by about 02:40 she had taken a list of 20° to starboard and the Captain Noel Loxley gave the order to abandon ship. Darkness and worsening weather made it difficult to get the men and boats over the side; some small boats were thrown into the water upside down. At about 03:05, *Formidable* was struck by a second torpedo on the starboard side. Amidst a 30 ft (9.1 m) swell the pinnaces and launch along with other boats (one of which capsized soon after) were launched and the two light cruisers came alongside and managed to pick up 80 men in the deteriorating weather. By 04:45, she seemed in imminent danger of capsizing and a few minutes later she rolled over onto many of the men in the water and sank quickly. Captain Loxley had remained on the bridge along with his Fox terrier Bruce, calmly overseeing the evacuation of the ship. In rough seas near Berry Head, the crew of a Brixham trawler *Provident BM291*, Skipper William Pillar, First Hand William Carter, Second Hand John Clarke and Apprentice (the boy) Daniel Taylor (né Ferguson), picked up the men from one pinnace before it sank, saving 71 members of the crew. The second pinnace took off another 70 men, of which 48 were brought ashore alive after it was eventually spotted from the shore the following night, 22 hours after the sinking. The loss of life of *Formidable* was 35 officers (including Captain Loxley) and 512 men from a complement of 780. The body of Captain Loxley's dog Bruce, a war dog washed ashore and was buried in a marked grave in Abbotsbury Gardens in Dorset.

*Formidable* was the third British battleship to be sunk and the second to be sunk by enemy action, during the First World War.

## Lassie



According to writer Nigel Clarke in the *Shipwreck Guide to Dorset and South Devon*, the original "Lassie" who inspired so many films and television episodes was a rough-haired crossbreed who saved the life of a sailor during World War I. Half collie, Lassie was owned by the landlord of the Pilot Boat, a pub in the port of Lyme Regis. On New Year's Day in 1915 the Royal Navy battleship *Formidable* was torpedoed by a German submarine off Start Point in South Devon, with the loss of more than 500 men. In a storm that followed the accident, a life raft containing bodies was blown along the coast to Lyme Regis. In helping to deal with the crisis, the local pub in Lyme Regis, called the Pilot Boat, offered its cellar as a mortuary. When the bodies had been laid out on the stone floor, Lassie, a crossbred collie owned by the pub owner, found her way down amongst the bodies, and she began to lick the face of one of the victims, Able Seaman John Cowan. She stayed beside him for more than half an hour, nuzzling him and keeping him warm. To everyone's astonishment, Cowan eventually stirred. He was taken to hospital and went on to make a full recovery. He visited Lassie again when he returned to thank all who saved his life.

The sinking of the ship was a severe blow to Britain during these early years of the war. When the officers heard the story of Lassie and what she did to rescue Cowan, they told it again and again to any reporter who would listen as it was inspirational and heart-warming. In 1938 the novel 'Lassie come home' was published by author Eric Knight and might have been inspired by this tale. Hollywood got hold of the story, and so a star was born.

## Wreck site

*Formidable* lies upside down on the seabed, almost cut in half by a large hole towards the bow. However, the vessel's thick armour means that most of the hull is still intact.

The wreck is designated as a Controlled Site under the [Protection of Military Remains Act 1986](#), meaning that diving on it is prohibited.