



Information sheet no 069

Loss of HMS *Hampshire*

The armoured cruiser HMS *Hampshire* was built by Armstrong at Elswick, and launched on 24 September 1903 and joined the Channel Fleet when she was completed on 15 July 1905. In 1911 she served in the Mediterranean and then at the China station from 1912 to 1914. In 1915 she was ordered to Scapa Flow to join the Grand Fleet and undertake patrol duties.

On 30 May 1916, *Hampshire* left with the Grand Fleet and fought in the Battle of Jutland returning safely to Scapa Flow on 3 June. Two days later on 5 June, despite furious gales and awful sailing conditions, the ship set out at 16.45 on route to Archangel in North Russia. On board was the War Minister and British hero, Lord Kitchener, whose mission was to explain the Allied financial and military policy to the Russian Tsar. He had been chosen because his prestige and status in foreign countries was almost as great as at home.

An hour later, Captain Savill decided to turn back due to appalling weather conditions. At 19.40, when *Hampshire* was only one and a half miles from shore between the Brough of Birsay and Marwick Head, there was an explosion which tore out the centre of the ship. The ship had struck a mine field of 22 mines laid by *U75* on the night of the 28/29 May while keeping watch on the British bases during the German fleet's sortie before Jutland. Within fifteen minutes, the ship sank with almost the entire company. Many perished due to the stormy sea and exposure rather than the explosion.

As soon as news of the disaster came through to the Commander-in-Chief, four Grand Fleet destroyers were ordered out to sea. They were followed by five others but all hopes of saving life were vain. By the time the destroyers and patrol vessels reached the spot there was hardly a trace of wreckage. Only fourteen men reached shore on Carley rafts but two died before the rescue parties could reach them. Lord Kitchener and his staff were not amongst the survivors and over 600 men had died when she sank. More may have survived if the lifeboats had not been smashed by the heavy seas during the lowering operations or become entangled in the main rigging. This had left the crew at the mercy of the sea and had to use the Carley floats or anything that floated in an attempt to survive. Survivors stated that Kitchener was not killed in the explosion and must have made it to the upper deck as they were told to "make way for Lord Kitchener" whilst mounting the hatchway ladder, although they did not see him after this.