

The Wrecks of Scapa Flow

The story of Ernest Cox and his salvaging the wrecks of Scapa Flow is fascinating and little known but one which intrigued the large audience who came to hear Michael Harrison's talk recently.

Ernest Cox, born in Wolverhampton in 1883, studied electrical engineering at a time when electricity in the home was in its infancy. He moved through various jobs in different places, learning the rudiments of management and the art of salesmanship. He married the daughter of a Scottish steelworks owner and financed by his wife's cousin, set up a firm specialising in scrap and metal salvage.

Cox treated his workers well and valued their expertise. When work slackened in the early 1920s, Cox turned his attention to raising the sunken wrecks of the German High Seas Fleet scuttled in Scapa Flow in the Orkneys in Scotland in 1919. The British Admiralty had decided they were unsalvageable but Cox bought the rights to salvage knowing the value of Krupps steel armour and confident it would provide work for his men.

He hired local men and skilled divers. Together with his core of experienced workers, he experimented and devised a way of making the hulls watertight and by pumping in air, floated the wrecks to the surface. In all, Cox raised six Capital ships including the battlecruisers Moltke, Hindenburg and Seydlitz, twenty-five destroyers and one light cruiser. Over the following years they were towed to Rosyth on the Firth of Forth for scrapping.

Ernest Cox was liked and respected by his men in spite of his well known explosive temper. He was a hard worker, compassionate and kept his business going in the years of depression through good judgement and common sense. When the price of scrap collapsed to a quarter of its former value and after witnessing a series of fatal accidents to his employees, Cox sold his marine salvaging business in 1932 though remained as consultant to the British Admiralty and continued to lecture on deepwater salvage.

He died in 1959 aged 76, commemorated by a Blue Plaque on his old school in Wolverhampton.

The Chairman thanked Michael on behalf of the rapt audience for his interesting and unusual talk.

Our final meeting of the year will be on November 26th at 7.30pm in the W.I.Hall in Lowdham when Ken Moulds will talk about The Duke of Wellington. For information phone Kay on 0115 9313646 or John on 0115 9313066 or visit our website www.lambleyheritage.co.uk

Derfflinger rises from the deeps after 20 years

