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## *Introduction*

The mass slaughter on the Western Front during the First World War remains appalling, even to modern eyes jaundiced as they are by Hitler and Stalin's massacres and the potential for death inherent in nuclear weapons.

In August 1914 the British had sent the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to France - four divisions under Sir John French to join the sixty-two French and eighty-seven German already engaged. At 160,000 men it represented virtually the entire British army. The German plan (the Schlieffen plan) was a massive right-wing-wheel through Belgium and northern France, brushing the coast and turning inland to take Paris. The French were already being badly beaten. Falling into a German trap they had launched their forces into the Ardennes and Alsace, the promise of liberating their former possessions taking precedence over logic. In the Battle of the Frontiers France lost 300,000 men in a fortnight; 27,000 were lost on one day, August 22nd; 40,000 in three days. By Christmas, France had suffered a million casualties.

The BEF was thrust into the line at Mons, in Belgium. Outnumbered three to one, 100,000 men took on the entire German First Army. They fought a running battle without rest as they retreated 170 miles, but they held on and the damage done to the German plans caused von Moltke, the German supremo, to lose his courage and turn towards Paris too soon. This exposed the German flank to a French counter attack

which brought two million men into conflict. The German advance was stopped and the ‘race for the sea’ began – each side trying to outflank the other. A last German thrust for the sea was halted by the British at Ypres. The first Battle of Ypres began on October 20th and lasted to the middle of November. The BEF held, but the cost was awful and they were wiped out as a fighting unit. British casualties included 80,000 dead. Battalions of 1000 men were reduced to thirty. The 7th Division, 12,000 strong, lost 9,000 in eighteen days.

During the early months and years of the war the general British public had little knowledge of the scale of the killings. A combination of a gung-ho desire for glory, a patriotic fervour and press censorship meant that the losses on the Front took time to be appreciated. And of course they were also invisible; the channel hid the war from view. In time the facts would become known, the death count would rise (c. 800,000 British killed, 1.1 million if Commonwealth losses are included, and some two million wounded). We honour them in memorials and on November 11th, and rightly so.

However, in those early months of the war there were losses much nearer to home, on the seas, often close to the shore that the ships were defending. The British navy, the Senior Service, was seen by the public as Britain’s strong arm and shield. As the great John Jervis, in the Napoleonic wars, said of Napoleon’s putative invasion, ‘I do not say, my Lords, that the French will not come, I say only that they will not come by sea’.<sup>1</sup> The navy, which had taken so much public money and made John Bull proud, would surely through some new Trafalgar end the German ambition in a defining sea battle.

No such battle ever occurred. But even without one the cost in men and *materiel* to the navy was high. These deaths are much less well known than those of the Western Front. By 1 January 1915 over 5,000 sailors had died at sea, many within metaphorical sight of home. The navy’s sacrifices are

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much less well remembered than those of the armies in the field. This book is an attempt to provide a better memorial for a few of the navy's fallen.

Some positions and characters are important to the structure of the story, but are not fundamental to its telling. A brief outline of these might be of help to the reader.

The First Lord of the Admiralty is the Cabinet member with political responsibility for the navy. Between October 1911 and May 1915 the position was held by the Rt Hon Winston Churchill MP. Now rightly considered to be one of the greatest of all Britons, at the time of his tenure at the Admiralty Churchill was mistrusted by his colleagues, the press and the navy. On his appointment to the Admiralty the *Navy League Annual* stated that his arrival was not regarded with much favour; the *National Review* went one better, calling him a 'self-advertising mountebank'. The *Globe* of 21 December 1912 stated that 'the methods of Mr Churchill are wholly unfitted for the great Service of which he is the responsible head'. To many of his colleagues he was 'a maverick, widely viewed as a spoilt and bumptious child'.<sup>2</sup> Prime Minister Asquith had sent him to the Admiralty to reduce the costs of the navy and form a Naval War Staff. He succeeded in the latter but had the opposite effect on the former, for in March 1914 the highest naval estimates ever were announced, £50 million (around £4,800 million today).

The First Sea Lord was the executive head of the navy and responsible for strategy in time of war. He was always a senior naval officer. Successive First Sea Lords under Churchill found him anxious to hold the levers of power himself in a day-to-day fashion, which caused much friction, considerable confusion and poor decision making. At the outbreak of war the First Sea Lord was Admiral Prince Louis of Battenberg but, under the triple pressures of Churchill's interference, a press campaign against him given his Teutonic

birth, and gout, he had a nervous collapse and resigned at the end of October.

Battenberg was replaced by Admiral Sir John (Jackie) Fisher. Fisher (Admiral of the Fleet Baron Fisher of Kilverstone) was the man who revolutionised the British navy in the early 1900s, dragging it protesting and screaming from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century while First Sea Lord from 1904 to 1910. He was a phenomenon; volcanic in temper, Old Testament in expression, a compulsive dancer, a man who loved and hated with a vengeance. Out of office Fisher befriended Churchill and became his *eminence grise* when the latter took over at the Admiralty. After Battenberg's demise Fisher returned as First Sea Lord, aged 73, for nine tumultuous months until he resigned again in May 1915, frustrated by Churchill's interference.

Admiral Sir John Jellicoe commanded the British Grand Fleet, based (eventually) at Scapa Flow. He had been parachuted into command by Churchill (probably at Fisher's behind-the-scenes urging) at the outbreak of war, replacing Admiral Sir George Callaghan and much against Jellicoe's own wishes. Jellicoe, like Fisher whose protégé he was, was obsessed by the threat to his fleet created by the recent development of the submarine and mines, and his detailed battle orders were conservative and preoccupied with avoiding the risk of submarine attack. Indeed, Jellicoe's fear of submarines was such that at one point he moved the Grand Fleet out of the North Sea (a considerable victory for the Germans had they but known it) and into Loch Swilly in Ireland. A centraliser, control freak and poor delegator, he remained in command of the Grand Fleet until appointed First Sea Lord in late 1916.

The man responsible for naval dispositions at the outbreak of war was the chief of staff, Vice-Admiral Doveton Sturdee. He held the post until the end of October when he was replaced on Fisher's arrival.

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The prime minister on the outbreak of war was H.H. Asquith, who had held the post since April 1908. Scruffy, donnish, a heavy drinker (known to some as ‘the Aged Squiff’) he had the effortless sense of superiority of a Balliol man. Leading the Liberals he had been elected on a ‘reformist’ ticket, specifically to spend less on Britain’s defence and more on social programmes, and in 1910 he narrowly achieved a majority in parliament defending the ‘people’s budget’ which was intended to tax the rich in order to introduce welfare for the poor. In this he was somewhat stymied by the naval ‘arms race’ with Germany that was to be a contributory factor to the outbreak of hostilities. As prime minister he was Churchill’s sponsor at the Admiralty but he did not attract the full respect of his colleagues. They subsequently depicted Asquith as a vacillating prime minister, overwhelmed by life and death decisions on a daily basis, barely able to handle the multitude of issues requiring his attention, and at best acting as a facilitator through whom men of more drive and ambition made the big decisions.



## *She was a ship*

*And the sea gave up the dead that were in it.*

(Revelations 20:13)

She was a ship, but is now a tomb. A hecatomb. The last resting place for nearly 600 men and boys,\* their mortal remains held in and around the rusting, rotting iron hull. She lies 200 feet beneath the surface of the English Channel, off the Jurassic Coast, Portland and the great arc of Lyme Bay. She is completely upside down. One huge bronze propeller, including its shaft, rests on the seabed close by. The other has been ripped off by some illegal salvage operation. Her secondary guns can still be seen in their casements, crushed against the sea bottom, and the huge 12-inch forward armament is visible beneath the upturned hull. Between the inverted bridge and the forward turret there is a rent in the hull some nineteen feet wide and almost cutting her in two. Fish swim in and out through it. Men could too, if she had not been designated a war grave.

She is tomb to old and young, officer and seaman, Royal Marine and stoker. The sea does not discriminate in death.

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\*There are conflicting numbers given for the total dead and survivors. [Naval-history.net](#), which is based on primary sources, gives 204 survivors. Some other online sources give 233. However, Corbett, in the official navy history of the war (*History of the Great War*, Sir Julian Corbett) gives 197 survivors out of a total crew of 780, meaning 583 dead. That is the figure that will be used in this book.

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She was once beautiful, the pride of the navy, but she got old, was pensioned off, and was then dragged out of retirement for the Kaiser's War, to die with her crew. She was formidable, HMS *Formidable*. Now she is just a wreck.

Wrecks are not unusual off that stormy coast. High seas, strong winds and an unpredictable shore line have trapped many a luckless mariner. At Portland, with its rocky coastline on its western side culminating at the Bill, several currents meet in the notorious Portland Race and make for some of the most dangerous conditions around the coastline of England. Further round the point lies the hidden Shambles, a sand and shingle bank just ten feet below the surface of the water at low tide. There is an abundance of wrecks and a tradition of wrecking. Indeed, the sea has claimed so many lives over the centuries that the local churchyards have many communal graves or memorials for the victims. Often the poor souls were just buried on the beach where the tide had thrown them up. The poet William Wordsworth lost his brother John there when the *Earl of Abergavenny* sank in 1805. She was a 1,200-ton East Indiaman en route to Bengal, but she sank on February 5th and took 261 lives with her.

Ten years earlier no fewer than six ships in Admiral Christian's fleet, heading for the West Indies to confront Napoleon's France, were lost. Some 300 or so died that day. The women and officers of rank (if it could be established) were buried in Wyke Regis churchyard where there is now a memorial tablet. The rest had a common grave on the beach. Those who survived the sea received little in the way of assistance from the locals who were busy with plundering the wrecks.

On 11 September 1877 the 1,210-ton iron ship *Avalanche* left London bound for Wellington, New Zealand, carrying sixty-three emigrants with a crew of forty-three under the command of Captain Williams. A force eight gale was

blowing and there was driving rain. The seas were high and very rough. Sailing nearby was a wooden ship, the *Forest*, bound for New York and carrying a crew of twenty-one men. It was a stormy dark night, and the two ships' crews saw each other only when it was too late to avoid a collision. The *Forest* struck the middle of the *Avalanche*, rebounded and struck again, almost cutting her in two. The *Avalanche* sank straight away with the loss of 103 lives. Only twelve men survived from both ships, one of whom was the captain of the *Forest*. The responsibility for burial of the bodies, which were being washed ashore by the tide, lay with the local parish councils. They were loath to spend money on such low-class flotsam and much publicity ensued at the treatment of the dead. *The Times* thundered in outrage and the friends and relatives of those lost in the tragedy launched an appeal fund. Contributions poured in from all over England as well as New Zealand and Australia. The appeal raised sufficient funds to purchase a site and erect a memorial chapel overlooking the scene of the disaster. It was dedicated to St. Andrew and opened in 1879.

There are thought to be over a thousand wrecks along the Dorset coast; *Formidable* was in good company as she settled on the sea bed on 1 January 1915. But how did she come to be there? What concatenation of circumstances took the ship and its crew to their doom?

This book is the story of the loss of HMS *Formidable*. But it is also the story of those who survived, of courage, heroism, political 'spin', of those left behind, of consequences, and of those who might be said to be the cause of the loss, of stupidity, irresponsibility and culpability. And it is also the story of two dogs.



# Part I

## *Tragedy*

*If you can meet with triumph and disaster  
And treat those two imposters both the same*

(Rudyard Kipling, *If*)



# 1

## *The Big Ship*

*They are grander things than all the art of towns;  
Their tests are tempests and the sea that drowns.  
They are my country's line, her great art done  
By strong brains labouring on the thought unwon.  
They mark our passage as a race of men—  
Earth will not see such ships as those again.*

(John Masefield, *Ships*)

She was born in Portsmouth, at the navy's own dockyard, on 17 November 1898 and christened by Lady Lucy Hicks-Beach, wife of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, 'Black Michael'. The British Mutoscope and Biograph Company filmed her launch, silently and in black and white. Construction work was completed by 1901, but problems with the contractors building her machinery (who went into liquidation) and engines (strikes at the engineering shops) delayed her coming out. It was only three years later that she finally entered commission as His Majesty's battleship *Formidable*, the fourth vessel to carry the name. The first, an 80-gun third rate, was captured from the French at the Battle of Quiberon Bay. Launched as the *Formidable* by the French she became HMS *Formidable*. The second, launched in 1777, was a 90-gun second rate which fought at the Battle of the Saintes as

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Admiral Rodney's flagship. And in 1825 an 84-gun second rate took the name.

The fourth *Formidable* had been ordered as part of the 1897 naval estimates and programme as the lead ship of a class of three. At the time of her design she was one of the most powerful battleships in Europe, but given the delays in her commissioning she was already looking somewhat elderly when she finally emerged into the public view. Displacing over 15,000 tons and armed with four 40 calibre 12-inch guns and twelve 6-inch quickfiring guns, she was considered under-gunned for her size and by the time of her final completion had already been overtaken by the more heavily armed and faster King Edward VII class of battleships. Home to 780 crew – 810 if an admiral sailed on board – she was considered a good steamer, ‘very handy ships, answer to the least touch of the helm’.<sup>1</sup> By the time she entered service the building cost was £1 million (about £103 million in today’s money).

The publisher George Newnes commissioned the famous British maritime painter Charles Dixon to paint her in 1901 for his book *British Bulwarks*, containing forty-eight chromolithographs of the latest British warships. The painter depicts her in Plymouth Sound in full cry and with a red-sailed fishing smack in the foreground, an augury of things to come. Given the delays in her construction and commissioning, Dixon must have painted her mainly from his fertile imagination.

Finally commissioned under Captain Alexander W. Chisholm-Batten, *Formidable* sailed to join the Mediterranean Fleet in late 1903 (in November 1903 the *Navy and Army Illustrated* magazine headlined ‘A Formidable Ship for the Med’) under Captain Thomas P. Walker, to serve with the flag of the commander in chief Admiral Sir Compton Domville and his successor in 1905 Admiral Lord Charles Beresford.

The Mediterranean Fleet was Britain’s premier command, based at Malta, the cynosure of everything that the navy

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valued and the repository of its finest ships. Resplendent in her painted finery, *Formidable* took her place with the fleet, although not for very long. Soon after arrival she went into dock for a refit which lasted until April 1905, but not before she was able to demonstrate the capabilities of her crew. In 1904, in a competition to investigate how rapidly submerged tubes could be fired four times sequentially, commencing with the tube loaded and the bar out, the ship's crew had been able to achieve a time of 1 minute 48 seconds, later improved to 1 minute 31 seconds. This compared very favourably to the typical timing of 2 minutes and 30 seconds. For a battleship her performance was very creditable.

Like any lady of note she had her portrait painted under the cerulean blue skies of the Med. Antonio de Simone, a well-known Italian marine painter, caught her in the Bay of Naples in 1905, in a painting that shows her dressed in her Mediterranean glory, black hull, white upper works, yellow funnels, a stately mistress of the waves (in 2005 Christies sold the painting for £576).

Malta was a society hub, a home away from home for the officers at least, a place where they could enjoy the same comforts and *divertissements* that, as minor aristocracy or landed gentry, they were used to in England, only at a lower cost. The social life was superb. Admiral C.C. Penrose Fitzgerald, writing in his autobiography of his service in the Med in 1889, emphasised it:

Very good opera companies used to come to Malta for the winter months ... then, it was extremely cheap - two-and-six for a stall and boxes in proportion. Several stars, including Albani, made their debut at the Malta Opera House. There were balls, parties, picnics, polo, gymkhanas, and golf. Many of the officers of the Mediterranean squadron got their wives out from England for three or four of the winter months, and as these frequently brought with them other ladies, there were plenty of dances, riding picnics, and other innocent relaxations from the stern

routine of naval discipline. The great event of the season was the fancy-dress ball at the Governor's palace. The various and picturesque costumes of the East were always well represented.<sup>2</sup>

It was also not uncommon for unescorted women to visit Malta. An annual 'fishing fleet' of marriageable ladies would arrive at the island every autumn hoping for romance (or more) with the military, and especially naval, unwed (or wed!) officer population. They would stay for the 'season' and return to England in the spring.

Meanwhile, the fleet cruised around the Med, its programme mainly social and its practices largely based around complex and centralised 'evolutions' – manoeuvres. These choreographed routines were like an army parade ground display and bore little or no resemblance to the likely needs of a shooting war. When ashore, officers could enjoy dinner parties, fancy dress balls, shooting, regattas, tennis parties, golf, cricket; and if you had the financial resources, polo and horse racing. Many played tennis and golf regularly. Generations of future flag officers grew up in this comfortable environment. Military 'bull' was the rule, a smart and clean ship the route to promotion, following orders and 'fitting in' socially the most important aspect of behaviour.

All this social whirl hid an inconvenient truth. *Formidable* and her sister vessels were built for the wrong type of war and, further, were condemned to obsolescence by a revolutionary type of battleship in 1906. British naval doctrine at the time of her birth was that ships would fight in lines, as in Nelson's time, engaging at close range, using their larger guns to 'fix' and crack the hulls of her enemy and pouring in a high volume of shells from the smaller quickfirers at close range. This had been the doctrine in the time of Trafalgar, it had been successful then and the navy saw no real need to do anything different.

But the world changed around them. First, heavy guns got

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bigger and longer-ranged. Ships became faster and more manoeuvrable. The torpedo, cheap and easy to carry as a 'stand-off' weapon by small, fast ships (torpedo boats and submarines), could threaten battleships from range. It became clear to some (but by no means all) naval officers that battles would be fought at longer range, which meant *Formidable*'s arsenal of quick-firing 6-inch guns could neither reach nor harm and her 12-inch rifles would be difficult to register accurately and deliver too low a weight of shell.

Second, Admiral Sir John Fisher, the revolutionary British First Sea Lord and head of the navy between 1904 and 1910, drove into service a fast, well-armoured, all-big-gun battleship, HMS *Dreadnought*, which – with its ten 12-inch heavy guns and minor secondary armament – was clearly able to out-fight and out-shoot any other battleship in any nation's navy, including the British one. *Formidable* and her sisters were immediately and doubly out of date. All navies began to build dreadnought types and a world-wide naval race was on, which soon narrowed into one primarily between Britain and Germany.

Once a blushing debutante, *Formidable* was now an old wallflower and in April 1908 she returned to England to join the Channel Fleet, subsequently paying off at Chatham in April 1909 to undergo another refit at Chatham Royal Dockyard.

The tactical deployment of ships like *Formidable* and other so-called 'pre-dreadnoughts' now became a subject of debate and a political football. Politicians wanted to count them in the fleet as fully operational battleships, capable of taking their place in the line of battle and contributing to the 'two power standard' (Britain's battle fleet to equate to the sum of the next two biggest). Many sailors disagreed, believing that such ships would have a very limited life if exposed in a battle with fully fledged dreadnought-type vessels. Fisher in particular thought their utility limited and

wanted to pay many off, to free money and men for new ships; but he was prevented in this by the politicians who were frightened of both the cost and the public reaction. His solution was to create the concept of a 'Second Fleet' and 'nucleus crews'.

The Second Fleet was effectively a naval reserve, ships that Fisher no longer wanted in the line of battle but for which there might be a need in time of war, and which could be counted in the total numbers of the fleet. They were 'retired' to port where they were kept ticking over by a reduced crew of about 60% of the required complement; in time of war or for exercises with the main fleet the crew could quickly be brought up to strength by drafting men from the nearby naval barracks, reservists and boys in training. This was the status to which *Formidable* was reduced in 1912, as part of the Fifth Battle Squadron, Second Fleet (which was headquartered at the Nore), and under the command of Captain Philip Nelson-Ward. Here she gently mouldered, Captain Ward no doubt doing his best to keep her smart as she swung on her anchor cables until he was replaced by Captain Drury St Aubyn-Wake in December.

Not that many people were fooled. An article in the *Daily Telegraph* summed up the situation nicely. 'This is the vital point to bear in mind. We are relying largely on obsolescent ships and in a comparatively short period only dreadnaughts among armoured ships will count. Owing to the obsolescence of the British battleships and armoured cruisers our strength is now steadily declining year on year.'<sup>13</sup>

Throughout 1913 tensions built in Europe. War clouds gathered. In Germany, France, Austro-Hungary, Russia, Britain and Serbia politicians and military men lurched unseeing towards total war, until in July 1914 the echo of an assassin's gun touched off the powder keg which consumed the world.

The whole of the navy, the First, Second and Third Fleets, had been assembled for a test mobilisation and exercises over

a period of two weeks. Now it was intended to return to peacetime status and decommission the Reserve Fleet once more, and on the weekend of 25-27 July the fleet was planned to disperse following the completion of the manoeuvres. With Churchill away from his office at the seaside, building sandcastles with his wife and children, Battenberg, First Sea Lord, issued the instruction 'no ship to leave harbour until further orders' to the CinC Home Fleet (the famous signal 'stand the fleet fast', for which Churchill later tried to take credit, despite having been out of communication at the time of its issue).

This signal had the effect of ensuring that the ships of the Reserve Fleet were crewed in large part by coastguardsmen (known to the navy as 'Gobbies', naval ratings who had completed so many years in the fleet, and then went on to the reserve, with a liability for recall in time of war, and for annual exercises), boys, fishermen, enthusiastic volunteer sailors and trainees. These were men who had expected to be back at their jobs after two weeks of manoeuvres and training. Men who had not expected to go to war. In *Formidable*'s case this meant many men from Chatham and the surrounding areas.

Without such reservists and volunteers the navy could not have functioned effectively, for its strength in August 1914 stood at only 147,667 men. The order for full naval mobilisation had finally gone out on 2 August and those not already detained on their ships by the 'stand the fleet fast' signal were hurriedly called up. In Hull and Grimsby, at the East Anglian fishing ports, in the fishing communities of the south west, thousands of reservists were called up by telegram, delivery boys or policemen knocking on their doors. In Brixham nearly every family was affected by mobilisation and the town's annual regatta was abandoned. Men were commanded to report to the Customs House on the quay and depart for the naval barracks at Devonport. The cottage

hospital nurses turned out to cheer them off and the chairman of the Urban District Council presided over the singing of the National Anthem at the railway station. In Looe, Cornwall, the men mustered on the quay and were marched to the railway station. In Falmouth the call up was announced by the Town Crier. The navy girded its loins. Mobilisation of the reserves added 27,395 Royal Fleet Reservists, 13,510 Royal Naval Reserve, 2,345 Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve, and 6,970 retired officers and pensioners who stepped forward once more for duty.<sup>4</sup> (One of the latter was Ex-Chief Gunner Israel Harding VC who had retired from the navy in 1885 but returned to the colours at the outbreak of war. Although aged over 80 he served in minesweepers until a mine blew up under his ship, breaking his left leg.) Without these part-time sailors, there would have been a very limited navy.

Like all his peers, Captain Wake had received the 'preparations for war' telegram on 27 July and the old lady under his command was brought back from her docile retirement. She once again raised steam in her boilers, took on ammunition, exercised the turret mechanisms and went to war. Not for her the glory of the Grand Fleet, streaking up the east coast of Britain to seek a safe battle station in the far north, shutting off the northern end of the North Sea and awaiting the appearance of the German fleet for the long-awaited and sought-after 'New Trafalgar'. Instead, the old lady and her spinster sisters in the Fifth Battle Squadron, now based at Portland, were sent to escort the British Expeditionary Force to France during August and then to perform the same service for the Portsmouth Royal Marines Battalion to Ostend on the 25th.

And on September 2nd Arthur Noel Loxley joined as her new Captain with his Airedale terrier, Bruce.

# 2

## *The Captain*

*They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters*

(Psalms 107;23)

The Loxley family had deep roots in the Hertfordshire countryside, having held the Manor of Norcott, in Northchurch, Berkhamstead through the distaff side since the seventeenth century, and residing in Norcott Court. Held first by Thomas Smart and then, from 1709, by his widow Tabitha, the estate passed through two more Thomases to William Smart, who died in 1837, leaving the estate to his daughter Elizabeth. She had married John Loxley, but was widowed by the time of her inheritance and on her death in 1887 the estate passed to her son, another John, who was a partner in the law firm Loxley and Morley in London. In 1845 John had married Emily Augusta, a niece of the poet Lord Byron whose cousin was her mother. They had one child, Arthur Smart Loxley, born in 1847. No expense was spared on young Arthur's education and he attended Radley College and Exeter College, Oxford before taking clerical orders. It might be that old John was a man who favoured education, for he founded the Northchurch village school in 1864 from his own funds.

After his ordination Arthur Smart Loxley became curate of All Saints Lamport in Northamptonshire. The living was in the gift of Sir Charles Edmund Isham, 10th Baronet, of Lamport Hall (who was a keen gardener and is credited with introducing the garden gnome into England). The Isham family had held the living of All Saints since 1729 and always kept it in ‘the family’. At the time of Arthur’s curacy, the rector was Robert Isham, cousin to Charles, and he employed the Reverend Loxley as his curate.

In 1873 Arthur married Alice Mary Duncombe of Hatton at Stone, another Hertfordshire village some thirty miles away from Northchurch. She was the daughter of the local rector but the Duncombe family also had deep roots in Northchurch, having been long-term residents and owners of the Hall in the eighteenth century. The two families undoubtedly knew each other. A year after the marriage Alice was delivered of the first of five children, a baby boy, born on All Hallows Eve and christened Arthur Noel.

Shortly afterwards, Arthur Smart Loxley moved his family back to the ancestral home and took over the curacy of the local church of St Mary’s. The advowson of the church was held by the Prince of Wales as Duke of Cornwall; but the rector for fifty years from 1830 until his death in 1880, and who paid for a curate – Loxley – to stand in for him, was Sir John Hobart Culme Seymour, 2nd Baronet Seymour and father to the extremely famous Victorian Admiral Sir Michael Culme Seymour who had been born in nearby Berkhamstead in 1836. Sir Michael, who finished his career as CinC Portsmouth, was renowned as a ship handler and had been a previous CinC of the Mediterranean Fleet, Britain’s prize command of the era.

In time Arthur Smart Loxley became a minor canon of

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Bristol cathedral\* and gained his own preferment, becoming Vicar of Fairford, Gloucestershire. The young Noel (as he liked to be called) was sent to be educated at Eton College, demonstrating that the family had wealth that did not depend on a clergyman's stipend. Meanwhile, on his inheritance Noel's grandfather John had knocked down the old seventeenth-century house (with the exception of the Georgian dovecote) and built a brand new, half-timbered Victorian mansion befitting, as he no doubt thought, his new exalted station in life.

But in 1888 Noel's father died, aged only 41, and the 14-year-old lad was despatched to the Royal Navy training ship *HMS Britannia*. The Seymour influence might well have had a bearing on the choice of career for young Noel, and there were naval antecedents in his grandmother's family too, the poet's cousin and grandfather having been admirals.

*Britannia* was probably an experience not unlike that of the boarding school Noel had just left. Fagging and bullying were rife, the environment was exclusively male and Spartan, discipline was fierce, education pedagogic. Athletic skills (especially rowing, hunting, cricket) were prized, and good connections and social skills valued above intelligence.

The ship had been built in 1860 as *HMS Prince of Wales* and renamed in 1869 when she was converted into a training ship (and she continued in that role until 1905 when she was replaced by a shore-based college designed by Sir Aston Webb). She was a hulk, moored at Dartmouth, with only her foremast remaining of the original full set of sails and masts. Two terms of cadets were accepted each year and the

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\*A canon is a member of the chapter of (for the most part) priests, headed by a dean, which is responsible for administering a cathedral or certain other churches that are styled collegiate churches. The dean and chapter are the formal body that has legal responsibility for the cathedral and for electing the (arch)bishop. Minor canons are those clergy who are members of the cathedral's establishment and take part in the daily services but are not part of the formal chapter. These are generally more junior clergy, who in a parish church would be serving a curacy.

education lasted for two years, after which cadets would qualify (or not) as midshipmen and pass on to a seagoing ship. Admittance was by nomination or exam and the fees were £35 a term.

The curriculum was divided into three parts – seamanship, study, and out-study. Seamanship aimed to cover practical sailing sea lore and signalling; study gave the young cadets the chance to learn mathematics and navigation; out-study focused on French and drawing (both very practical: France was our oldest enemy and an ability to draw maps and visualisations was of practical use).

Much emphasis was placed on sports, especially sailing and boxing, and the ability to shin up and down masts and dress yards was much prized (this despite the fact that in the years while Loxley was at *Britannia* the navy commissioned the ‘Royal Sovereign’ class of battleship, the largest and fastest ships of their time, 13.5-inch gunned, all steam powered, and had been building such ships since the ‘Devastation’ class of 1869). Physical attributes were the more likely to gain a cadet respect, while doing too well in the mathematical subjects could be injurious to one’s reputation.

Indeed it could be positively deleterious to one’s acceptability to perform too well in a scholastic manner. It was not necessary, or even desirable, to be academically gifted in order to progress in the Victorian navy. Cleverness was looked at somewhat askance and academic study was not particularly encouraged. A ‘three-oner’ – a man who obtained first-class passes at his Seamanship Board, Royal Naval College and Excellent (for gunnery) – was suspect and ‘three-oners’ were held in contempt by many in the navy as being ‘too clever by half’. Fitting in socially and coming from the ‘right’ background was much more important. Noel Loxley’s later career would show that he might not have fitted this mould.

Passing out as a midshipman in 1890 he was briefly posted to the Channel Squadron before being shipped far overseas to

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HMS *Warspite*, Flagship of the Pacific Fleet based at Esquimalt, British Columbia, an assignment that would last for the next five years. During this time he made steady progress, being appointed Sub-Lieutenant in April 1894 (having sat an exam and been passed by a panel of four captains) and Lieutenant in April 1895. Progression was in part examination-based and Loxley's achievements in this regard marked him out as unlike the archetype. On passing to Sub-Lieutenant he had received a first-class pass in Seamanship. In 1894 he gained part 1 of his Lieutenant's exam with a second but part 2 with a first-class pass. In 1895 he achieved a first-class pass in Gunnery, a first in Pilotage (part 1) and a first again in Pilotage (part 2). He was a three-oner; a navy 'brain'.

Somewhere along the way he contracted malaria and this would never leave him, causing him to be hospitalised at the navy's own Haslar Hospital on his return from the Pacific and at least one of his subsequent captains to remark 'strongly recommend, liable to short attacks of malaria'.<sup>1</sup> He also returned as a man of property, for during his service abroad his grandfather had died (in 1892) and left him the Manor of Norcott and the new house thereon, Norcott Court which was only 4 years old. Loxley was thus assured of an income for life.

Noel Loxley's captains clearly rated him. His 'report card' for the time contains such comments as 'good physique, v. zealous and intelligent' and 'recommend for advancement'.<sup>2</sup> He was making his mark.

With no wars to fight at sea, many naval officers sought battle ashore and Loxley was no exception. In 1897 he joined a British punitive expeditionary force led by Admiral Sir Harry Rawson in response to the defeat of a previous British-led invasion force under Acting Consul General James Philips (which had left all but two men dead). Rawson's troops captured, burned and looted Benin City, dethroned the king, and brought to an end the west African kingdom of Benin.

Loxley received the East and West Africa medal with 'Benin 1897' clasp for his pains.

In 1900, while serving in the Home Fleet, he married Gladys Maude Brooke-Hunt. Gladys, who was 17 when she married the 26-year-old Noel, was the daughter of Arthur Ernest Brooke-Hunt, born in Peers Court, Dursley. Harrow educated, a graduate of Trinity College Cambridge and The Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester, Arthur held the position of Inspector of Agricultural Education for the Board of Agriculture. The family were landed gentry, part owners of the advowson and benefice of Dinas (which they were to sell in 1909) and similar in background to the Loxleys. Arthur had married Gertrude Mabel Calvarly and sired two children, Gladys and a much younger boy, Robert.

After ten years as a lieutenant and successful completion of the 'Senior Staff Course' course at HMS *Excellent*, Loxley was promoted to Commander on 1 January 1905 - a year no doubt made doubly joyous by the birth of his son Peter in March. Appointed to the newly built armoured cruiser *Hampshire* he served under Captain Robert Arbuthnot (who, when asked by First Sea Lord Jackie Fisher what ship he would like, replied that as he had played football and cricket for the county he would like the *Hampshire*). Arbuthnot was a martinet and hard case who must have been a very demanding taskmaster. Nonetheless, Captain Arbuthnot commented of Loxley, 'very smart and gives orders well, good judgement and manners, strongly recommend; sings and acts well'.<sup>3</sup>

Leaving *Hampshire* after two years via the War College course, Loxley became Staff Commander to the Admiral commanding the 2nd Division of the Home Fleet, first under Sir Archibald Berkley-Milne and then Sir George Callaghan. Both rated him, Callaghan recommending him for promotion in 1910 and 1911. Milne, however, was to become something of a patron and was to repeatedly recommend Loxley for

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advancement. Some of Milne's comments make interesting reading: 'very zealous, hardworking, painstaking. Strongly recommend' (while still a lieutenant on *Camperdown* in 1900), 'recommend for promotion, zealous, attentive, painstaking officer, has been of invaluable assistance to me' (1909), 'recommended' (1910), 'a very zealous and reliable officer, vg gunnery and exceptional knowledge of the service. Excellent Captain of ship' (1914).<sup>4</sup>

Promoted captain in 1911 (on the occasion of the coronation of King George V), Loxley was sent on the staff college 'war course' before being assigned to the new *Orion* class dreadnought HMS *Thunderer*, not as ship's captain but to work on the new 'director firing' trials, examining the impact on the ship's gunnery of coordinated central laying and firing of the main guns. *Thunderer* was fitted with the Dreyer fire-control table designed by Frederic Charles Dreyer, which was a proto-computer. Loxley's assignment was to test Percy Scott's new director firing system which made *Thunderer* top-shooting ship in the 1912 trials, when she delivered over six times the hits of her sister ship in just three and a half minutes. Loxley's gunnery knowledge clearly stood him in good stead and the Admiralty expressed their 'appreciation of care and trouble taken in connexion with this important subject'.<sup>5</sup>

But then on 5 November 1912 this newly appointed captain, with no previous command experience, was assigned to the Mediterranean Fleet as Flag Captain to Sir Archibald Berkley Milne, Admiral Commanding, seemingly his biggest fan. This was a plum appointment and it is inconceivable that he would have got it except by Milne's special request. Who, then, was Milne and why did he champion Loxley?

Berkley Milne was the son of an admiral and baronet who became First Naval Lord under both Gladstone and Disraeli, and also grandson of another admiral. In appearance Milne was affected, sporting a non-regulation stiff turned-down collar and bow tie, a white, trimmed beard and luxuriant

black moustache. He was a snob of the worst kind. Once his sleeve was brushed by a passing seaman; Milne took out his handkerchief, flicked some imagined dirt from his sleeve with it and threw the contaminated linen over the side. He was also one of those admirals who owed their position to royal influence rather than ability.

After service in the Zulu war as an ADC to Lord Chelmsford, and escaping the massacre at Isandlwana, Milne rose to the rank of captain in the navy before accepting the post of captain of HM Yacht *Osborne*, a post usually held by a commander, reasoning that exposure to royalty offered him better hopes of promotion. Such posts were often seen as mixed blessings, for they lacked any martial qualities, but Milne loved the ceremony and obsessive spit and polish of service in the Royal Squadron and went on to command the royal yachts from 1903 to 1905. He became good friends with King Edward VII and, especially, Queen Alexandra who nicknamed him 'Arky-Barky', an appellation that soon got round the fleet to humorous effect. A fellow officer asserted that Milne's hobbies were collecting rare orchids and entertaining royal ladies. Never an intellect (he is recorded as saying 'they don't pay me to think, they pay me to be an admiral')<sup>6</sup> and lacking any combat experience, he was nonetheless promoted through royal influence to flag rank. In 1912 Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty and under pressure from George V, made him Admiral Commanding the Mediterranean Fleet. It was not a well-received appointment in many parts of the navy.

Does Milne's liking for Loxley say anything of the latter's character? We can see an intelligent man in the record (Milne was not), fastidious and painstaking with a great knowledge of, and respect for, the navy, a hard worker; and perhaps a man who, from lack of seniority, would defer to Milne's authority. This latter characteristic would appeal to Milne but had in it the seeds of future failure.

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Milne's flagship was HMS *Inflexible*. Launched in 1907 she was a battlecruiser, one of Jackie Fisher's 'greyhounds of the fleet', fast, modern, heavily armed, all big guns, designed to overwhelm lesser vessels and fast enough to evade bigger ones. It was a prize command for any captain and especially an inexperienced one.

But disaster lurked. At the outbreak of war Milne and his number two, Rear Admiral Ernest Troubridge, commanding the 1st Cruiser Squadron, had a number of missions to fulfil, not the least of which was to prevent the modern German battlecruiser *Goeben* (accompanied by the light cruiser *Breslau*) from escaping. After a series of tactical moves and mischances, the *Goeben* began a run for Constantinople with the mission of becoming part of the Turkish navy and catalysing Turkey's entry into the war on the German side. On August 7th Troubridge found himself in a position to stop them. His four armoured cruisers together packed a broadside of 8,680 pounds compared to the 8,272 of the *Goeben*. Despite his numerical superiority in ships and the ability to divide *Goeben*'s fire, Troubridge allowed himself to be persuaded not to fix and engage the *Goeben* and she made good her escape to Constantinople.

The escape was regarded by the public and the Admiralty as a great disaster, helping to bring Turkey into the war on the German side. Milne and Troubridge were vilified, the latter being court martialled. Milne was recalled to England, told to haul down his flag and never given another appointment on sea or land. Three weeks after the event Loxley was also recalled, on August 28th, and a week later he was posted to the ageing *Formidable*.

By any analysis this was a diminution of responsibility. *Inflexible* was one of Fisher's first 'greyhounds of the sea'. Heavily armed, fast, able to catch and kill anything that was of weaker armament, they could also outstrip those vessels that might outshoot them. Launched in 1907, she was still a prime

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command and carried an armament of eight 12-inch guns at a speed of 26.5 knots compared to *Formidable*'s four 12-inch guns and 18 knots.

Had Loxley too been blamed by implication for the disaster of the *Goeben*? As flag-captain to Milne he could have been expected to offer advice to further decision making, although it is possible that Milne chose him for the opposite reason. Whatever the case, Loxley returned to the UK from a prime command to a much lesser one. And probably felt under a cloud.\*\*

Perhaps that was why his 9-year-old son Peter, whose dog Bruce had been bought for the child as a puppy, gave the terrier to Loxley to keep him company during his new command.

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\*\*The transfer to *Formidable* also denied Loxley a greater role in the prosecution of the war at sea, for *Inflexible* was to gain three battle honours, Falklands Islands, 8 December 1914; Dardanelles, 1915; and Jutland, 31 May 1916.