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CAPTAIN CHARLES FRYATT AND THE “BRUSSELS”
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CAPTAIN CHARLES FRYATT AND THE "BRUSSELS"

by Charles Dawson

BRUSSELS Steel Twin-Screw Steamer, 1,380 gross tons, 523 nett.

Built in 1902 by Gourlay Bros. & Company, Dundee

Owners : The Great Eastern Railway Company

Triple Expansion Machinery of 350 NHP

Length : 285·3 feet. Breadth : 34·0 feet. Registered at Harwich.

Born on 2nd December 1872, Charles Fryatt entered the service of the Great Eastern Railway at an early age as an ordinary seaman. In 1904 he became chief officer, obtained his master's certificate in 1905 and was promoted to command in 1913. The outbreak of the First World War found him master of the twin-screw, 15 knot passenger steamer Brussels; one of the Great Eastern Railway steamers operating between Parkesdon Quay, Harwich, and the Hook of Holland, a service which was maintained for many months after the outbreak of hostilities. The Brussels was sailing as an unarmed passenger steamer, subject as all others to the usual international sea law of search and capture. It was a trying time for masters who were faced with the added threat, to which the world had never before been subjected, of being torpedoed by a German U-boat without warning.

There is no doubt that the continuation of this service, which so vividly exemplified the spirit of the unarmed British Merchant Navy whose personnel were determined to sail the seas despite ruthless enemy submarine attacks, did much to inspire a confidence at home and in neutral countries which the military situation at that time hardly justified. It may not have been possible for the Admiralty to give protection to the ordinary merchant ships, but they did give instructions and advice, and in February 1915 Captain Fryatt procured a confidential paper that had been issued to shipmasters (with the injunction that it was not to be allowed to fall into the enemy's hands under any circumstances) in which suggestions were made as to what steps should be taken if they encountered an enemy submarine.

They were told never tamely to surrender, but that they should do their utmost to escape, and were advised that if a submarine came up suddenly ahead with obvious hostile intention, they were to steer for it at top speed, altering course as necessary to keep the submarine ahead. This would force the U-boat to dive and remain submerged until it could surface again astern. The time thus gained would create an opportunity for the steamer to escape.

An attempted attack on the Brussels on 3rd March 1915 was frustrated by the steamer's speed, but shortly afterwards Captain Fryatt was called upon to put the Admiralty's instructions into effect. Leaving Harwich on

28th March, the Brussels was steaming at full speed on the approved Admiralty course, bound for Rotterdam. When about eight miles west of the Maas lightship, Captain Fryatt observed a large U-boat approaching on the starboard bow.

The submarine, the U-33 (at that time one of Germany's latest craft, and one which did considerable damage to merchant shipping in the Channel and Mediterranean), under the command of Cmdr. Gausser, signalled the Brussels to stop. Ignoring this order, Captain Fryatt alerted the engine room and altered course to take the Brussels astern of the submarine. This alteration of course on the part of the Brussels was countered by one on the part of the submarine, and Captain Fryatt then realised that the U-boat was manoeuvring into position to torpedo his ship. By this time both vessels were converging at full speed.

Captain Fryatt then altered course again, bringing the submarine right ahead. This forced the U-33 to dive. She travelled blindly under water for some minutes before her periscope broke the surface just yards away from the Brussels. Captain Fryatt and chief officer Hartnell saw the periscope emerge by the port bow, but it swiftly re-submerged and the Brussels steamed ahead at full speed. When the U-boat re-surfaced the steamer was four or five miles away and out of danger.

Captain Fryatt duly recorded the incident in his log, and it was on this evidence that he was subsequently condemned. The entry read : "*1.10pm : sighted submarine two points on starboard bow. I altered my course to go under his stern. He then turned round and crossed my bow from starboard to port. When he saw me starboard my helm he started to submerge and I steered straight for him. At 1.30 pm his periscope came up under my bows, port side, about six feet from the side and passed astern. Although a good look-out was kept, I saw nothing else of him. I was steering an E x S course at the time of sighting him, and brought my ship to a north-easterly course when I was over the top of him. The latitude was 51°08' N, longitude 3°41' E.*" Gausser's report of how he had been forced to submerge thereby enabling the Brussels to escape angered the German naval authorities, and orders were issued that no efforts were to be spared to capture or destroy the Brussels and her master.

From then on the steamer was a priority target, but she managed to evade the enemy until 11th June, 1915, when speed and skilful navigation alone saved her. Another attack on 15th June, when she was off the Sunk lightship, was also successfully countered, and 14 days later a fifth attempt to sink her was made east of the Sunk. On 20th July, the Brussels was twenty miles south of the inner Gabbard buoy when Captain Fryatt observed a torpedo coming straight for his ship. He immediately put his helm hard over and again escaped. On innumerable occasions Captain Fryatt matched his wits successfully against the guile and missiles of the U-boats whilst playing a leading part in

maintaining the link with Holland. This goaded the Germans into staging a minor naval operation to achieve the result they desired.

On 22nd June 1916 the **Brussels** left Rotterdam with passengers and mails including a sealed diplomatic bag containing confidential documents from the British Consul General at Rotterdam. Another batch of mail had to be collected at the Hook of Holland, to which port the vessel proceeded. It was 11.00pm when she cast off from her berth at the Hook, and as she was leaving harbour bound for Tilbury, a rocket was observed to soar skywards from the shore. Nearly an hour after passing the Maas a small vessel, which neither the master nor the chief officer could identify, was detected in the darkness. After the **Brussels** passed her she was seen to send out the letter 'S' in Morse code by signal lamp. Captain Fryatt's suspicions were aroused by these two unusual incidents and he at once ordered the passengers below and had all lights extinguished. The **Brussels** then proceeded on her course at top speed.

Following the same course was another 'blacked out' steamer which could not be located by Captain Fryatt or Mr. Hartnell. Both officers had their night glasses constantly in use. The possibility of collision was causing considerable concern, so at 12.30am it was decided to switch on the port and starboard lights for a minute or so to warn the other vessel of the **Brussels'** proximity. Fifteen minutes later the **Brussels** was hemmed in on all sides by a flotilla of German destroyers which had made a dash from its Zeebrugge base to bring off the *coup*. They threatened to open fire if the **Brussels** did not stop immediately.

In order to save the lives of his passengers, Captain Fryatt was forced to abandon any idea of making what would have been a suicidal attempt to escape, but before the Germans closed in to board, he rushed to his cabin for his confidential papers and the diplomatic bag, which he took down to the engine room and flung into the furnace to ensure that they did not fall into enemy hands. The Germans, with revolvers and grenades in their hands, were soon swarming all over the **Brussels**, whose crew was rounded up and transferred to one of the destroyers. Captain Fryatt and the chief officer were kept on board the ship.

The German officers went on the bridge and rang for full speed ahead, but there was no response. Infuriated at this, they levelled their revolvers at Captain Fryatt in their belief that he was responsible, and threatened to shoot him if the order was not obeyed at once. After some effort, Captain Fryatt succeeded in convincing them that the engine room was deserted. The engine room was then manned by Germans, who wasted no time in getting their capture under way, heading for the German-occupied Belgian coast. With the German colours flying and her escort of destroyers, the **Brussels** arrived at Zeebrugge at daylight on 23rd June, and as she passed up to Bruges, both banks of the canal were lined with German soldiers.

The crew of the **Brussels** was sent to the notorious Ruhleben camp,

but a few days later on 2nd July Captain Fryatt and chief officer Hartnell were transferred to a prison in Bruges where the former was kept in solitary confinement and subjected to an inquisition for three weeks. With the object of intimidating other British shipmasters, the Germans made it known he was to be court-martialled. On receipt of this knowledge, the British Foreign Office requested Mr Gerard, the American Ambassador in Berlin, to take every possible step to ensure that Captain Fryatt was adequately represented, but the Ambassador's written approaches were ignored by the Germans until less than 24 hours before the proceedings began. On 27th July, 1916 on the charge - based upon his log entry previously quoted - that he "*was strongly suspected of having attempted to cause injury to the forces of Germany*", Captain Fryatt had to face a bitterly hostile court. He was defended by a German officer, a Major Neumann. He faced his accusers with calm dignity, and remained stubbornly silent regarding the Admiralty instructions. The brief proceedings terminated with the court condemning him. Two hours later he was taken out of his cell into the prison yard where he was tied to a post and shot. The next day the German official telegram received in Holland contained the following announcement:

"On 27th July, 1916, at Bruges, before the Court Martial of the Marine Corps, the trial took place of Captain Fryatt, of the British steamer Brussels, which was brought in as a prize. The accused was condemned to death because, although not a member of a combatant force, he made an attempt on the afternoon of 28th March, 1915 to ram the German submarine 'U-33' near the Maas lightship. The accused as well as the first officer and the chief engineer of the steamer received at the time gold watches from the British Admiralty as a reward for their brave conduct on that occasion, and the action was mentioned with pride in the House of Commons. On the occasion in question, disregarding the U-boat's signal to stop and show his national flag, he turned at the critical moment at high speed on the submarine, which escaped the steamer by a few metres only by immediate diving. He confessed that in so doing he had acted in accordance with the instructions of the Admiralty. The sentence was confirmed on 27th July and carried out by shooting".

Condemnation of this barbaric action was world-wide. The matter was considered by a German commission of inquiry in April 1919, and while it upheld the sentence, it expressed regret for the haste with which it had been carried out. Captain Fryatt's remains were brought back to England in HMS *Orpheus* in July 1919 and, after an impressive memorial service at St.Paul's Cathedral, were taken to Dovercourt for interment.

In his official history, "The Merchant Navy", Sir Archibald Hurd states: "*Captain Fryatt's innocence is alike attested by British history, by British laws and by British privileges at sea. He upheld a right which is vital to those who go down to the sea, and defended it with constancy, loyalty and*

unflinching courage". A fund was established in Captain Fryatt's name for the relief of officers and their dependents, and is now administered by NUMAST.

The Brussels was used as a dépôt ship by the Germans for a submarine flotilla based at Zeebrugge, and in the course of the attack on the port on 23rd April 1918, it was believed that she had been torpedoed and sunk by Coastal Motor Boat 32A, but this was proved later not to be the case. Before the Germans evacuated this coastal area, they sank everything they could in the harbour. The Brussels was sunk off the head of the mole to serve as a breakwater and boom defence. After the war the work of clearing the harbour was undertaken by the Admiralty, and the raising of the Brussels was one of the most difficult jobs tackled by Cmdr. G.J.Wheeler, who had charge of the operations.

Divers found her settled on an even keel in 18ft of mud with two holes in the starboard side, both about 5ft in diameter, and one near her bilge keel about 5ft x 6ft on the port side, all caused by internal mining. Considerable clearance work on and around the steamer had to be done before the Brussels was cradled on 16 nine-inch cables slung from four lifting craft. The first stage of the lift was successfully accomplished on 4th August 1919, and she was taken to Heyst and beached. On the next day she was carried further inshore and this procedure was repeated on 6th August. She was then patched up, and when pumped out, refloated. Overgrown with barnacles and weed she presented a sorry spectacle. As she had been abandoned by the enemy in Belgian waters, legally she was a Belgian prize, but in the belief that Britons would cherish her with national pride, the Belgians restored her to Britain. In due course she was put up for auction and was in danger of going to foreigners when the Admiralty Marshal intervened.

The Brussels was eventually purchased by J.Gale & Company of Preston, and in March 1921 she was sent to Henry Robb of Leith to be adapted for service in the Irish cattle trade to operate between Preston and Dublin. When she left their hands in September her livestock carrying capacity was 600 cattle and 1,000 sheep. The Brussels docked in Preston for the first time on Monday 5th September 1921, and an object of considerable interest, fixed near the captain's quarters, was a framed copy of the death sentence on Captain Fryatt, signed by Admiral von Schroeder.

Under Captain D.I.Ronayne, the first trip of the Brussels was made on 7th September 1921 and for 7½ years she maintained this service with occasional visits to the Mersey, especially during the period August 1927 until April 1929. There was however, a change in her ownership. In 1923 she was taken over by the British & Irish Steam Packet Company, for whom Henry Tyre & Company acted as agents at Preston, and in conformity with other units in their fleet, her name was prefixed by "*Lady*".

Apart from a collision with the lock gates at Preston on 30th July 1926, to which the *Lady Brussels* did extensive damage, her cattle-carrying career

was more or less uneventful, and she made her last crossing from Dublin on 19th April 1929. An atmosphere of sadness prevailed when she passed out of the life of Preston, and as she steamed out of the dock on her way to the shipbreakers' yard at Port Glasgow, the sirens of the ships in port accorded her an impressive farewell. The plate recording the sacrifice of Captain Fryatt which had been affixed to the deck of the **Lady Brussels** was a treasured memento in the Mercantile Marine Institute in Brussels before the Second World War, and very probably is still resting there.

*By way of conclusion, L.N.R.S. Member Peter Kenyon has extracted some details about the **Brussels** from the Port of Preston Arrivals and Sailings Books. These books are deposited in the Lancashire County Records Office, Bow Lane, Preston.*

Sources:

1. David Masters, *Captain Fryatt and the Brussels*, article in "Shipping Wonders of the World".
2. Joseph Conrad, 'Tradition', in *Notes on Life and Letters*, London, 1924
3. *The Murder of Captain Charles Algernon Fryatt* (London, 1916)
4. John P.Light, "An Immortal Shipmaster", Sea Breezes, Vol.9, Jan/June 1950, page 180.

Editor's Note:

Members may recall the following incident when another British cross-Channel steamer attempted to ram a German U-boat.

On 6th February, 1917, the paddle steamer **Mona's Queen** (2) left Southampton under the command of Captain Cain with 1,000 troops on board, bound for Le Havre. Some twenty miles from the French coast a German U-boat surfaced, almost dead ahead. The *Queen* kept on course, despite a torpedo being fired at her, and the U-boat's conning tower was struck by her port paddle box, the steel paddle floats inflicting severe damage. Despite diving immediately, the U-boat (UC.26) was not fatally damaged and arrived at Ostend two days later for repairs and overhaul. UC.26 was finally sunk in the Thames estuary by the Royal Navy on 30th April, 1917.

The **Mona's Queen** was disabled by the incident, but managed to steam slowly into Le Havre. After discharging her troops she steamed back to Southampton for repairs by Harland & Wolff, and resumed her trooping duties on 17th March.

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ss BRUSSELS, Owner : J.Gale & Co. (Preston)

Arrival (1921)	Draft	From	Cargo	Sailed (1921)	Draft	For	Cargo/Bunkers & Bunkering Agent
5.Sept. pm	14'06"	Leith	Light	7.Sept	14'10"	Dublin	Light. Bk.61t,16cwt, Settle Speakman
9.Sept. pm	15'06"	Dublin	Cattle 434/ Sheep 473 Pigs 60	13.Sept	14'08"	Dublin	Light. Bk.42t,12cwt, Settle Speakman
15.Sept. pm	15'10"	Dublin	Cattle 465/ Sheep 811	16.Sept	14'06"	Dublin	Light. Bk.52t,14cwt, A.Willets & Son
23.Sept. am	15'09"	Dublin	Cattle 502/ Sheep 856 Pigs 43	24.Sept	15'06"	Dublin	Woodpulp-200tons,18cwt,1qtr. Bk. 26t,17cwt, Settle Speakman
30.Sept. am	15'10"	Dublin	Cattle 399/ Sheep 804 Pigs 15/ Gen.1t.1cwt	4.Oct	15'00"	Dublin	General-4tons,7cwt. Bk. 34t, Settle Speakman
7.Oct. am	16'00"	Dublin	Cattle 477/ Sheep 1114 Pigs 57	8.Oct	14'09"	Dublin	Light. Bk.40t,12cwt, Settle Speakman
9.Oct. am	14'08"	Dublin	Cattle 124/ Sheep 357 Pigs 45/ Gen.40t	11.Oct	14'06"	Dublin	Paper-6t,8cwt
14.Oct. am	16'00"	Dublin	Cattle 535/ Sheep 920 Pigs 74, Gen.29t,3cwt	14.Oct	14'08"	Dublin	Light. Bk.28t,14cwt, Pigot & Smith
16.Oct. am	14'06"	Dublin	Cattle 147/ Sheep 201 Gen.33t,3cwt	18.Oct	14'05"	Dublin	General-10t,18cwt,3qtr Bk.46t,15cwt, Settle Speakman
21.Oct. am	15'08"	Dublin	Cattle 548/ Sheep 955 Pigs 91/ Gen.46t,16cwt	22.Oct	14'06"	Dublin	General-2t,3cwt,2qtr Bk.39t,7cwt, Settle Speakman
23.Oct. pm	16'00"	Dublin	Cattle 621/ Sheep 508 Pigs 164/ Gen.50t.17cwt	25.Oct	14'05"	Dublin	General- 12t. Bk.41t,2cwt, Settle Speakman