

HISTORY OF SCAPA FLOW

Scapa Flow is a body of water about 120 square miles (311 square kilometres) in area with an average depth of 98 – 131 feet (30 – 40 meters). It is encircled by the Orkney Mainland and South Isles, making it a sheltered harbour with easy access to both the North Sea and Atlantic Ocean. The name, Scapa Flow, comes from the Old Norse Skalpaflói, meaning 'bay of the long isthmus', which refers to the thin strip of land between the town of Kirkwall and Scapa Bay. It was much used in Viking times and there are several references to it in the saga of the Earls of Orkney, Orkneyinga Saga. The first mention of a fleet of ships using Scapa Flow was in 1198 when Earl Harald Maddadsson raised a great force to resist a rival's claim to half of the earldom. A spy travelled to South Ronaldsay where he climbed a hill and saw the earl's army and a great fleet of ships, many of them large warships. Earl Harald defeated his rival in a battle in Caithness, but incurred the wrath of both the kings of Scotland and Norway as a result of his actions.

Another great fleet (or at least the remnants of one) found safety in Scapa Flow in 1263. King Hákon IV of Norway sailed to Orkney with a mighty flotilla, then on to the Norwegian owned Western Isles as a demonstration of his sea power to the King of Scotland. The fleet was delayed from leaving because of negotiations with Scotland over the disputed territory, but in the end the autumnal gales that the King of Scotland had anticipated wrecked many ships and the Norwegians were defeated by the Scots at the Battle of Largs. King Hákon returned to Orkney, which was still firmly in Norwegian control at the time, and had his ships pulled up on the Mainland beaches of Scapa Flow; from Scapa Bay to Houton. King Hákon was a broken man and died in the Bishop's Palace in Kirkwall during Yule. He was temporarily buried in St Magnus Cathedral before his body was returned to Bergen the following spring.

In 1529 Orkney was invaded by a force led by the Earl of Caithness, who had been ordered by King James V of Scotland to suppress a rebellion in the islands. His fleet sail across Scapa Flow, but missed their intended landing at Scapa Bay due to fog and landed at another beach instead, most likely Waulkmill Bay in Orphir. They marched north, thinking they would reach Kirkwall, but instead they were attacked by the Orkney men and routed at Summerdale, between Orphir and Stenness. In 1812 the Admiralty took an interest in Scapa Flow as a deep water anchorage. Eventually it was decided to build two Martello Towers on either side of Longhope as a defence for merchant ships waiting there for a warship to escort them to the Baltic Sea. It would not be until the early 20th century before the Admiralty once again looked at Scapa Flow's potential as a northern naval base against a new enemy; Germany. Previous wars had been waged against countries like France, Spain and the Netherlands, so the need for a naval base in the north was unnecessary. Now they found Scapa Flow to be ideally situated to provide a safe anchorage in the north with easy access to open waters. If they relied on the Firth of Forth (where the Battlecruiser Squadron would be stationed) they had to run the risk of ships being trapped in their own base if a minefield was placed across the mouth of the estuary by a mine-laying submarine.

On the outbreak of World War I defences had to be put in place to guard the Grand Fleet in its new home. Coastal defence batteries were built; boom defences and nets were stretched over the entrances to prevent enemy ships or submarines from penetrating the safe waters of Scapa Flow. Old merchant ships were sunk to block the four channels to the east and Burra Sound in the west. It was from this well guarded naval base that the Grand Fleet sailed in May 1916 to engage in battle with the German High Seas Fleet (Hochseeflotte) at the Battle of Jutland; among the sailors who took part was the future King George VI. On the 5th June, in the aftermath of the battle, the Grand Fleet was visited by the Minister of War, Lord Kitchener, who was on his way to Russia for a goodwill visit. He left Scapa Flow in the light cruiser HMS Hampshire, which struck a mine and sank off Marwick Head in Birsay

during a summer gale. Of the 667 men on board there were only 12 survivors. A greater loss would be suffered the following year when the battleship HMS Vanguard blew up in Scapa Flow with the loss of 843 men. The naval blockade of goods to Germany was enforced by the Royal Navy based at Scapa Flow; this virtually unknown and unseen tactic would eventually ensure Germany's defeat.

As part of the Armistice agreement signed with Germany it had to surrender most of its fleet. 74 ships of the High Seas Fleet were interned in Scapa Flow from November 1918 until they scuttled themselves on the 21st June 1919 in the mistaken belief that the peace talks had failed. 52 ships went to the bottom of Scapa Flow that day; it remains the greatest loss of shipping ever recorded in a single day. The German ships were raised in what must be one of the largest ever salvage operations in history, pioneered by the engineering genius of Ernest Cox of Cox & Danks, and later by Metal Industries Ltd. Only 7 of the 52 ships remain in Scapa Flow providing one of the world's greatest dive sites.

World War II saw the Home Fleet return to Scapa Flow, but the defences had been allowed to run down and it was vulnerable to attack. This was brought home when the battleship HMS Royal Oak was sunk by the U-47 on the night of 14th October 1939. The defences were strengthened and the vulnerable eastern channels, which had been unsuccessfully obstructed with blockships, were closed forever by the Churchill Barriers. Italian POWs who worked on their construction left behind them a symbol of peace in the form of a small chapel made from converted Nissan huts and scrap, beautifully designed and painted by Domenico Chiocchetti. It remains an inspiration to all who visit it.

The British troops who were responsible for the defences at Scapa Flow could feel as trapped in these far off islands as the Italian POWs did, and one of them painted a large mural on the walls of the mess hall at Ness Battery, which guards the Hoy Sound to the west. The artist, A. R. Woods, depicted scenes of an idyllic English village; quite a contrast with the bare islands that surrounded the gun battery. During World War II Scapa Flow found itself vulnerable to air attacks, until the Scapa Barrage was introduced in April 1940. This saw all anti-aircraft guns on shore and on ships open fire to spread a blanket of deadly shrapnel over the anchorage, breaking up attacks and forcing aircraft to remain at high altitude where bombing was less accurate. Some of the war's major naval actions began from Scapa Flow. The hunt for the Bismarck in 1941 began from here, as did aircraft carrier raids against her sister ship Tirpitz and the sinking of the Scharnhorst in 1943 was done by ships from Scapa Flow. This was also the base for the Arctic Convoy escort ships that sailed to northern Russia with vital war supplies for the Soviet Union.

The naval base at Lyness closed in 1957 and now warships are an unusual sight in Scapa Flow. They were replaced by tankers that carry away oil from the Flotta Oil Terminal. Divers come to explore the wrecks of Scapa Flow and to see for themselves the remains of the Kaiser's High Seas Fleet that once posed such a deadly threat to Britain during the dark days of World War I. Blockships from both World Wars also make good dive sites, as well as other wrecks. The two battleships HMS Vanguard and HMS Royal Oak, as well as the light cruiser HMS Hampshire to the west of Orkney, were all veterans of the Battle of Jutland and are all now war graves where diving is forbidden.