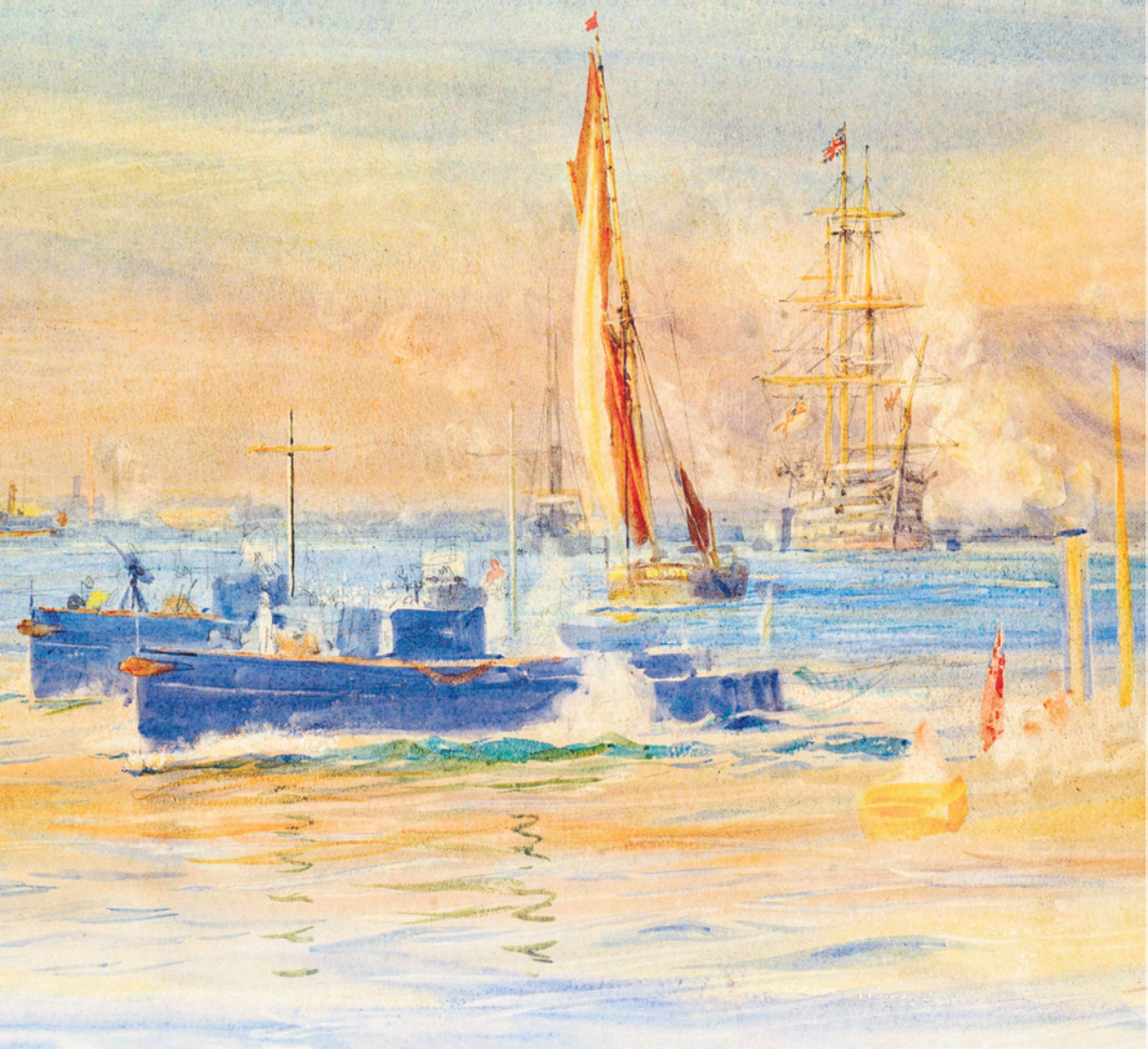
THE PETROL NAVY

STEVE R DUNN

British, American and Other Naval Motor Boats at War 1914–1920



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For Vivienne, with love

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List of Abbreviations

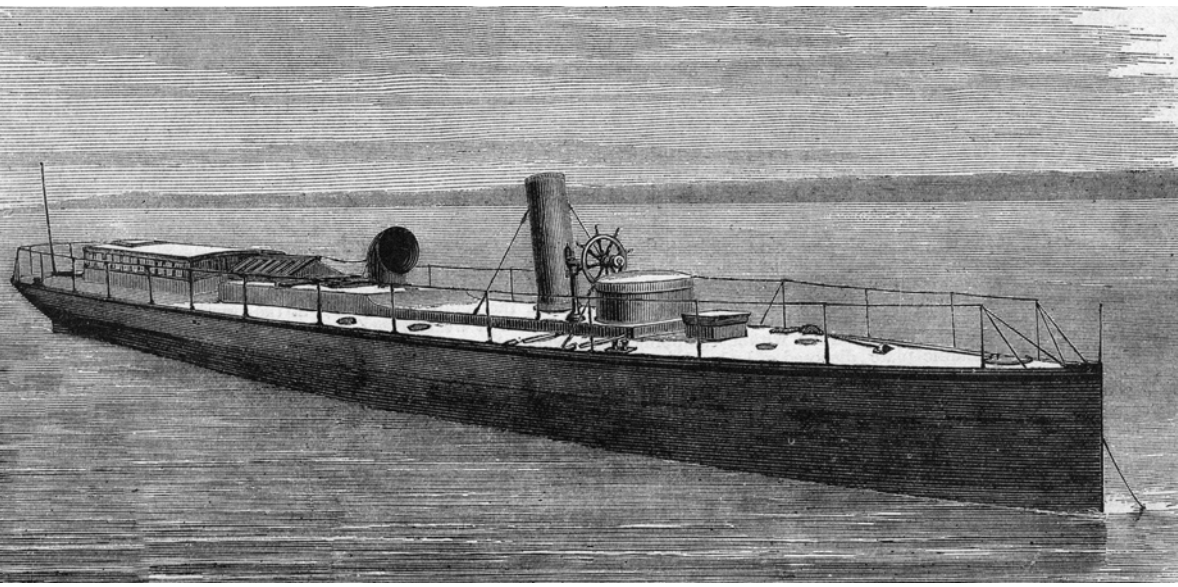
A/S	Anti-Submarine
ASC	Army Service Corps
BMBC	British Motor Boat Club
C	French submarine chasers acquired from the USA
CMB	Coastal Motor Boat
CNVM	Corpo Nazionale Volontari Motornauti, the Italian Naval Reserve
DCB	Distant Control Boat
ECB	(German) Electrically Controlled Motor Boat
EEF	Egyptian Expeditionary Force
Elco	The Electric Launch Company
GRT	Gross Register Tons
M	Monitor
MAS	either *Motoscafo Armato Silurante* or *Motoscafi AntiSommergibili*, Italian motor boats
ML	Motor Launch
MMA	Marine Motoring Association
MMR	Mercantile Marine Reserve
PDH	Portable Directional Hydrophone
PSG	Portable General Service Hydrophone
RFA	Royal Fleet Auxiliary
RN	Royal Navy
RNR	Royal Naval Reserve
RNR(T)	Royal Naval Reserve Trawler Section
RNCV	Royal Naval Coast Volunteers
RNAV	Royal Naval Artillery Volunteers
RNMBR	Royal Naval Motor Boat Reserve
RNVR	Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve
RNAS	Royal Naval Air Service
SC	Submarine Chaser
SNO	Senior Naval Officer
SVAN	Societa Veneziana Automobili Navali, an Italian shipyard
USN	US Navy
USNRF	US Naval Reserve Force
V	French *Vedettes*, largely US-built MLs

Very bold, very gallant was he
Who first built a ship
And set sail down wind
Seeking a country he didn't see
And a shore he didn't know
Wace, *Roman de Brut* (1155)

One who never turned his back but marched breast forward,
Never doubted clouds would break,
Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would triumph,
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,
Sleep to wake.
Robert Browning, *Epilogue to Asolando* (1889)

'Believe me, my young friend, there is nothing – absolutely nothing – half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats'.
Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows* (1908)

Sing me a song of a frail ML
May the Lord have mercy upon us,
Rolling about in an oily swell
May the Lord have mercy upon us,
Out on a high explosive spree,
Petrol, Lyddite and TNT,
Looking for U-boat 303,
May the Lord have mercy upon us.
Anon, *The Song of the Sea Slugs*
(quoted in Nutting, *Cinderellas of the Fleet*, p54)



HMS *Lightning* (1876), the first seagoing vessel to be armed with an explosive cylinder driven by a compressed air engine. The illustration is from *Scientific American*, Supplement 7 July 1877. *(Author's collection)*

Introduction

Britain's navy played a key role in the eventual defeat of Germany in the First World War. Much has been written about the battles of Heligoland Bight, Dogger Bank and Jutland, of the Zeebrugge and Ostend raids, and of the destroyers of the Dover Patrol.

But these famous actions did not decide the outcome of the war. It was the battle of attrition, fought in the North Sea and elsewhere, to starve Germany of supplies through naval blockade which ruined German morale and eventually brought that country to its knees. And it was the hard-fought battle against the U-boats in the North Sea and the Western Approaches which ensured that food, men and armaments reached Britain and her Allies. It was the Royal Navy's eventual success in this campaign which ensured that the British population was fed and watered throughout the conflict and that Allied arms and manufacturing prevailed in the end.

Key to these two successes was the role of the auxiliary naval forces. Rich men's private yachts, cross-channel ferries and sundry other commercial craft were taken up by the Admiralty and commissioned as temporary warships. Steam trawlers and drifters were hastily removed from their peacetime activities and converted to minesweepers or anti-submarine patrol vessels. Over three thousand fishing vessels were used by the Royal Navy in this fashion, in the main manned by their fishermen crews. They are remembered in fishing ports all round Britain's coast to this day.

But there was another category of vessel that was to play a key part in these auxiliary forces, and in the regular navy; and that was the small, durable, motor boat, armed with torpedoes or anti-submarine weapons. The concept of a small manoeuvrable craft, capable of carrying an offensive explosive charge dates back to 1864, when a retired Italian army officer, Capitano Giovanni Luppis, developed a 'mobile spar torpedo', an explosive charge that was guided by two wires. A British engineer, Robert Whitehead, furthered Luppis' work and came up with 'an automobile torpedo' that could be detonated below a ship's waterline. In April 1871 the Admiralty purchased the rights to the Whitehead device for £15,000 and it was further refined at Woolwich. Then British boatbuilder John Isaac Thornycroft adapted the weapon to his fast steam launches. The first boat of such design was accepted by the Royal Navy as HMS *Lightning* (1876). *Lightning* was in effect a steam

launch, relatively fast for the time. She had two drop collars to launch torpedoes; these were replaced in 1879 by a single torpedo tube in the bow. She also carried two reload torpedoes amidships.

But fitting a steam engine into such craft was a difficult piece of naval architecture. Coal, stokers, boilers: all had to be found a place in a small space. The inception of the internal combustion engine gave naval planners a new opportunity to consider the concept – a petrol-powered vessel. The development of the marine internal combustion engine in the early years of the century led to the rise of motor-powered small craft, motor boats and motor-powered yachts. And an obvious extension of this new technology was its use in naval vessels.

The parts that these boats took are not well known today; and less renowned too is the role in the auxiliary forces played by the amateur yachtsmen and motor boat enthusiasts of the country. In the years immediately before the First World War, sport featured the gentleman amateur as never before. Relatively wealthy and with copious free time, these so-called 'Corinthians', with their carefully nurtured, seemingly effortless success, dominated the sporting world and nowhere more so than competitive yachting and motor boat racing.

In 1912 a group of these sporting motor boat owners had suggested to the Admiralty that their vessels too could assist in the defence of Britain. This led to the creation of the Royal Naval Motor Boat Reserve (RNMBR). At the beginning of the war, these marine sportsmen and owners of motor pleasure launches responded to the clarion call of *noblesse oblige* and brought forward their vessels and themselves for naval service in the auxiliary forces. Owners came with their boats and in exchange were given a commission in the RNMBR, a minimum of training, a rifle or machine gun, and set to all types of work in harbours and along the littoral. During the war, a total of 194 motor boats were so employed as naval auxiliaries. The boats' owners, now RNMBR officers, came from the landed gentry, the peerage and the monied middle class; they were gentlemen amateur sailors turned warriors.

But by mid 1915 it was clear that the demands of naval duty had proved too much for the motor pleasure boats and that they were structurally unfitted for the task. A fortunate meeting in the USA led to their replacement by Elco motor launches (MLs), of which 550 were eventually purchased from the Elco company of America. Constructed according to the methods of mass production pioneered by Henry Ford, these craft were built in record time and began to be commissioned into the Royal Navy from October 1915. Around the same time, the RMBR was disestablished and its men absorbed into the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNVR). The

officers transferred to command the MLs, while their original craft were decommissioned back to civilian life.

The Elco launches gave great service for the rest of the war, almost entirely officered by RNVR personnel, in duties that included hunting U-boats, minesweeping, convoy escort and smoke-laying. And three Victoria Crosses were won in these craft at the Zeebrugge/Ostend raids of 1918.

This book tells the story of how the RNMBR and the MLs came into being, describes the men who brought them into existence, and how they were manned. The narrative also details the design and technical development of the Elco boats, from a chance meeting in New York to their production in Canada at the rate of one a day. The actions and day-to-day duties involving ML boats are examined, as is the character of the amateur sailors who commanded and crewed them.

But this was not the only example of motor-powered small war craft in the Royal Navy. In 1915 some serving naval officers developed another concept, the hydroplaning coastal motor boat or CMB, many of which served with great distinction in the later part of the war, especially at Zeebrugge and Ostend and with the Harwich Force. These craft were the province of regular Royal Navy sailors, as well as volunteers, and were not considered 'auxiliary'. At least 116 of these remarkable boats were produced and the story of their development and use is considered.

Post-war, both MLs and CMBs saw valuable service, inter alia, in the Occupation of the Rhineland, policing and defending the Rhine waterways, and in the Baltic Campaign of 1918–1920 where three VCs were won in them. The book examines their usage and success in these little-known deployments.

Britain was not alone in using diminutive motor-powered boats for war. In Italy, the MAS torpedo-carrying motor craft achieved some success, including sinking a battleship. And in France, motor launches (*vedettes*), supplied by the Royal Navy and acquired direct from Elco, played their part.

Germany too made use of small motor vessels, building twenty-one torpedo-armed *Luftschiffmotorboote* together with some *Fernlenkboot* remotely controlled designs. And when America entered the war, she built a considerable fleet of so-called 'sub chasers' (also known as 'splinter ships'), wooden-built and specifically designed to counter the threat from U-boats. They were deployed in British and European waters just before the war's end and post-war continued to serve with their British sisters in Europe and Russia.

And it was American manufacturing drive and know-how that allowed the petrol navies of Britain, France and the USA to come to fruition. US shipyards and designers were the source for many of the vessels deployed.

The stories of these small, versatile motor craft, largely utilised in coastal waters, have rarely been told. They were 'The Petrol Navy', a new type of war machine which owed its existence to the recent development of the marine internal combustion engine and opened new tactical opportunities for maritime powers.

In both Britain and the USA, such vessels were almost entirely crewed and commanded by volunteers. The contribution to the Allied war effort that these little craft and their officers and crews made is largely overlooked. In this book, the author hopes to both rectify these omissions and provide a tribute to the work of these men and boats, both in the Royal Navy, the USN and in the navies of both friend and foe. Although primarily from a British perspective, the intent is a celebration and commemoration of the motor boat at war.

Please note: the twenty-four-hour clock is employed throughout. Where ante-meridian/post-meridian was used in the original it has been converted. Naval ranks and other titles given to individuals are the ones they held at the time of the incident narrated. A date in brackets after the name of a vessel is its year of launch. Names of towns are the ones used at the time of the war. The book does not follow a strict chronology but rather a thematic one, which examines a topic through time before moving on to others. And finally, weights: a warship's size was generally reckoned as 'displacement tonnage', cargo vessels as 'gross register tons' or grt (a measure of internal volume).

1

Yachting and the Development of the Motor Boat

There has probably never been a better time in British history to be alive than the twenty or so years preceding the First World War – as long as you were rich, or at least substantially well off. Advances in health care meant that a man of means had an increased possibility of living his three score and ten, and a growing consumerist society presented the opportunity for wealth creation as well as wealth retention.

Immediately before this period, it had not been all beer and skittles for the landed rich. Britain fell into a severe agricultural depression in the 1880s which lasted until Edward VII's ascension to the throne.* Rental income from land holdings fell sharply, and the aristocracy had to sell land, houses and other treasures to stave off their decrease in ready money. Fortunately, American millionaires simultaneously filled their homes with the treasures of the Old World, bought into the troubled estates and married their daughters into these suddenly less wealthy aristocratic families, desperate for English status and titles for themselves and their offspring. They also provided staggeringly large dowries.†

Additionally, by the time of the extended Edwardian era, the period between 1900 and 1914, society was no longer a small, exclusive circle confined to those of aristocratic birth, but had expanded to include those who had made their wealth through trade or banking. Travel was cheap and easy, since one needed no passport or visa before the Russian or Ottoman borders. Tax on income or capital had been trivial, and technological advances were exciting and opened up new horizons for pleasure and commerce. Innovative technical designs came to the market one after the other, including, inter alia, telephones, typewriters, sewing machines, motorcars, aeroplanes and wireless radio.

The influence of the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) dominated the latter part of the nineteenth century. His mannerisms of dress, speech,

* Corn imports from Australia and the USA, combined with more efficient bacon production in Denmark and new refrigerated ships bringing beef from South America, caused agricultural rents to drop by an average 22.6 per cent between 1878 and 1893. The price of wheat fell from 46 shillings per quarter in 1870 to 22 shillings in 1894 (Offer, *An Agrarian Interpretation*, p93).

† The 9th Duke of Marlborough was one of the pioneers in 1895, marrying Consuelo Vanderbilt and receiving a dowry of $2.5 million, perhaps $70 million today. He told his unfortunate bride that he only married her to save Blenheim Palace.

leisure, amusements, and those whom he chose to befriend, were imitated by the aspirants who wished to be accepted in society. Edward opened the doors of society to those previously excluded from it by birth, occupation or religion – people such as the Rothschilds, Sassoons and Cassells – American millionaires, and the nouveau riche from the British Empire. As long as they had money and/or were amusing, they were in. Thus Edward's sporting interests influenced the leisure choices of society. There were at least two 'sports of kings', not just horse racing. For though he loved the turf, Edward delighted in sailing too, especially Cowes Week, as did his younger son, later George V, who served in the Royal Navy until 1892.

And with increased leisure time, at least among the middle and upper classes, other sports grew too. Cricket, football, rugby and rowing all boomed during this period, as did tennis, croquet and golf. To a greater or lesser extent, royalty, the aristocracy and the monied bourgeoisie participated in all of these interests. But they were careful with whom they played or competed and on what basis.

The cult of the amateur

It was a trope of the age that one should not be seen to try too hard at anything. To work in trade was of a lesser status than to live off rental or capital. The future Admiral Sir Percy Scott remembered his father: 'it was a principle with him never to make a fuss about anything, and he impressed upon me that every occurrence, whatever it might be, should be taken with imperturbable quiet. He would quote that passage from "Pelham",* who declares that among the properly educated a calm pervaded all their habits and actions, whereas the vulgar could take neither a spoon nor an affront without making an amazing noise about it'.[1]

To work hard at school or university was considered poor form; better one should make friends, play sports, roister and be seen as a 'jolly good egg'. Professionalism in sport was seen as infra dig, as it suggested effort. Successful sportsmen should be amateurs (with certain exceptions such as jockeys, who were paid substantial sums to ensure that their lordly horse-owning patrons won) and losing should be taken in good part; better to participate fairly and lose, than win by taking an advantage or through poor sportsmanship.

Such behaviours and beliefs applied in Britain's senior service as well. In the Royal Navy, 'advertising' – pushing oneself forward or striving overmuch to be successful – was a social crime. Indeed, it could be positively deleterious

* *Pelham, or, the Adventures of a Gentleman*, was a novel by Edward George Bulwer-Lytton, written in 1827.

to one's reputation 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 Edwardian and Victorian navy. Cleverness was looked at somewhat askance and the furtherance of academic study was not encouraged. A 'three-oner' – a man who obtained first-class passes at his Seamanship Board, Royal Naval College and the HMS *Excellent* Gunnery School – was suspect and 'three-oners' were held in contempt by many in the navy as being 'too clever by half', as were officers who pursued outside interests. Fitting in socially and coming from the 'right' background was deemed more important.

The army was the same. Horace Smith-Dorrien was one of the better British generals in the 1914–1918 war. As a captain, he attended the army staff college in 1887. He found his two years there very pleasant: 'I enjoyed every minute,' he wrote later. 'I do not think we were taught as much as we might have been, but there was plenty of sport and not too much work.'[2] He never managed to find the library but still passed out.

Even in battue shooting, so beloved of Edward VII and George V, it was a crime to be seen to try too hard. At the end of the nineteenth century, the best shot in Britain was Lord de Grey (later the Marquess of Ripon). He liked to pretend that his mass killing of birds was effortless and 'was annoyed to be discovered in the library of a country house before breakfast, practising changing guns with his loader'.[3]

Corinthians

The right sort of amateur sportsman was called a Corinthian. There was even a football club named Corinthian FC. It was founded in 1882, entirely amateur, and grounded in the concept of fair play. The club produced sixteen English national team captains, including Reginald Erskine 'Tip' Foster, still the only man to have captained an English international team at both cricket and football. Another who played football for Corinthian and cricket for England was C B Fry. He appeared seventy-four times for the club, competed for England at football once and won twenty-six Test cricket caps. He also held the British long jump record and was offered the throne of Albania. In 1908 he became Captain Superintendent of the Training Ship *Mercury*, a nautical school primarily designed to prepare boys for service in the Royal Navy.*

In cricket, amateurs changed in separate dressing rooms from the professionals. One of the most prestigious matches was that between the public schools of Eton and Harrow at Lord's each year. Another high-ranked

* When war came, Fry was made an honorary captain in the RNR. According to *The Globe* newspaper, 'he would stride about in his uniform looking every inch like six admirals' (Sandford, *The Final Over*, p66).

cricket fixture was that held annually between the Gentlemen (amateurs) and the Players (professional).* A cricketer such as the Indian prince and England Test batsman K S Ranjitsinhji, ruler of the princely state of Nawanagar, who won fifteen international caps between 1896 and 1902, was admired for his effortless artistry and apparent lack of effort at the crease.

And the term 'Corinthian' came to have a considerable resonance in the world of yachting. In the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary,* the word 'Corinthian' is defined as 'a wealthy amateur of sport'.[4] But *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* goes further, giving as its meaning 'a gentleman sportsman who rides his own horses on the turf or sails his own yacht'.[5] As with cricket, yacht races had once been the vehicle for betting, and rich men used to race yachts in much the same manner as they raced horses – for large prizes and with the use of highly professional methods. Yachts such as these were crewed entirely by paid hands with professional skippers. There was little scope for amateurs in such a set-up. But by the second half of the nineteenth century, such racing became unfashionable. By 1892, the yachtsman Frank Cooper, writing in his book *Sailing Tours*, was able to state that 'a Corinthian sailor … is one capable of managing a craft either single-handed (if she is small enough) or with the assistance of other amateurs'.† And sailing really did become the sport of kings (and queens).

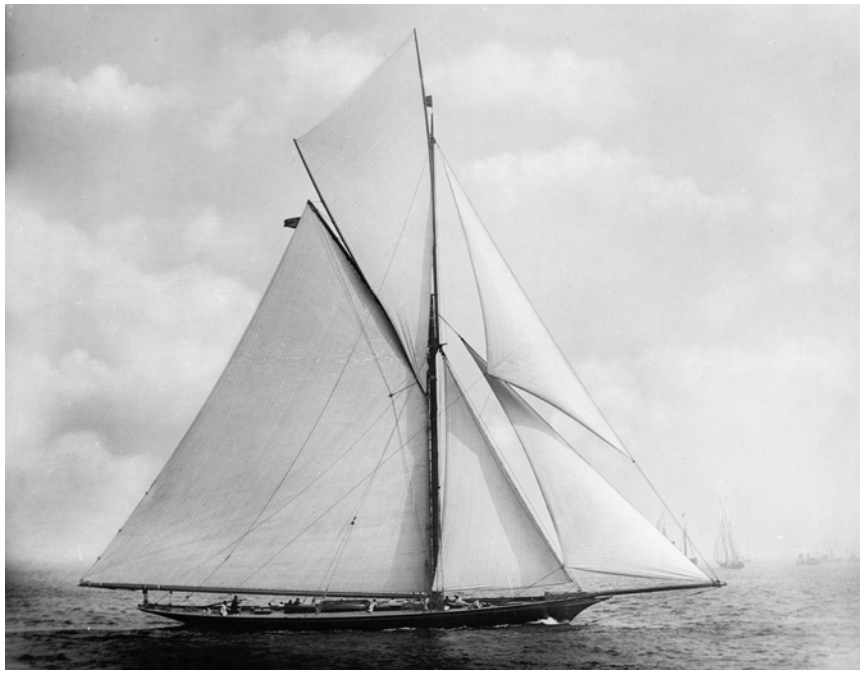
The rise of the yacht club

It was Charles II who popularised the yacht. Whilst in exile in Holland, the King had become enamoured of the Dutch vessel known as a *jacht*. Charles's early experience of Dutch *jachts* led him to desire similar vessels for himself. His return to the English throne was celebrated by the city of Amsterdam, which presented him with a luxurious 60ft yacht, including a crew of twenty, named the *Mary*. The first English-built yacht was the *Katherine*, of length at the keel 49ft and beam 19ft. By 1685 there were twenty yachts in the royal squadron (there would be twenty-five over the two reigns of Charles and his brother James), including one specially built and launched in 1670 for Queen Henrietta, named *Saudadoes* ('greetings to you' in Portuguese), although only seven were truly royal and assigned to the immediate service of the King and royal family.

Soon the first organised regatta took place, a forty-mile race on the Thames in 1661 between *Katherine* and *Anne*, James, Duke of York's new yacht. The King himself was at the helm of *Katherine* – and unsurprisingly won. A new sport was born.

* This tradition did not end until 1962.

† And the term persists. Even in the 2020s, there exists the Royal Corinthian Sailing Club (est 1894) and the Cowes Corinthian Yacht Club (est 1852).

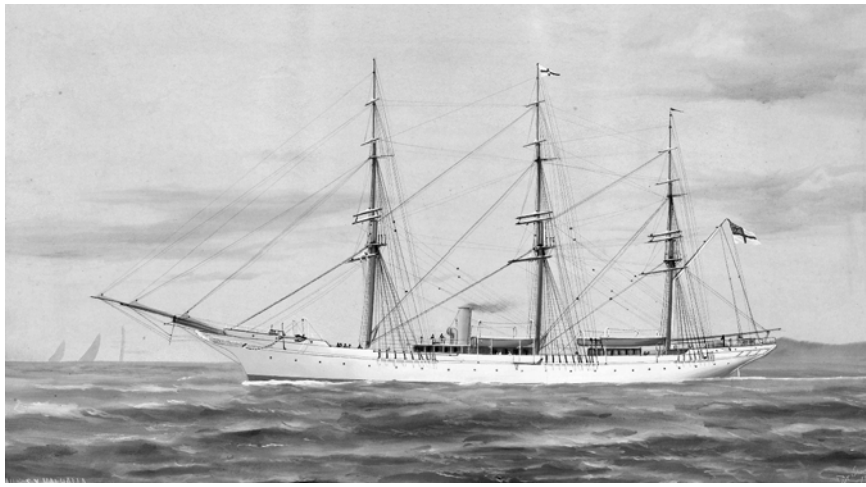


The ex-America's cup challenger *Thistle*, later Kaiser Wilhelm II's *Meteor*.
(Author's collection)

With the rise of sailing, came the yacht club. By the 1800s, yachting had grown to include the world's wealthiest men. Yacht clubs began to form in the eighteenth century to accommodate the new interest shown and codify and establish races and rules. The first yacht club in the world, called the Cork Water Club, later the Royal Cork,* was established in Ireland in 1720, followed by the Lough Ree Yacht Club in 1770 (again in Ireland), and the Starcross Yacht Club in 1772 in England.

Probably the most famous of all the English yacht clubs, the Royal Yacht Squadron, was founded on 1 June 1815 at the Thatched House Tavern in St James's, London, as 'The Yacht Club' by forty-two gentlemen interested in yachting. It welcomed the Prince Regent as a member in 1817. Three years later, when the Regent became George IV, it was entitled the Royal Yacht Club. The club organised yacht racing as part of its annual regatta, which eventually became known as Cowes Week. And in 1833 William IV renamed the club the Royal Yacht Squadron. The Squadron hosted royal visitors of many nations over the years and maintained strong links with the British

* With a clubhouse built in 1854 to the designs of Anthony Salvin, the go-to architect for the minor aristocracy.



Lord Crawford's auxiliary steam yacht *Valhalla* (1892), depicted in 1901 by Antonio de Simone. *(Author's collection)*

monarchy and Royal Navy. Members' yachts were given the suffix RYS to their names and permitted to fly the White Ensign of the Royal Navy.

The German emperor brought his *Meteor*, the 1887 ex-America's Cup challenger *Thistle*, to Cowes in 1892. This encouraged Edward, Prince of Wales to build *Britannia*, one of the most successful racing yachts in the calendar. Lord Crawford's* beautiful ship-rigged yacht *Valhalla* cruised far afield and was a noted visitor in Cowes Week; she was also a competitor in the 1905 Transatlantic Race for the German Emperor's Cup. Cowes became one of the social events of the season.

Yacht clubs sprang up all over Britain and attracted noble and wealthy members and patrons. The Royal Harwich Yacht Club boasted Queen Victoria as its patron from 1847 to 1901, followed by King George V between 1911 and 1936. The Harwich regattas had become the opening event for each season's 'Big Yacht Class' and attracted most of the famous racing yachts of the time, including *Britannia.*

Or consider the Royal Western Yacht Club: founded as the Port of Plymouth Royal Clarence Regatta Club in 1827, it became the Royal Western in 1833. Its original aims were to hold an annual regatta, to organise an active social programme and to stimulate improvements in naval architecture through yacht racing. In its early years its principal strength was in long-

* James Lindsay, 26th Earl of Crawford.

distance cruising and its members' yachts, wearing the Blue Ensign* – a privilege given to them in a warrant granted by Queen Victoria – were to be seen in many far-flung places.

And as a final example, the Royal Temple Yacht Club was founded in 1857 by a group of yachtsmen sailing from the Temple Steps, on the River Thames in the centre of London. Club racing started on the Thames, but increasing commercial traffic on the river made racing ever more difficult. Races began to be moved further and further down the river, until eventually it was decided that a more suitable base for racing should be found. This proved to be at Ramsgate, where a new clubhouse was opened in 1896. At the turn of the century two thousand members dined annually at the Hotel Cecil.† The Commodore at that time was Baron Nathaniel Mayer de Rothschild, who was often accompanied by his close friend, Edward, Prince of Wales. A Royal Charter was granted in 1897 and the Admiralty Warrant to wear the Blue Ensign was given in 1898.

And the growth of yacht clubs and racing brought the need for a unified code of conduct. In 1875 the Yacht Racing Association agreed a set of rules which would govern what were then called 'sailing matches' – rules which are broadly the same today.

Running a large racing or pleasure yacht was expensive. Paid crews were necessary, servants and cooks if touring; berths and mooring when at sea cost money. Thus money, aristocracy and yachting went hand in hand. No surprise then, that yacht clubs were seen as exclusive and snobbish. But as the twentieth century dawned, technological advancement provided the opportunity for a different type of sailing, and a different sort of club.

The advent of the motor launch and motor boat

Several inventors developed their own versions of practical automobiles with petrol-powered internal combustion engines during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Perhaps the best known of these was Karl Benz, who built his first automobile in 1885 in Mannheim. Benz was granted a patent

* Prior to the reorganisation of the Royal Navy in 1864, the plain blue ensign had been the ensign of one of three squadrons of the Royal Navy, the Blue Squadron. This changed in 1864, when an Order in Council provided that the Red Ensign was to be allocated to merchantmen, the Blue Ensign to be the flag of ships in public service or commanded by an officer in the Royal Naval Reserve, and the White Ensign was allocated to the navy. Thus, after 1864, the plain blue ensign was permitted to be worn, instead of the Red Ensign, by three categories of civilian vessel. First, British merchant vessels whose officers and crew included a certain number of retired Royal Navy personnel or Royal Naval Reservists, or commanded by an officer of the Royal Naval Reserve in possession of a government warrant. Secondly, Royal Research Ships by warrant, whether manned by former Royal Navy personnel or Merchant Navy personnel. And thirdly, British-registered yachts belonging to members of a defined list of yacht clubs, thirty-four in number, including eleven in the Antipodes.

† A grand hotel built 1890–96 between the Thames Embankment and the Strand in London. Shell-Mex House now stands on the site.

for his creation on 29 January 1886 and began to manufacture them two years later.

Around the same time, people began to experiment with putting an internal combustion engine into a boat. Probably the progenitor was Priestman Brothers, with a working launch built in 1888. James Dennis Roots of London fitted a launch with a petrol engine, which he used to run on the Thames between Richmond and Wandsworth in 1891 and 1892; and in 1897 the Daimler company in Coventry offered powered boats for sale*.

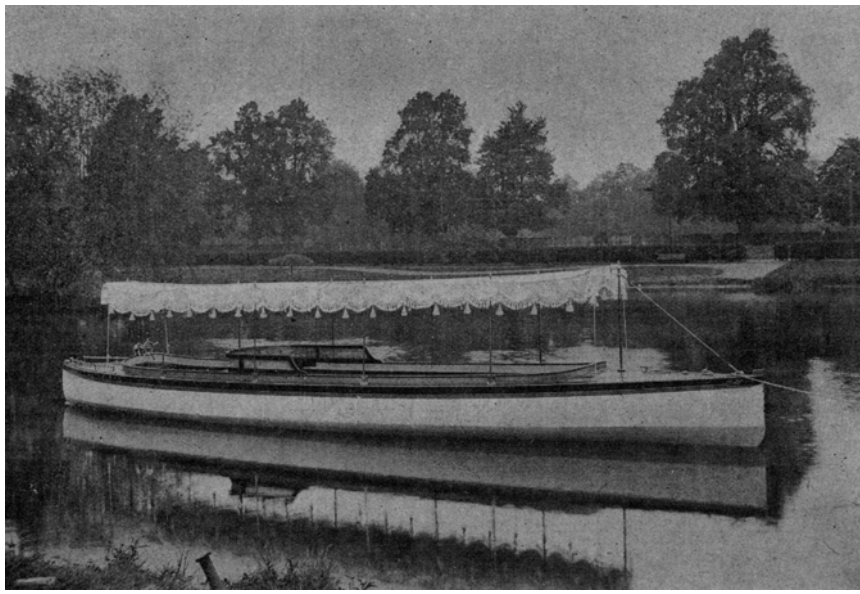
But the advent of the new century sparked a sudden rush of development, as it was at about this time that the British and continental motor car manufacturers began to turn their attention to motor boat construction.

Many of the engines so deployed were unsuitable for marine use but companies such as Thornycroft and Napier and Sons specialised in boat work, and development was further enhanced when a cup was offered by Lord Northcliffe, then Alfred Harmsworth and owner of the *Daily Mail*, for international competition. The contest was to be confined to boats of a maximum overall length of 40ft, built and engined in the country which they represented, with no other restrictions imposed. Queenstown, near Cork, was the venue for the first such race, held in 1903, and a number of innovative vessels were demonstrated.

It was won by the famous racing driver Selwyn Francis Edge† in a 40ft, steel-hulled, 75hp Napier-engined craft named *Napier I*. With an eye for publicity (he was the representative for Napier cars), Edge had trained a

Dorothy Levitt piloting the 1903 cup winning motor boat *Napier I*.
(Author's collection)

* The Daimler Motor Company (Coventry) was registered as the first British car manufacturer in January 1896.
† Winner of, inter alia, the 1902 Gordon Bennett motor car race.



The petrol launch built for King Edward VII by Tom Tagg and Sons in 1903. It was kept in the royal boathouse at Datchet. *(Author's collection)*

female co-pilot, the tall and very beautiful Dorothy Levitt, who worked for him as a secretary (and was probably his mistress), to be the first woman to compete in a motor boat race, but it was his name as owner and entrant that went on the trophy. Miss Levitt had achieved reported speeds of 19.3mph (16.8 knots)*.

The contest was repeated at Seaview, Isle of Wight, in 1905, with the Thornycroft company entering five boats; one of the entrants was Commander Mansfield Smith-Cumming, later to be in charge of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service as the original 'M'. A Napier-built boat eventually won the competition. And by 1909, the Thornycroft boat *Gyrinus II* carried off the *Prix de la Méditerranée*, apparently exceeding 22 knots.

Meanwhile, petrol-driven motor craft had acquired the royal imprimatur in 1903 when King Edward VII purchased one. He took his first trip in it on Whit Monday afternoon, sailing on the Thames near Windsor, wearing a soft grey hat and a navy-blue suit, and accompanied by Prince Louis of Battenberg (at that time the Director of Naval Intelligence at the Admiralty,

* On 8 August 1903 Levitt drove the Napier motor boat at Cowes and again won the race. She was then commanded to the royal yacht by King Edward VII, where he congratulated her on her courage and skill, and discussed the performance of the boat and its potential for British government despatch work.

with the rank of captain), Lord Esher (Reginald Brett, 2nd Viscount Esher) and the Honourable John Ward (second son of William Ward, 1st Earl of Dudley). This was the first petrol launch to be built for the monarchy and was designed and constructed by Messrs Tom Tagg and Sons of Molesey.

And the use of the internal combustion engine soon reached Africa too, when the Crown Agents for the Colonies commissioned two light draught vessels from Thornycroft's for use on the West African rivers. Delivered in early 1906, they were built of galvanised steel and were powered by four-cylinder Thornycroft engines which ran on petrol or paraffin. One, *Spider*, used screw propulsion and 'attained a mean speed of 8 knots with a load of four tons and a draught of twelve inches'.[6] In the other, the engine drove a stern paddle wheel.

The advent of powered boats and racing led naturally to the formation of motor boat clubs. According to *The Times*, the British Motor Boat Club (BMBC) was founded in November 1904 by a group of between 'fifty and sixty gentlemen well known in the automobile world … having for its objects the development of the motor boat and the encouragement of racing and cruising events for boats with internal combustion engines'.[7] Perhaps unsurprisingly, one of the founder members was John Walter Brooke, chairman of Messrs J W Brooke and Co of Lowestoft who were 'among the early workers on the application of the internal-combustion engine to marine propulsion'.[8]

The BMBC had been preceded by the creation of the Marine Motoring Association (MMA) in 1903, which was intended to be the official body governing motor boat racing. It was stated at the outset that the prevailing idea of the BMBC 'was not one of hostility to the Automobile Club or the MMA, but rather that this proposed club should carry out a programme of encouragement under the rules already laid down by the existing bodies'.[9] The use of the word 'motoring' in the club's title perhaps reflects one of reasons for motor boat popularity. The Locomotives on Highways Act of 1896 restricted powered road vehicles to 14mph. The Motor Car Act of 1904 raised this to 20mph. But many motor cars could cruise at twice that speed, and so those with a need for fast and/or reckless driving turned to motor boats, for which there were no limits.

The first gathering of the BMBC was in May 1905 and it attracted twenty-five craft and a large crowd at Kingston upon Thames, where the event took place. The club admiral was a retired Royal Navy officer, Admiral Sir William Robert Kennedy KCB, Commander-in-Chief at The Nore between 1900 and 1901, and the vice admiral was Archibald Kennedy, 3rd Marquess of Ailsa, founder of the Ailsa Shipbuilding Company.

Meanwhile, the MMA inaugurated annual reliability trials in 1904,

Admiral Sir William Robert Kennedy, one of the founding members (and club admiral) of the British Motor Boat Club. A prolific author, he had written about sport in the navy and an autobiography of his naval days. *(Author's collection)*

administered from the following year by the Motor Yacht Club at Poole. And another annual event was created in 1906, a rally from London to Cowes.

Other organisations soon sprang into existence. The Royal Sussex Yacht Club (whose successive patrons were Queen Victoria, King Edward VII and George V) was already a major force in the yacht-racing movement and held an annual regatta each August. In 1905 the officers of the club decided to run a race for motor boats as part of this event, and other yacht clubs were not far behind.

A Sussex Motor Yacht Club was founded in Brighton in 1907. Francis, Viscount Curzon (later the 5th Lord Howe), accepted the position of commodore. He had joined the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNVR) on leaving school and was appointed commanding officer of the Sussex

Division, based in Hove, and with the rank of commander RNVR that same year. The vice commodore was Sir Theodore Vivian Samuel Angier, a wealthy shipping-line owner and prominent Liberal Unionist. Millionaire Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt* presented the Venture International Challenge Cup to the SMYC. This was a large Edwardian silver trophy decorated with an enamelled SMYC burgee and engraved 'Sussex Motor Yacht Club, The Venture, International Challenge Cup'.

In Scotland, from the year 1906 there were three clubs for motor boaters, the Scottish Marine Motor Club, Clyde Motor Boat Club and Clyde Motor Yacht Club. A leading light in these associations was James Cleland Burns, 3rd Lord Inverclyde, from the family of Cunard fame.

And by 1913, the *Spectator* magazine was reporting that 'In brief, … in spite of admittedly good arguments on the other side, the general use of the auxiliary motor in sailing yachts will act on the whole in the right direction by making yachtsmen undertake adventures which they would formerly have shunned'.[10] Motor boating was here to stay.

The spirit of the age

The men who formed the membership of these yacht and motor boat clubs all largely subscribed to a particular view of the demeanour necessary to be considered a 'good sort', a pillar of their societies and a well-regarded member of their club. The concept of gentlemanly behaviour was closely entwined with the dominant moral codes of the late Victorians and Edwardians. These were derived from their reverence for the chivalric, the lost Eden of Arthurian legend, Camelot, the Round Table and from their obsession with imperial England as a new Rome. The educational system was founded on the Latin and Greek classics for that very reason.

As a result, public schools and colleges tended to produce a breed of men who were devoid of guile and conditioned to believe in romantic notions of honour, glory and sacrifice. These educational establishments raised boys to believe in the high-minded values of chivalry that were all the more potent because they had not been tested in the real world. And as one historian has written, 'every public schoolboy was familiar with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and the poetry – with its emphasis on honour, discipline, athleticism and courage in the face of death – spoke across the ages about what it meant to be a gentleman and a scholar at the height of empire'.[11]

Launcelot and Galahad were admired for their honour and virtue as

* Alfred Vanderbilt was an extremely wealthy sportsman and a member of the famous Vanderbilt family. He died in 1915 when the luxury liner RMS *Lusitania* was torpedoed and sunk by *U-20*. *Alfred* gave up his life vest to a child-carrying female passenger.

much as for their fighting ability in the Camelot tales. In the *Iliad*, Sarpedon, one of the Trojan allies, urges his fellows to take their place in the front line of the attack on the Greeks so that no one may later call them cowards. And the Greek heroes always feared what other people would say about them if their behaviour did not come up to what was expected; they felt *aidos* (shame) if they slipped from their high standards.

As historian Margaret MacMillan put it, in relation to the First World War, 'the young British officers who went to the front had been raised on the classics and hoped … to fight like the Greek and Roman heroes'.[12] These golden lads 'represented the old chivalry of England … moulded in the gentleman image … they were confident in their role as standard bearers of a code entitling them to be called, in Marc Anthony's words, "all honourable men"'.[13] And 'honour could not be drunk by babies from their mother's breast and then kept for ever. It could only be earned in conflict or when faced with shame … honour was not heritable. Each generation had to earn it anew.'[14]

And patriotism and pride in Britain was an important belief too, set deep in the national psyche. Ulric Nisbet left Marlborough School in July 1914; on the outbreak of war he felt 'it wasn't a matter of "our country right or wrong". Our country was 100% right and Germany 100% wrong … the British Empire was the greatest the world had ever known and its greatness was due to the superior qualities of the British. Foreigners weren't cast in the same mould'.[15]

Another hallmark of the gentleman was speech. 'In the later years of the reign of Queen Victoria and into the twentieth century, almost all "gentlemen" and "ladies" spoke with what can only be described as a marked nasal drawl. Words such as "off", "gone", "often" and so on were pronounced "orff", "gorn", "orfen". This way of speaking was instantly recognisable as that of an acceptable member of the class – and hence of the amateur spirit which, it was generally agreed, the class represented'.[16]

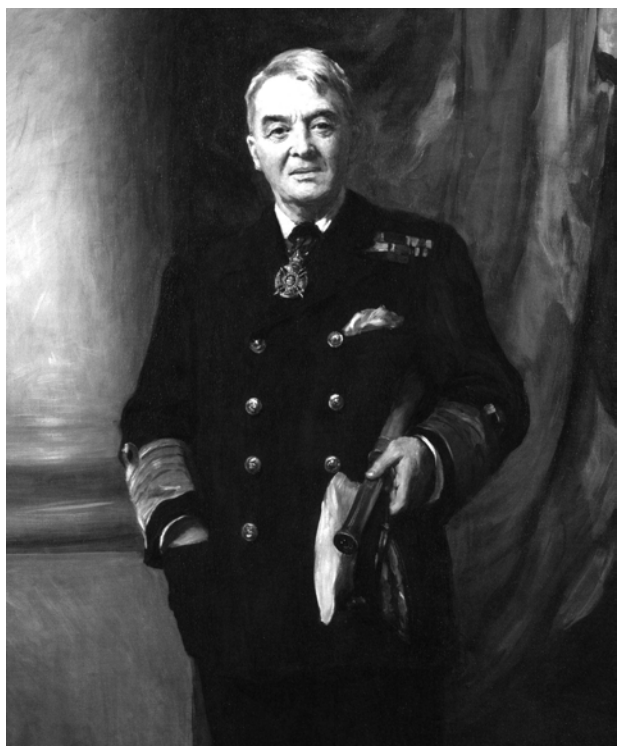
Belief drives behaviour and behaviour produces culture; and hence the idealised gentleman was brave, loyal, and chivalrous towards females, put public duty before his own interests, and took part in activities for love rather than financial gain. These values were applied to a wide range of activities during the nineteenth century. Science, sport, politics and the arts were all defined by this *beau idéal* of the 'gentleman amateur'. These were the men who would volunteer in their thousands to Kitchener's New Armies when war came or, if a sailing or motor boat club member, seek an opportunity to serve in Britain's naval forces.

2

A Strategic Gap and a Motor Boat Solution

While the Edwardian age ran to its close, a fundamental change in the world order was taking place. Germany's defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, and the subsequent unification of Germany under a Hohenzollern Prussian king, caused France to seek new friends and Britain to worry about the rapidly industrialising state, with growing naval and expansionist ambitions, that lay across the waters of the North Sea.

With assistance from King Edward VII, an Entente Cordiale was agreed between Britain and France that buried past differences, and which was signed on 8 April 1904. The two most powerful nations in Europe had



Admiral Sir John 'Jacky' Fisher, First Sea Lord 1904–1910 and 1914–1915, the man who more than anyone recognised the need for a new strategy in the North Sea and created the First World War Royal Navy, in a painting by Hubert von Herkomer. *(Author's collection)*

reached a concord, but it posed a challenge to Germany's influence in Europe and the world, and caused a paranoid Kaiser Wilhelm II to imagine that Germany was being encircled by its rivals.

At the same time, the Royal Navy gained a new executive head. First Sea Lord Admiral Sir John (Jacky) Fisher, a dynamo in human form and a man possessed of both a reforming zeal and the energy to implement his plans, took office in October. Fisher recognised that the most likely enemy that Britain would have to face was not France but Germany. Admiral von Tirpitz, with the enthusiastic backing of Kaiser Wilhelm II, was creating an Imperial German Navy designed to raise his country to first-class naval status. With other factors, including an anti-British stance during the Boer War and the German government's refusal to consider an alliance with Britain, except on terms that guaranteed Germany a free hand and hegemony in Europe, Fisher was convinced that Germany was now the most probable foe. His political master, First Lord of the Admiralty Lord Selborne, certainly agreed with him. In a memo to the Cabinet, Selborne noted that 'the great new German navy is being built up from the point of view of war with us'.[1]

To ensure that Britain had the necessary concentration of forces, Fisher instigated a reorganisation of the fleets. He recalled ships from far-flung postings, concentrated the navy where he expected it to have to fight (the Channel and the North Sea) and scrapped 150 ships, deeming them 'too weak to fight and too slow to run away'. Five battleships were withdrawn from the China station in 1904. The standing South American, North American* and Pacific squadrons were abolished. As Andrew Lambert has written 'by early 1906 the centre of naval effort was shifting from the Mediterranean to the North Sea; Germany was not only the most likely but also the only realistic enemy. Russia was no longer a naval power and the French navy had collapsed'.[2]

Fisher created a new entity – the Home Fleet – to be based on Sheerness, where easy access to the North Sea and the German coastline could be obtained and which was announced by the Admiralty on 24 October 1906. He stripped the Mediterranean, Atlantic and Channel Fleets of battleships and cruisers to make up this new force and backed it up with ships from the reserve.

Under international law, close blockade of an enemy's ports was legal, but the closing-off of large areas of the seas to them was not.† This close blockade had been the Royal Navy's traditional strategy. But Jacky Fisher

* The North America and West Indies station was reinstated in 1913.

† The Treaty of Paris (1856, and subsequently re-ratified at the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907) gave legal basis to the concept of blockade. The agreement, among other things, permitted 'close' but not 'distant' blockades. A belligerent was allowed to station ships near the three-mile limit to stop or inspect traffic with an enemy's ports; it was not allowed simply to declare areas of the high seas comprising the approaches to the enemy's coast to be off-limits.

foresaw that the submarine, the torpedo, and light inexpensive craft which could deliver them, made the shallow and confined North Sea unsuitable for the battleships and other large vessels of the navy's battlefleet. Nor, in any case, could warships stay close to the continental coastline, as in the days of the Nelsonian frigates of old. They were too vulnerable to underwater attack and too dependent on regular refuelling. Instead, he strongly advocated a distant blockade, in which the North Sea was sealed off at either end and patrolled only by light craft.

Two years after Fisher had retired, on 16 December 1912 Admiral George Callaghan, CinC Home Fleet, was instructed that in time of war he should base himself at the Firth of Forth and sweep the North Sea, without going more than halfway across. When in 1913 First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill pressed a madcap scheme for the close blockade of the Heligoland Bight and the capture of the island of Borkum, Callaghan was dismissive, stating that close blockade was no longer a viable strategy. And Chief of the Admiralty Staff Admiral Sir Henry Jackson noted on 16 October 1913 that 'our war plans lay down definitely that one of our objects of war is to bring economic pressure on Germany by stopping her oversea trade',[3] thereby creating great social unrest.

Accordingly, as the likelihood of conflict with Germany grew, Scapa Flow was designated the main battlefleet base. The Firth of Forth was developed for naval purposes at Granton, Invergordon and Rosyth. The Nore command, which included Chatham and Sheerness Royal Dockyards, gained in importance. It might be noted that in adopting this strategy, Britain ignored international treaties in determining that its approach to countering Germany would henceforth be based on a distant blockade.

Distant blockade and a problem

The strategy of distant blockade left the North Sea, and with it Britain's eastern seaboard, bereft of large British warships. Nor were there sufficient small ships, destroyers, minesweepers, etc, to police and protect the coast. In 1910 the Admiralty decided that it would co-opt fishing boats, trawlers and drifters to close this gap and act as auxiliary minesweepers and patrol vessels. These little ships would be hired or purchased from their civilian owners in time of war. To man them a new naval reserve would be created as a sub-section of the Royal Naval Reserve (RNR).

The RNR had been created by the Naval Reserve Act of 1859, itself a product of the invasion scare of the same year. For one month a year, merchant sailors and fishermen were given gunnery training on drill ships stationed around the coast. When war was declared they were liable to be drafted to the fleet or reserve ships. As first created, the RNR consisted of