

Smith's Dock Monthly

An Illustrated Social Magazine for the Workers and Staff of Smith's Dock Company, Limited. Edited by CAPTAIN JAMES ROBINSON, F.S.S., F.C.I.S.

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What Smith's Dock did in the War

H.M. Floating Dock at Jarrow.

THE outbreak of war in August, 1914, found the Admiralty faced with a very grave problem in so far as docks for capital ships on the East Coast were concerned.

From Scapa Flow, the Grand Fleet base away up in the Orkneys, down to the Thames, there was not a single dock capable of taking a Dreadnought or a Battle Cruiser.

Rosyth, the great dockyard on the Firth of Forth, was still incomplete, and it was not until early in 1916 that the docks were sufficiently far advanced to accommodate any of the big ships.

Something had to be done in the meantime on account of the extreme danger in sending any of the ships south to Portsmouth or Devonport. The Tyne Commissioners were therefore approached by the Admiralty with a view to placing a Floating Dock on the Tyne, as it was felt that in case of a fleet action in the North Sea, some damaged vessels would in all probability have to make for the Tyne.

Jarrow Slake was chosen as the most suitable site on the river, and it was decided to bring the large Admiralty Floating Dock round from the Medway as soon as the berth could be got ready. This was rather a big undertaking and necessitated the removal of some of the tiers of buoys and the dredging of a berth for the dock to the depth of 55 feet at low water. The available dredging plant on the river being inadequate for this purpose, it was found necessary to enlist the services of two large Admiralty dredgers, one of the Port of London Authority's dredgers, and a number of large ocean-going steam hoppers. The dredging operations were commenced in February, 1915, and were carried on day and night for about five months, and a record in dredging was accomplished. Eventually (in June), after a hazardous journey, the huge dock was successfully transported to the Tyne, convoyed by a number of destroyers and armed trawlers, and was safely moored in the berth prepared for her.

When the dock was ready to commence operations, Smith's Dock Company, Ltd., was approached by Captain (now Rear-Admiral) L. E. Power, Captain Superintendent, Tyne District, as to whether they would undertake the docking and refitting of the first vessel to go on to the dock, namely, H.M. Armoured Cruiser *Shannon*. After consideration, the Company agreed to take on the work, and the Manager, at Captain Power's request, together with the Admiralty officials, travelled north to Scapa Flow with a view to making the necessary preparations for receiving the vessel. In the meantime, preparations were being made at the Floating Dock, and on the morning of September 7th, the huge vessel arrived and steamed slowly up the river in charge of tugs and, without a hitch, entered the dock amidst great excitement.

The Firm had never previously handled any of His Majesty's Fighting Ships, their experience having been almost exclusively devoted to merchant vessels, and it may be imagined what a proud moment it was for us all when the big Cruiser was safely shored in place and the dock lifted.

During the morning, a conference was held on board, presided over by Captain Power, at which the question of repairs and defects was fully investigated. As only a limited time was allowed for the refit, and as the work to be done was of great magnitude, it was deemed necessary to call in the assistance of several other firms on the river in order to avoid any of the defects being left undone.

In spite of the class of work being entirely strange to a large majority of the men, everything went splendidly, and the repairs were handled in such a workmanlike manner that the vessel was completed right up to schedule time and safely undocked, sailing the next day to rejoin the Grand Fleet.

On account of the shortness of labour, the almost continuous overtime necessary to carry the work through in time brought a great strain upon the available men. Their unstinted efforts were highly appreciated by all the Admiralty officials concerned.

The next vessel on the programme was H.M.S. *Invincible*, the famous Battle Cruiser, herself a Tyne-built vessel, and the prototype of her class. On the day she was expected, it began to be whispered about the Dock that another and more important vessel was coming in her place. Eventually word was

passed round that the "mystery ship" had entered the river, and all eyes were directed to the point where the river takes a sharp turn, opposite the Commissioners' Staithes. Amidst a hush of suppressed excitement, there loomed out of the mist the shadowy outline of an enormous Dreadnought, her huge guns and turrets making her an impressive sight. Up she came, slowly and majestically, the tugs round her looking like so many flies, until she was almost level with the Dock, when it was seen that she was none other than the famous *Warspite*.

As it was known that she was only a few months old, conjecture was busy respecting the reason of her emergency docking.

When the dock was pumped up and an examination made of the vessel's bottom, it was found that she was badly damaged through having grounded at the entrance to the Firth of Forth. The damage extended from the bow to the engine room and was very severe, the plating and framing being extensively buckled, almost every double bottom compartment leaking badly.

The Director of Dockyards (at that time Sir James Marshall), and other important Admiralty officials were very soon on the scene. After long consultation, it was decided that the only alternative was to repair the vessel where she was on account of the impracticability of removing her to one of the southern dockyards in her damaged state. Smith's Dock Company, Ltd., was entrusted with the job, and their resources were tested to the uttermost. It was a huge undertaking, as all the men and materials had to be transported to and from the yards, which were some considerable distance away. The heavy plates, some of which weighed about three tons, had to be taken up in special craft hired for the purpose. When the repairs were finally completed, the whole of the double bottom compartments in way of the damage (some fifty in all) were hydraulically tested to a head of 85 feet. This in itself was a very big undertaking, for which the whole district had to be scoured for caulkers. However, it was successfully carried through, thanks chiefly to Mr. George Coulthard, the capable foreman ironman at the High Docks Department, assisted by Mr. Arthur Barnett, of the Bull Ring Department, the former being personally congratulated by the Chief Admiralty Overseer and the Senior Engineer of the ship.

In addition to the damage repairs, the refit was carried out and also a number of extensive alterations to the hull of the vessel.

The huge vessel was finally completed and returned to service in November, 1915.

Before bidding farewell to the *Warspite* it may be stated that the whole of the staff and officials connected with the job were very much indebted to Captain (now Rear-Admiral) E. M. Phillpotts and all his officers for the extreme courtesy and kindly assistance shown to everyone during the time the repairs were being carried out.

It had been intended, but for the mishap to the *Warspite*, to send the whole of the Battle Cruiser Squadron to the Tyne for refit, one by one, after the *Shannon* had been completed. But the programme being upset, they had perforce to remain out of dock until the *Warspite* repairs were finished, as it was absolutely imperative, apart from the danger from submarines in going south, that the Battle Cruiser Force should be kept intact, and as near to their base as possible, in view of the fact that raids on the East Coast by German Cruisers, and even an attempt at invasion, were thought highly probable.

By this time the bottoms of the Battle Cruisers were beginning to get very foul with a consequent reduction in speed; so it was decided to send them to the Tyne for docking and short refits. The time allowed for each vessel was only seven days, and under no circumstances whatever was it to be exceeded.

The first to arrive was the mighty *Lion*, still bearing on her side the scars of the Dogger Bank fight, her feed tank, which put her out of action, still needing some attention. Then followed in quick succession the *Princess Royal*, *Tiger*, *Inflexible*, *Indomitable*, *Australian*, *Indefatigable*, and *Queen Mary*.

Each ship was completed up to schedule time and went direct to sea off the dock, the next vessel being then on her way from Rosyth, docking a few hours later. The Firm shortly afterwards were highly complimented by the Admiralty and by several of the Captains of the Battle Cruisers on the prompt and efficient way the work had been taken in hand and carried through to completion in such short time. One letter received from the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty may be quoted:—

Admiralty, S.W.,
3rd January, 1916.

GENTLEMEN,—With reference to the recent refit of H.M.S. *Princess Royal* at your Works, I am commanded by My Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to convey to your Firm an expression of their appreciation of the able and expeditious manner in which this work was carried out.

2. My Lords consider that the expedition with which the work necessary was reviewed, and the promptitude and punctuality in taking it in hand and completing it, reflect great credit on all concerned.

I am, Gentlemen,
Your obedient Servant,
(Signed) W. GRAHAM GREENE.

Messrs. Smith's Dock Co., Ltd., South Shields.

The next vessels to be taken in hand were the Dreadnoughts *Bellerophon* and *Vanguard*. These two vessels belonged to the earliest class of Dreadnoughts, consequently considerable repairs and alterations were necessary for their fighting efficiency, to bring them up to date.

The *Vanguard*, it will be remembered, was some time afterwards blown up in Scapa Flow, as the result of an internal explosion.

On Easter Sunday a sudden emergency call for the Floating Dock was received. During a dash into the Heligoland Bight by the Battle Cruiser Squadron, H.M.S. *Australia* had collided, in a dense fog, with H.M.S. *New Zealand*, and both were considerably damaged. The *Australia* arrived and docked on Easter Monday, but as the dock was urgently required for other vessels it was decided to carry out temporary repairs to enable the vessel to proceed to another port for permanent repairs.

A very smart job was carried out, and the vessel was made seaworthy and sailed a week later.

H.M.S. *Defence*, Armoured Cruiser, arrived shortly afterwards, for a quite extensive refit, which was carried out in record time, thanks to the kindly assistance of Captain Venn Ellis and all his officers. Little did these brave men think this was destined to be their last refit, as the *Defence* had scarcely returned to her base when the Grand Fleet left to meet the enemy off the Coast of Jutland, and the ill-fated vessel was blown up and sunk with the loss of her whole ship's company.

At the time the news arrived that the High Seas Fleet had at last been brought to action, the dock was occupied by H.M.S. *Achilles*, a sister ship to the *Defence*.

On the night of the battle, an urgent message was received that the dock must be got ready at the earliest possible moment to take a damaged vessel which was making for the Tyne in a sinking condition. The *Achilles* was not scheduled to undock until two days later, and a considerable amount of work was necessary before the vessel could be floated.

However, in a national emergency like this, nothing was considered impossible, and by an exceptional effort on the part of the men concerned, working right through the night, at breakneck speed, the vessel was enabled to undock early the following morning.

It is worthy of note that the Firm were specially thanked by Captain Power and the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty for their efforts in successfully attaining this end.

CAPTAIN SUPERINTENDENT,
4, Eslington Terrace,
Newcastle-on-Tyne,

3rd June, 1916.

GENTLEMEN,—About 9.15 p.m. on Wednesday, May 31st, I communicated by telephone with Mr. Stephenson informing him that it was desirable to undock H.M.S. *Achilles* on the early morning tide, namely 4 a.m., and that I was making arrangements accordingly.

Without any hesitation, Mr. Stephenson said he would do his best in the matter—the vessel was safely undocked and moved to a berth up the river at the time indicated.

It is very satisfactory to feel how thoroughly I can rely upon the co-operation of your firm in such emergencies, which are or may be of national importance, and, in my opinion, it reflects the greatest credit upon the organisation, and shews how good a touch there must be between the management and the employees that the men could be collected at short notice and so successfully carry out the work required.

Will you be good enough to convey my appreciation to Mr. Stephenson?

Yours faithfully,

(Signed) L. E. POWER,

Captain Superintendent, Tyne District.

Messrs. Smith's Dock Co., Ltd., South Shields.

Admiralty, S.W.,

24th June, 1916.

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GENTLEMEN,—I am commanded by My Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to convey to you an expression of their satisfaction and appreciation as regards the expeditious and successful manner in which you carried out the recent emergency undocking of H.M.S. *Achilles*, and they consider that great credit is due to your Mr. Stephenson for his valuable co-operation in carrying out this work,

and My Lords would be glad if he could be so informed.

I am, Gentlemen,

Your obedient Servant,

(Signed) O. MURRAY.

Messrs. Smith's Dock Co., South Shields.

As it turned out, however, the damaged vessel, H.M.S. *Marlborough*, which had been hit by a torpedo, had to put into the Humber, and did not arrive at the Floating Dock until some few days later. When she came proudly up the river and entered the dock none but those on board imagined she was much the worse, as above the water, nothing amiss could be seen.

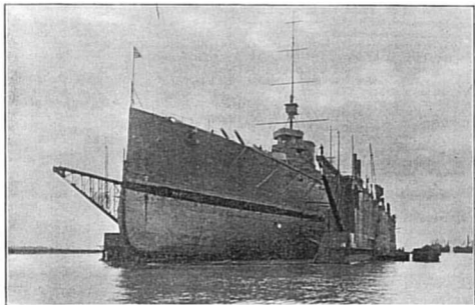
However, as the dock was slowly lifted, it quickly became apparent that the magnificent vessel had had a very narrow escape. An enormous hole about 70 feet long was torn in her starboard side, abreast the forward boiler room, and everything in the vicinity was rent and twisted into a mass of scrap-metal.

It was very soon decided that permanent repairs would have to be effected where she was, on account of the tremendous risk and difficulty entailed in removing her to another port in such a damaged state. After due consultation with the Admiralty officials, it was finally decided to enlist the services of a number of firms, as on account of the vessel being one of the most important units of the Grand Fleet, it was of paramount importance that she should not be detained a day longer than was absolutely necessary.

The repairs occupied about eight weeks, and the vessel was returned to service early in August.

In November, 1916, H.M.S. *Bellerophon* was again taken in hand for refit and completed by the end of the month. For the next few weeks things were rather quieter, as by this time the Rosyth Docks were in full working order, and were able to handle a big proportion of the capital ships.

Shortly after Christmas it was decided to send the *Queen Elizabeth* to the Tyne for a special refit and extensive alterations necessary to convert her into the flag-ship for the Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Sir David Beatty. She arrived in the Tyne on January 8th, 1917, and it was one of the proudest days in the memory of Tyneside, and of South Shields in particular, when the magnificent vessel, the finest and most powerful fighting ship afloat, was safely berthed on the Floating Dock. As time was of vital importance, it was found necessary to call in other firms



Dreadnought on H.M. Floating Dock

on the river to assist in carrying out the work.

Everything was, however, completed up to time, and the vessel was safely undocked and sailed on February 1st to rejoin the Grand Fleet.

The next ship taken in hand for refit was H.M.S. *Agincourt*, in March. This vessel, it will be remembered, was the Turkish Dreadnought *Sultan Osman I.*, and was fitting out at the Armstrong Naval Yard when war was declared on Turkey, and was commandeered by the Admiralty.

The *Agincourt* was considered one of the most powerfully armed ships afloat, her main armament consisting of fourteen 12 in. guns. In addition to the usual refit, considerable stiffening was fitted to the decks. This work, which was carried out to a number of the big ships, was found necessary after the Battle of Jutland, when several ships had their decks pierced by the big shells fired at extreme range falling almost perpendicularly. The repairs were finished and the vessel re-joined the Grand Fleet on April 6th.

During the summer and autumn of 1917,

a number of the big monitors were docked and refitted, the *Prince Rupert*, *Roberts*, and *Havelock* in June and July, and the *Erebus*, *Terror*, and *Marshal Soult* in October. These vessels were of shallow draft, and specially built to resist torpedo attack, with watertight compartments outside the hulls of the vessels, and were also fitted with exceptionally heavy guns.

Three of them were fitted with enormous teak fenders on their sides, and other extra fittings to enable them to be secured together side by side, for special operations on the Belgian Coast.

In August of this year, H.M.S. *Inflexible* again arrived for a considerable refit, which was carried out with the usual prompt despatch. This vessel, together with the *Invincible*, will be remembered as having annihilated Von Spee's Squadron at the battle of the Falkland Islands.

In December, 1917, a somewhat unusual job was carried out on the Floating Dock, *Submarine K4* being taken in hand for extensive repairs to her bow, which had been damaged through collision with a sister ship

during a dense fog. This was a very difficult and complicated job, due chiefly to the fact of the four bow torpedo tube shutters being badly damaged. As it was anticipated that the dock might be required at any moment for an emergency, it was necessary to work night and day. In spite of bad weather, the men worked splendidly, and the whole job was completed in about three weeks.

In the spring of 1918, the American squadron attached to the Grand Fleet were sent to the Tyne to have Paravane equipment fitted on the Floating Dock, and the opportunity was taken to carry out short refits. U.S.S. *New York* (Admiral Rodman's Flag-ship), was the first to arrive, in February; then followed U.S.S. *Delaware*, *Wyoming*, and *Florida*, in April and May. U.S. *Texas* was delayed, and did not arrive until October, being completed just before the Armistice in November. Very great interest was taken in these ships on Tyneside, as an American warship had never been in the river before. To the man in the street the only difference between the American and the British ships was in their masts, the Americans having the well-known trellis work masts, which looked very flimsy beside our huge tripod masts. U.S.S. *Texas*, in addition to the other repairs, was fitted with a complete new navigating bridge, and also a portable flying-off platform for aeroplanes on the top of one of the forward gun turrets. This was one of the smartest jobs carried out by Smith's Dock Co., Ltd., during the war, as it entailed a tremendous amount of detail work and almost continuous overtime. However, with the kindly co-operation and assistance of the ship's staff, the whole job was completed in schedule time. The Firm were highly complimented by the Captain and Officers of the ship on the prompt and efficient way the work had been carried out. In this connection an extract may be given from a letter received by the Firm from Admiral W. S. Sims, Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Navy.

"I take pleasure in quoting for your information the following letter from Rear-Admiral Hugh Rodman, U.S. Navy:—

"The work carried out on battleships under my command by the Smith's Dock Co., Ltd., of South Shields, has been most satisfactory in all respects to me and to the Commanding Officers of the vessels concerned. In every case work was promptly taken in hand, and

efficiently and expeditiously carried on to completion."

U.S.S. *Texas*,

3rd November, 1918.

R. H. Stephenson, Esq.,

c/o Smith's Dock Company, Ltd.,

High Docks Department,

South Shields.

MY DEAR MR. STEPHENSON,—I cannot leave this port without taking this occasion to say what a distinct pleasure it has been to work in conjunction with you and your organisation. We have never had, heretofore, so satisfactory a refit, and apparently all your men share your happy enthusiasm as they have applied themselves to our work with an energy which is exceptional after all these years of pressure.

Both you and Mr. Patton have been singularly patient with us all in the seemingly unavoidable changes which have occurred, though realising that it was making demands upon time which could not be easily spared, and what we have accomplished successfully must be credited to you all.

Please accept for yourself and convey to all my appreciation of your unceasing efforts to make our stay here so profitable and withal most pleasant.

Very sincerely,

(Signed) T. W. HARRIS.



Mr. R. H. Stephenson, O.B.E.

In conclusion, it is pleasing to record that during the whole of the war, a period of abnormal strain, physical and mental, everyone concerned, staff and workmen, worked with the utmost good-will and earnestness; and it was chiefly due to this whole-hearted co-operation that Smith's Dock Company was enabled to achieve such excellent results. Nor must we forget to mention the valuable national services rendered by the Manager of the High Docks Department, Mr. R. H. Stephenson, who in all the strenuous and difficult time of the war period, personally supervised all the work taken in hand and completed, either on the Floating Dock or

at South Shields, by the Company. His good work was repeatedly acknowledged by Admiralty officials, and His Majesty's Government, in recognition of his patriotic and efficient services in a great national emergency, conferred on him the honour of Officer of the Order of the British Empire.

Smith's Dock Company wish to record their sincere appreciation of the kindly and ever-willing help, at all times and in all circumstances, of Mr. Turpin (the Dockmaster at the Floating Dock), and his capable and efficient staff, and of the expert advice and courteous help of the Admiral Superintendent's staff and overseers.