

The Birchington Hero & the Sunken Treasure

By Janet Robinson (March 2019)

In a recent edition of the 'Margate Handbook' a short article caught my eye, as it concerned a heroic Birchington man. I did some further investigation and discovered an amazing story.

Captain Ayres and his family came to live in Epple Road, Birchington, shortly after WW1. He retired after many years in the Merchant Navy, and during WW2 was a Birchington air-raid warden. This story is about his son, Richard Hamilton Ayres, born 1910. Richard attended our local Woodford House School until the age of 15. He decided to follow his father into the Merchant Navy and went to the training ship in Worcester and two years later he was posted to his first ship.

December 1940 found Richard as second mate on the British India Steam Navigation Co. Ship Gairsoppa. The steamer was heavily laden with tea (enough for 65% of Britain's entire population at the time) and iron. In Calcutta it took on board 2,817 silver bars, weigh 110 tons, for the British Mint. With a load of almost 7,000 tons, the ship struggled to reach its normal speed of ten knots.

The Gairsoppa steamed round Africa to Freetown, Sierra Leone, where in January 1941, it joined a convoy for the perilous voyage across the submarine-infested waters, to Liverpool. Heavy storms forced the ship's captain to burn extra coal, to keep up with the convoy, and fearing he would not have enough fuel to reach Liverpool, the Gairsoppa was forced to split off and head for Galway on Ireland's west coast.

Two days after setting off alone, they were spotted by a German reconnaissance plane, and in the darkness of the evening of the 6th February 1941 they were attacked by a submarine, while still 300 miles from the Irish coast. Sinking fast, the crew made for the three lifeboats. The U-boat surfaced and sprayed the deck with machine-gun fire. Some of the bullets cut through the ropes of one of the lifeboats, sending it crashing into the sea. Dozens of men leapt overboard and swam towards it, including Richard Ayres. They saw the Gairsoppa sink within twenty minutes and there was no sign of the other two lifeboats.

31 men managed to climb into the lifeboat, 8 Europeans and 23 Indian seamen, known as Lascars. The only man skilled at sailing a small boat was Richard, who took command and set sail eastwards, steering with an oar, because the rudder had been lost. Their food supplies consisted of some drinking water, a few tins of condensed milk, and dry biscuits, so hard they

could barely be swallowed. Each man was limited to half a pint of water each morning and another half pint an evening. Some of the crew began drinking sea water, which made them go mad and start fighting each other. Soon men began dying. Then the water ran out. A couple of rain showers gave some relief, but in the cold air, their hands and fingers became swollen with frostbite, making it impossible to grip the oars.

Richard Ayres was determined to save the lives of the remaining men, and sailed the boat through fierce gales with the help of the only two other men still strong enough to man the rudder. 13 days after the sinking, with only seven men still alive, land was sighted and they saw the Lizard lighthouse on the southernmost tip of Cornwall, 300 miles from where the Gairsoppa sank.

Luck was still against them, as when nearing the entrance to a rocky cove, a huge wave smashed into the small boat, capsizing it, and in their weakened state, four of the men drowned. Another wave righted the boat and Richard managed to drag himself, Robert Hampshire an 18-year-old radio officer, and Norman Thomas, 20, a gunner from Chatham on board, only for another breaker to capsize them again. They clung to the keel, but as more waves crashed over them, they lost their grip. Hampshire was washed to his death, but Richard and Norman Thomas made it onto some nearby rocks. Then another icy wave knocked Thomas backwards, drowning him just yards from safety.

Luckily for Richard Ayres, three young London evacuees had been walking on the cliff top when they spotted the boat flip over. One ran across the fields to fetch help and the others raced to the beach to shout encouragement. A coastguard arrived who threw Richard a rope and pulled him ashore. The bodies of Hampshire, Thomas, and two Lascars were recovered and buried in a nearby cemetery.

Richard Ayres returned to sea just nine months later, reaching the rank of Captain and retiring in 1964. He was awarded an MBE in recognition of his heroic efforts to keep fellow crew members alive, and also received the Lloyds' War Medal for bravery at sea.

In 2010 the British Government awarded a contract to the American company, Odyssey Marine Exploration, to locate the wreck of the Gairsoppa and recover the silver. It was found off the Irish coast at a depth of 2.9 miles. 80% of the value of the recovered cargo would be kept by the Odyssey Company and the remaining 20% to H.M. Treasury. Work took place over two seasons in 2012 and 2013 and on July 23rd 2013 it was reported that a total of 61 tons of silver bullion had been recovered from the wreckage, with an estimated value of £137 million.

In 2014 the Royal Mint issued 20,000 commemorative coins, struck using a portion of the recovered silver. These were engraved with the name of the ship 'Gairsoppa' round the edge of the coin.

So that is the story of our local Birchington hero, Richard Hamilton Ayres and the sunken treasure. There are more interesting stories connected with this which I haven't been able to fit into this article, plus pictures and videos of the wreck and salvage work, but I hope next year to be able to present an illustrated talk on the subject at one of our meetings.

(Janet tells me there was a cache of - "700 letters being carried from India to England, from soldiers. They were preserved in an air pocket when the ship sank, and the Post Office Museum in London managed to conserve some of them and trace some of the people concerned. One of the stories made me shed a tear !! There is an exhibition at the PO Museum at the moment, ends in June, and as John and I have to go near there for a meeting this month we are going to visit it.")

(Jennie Burgess)

I have found the grave of Richard Ayres' father and mother in All Saints churchyard. (J. 832)

The wording on the stone states:-

"In loving memory of a devoted wife and mother, Mabel Ayres, died
14 Dec 1953, aged 74 years. "In the garden of remembrance
Are many beautiful flowers,
Their fragrance will bring back
Happy memories."

"In loving memory of father, Richard Augustus, Mark Ayres, Master
Mariner, who died 21st Dec 1946, aged 90.

"Safe in God's harbour,
You're home to rest".