

FORGOTTEN WRECKS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

C8 - an airship lost in the English Channel



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The Forgotten Wrecks are not all ships and boats. Airships and aircraft of various types were essential to the anti-submarine effort of the First World War.

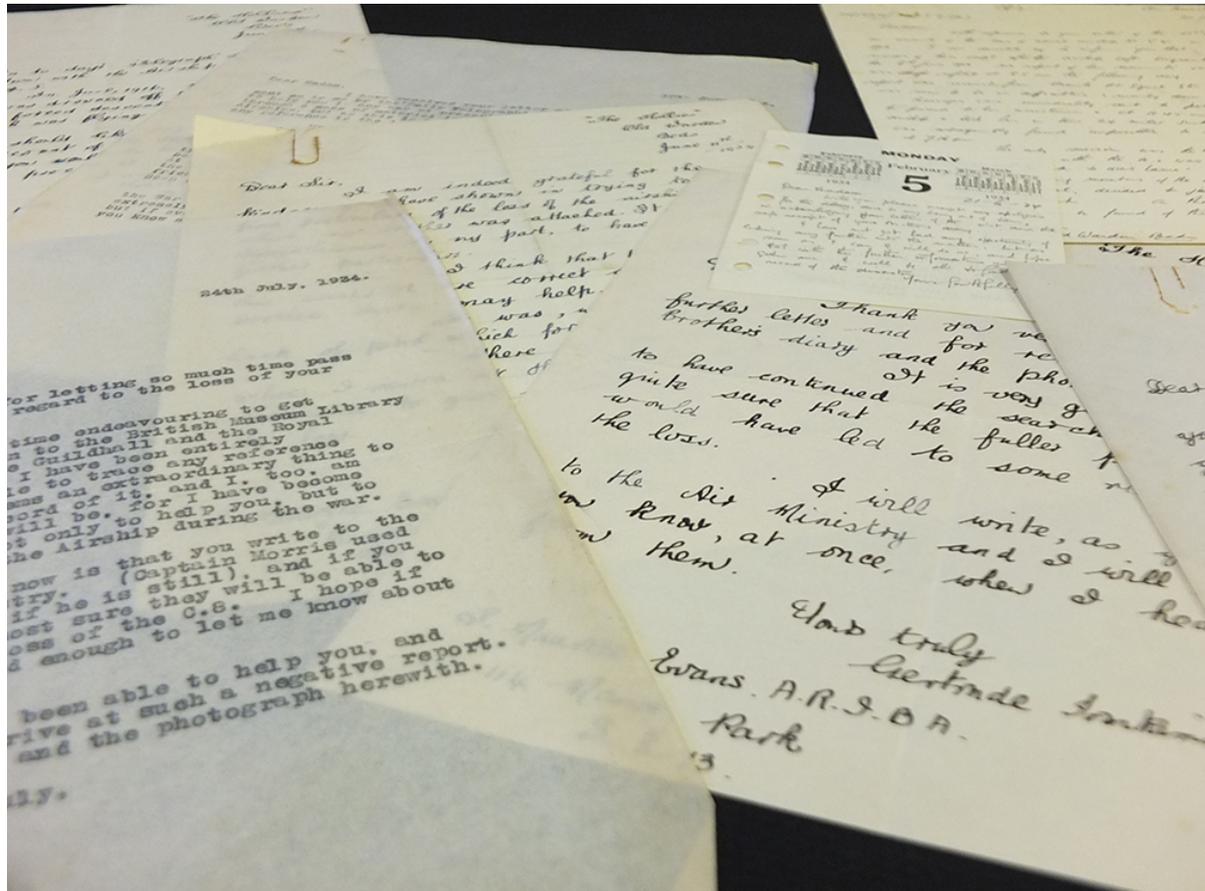
Airships offered a range of advantages over aircraft, including increased flight time, the ability to fly in low cloud and fog, and the option to hover slowly to search below. Visibility from an airship was excellent; they could fly both high and low and there were no wings to obscure the view. If an engine should fail, they could remain airborne while the problem was addressed. Disadvantages included a slow speed (40 – 55 mph), vulnerability to enemy aircraft, the need for light winds plus significant infrastructure requirements at base, including hydrogen and hangars.

C8 was a Coastal Class, non-rigid airship, as the name suggests, was designed to undertake extended coastal patrols. With an approximate length of 60m (195 feet) and diameter of 11m (37 feet) and two 150hp engines, the Coastals had a range of approximately 22 hours. They had an unusual tri-lobe envelope and a car slung beneath, that would carry up to 5 people. These airships carried 2 machine guns, one of which was positioned on the top of the envelope and accessed via a ladder that ran up the inside of it!

On the 9th June 1916, airship C-8 crashed off Plymouth. Flight Lieutenant **Cecil William Dickinson** (Captain), CPO Mech **Ernest Bernard Ames** (J7913), and CPO Mech **George Palmer** (231416) all drowned. Only the Wireless Operator survived and project research at The National Archives revealed his name as **Douglas Andrew Wilkings**.

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Online research revealed a collection of letters from 1934 between the sister of one of C8's crew and somebody connected with the Airship Branch of the Royal Naval Air Service.



Collection of letters from 1934 relating to the loss of Airship C8

Nearly 20 years after his death, Mrs Gertrude Tomkinson was still seeking information about the loss of C8 and her brother Chief Petty Officer Ernest Bernard Ames. Her emotional plea for help from a total stranger, and his attempts to provide it, constitute a heartrending glimpse into the years between the two world wars. Eventually, Mrs Tomkinson receives a letter from the Air Ministry that gives a very matter-of-fact account of the loss of C8, including the fact that Douglas Wilkings stated that the other 3 men abandoned the airship to prevent it from sinking, approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour before the patrol boat HMS *Larne* arrived. Wilkings, being a non-swimmer, remained on board and was later rescued by a French vessel. The account states that *Larne* took C8 in tow 24 miles south of Start Point, Devon, but, being unable to save it, the airship was deliberately sunk at 7.16pm.

The reference to HMS *Larne* enabled us to find further information as *Larne's* ship's log for June 1916 is one of those in the The National Archives (TNA) collection and a number of



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volunteers with extensive naval experience, helped us decipher the information it contained. The log regularly records the vessel's speed, position, direction and details about the weather and on Friday 9th June 1916, the remarks column of the log mentions *Larne* going to the assistance of Airship C8, providing further interesting details. This includes a list of equipment lost during the attempted salvage (brass boathooks, cordage, a lifebuoy and tools, information about C8's position when encountered by *Larne* (20' S 10 W from Prawle Point) and the fact that, after a failed attempt to tow the airship, it was finally sunk at 7.20pm by 4 rounds of gunfire from *Larne's* 12-pounder gun.

Through our HLF Forgotten Wrecks project, the Maritime Archaeology Trust has been able to digitise the collection of letters relating to the loss of C8 and make them publicly available. The originals have been deposited with the Plymouth & West Devon Record Office where they can soon be viewed by appointment.

The Forgotten Wrecks project has created a 'Community' on the Lives of the First World War digital memorial for C8, it comprises a page for each of the 4 men who were onboard when it was lost. It is hoped that somebody out there might have links with these individuals and may be able to shed more light on the story, please contact us if you can help. [Click here to visit the C8 community on the Lives of the First World War website.](#)