

‘Sundowner’ Dunkirk memorial Ramsgate

Introduction

The ‘Sundowner’ is a war memorial located in Ramsgate, Kent. It is a somewhat unusual memorial, being a small boat moored in the town’s Inner Harbour. The Sundowner was one of the ‘Little Ships’ that assisted with the evacuation from Dunkirk in June 1940. She is now a museum ship and, as part of the Ramsgate Maritime Museum, commemorates the events of Dunkirk and serves as a powerful reminder of the ‘Little Ships’ and the people that sailed them nearly 75 years ago.

The memorial’s design and early history

The Sundowner is a 58 foot motor yacht, originally built in 1912. The fact that this memorial is a vehicle makes it quite distinctive from other war memorials, particularly the more traditional sculptural designs we tend to be more familiar with, and demonstrates the diversity in war memorial design that can be found in the UK. Moored in Ramsgate harbour near the Maritime Museum, there is little to immediately mark her out from other boats as a memorial other than a board outlining a brief history of her participation in the Dunkirk evacuation.

The Sundowner was bought in 1929 by Commander Charles Lightoller, who himself is well-known for being the most senior surviving officer of the Titanic disaster in April 1912. After a decade of being used by the Lightoller family, in 1940 the Admiralty requisitioned the Sundowner to assist with ‘Operation Dynamo,’ the evacuation of Allied soldiers from the beaches of Dunkirk.

The Dunkirk evacuation

In May 1940 the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), along with Belgian and French forces became trapped by German forces invading France and driving them back towards the English Channel. It soon became apparent that evacuation across the Channel was the best course of action for the Allies and a withdrawal to Dunkirk, the closest port, was organised. On 20th May planning for ‘Operation Dynamo,’ the code name for the evacuation of troops from Dunkirk, began in Dover where a fleet of boats assembled to assist with the evacuation.

The first full day of the evacuation was 27th May and by the 30th, following an emergency call for additional help, hundreds of boats and ‘Little Ships’ had been volunteered for service, the Sundowner among them. The key role of the Little Ships was to ferry soldiers from the beaches out to larger ships that could not get close enough for soldiers to go aboard. Many were sailed by civilian crews.

Charles Lightoller, by then aged 66 and retired, sailed the Sundowner across the Channel himself along with his son. They left Ramsgate on the morning of 1st June, and on their way across the channel rescued the crew of another ship that was on fire. On arrival at Dunkirk they drew up alongside a destroyer (HMS Worcester) and took on board the soldiers from there. A total of 130 men were packed on board the Sundowner; 75 in the cabin and 55 on deck. On the journey back to Ramsgate the boat faced significant danger, both from enemy aircraft fire and, due to her heavy load, from being swamped by wash from faster-moving destroyers. On arrival back in Ramsgate the



The ‘Little Ship’ Sundowner, moored in Ramsgate harbour © WMT, 2014



Information board on board the Sundowner © WMT, 2014

Lightollers disembarked the rescued troops and were preparing to return to Dunkirk but by that time the Sundowner's speed, which was slower than what was by that time permitted to support the evacuation, prevented them from doing so. The evacuation continued until 4th June, by which time over 300,000 troops had been rescued.

After Dunkirk

Following the evacuation from Dunkirk, the Sundowner remained in service as a coastal patrol vessel until the end of the war, before being returned to the Lightollers for use as a family boat in 1946. On the 25th anniversary of the evacuation in 1965, the Sundowner was once again sailed to Dunkirk, this time by Charles Lightoller's widow. After various subsequent owners the boat was eventually purchased by the East Kent Maritime Trust in 1986 and underwent restoration in time for the 50th anniversary of Dunkirk in 1990. After also participating in the 60th anniversary return voyage to Dunkirk in 2000, the Sundowner underwent a further extensive refit and restoration in 2004, partly funded by a grant of £2000 from War Memorials Trust.

The memorial today

The Sundowner is now a museum ship and is moored in Ramsgate's Inner Harbour as part of the Ramsgate Maritime Museum. Also in and around the harbour are various other memorials commemorating Operation Dynamo. These include a casket of sand brought back from the Dunkirk beaches and plaques depicting and giving information about the evacuation.

Teaching suggestions

Information about and photographs of this memorial can be used in sessions with young people about:

- War memorial designs: the Sundowner is a rare example of a war memorial boat and can be used in general sessions to highlight the range of war memorial designs that can be found in the UK, as well as the fact that there are no rules about what a war memorial should look like. It is a good example to use to challenge many young people's idea that a war memorial must be a stone cross or monument.
- The Dunkirk evacuation: the Sundowner memorial can be used as a stimulus for lessons about the events surrounding the Dunkirk evacuation.

Useful links

The following links may provide additional helpful information about this memorial:

- War Memorials Online record: www.warmemorials.org.uk/node/90512
- War Memorials Trust's Grant Showcase record detailing restoration works to the memorial: www.warmemorials.org/search-grants/?glD=503

Further information can be found at www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org/links which may help with lessons on some of the wider issues suggested here.

For further information and resources please contact the Learning Officer at:
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