

Memorials to Dunkirk



War Memorials Trust

Introduction

There are various memorials in the UK that commemorate the events of Dunkirk, and some of these have been described below. There may be others in your locality and there are official memorials maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in Dunkirk itself. The information provided here about these memorials can be used to examine how the events of Dunkirk are now remembered and how war memorials vary.

Sundowner

Introduction

The 'Sundowner' is a war memorial located in Ramsgate, Kent (www.warmemorialsonline.org.uk/node/90512). 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

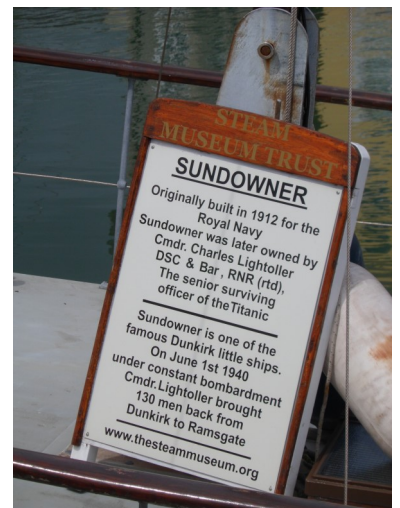
In May 1940 the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), along with Belgian and French forces became trapped by German forces invading France and driving them back towards the English Channel. It soon became apparent that evacuation across the Channel was the best course of action for the Allies and a withdrawal 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



The Sundowner 'Little Ship' and information board (below), Ramsgate, Kent © War Memorials Trust, 2014



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 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, as the photos on the previous page show, 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. Some of these are outlined on additional information sheets from War Memorials Trust.

Dunkirk casket and window

Introduction

Technically two separate memorials, the Dunkirk casket (www.warmemorialsonline.org.uk/node/89405) and stained glass window (www.warmemorialsonline.org.uk/node/89407) in St George the Martyr Church, Ramsgate are located close to each other, with the casket immediately under the window, and commemorate the events of Dunkirk.

The memorial's design and history

The casket is an oak box fixed to the church wall. It contains sand that was taken from the Dunkirk beaches and is one example of several memorials that take this form in various places in the UK. On the front of the box, a plaque carries the inscription: 'In commemoration of the/ epic of Dunkirk in 1940/ this casket of sand from/ the Dunkirk beaches/ was placed in this church by/ the East Kent branch of the/ Dunkirk Veterans Association/ during a service held on/ 15th Nov. 1987.'



Dunkirk casket in Ramsgate, Kent © James Brazier, 2008

This is a fairly unusual example of a memorial that takes the form of a relic from the event. There are other, similar style memorials to Dunkirk in other churches in the UK. Ramsgate itself also has various other Dunkirk

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memorials commemorating the fact that this was where the Little Ships sailed from.

The stained glass window is located in the same church above where the casket is hung. It was installed in 1961. This shows images of the Little Ships sailing from Ramsgate to Dunkirk. It also depicts troops being rescued from the beaches and the people that welcomed them home. Along the top of the window are the military badges of organisations involved in the evacuation.

Under the window there is a plaque fixed to the wall, bearing the inscription 'This window was unveiled on June 21st 1961/ by Jack Hawkes a member of the crew/ of the Ramsgate Lifeboat Prudential/ who were responsible for rescuing 2800 men/ from the beaches of Dunkirk in June 1940.' Under this is the badge of the East Kent branch of the Dunkirk Veterans' Association.

There are many war memorial windows in churches commemorating the World Wars or, like this one, specific events. They often depict scenes of what happened.



Dunkirk memorial window in Ramsgate, Kent © James Brazier, 2007.

Ramsgate Harbour Dunkirk memorial

Introduction

This memorial (www.warmemorialsonline.org.uk/node/90511) is situated in Ramsgate Harbour, one of several Dunkirk memorials (including the Sundowner) in that area commemorating the fact that the Little Ships sailed from here. It was erected in 2000 to commemorate the 60th anniversary of Operation Dynamo. It was unveiled by Dame Vera Lynn on 5th June 2000.

The memorial's design

The memorial takes the form of a rough stone rectangular pillar overlooking the harbour. On one side of this is a brass plaque, on which is depicted the evacuation.



Dunkirk memorial stone, Ramsgate Harbour, Kent © James Brazier, 2007.

There are also other memorials to Dunkirk in the UK, from plaques in other churches to a bench in Portsmouth encouraging people to 'rest awhile and remember the miracle of Dunkirk.' A particularly unusual example is a memorial care home established as a 'living memorial' to all those involved in Operation Dynamo. The many memorials to those events can be used to learn about the different memorial types and designs that exist in the UK, from the traditional to the more unusual. Examples can be found on the accompanying PowerPoint and on www.warmemorialsonline.org.uk.

War Memorials Trust only operates in the UK but there are also memorials to the events of Dunkirk on the other side of the Channel in France, including the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's Dunkirk memorial which is located among British war graves in Dunkirk cemetery. Further information about this memorial can be found at www.cwgc.org.

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