SS *Donegal*

The Beginning

The mid to late Victorian period saw unprecedented expansion of the railway infrastructure in the UK. The first railway to reach a port on the North West coast of England was the Furness Railway at Barrow on Furness. Railway companies were not empowered to run shipping services however and the Barrow Steam Navigation Co was formed to start service from Barrow to Belfast with interests and investments from the Midland Railway and the Furness Railway. In 1904, the Midland Railway's purpose-built port at Heysham was opened, with direct rail connection and four new steamers were built to open services to Belfast and Douglas (Isle of Man). (In 1907, the Midland Railway took over the Barrow Steam Navigation Co. and added two further vessels, SS *City of Belfast* and *Duchess of Devonshire* joined the fleet, mainly used as relief and summer extra vessels. The Midland Railway became part of the London Midland and Scottish Railway company in 1923.) (http://www.simplonpc.co.uk/LMS_MR.html#anchor140376)

Together with the SS *Antrim*, the SS *Donegal* was a purpose built passenger ferry operating from Heysham Port to Belfast and Douglas (IoM). Built in 1904 by Caird & Company of Greenock and launched on 30th April 1904, at 1,885 tons (gross) the SS *Donegal* was a twin screw steamer powered by a triple-expansion steam engine rated at 386 NHP, giving her a speed of 13 knots (24 km/h). Both *Donegal* and *Antrim* worked between Heysham and Belfast from 1904 until they were requisitioned for UK Government service in the First World War.
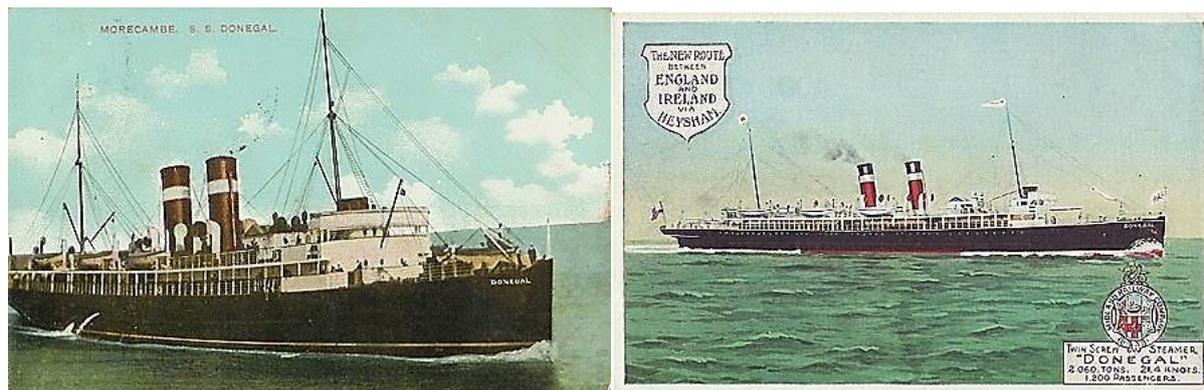
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(NB: The formal Midland Railway postcards illustrated above highlight an operational speed of 21.4 knots, weight of 2060 tons and a passenger complement of 1200.)

At War

Both the SS *Antrim* and *Donegal* were among many passenger ferries requisitioned by the Admiralty during WW1 to act as hospital ships, casualty ships and general transport vessels. During 1915 the ship was outfitted as a hospital ship (but fitted with a 13pdr gun)

and so technically was an armed transport vessel used as a casualty clearing ship. As an ambulance ship, the SS *Donegal* was configured for a crew of 70 with 610 (wounded) passengers.

During the course of the war, the SS *Donegal* crossed the channel between Northern France and Southampton many times and on 1st March 1917 a German submarine tried to attack SS *Donegal,* but the steamer managed to outrun her.

The Sinking and Aftermath

On 17th April 1917, the SS *Donegal* sailed from Le Havre bound for Southampton with the HMHS *Lanfranc* and several RN escorts, carrying 610 lightly wounded soldiers and 70 crew. She was about 19 nautical miles (35 km) south of the Dean light vessel when the German Type UC II submarine SM *UC-21* torpedoed her without warning.

According to contemporary reports "the torpedo tore a great hole in the casing, and part of the deck collapsed. Parts of the vessel were blown to atoms, injuring a number of the crew and killing five. The rudder was blown off, and the vessel sank in half an hour. There was no panic. The officers and 'crew displayed wonderful spirit working like heroes in rescuing the wounded. Fortunately, the majority of the wounded were able to walk. The lifeboats were lowered promptly and coolly, and all the wounded were saved except a few who were killed by the explosion." The SS *Donegal* sank with the loss of 29 wounded British soldiers and 12 of her crew.

A crew report offers the following view:

"SS *Donegal* was under escort when the captain spotted a torpedo track some 400 yards or so away to port at 7.43pm, and gave the order "hard to starboard", but this was too late, and in the words of the captain: "...my ship was struck near the port propeller with the result that the stern was practically blown away and carried with it the 13-pounder gun, which had only been mounted the day before. One of the gunners who was standing by it is missing and must have been killed..."

The vessel began to sink rapidly but HMS *Jackal* got alongside and took off some 500 troops, with other ships picking up some of the remainder. Three-quarters of an hour after the attack, *Donegal* lurched to starboard, throwing those left on board into the sea as she foundered, with the loss of 69 crew and 26 of the wounded soldiers. This report seems at odds with much other casualty reporting which suggests 29 soldiers lost and 11 crew.

(Passenger figures vary; Wikipedia highlights 610 wounded soldiers, while His Majesty's Stationary Office, British Merchant Shipping (Losses) WW1 suggests as many as 639)

One the numerous acts of bravery in the face of the sinking is that of Lieutenant H Holehouse, to whom the Royal Humane Society awarded its bronze medal with the citation:

Holehouse, H., Lieutenant, R.N.R. Case 43264

"At 7.30 p.m. on the 17th April, 1917, the S.S. *Donegal* was torpedoed at sea, and a wounded soldier was seen in the water, it being nearly dark at the time. Lieutenant H. Holehouse, R.N.R., jumped in and brought the man to his ship, but when got on board he did not recover."

Two of SS *Donegal*'s crew had served on together on previous ships. Archie Jewell and John Priest had served on RMS *Titanic* and survived her sinking in April 1912 where Jewell had been one of *Titanic*'s lookouts (although not on watch when she struck the iceberg) and Priest had been one of her stokers. Both Jewell and Priest then served on *Titanic*'s White Star Line sister ship HMHS *Britannic*, and survived when she was sunk in November 1916.

Priest had also been on the liner RMS *Asturias* when she foundered on her maiden voyage in 1907, and on RMS *Olympic* when she was damaged in a collision with HMS *Hawke* in 1911. Priest then served on the armed merchant cruiser *Alcantara* when she and the German armed merchant cruiser SMS *Greif* sank each other in February 1916. When SS *Donegal* sank, Priest survived yet again but Jewell was killed. In 1917 Priest was awarded the Mercantile Marine Ribbon for his service in the war.

The Memorials

More than 2,500 merchant ships and auxiliaries were sunk during the war, by far the greatest majority by U-boats. "The Cross of Sacrifice: The Officers, Men and Women of the Merchant Navy and Mercantile Fleet Auxiliary 1914 – 1919" contains the names of all who died serving in the merchant marine (MM) and in auxiliaries, armed merchant cruisers, hospital ships etc. with the date of death. In each case the name of the ship is given and the individual's function on board and the preview of the volume includes a number of those lost on the SS *Donegal*;

- CLIFFORD William John (29), Greaser, MM from Belfast
- COWLEY Andrew (33), Wireless Operator, MM from Derby
- DAWKINS Charles James (31), Fireman, MM from Southampton
- FARNAN John William (28), Fireman, MM from Southampton
- HAMMOND Thomas (30), Able Seaman, MM from Southampton
- HILL Nelson (22), Able Seaman, MM from Bogside Islandmagee
- HUGHES Robert (40), Carpenter, MM from County Down
- JEWELL Archie (28), Able Seaman, MM from Bude
- RICHARDS Samuel (32), Fireman, MM from Southampton
- THREFALL, Thomas (31), Fireman, MM from Lancaster

each of whom is remembered at the [Tower Hill Memorial in London](#).

Peter McFADYEN (26), a Leading Deck Hand in the Royal Naval Reserve, is remembered at the Portsmouth Naval Memorial.

The story of Archie Jewell can be found at [100 First World War Stories.](#)

The Wreck Today

Today, the SS *Donegal* lies intact on her port side in about 45 to 50 metres (148 to 164 ft) of water.