

A 'Natural Death' After Accidental Water Immersion

SS109181 Stoker 1st Class Robert Barber ~ Royal Navy

Robert Barber was born on the 5th November, 1889 at Plumstead, Kent the son of Robert and Sarah Barber. The 1891 Census recorded that Robert and Sarah had five children, Bessy aged 10, Patty aged 8, Rose aged 3, Robert (junior) aged 2 and four month old Jessie. Robert (senior) who was aged 40 had been born at Diss, in Norfolk and was a slater by trade. His wife, Sarah (née Appleton) aged 38 had been born at Andover, in Hampshire. They were married at Norwich in the autumn of 1869. Bessie had been born at Bromley, when the family were living at 38 College Road, Bromley. All their other children were born at Plumstead after the family had moved to Richmond Hill. During the next decade the family moved again and were living at 49 Bank Road, Plumstead. The household members by 1901 were Robert (senior), Sarah, his wife, Bessie aged 20, Rose aged 13, Robert (junior) aged 12, Thomas aged 9, Kate aged 3 and two boarders William Wilker and William Spelwood who both worked at Woolwich Arsenal.

By the time of the 1911 Census, Robert (senior), was a 59 year old widower, living at 13 Bannockburn Road, Plumstead, with Elizabeth Blanche recorded as a widow, housekeeper and her three children. There is no information about Robert (Junior) formative years but on leaving school he was employed as a slater following his father's trade. However, on the 23rd August, 1909, perhaps seeking a better career he joined the Royal Navy at Chatham at the age of 20 for a 12 year engagement – (5 years full-time service and 7 years in the Royal Fleet Reserve). The prefix SS of his service number indicates that he was a Special Service man who engaged for 5 and 7 years as aforementioned. Robert was described on his service record as being 5-ft 5-inches in height, had a chest measurement of 36-inches, light brown hair, blue eyes, a ruddy complexion and had a scar on his right shin. Details of Robert's service were as follows:-

Period of Service

<u>Ship</u>	<u>Rating</u>	<u>From</u>	<u>To</u>	<u>Remarks</u>
Acheron	Stoker 2 nd Class	23 Aug 1909	10 Feb 1910	
Magnificent	Stoker 2 nd Class	11 Feb 1910	20 Apr 1910	
Pembroke II	Stoker 2 nd Class	21 Apr 1910	30 May 1910	
Lancaster	Stoker 2 nd Class	31 May 1910		
Lancaster	Stoker 1 st Class	20 Feb 1912	26 Jun 1912	3 Days Cells

Lancaster	Stoker 1 st Class	30 Jul 1912	4 Nov 1912	
Pembroke II	Stoker 1 st Class	5 Nov 1912	14 Oct 1913	
Weymouth	Stoker 1 st Class	15 Oct 1913	12 Jan 1914	
Pembroke II	Stoker 1 st Class	13 Jan 1914	21 Jan 1914	
Vengeance	Stoker 1 st Class	22 Jan 1914	8 Sep 1914	Discharged Dead

Robert Barber's character was marked as 'Very Good' with one lapse in his conduct having spent three days in the cells during July 1912 for an unspecified offence. A month later on the 25th August he received his first Good Conduct Badge.

His first ship HMS Acheron had been originally named HMS Northumberland, one of three Minotaur-class armoured frigates built during the 1860's. Most of her service was with the Channel Squadron and after a refit in 1885 became the flagship of the squadron. Five years later she was placed in reserve with the 1st Reserve Squadron firstly at Portland, than at Devonport. In 1898 she was 'hulked' as a stoker's training ship at the Nore and renamed HMS Acheron in January 1904. From 1909 until 1926 she was used as a coal hulk, sold a year later and renamed for service at Dakar, the capital of Senegal in West Africa and then scrapped in 1935.



Grave Of Stoker 1st Class Robert Barber R.N.

Another warship on which Robert served was HMS Lancaster, one of ten Monmouth-class armoured cruisers built by Armstrong Whitworth at their Elswick shipyard. Laid down in March 1901 she was completed in 1904. With a displacement of 10,000-tons, she had an overall length of 463-ft 6-inches, a beam of 66-ft and a deep draught of 25-ft. Powered by two 4-cylinder triple expansion engines producing 22,000 IHP she achieved 24-knots on her sea trials exceeding her designed speed. On completion HMS Lancaster joined the 3rd Cruiser Squadron of the

Mediterranean Fleet and remained there until 1912 when she returned to the United Kingdom and was placed in reserve. Robert was drafted to HMS Lancaster on the 31st May, 1910 and is listed on the 1911 Census 'List Of Officers Crew And Royal Marines On Board At Midnight On Sunday April 2nd 1911.'

His last warship was HMS Vengeance, one of six 'Canopus' class battleships built by Vickers at Barrow-in-Furness under the 1896 Naval building programme. She was laid down in August 1897, launched on the 25th July 1899 and completed in April 1901 with a displacement of 12,950-tons.

Technical Details

Dimension ~ Length Overall 418-ft; Beam 74-ft; Maximum Draft 26-ft 6-inches;

Armament ~ Guns: 4 x 12-inch Mk VII, 35 calibre; 12 x 6-inch (wire) 40 calibre; 10 x 12-pounders (12-cwt); 2 x 12-pounders (8-cwt); 6 x 3-pounders; 2 x Maxim Guns; 4 x Torpedo Tubes (Submerged);

Machinery ~ 2 x 3 Cylinder Vertical Inverted Triple Expansion Engines; 2 x Propeller Shafts; Propellers – 4 Bladed; 20 x Belleville Boilers; (The ships of this class were the first British battleships to be fitted with water-tube boilers, which generated more power at less expense in weight compared with the fire-tube boilers used in previous ships); Steam Pressure at Boilers 300lbs/sq.in; Steam Pressure at Engines 250lbs/sq.in; Designed Horse Power 13,500 = 18.25-knots;

Fuel ~ Coal – Normal 1,000-tons; Maximum 2,300-tons; Average Coal Consumption 9-tons/hour at 16.5-knots; 12.5-tons at 18.25-knots;

Armoured Notes ~ 6-inch Belt 14-ft Wide x 210-ft Long; Bulkheads 6-inch to 10-inch; Barbettes 12-inch; Turrets 8-inch; Casemates 6-inch; Conning Tower 12-inch; Decks 1-inch to 2-inch; Approximate Total Weight Of Armour 3,600-tons;

Building Costs ~ Approximately £900,000/Ship;

Complement ~ 750 Officers & Men; As Flagship 780 Officers & Ratings;

After commissioning in April 1902 HMS Vengeance was deployed on the China Station but her presence there proved to be unnecessary due to the signing of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance and she returned to the United Kingdom in 1905. After a refit she joined the Channel Fleet until

1908 and then became part of the Home Fleet as gunnery training ship. In 1913 she was attached to the 6th Battle Squadron of the Second Fleet.

The Royal Navy was mobilised on the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 and HMS Vengeance was transferred to the 8th Battle Squadron of the Channel Fleet. The squadron was deployed on patrol duties in the English Channel and the Atlantic. She then was assigned on the 15th August, 1914 to the 7th Battle Squadron as the squadron flagship. With five other ships of the squadron they covered the landing of the Plymouth Marine Battalion at Ostend on the 25th August, 1914. They also escorted troopships across the channel. Stoker 1st Class Robert Barber served on HMS Vengeance from the 22nd January, 1914 until his untimely death on the 8th September of that year.

HMS Vengeance continued her patrolling and escort duties until November 1914 when she was transferred to Alexandria for protection of the Suez Canal. Later she participated in the Dardanelles Campaign in January 1915 and later at Gallipoli supporting the troop landings, then in July returned home for a refit. Re-commissioned she was sent to East Africa, remaining there until 1917, returned to the United Kingdom and decommissioned. Re-commissioned in February 1918 she was used for gunnery experiments and then became an ammunition store ship. At the end of the war HMS Vengeance was placed on the sale list in July 1920 and sold for scrap in December 1921.

Southern Times ~ Saturday, 12th September, 1914.

A Sailor Drowned – Death After Rescue

At the R.N. Hospital on Thursday afternoon the Coroner (Mr G.P. Symes) held an inquest on the death of Robert Barber, of HMS —, which occurred on Tuesday. Mr William J. Keats was chosen foreman of the jury. In opening the enquiry the Coroner said that since the ship had gone to sea to a place, which he did not know and would not tell even if he did know, the only evidence would be that of identification and written statements.

Surgeon Briscoe, of H.M. Naval Hospital, stated that the body viewed by the jury was that of Robert Barber, stoker first class, of H.M.S. —. The body was brought into R.N. Hospital on Wednesday with a report from the ship's surgeon. Deceased was, 25 years of age and a native of Plumstead S.E. The Coroner said he had received a letter from the captain of the ship, in which he said he regretted to have to report the death of Stoker Barber from syncope – (faint) – due to his having fallen overboard from a steamboat on Tuesday. He was seen to fall, and other men jumped in after him and got him out. He remained unconscious until 11 p.m. and then died. The

Staff Surgeon wrote that when he saw deceased rescued he found three contusions on the head, but no fracture of the skull. Artificial respiration was tried for four minutes and deceased commenced to breathe naturally, but he never recovered consciousness and died about 11 p.m. The jury accepted this as evidence and returned verdict of natural death consequent upon accidental immersion.

Note: — Due to the war disclosure of information thought to be helpful to the enemy the name of the warship was censored and omitted.

Syncope is a temporary loss of consciousness usually related to insufficient blood flow to the brain. It is also called fainting or 'passing out'. Most often occurs when the blood pressure is too low and the heart does not pump enough oxygen to the brain. In most cases syncope is not a sign of a life-threatening problem, although some people with syncope have a serious underlying medical condition and consequently may require immediate medical attention.

Stoker 1st Class Robert Barber who died on the 8th September, 1914, aged 25 years lies buried in Portland Royal Naval Cemetery. Grave Location: Plot No.533.

Portland Harbour is a manmade harbour attached to the north of Portland. Originally it was a natural anchorage known as Portland Roads, protected by Portland to the south, Chesil Beach to the west and mainland Dorset to the north. Portland Roads was transformed into a naval base following the building of two breakwater arms in



Grave Of Stoker 1st Class Robert Barber R.N.

the mid-19th century. The Cemetery was established by the War Office in 1876 for the burial of the soldiers garrisoned at Verne Citadel (part of the harbour defence fortifications) and Royal Navy sailors based at Portland. In 1907 the site was transferred to the Admiralty, who went on to extend the site to the west in 1914. Throughout the First World War, Portland Harbour was used regularly for training exercises and patrols for German U-boats. There are 67 burials from the First World War, 50 of which are unidentified. In addition, there is a Special Memorial to a

casualty buried in Portland (St George) Churchyard. After the War the maintenance of the Cemetery was passed to the Imperial War Graves Commission and in November 1926, the Cross of Sacrifice was unveiled in the presence of detachments from ships stationed at Portland and the local garrison. With the outbreak of the Second World War, Portland continued hosting training exercises. However, after Germany's successful invasion of France, the naval base quickly became the target of air attacks. On the 4th July, 1940 HMS Foylebank was attacked while at Portland Harbour, which resulted in her sinking on the 5th. Over 70 crew members lost their lives, some of whom are buried at Portland Royal Naval Cemetery, the rest are commemorated on memorials to the missing. By May 1944, both Portland Harbour and Weymouth Harbour were used as part of the D-Day preparations. They were major embarkation points for American troops, particularly the US 1st Division who embarked for 'Omaha Beach' in June 1944. There are 103 burials (including 1 Norwegian Merchant Navy seaman and 12 German airmen) 10 of which are unidentified, from the Second World War, the majority of which are in the Church of England section, near the Cross of Sacrifice. The Cemetery was extended eastwards in the mid-20th century, where many post-Second World War burials are found. In 1996 the Naval Base at Portland was closed.

Robert's father was informed of his son's death and later as his next-of-kin received his personal effects, residue of his pay and war gratuity. He also received his son's 1914-15 Star, British War Medal 1914-1920, Allied Victory Medal 1914-1919, Bronze Memorial Plaque and Scroll.

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Sources

Southern Times Newspaper ~ Saturday, 12th September, 1914.

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National Archives ~ UK Naval Medal & Award Rolls 1793-1972 – Stoker 1st Class Robert Barber ADM 171/95

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