

## The Loss of His Majesty's Minesweeper, HM Trawler Beech

In the early hours of Sunday, 22nd June, 1941, the minesweeper, HM Trawler Beech, was bombed and sunk by a German aircraft as it lay at anchor in Thurso Bay, about 400 yards off Scrabster pier. This incident has been related numerous times and is always described as being carried out by a lone aircraft. However, this is not entirely accurate. Indeed, it was a single aircraft which sunk the Beech but it was not operating as a 'Lone Wolf', it was in fact one of a number of enemy aircraft, official reports say up to 10, which were on active operations over the north of Scotland that night.



Scrabster harbour in 1938, much as it would have appeared during WW2.

Beech's position was roughly centre, in line with lighthouse. Public Domain

## The Setting

1941 was a busy year in Scotland's war. The Luftwaffe launched nuisance raids over some part or other of Scotland on an almost daily basis. The north east coast was a favourite target, probably because of its distinctive and easily identified coastline and being nearer to German air bases. Operations over northern Scotland were predominantly executed by Luftflotte 5 (Air Fleet 5), which operated from occupied Norway and Denmark. The main units involved were: Kampfgeschwader 30 (KG 30), flying Junkers Ju 88s, this bomber wing was heavily involved in anti-shipping operations and strikes against northern Scottish infrastructure, and Fernaufklärungsgruppen (Long-Range Reconnaissance), flying frequent high-altitude photographic missions over Caithness, Sutherland, and Orkney using Junkers Ju 88s and Heinkel He 111s, to map defences and track fleet movements.

Peterhead came in for particular attention and has the dubious honour of being the most raided town in Scotland, suffering 28 raids mostly between 1940 to 1942. However, the rest of Scotland did not escape the attention of the Luftwaffe and many raids were carried out over many areas during this period, including a number of locations in Caithness. These attacks usually took the form of 'hit and run' raids, these were fast, elusive attacks usually carried out around the coast by a single aircraft on a target. The aircraft would approach the coast flying extremely low (often just 5 to 500 feet above the water) to avoid radar detection and gain the element of surprise. It would then appear suddenly and unexpectedly over its target, drop its bombs, strafe the ground with machine gun or cannon fire and speed away again at low altitude before RAF fighters could be scrambled to

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intercept them. It was a highly risky and dangerous method of combat, and it would appear that the Beech was a casualty of one of these regular hit and run raids.

Apart from the 22nd of June being the summer solstice, and the shortest night, in 1941, this date was also significant for the Luftwaffe in Norway as it was the eve of Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the Soviet Union, and their attention would increasingly be directed towards supporting that operation. The raids over Scotland continued for several months but from this date they began to dwindle as Barbarossa consumed more and more of the Luftwaffe's time and resources.

### The Raid

On the night of 21/22 June there was a considerable amount of enemy activity in the skies above the north of Scotland and the northern isles.

Just after midnight, at 00:15, an enemy aircraft was spotted passing westward over Herma Ness on the northern tip of Shetland. Around the same time several enemy aircraft were plotted over Orkney also flying westward. At 01:31 an estimated 10 aircraft were plotted in the vicinity of Cape Wrath entering north Minch and heading south towards Loch Ewe. However, these turned back without committing any hostile acts, probably because of poor visibility due to the foggy weather over the west coast that night.

At 02:12 eight or nine raiders were flying eastwards along the north coast towards Orkney. At 02:28 a Red air raid warning was issued and the air raid sirens began to wail across the islands. As the raiders approached the Orkney Mainland, flying low, Orkney's anti-aircraft guns went into action but unfortunately failed to hit any targets. As the aircraft passed above Kirkwall one of them released 2 of its bombs over the newly constructed airfield at Grimsetter (now Kirkwall Airport), fortunately causing little damage. Now positively identified as Junkers 88s, they passed low over the Kirkwall Fighter Sector Headquarters building (known locally as the 'Black Building', it was demolished in 2009) and machine gunned the airfield buildings nearby, killing one serviceman.

Despite the weather being 'non-operational' that night, the RAF did not sit back and watch. Kirkwall Sector HQ's log records the fact that two aircraft were scrambled to intercept the raiders, these were a Hurricane of 253 Sqn. based at RAF Skeabrae on Orkney and a Hurricane of 607 Sqn based at RAF Skitten. Strangely, neither squadron's logs record these sorties.

As this raid over Orkney was taking place, at about 02:30, the minesweeper Beech was also attacked and sunk in Thurso Bay. Fifteen minutes later, at 02:45, another Red air raid warning was issued and Wick's air raid sirens sounded, although the danger to Wick itself had already passed. A single aircraft had ignored the town and was heading westward towards the decoy aerodrome at Sarclet where it dropped four of its 250 Kg bombs. The ground personnel at Sarclet opened fire with their anti-aircraft machine guns but with no result, and no one was hurt on the ground.

The all clear sounded at 03:20 as the enemy machines made their way back to base, bringing to an end what had been a fairly disastrous night in the north of Scotland.

### The Target

The minesweeper Beech started life as a steel hulled steam trawler built by Cochrane and Sons of Selby, North Yorkshire, for Pickering and Haldanes Steam Trawling Co. Ltd. of Hull, and launched in

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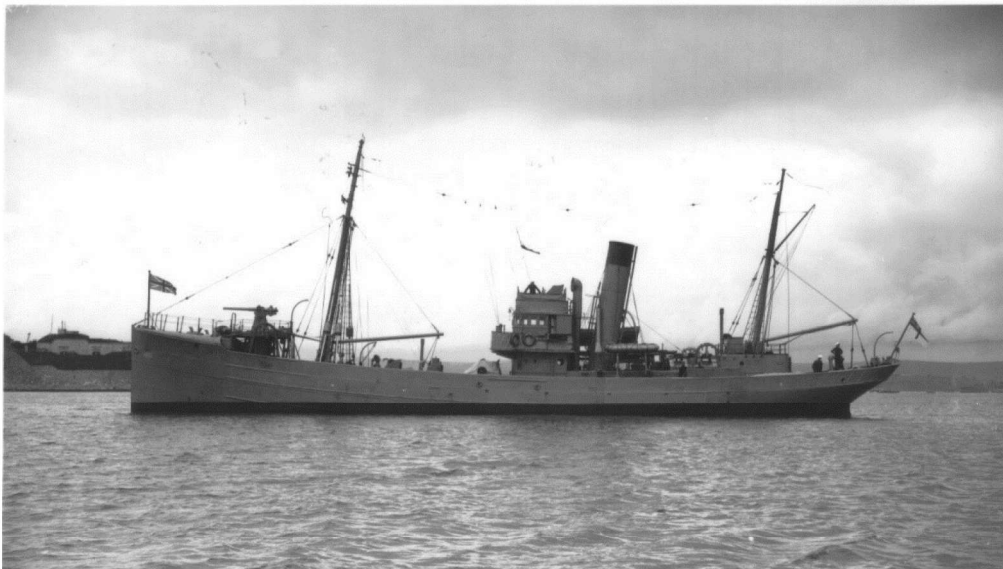
October 1929. Named the Lord Dawson, she measured 140 feet with a tonnage was 346 gross tons. The first ten years of its life were spent fishing out of that port along the east coast, northern isles and in the Icelandic fishing grounds.

These type of trawlers had been requisitioned by the navy during the First World War and converted for minesweeping. They had been so successful in that role that the Admiralty had ordered a number of the converted versions built specifically as naval minesweepers. Leading up to the outbreak of WW2 many of these fishing trawlers were again requisitioned for this purpose.

In February 1939 the Lord Dawson was impressed into the Royal Navy and converted to a Berberis-class minesweeper. The Berberis class vessels were Royal Navy Admiralty type trawlers, requisitioned and modified for minesweeping duties. Renamed Beech and given the pennant No. T44, she was fitted with an upper bridge and a four inch deck gun for defence, mounted on the fo'c'sle.

For her minesweeping duties she had Oropesa mine sweeping gear installed, equipment which, when towed underwater, would cut the mooring cables of any U-boat laid contact mines, allowing them to rise to surface where they could be destroyed. When not sweeping for mines they acted as patrol vessels, convoy escorts, and conducted other anti-submarine warfare duties.

Initially based in Grimsby from early 1940, under the command of W McRuvie, R.N.R., the Beech was responsible for keeping the entrance to this, and a number of other ports on the North Sea coast, clear of the ever present danger of German mines. On 14th April, 1941 Lieutenant Arthur Patrick Cocks, R.N.V.R., took over command of the Beech. Cocks was born in Colchester in December 1910 and had worked as a lawyer in Lincoln's Inn, London, until joining the navy in 1940.



HM Trawler Beech anchored just off Nothe Fort at Weymouth, beside Portland naval base. The deck gun and upper bridge are fitted so this was after the conversion, but the pennant number has not yet been painted on the bow, so she is not yet in active service. Portland naval base had long been associated with training so it most likely that this photo was taken sometime in late 1939 or early 1940 while her crew were being trained on the Oropesa mine sweeping gear.

Photo source unknown

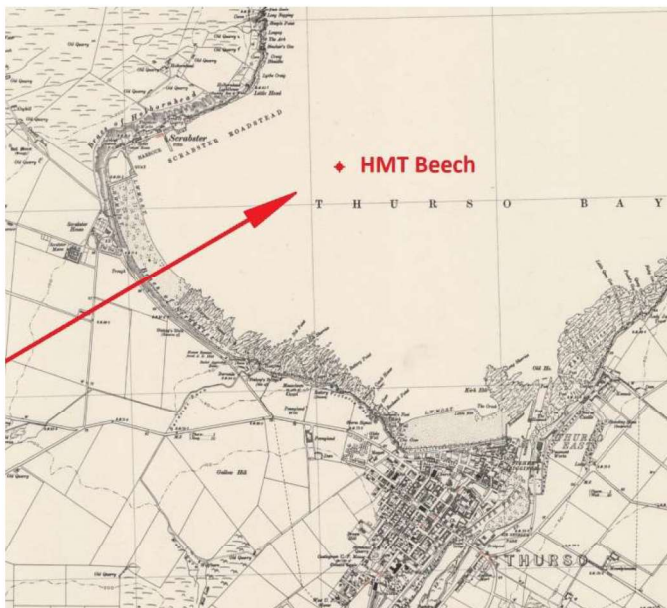
Several weeks later, in June, the Beech was reassigned to a group of twenty minesweepers deployed around Orkney and Shetland and tasked with keeping the Pentland firth clear of mines. The work involved regularly towing her Oropesa gear back and forth along predetermined lanes, or swept paths, through the Pentland firth searching for German mines, tedious but vital work.

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Beech used Scrabster as her weekend base where her crew had the opportunity of a run ashore to relax away from the cramped conditions on trawler. On her regular visits to Scrabster she usually anchored just off the South Quay, and this is where she was on the morning of 22nd June.

### The Attack

Whilst the group of enemy aircraft had been approaching Orkney from Cape Wrath, one of their number peeled away southwards and headed towards the small but important harbour of Scrabster looking for a target to attack. Although many such raids were directed at 'targets of opportunity', it is quite possible that the regular presence of the minesweeper at this location was known to the Luftwaffe from their Fernaufklärungsgruppen's regular reconnaissance sorties over the area, and the Beech may have been specifically targeted.



Position of Beech and estimated direction of attack.

Map reproduced with permission of National Library of Scotland.

The aircraft flew in southwards over the coast then circled back around to the north, approaching Scrabster Brae with Thurso Bay and Scrabster harbour spread out ahead in the early dawn twilight. The pilot spotted the minesweeper resting at anchor almost dead ahead and, putting his aircraft into a steep dive towards the vessel, he released his bomb at zero feet and made off, flying low over the water towards Dunnet Head and the Pentland Firth. A quick, unexpected and effective surprise attack had been successfully accomplished. Behind him his bomb hit the Beech and exploded, the force of the explosion tearing the little vessel wide open, causing such catastrophic damage that she plunged to the bottom in less

than a minute, taking all the 11 crew on board with her, leaving nothing to show she had ever been there.

### The Casualties

The exact number of Beech's crew is not clear as the number of casualties and survivors varies in different accounts, but the Admiralty record of the sinking lists the details of 11 casualties, including the Commanding Officer Arthur Cocks, and mentions that there were 8 survivors, so 19 would seem to be the correct number.

Of the eleven dead only 8 bodies were ever recovered, and of these only 5 were able to be identified. All eight men were laid to rest in Thurso cemetery where they remain today, the three unidentified bodies sharing a common grave.

The 8 survivors do pose a question however, how did they survive? The devastating effect of the bomb's explosion and immediate sinking make it extremely unlikely that anyone on board could

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have survived the destruction of the bomb's blast and would not have had time to get off the rapidly sinking wreckage had they survived. It is almost certain therefore that these survivors were not actually on board at the time of the attack but were still ashore and had not yet returned to their vessel. What is known is that next day these men were all taken across to Orkney to the depot ship, HMS Dunluce Castle, moored at Lyness in Scapa Flow, to await 'dispersal' to other vessels. There was no time for shock, for counselling, for mourning your lost crewmates, the war went on regardless, and they with it.

The other casualty was, of course, the Beech itself. The wreckage proved to be a hazard to vessels using Scrabster so it was deliberately broken up soon after the sinking, a report by the C.S.V.O., Lyness, dated 15th August 1941, stated that the wreck had been dispersed to give a clearance of 5 fathoms (approx. 30 ft.), although in 1948 it apparently fouled a fishery protection cruiser. By 1971 the Scrabster Harbourmaster reported it to be non-existent. In 1977 examination of echo sounder traces taken the year before by HMS Herald, revealed the wreck's location, but all remains having now sunk to the level of the sea bed. In March 1982 the wreck was purchased from the Ministry of Defence by Thurso man, the late Billy Stewart, a retired local diving expert and businessman. In November 1999 the Beech was again located during a magnetometer trial and when dived a metal rib, a section of gunwale and the boiler, standing about 9 feet off the seabed, were the only remaining pieces of wreckage visible.

The Beech was the 140th naval trawler to be lost in the first eighteen month of the War and just one of the fifty seven lost during 1941.

### Those who died on HM Trawler Beech

Lieutenant (Temp) **ARTHUR PATRICK COCKS**, R.N.V.R.

2nd Hand **JOHN BRODIE**, R.N.R.

Seaman **THOMAS GILMOUR GALE** R.N.P.S.

Seaman **JAMES MAIN**, R.N.P.S.

Ordinary Seaman **RONALD VIVIEN BROAD**, R.N.P.S.

Ordinary Seaman **WILLIAM G L MACDONALD**, R.N.P.S.

Engineman **CHARLES STEPHEN**, R.N.R.

Stoker 2nd class **GLYNDWR MORRIS JENKINS**, R.N.P.S.

Stoker Arthur **PATRICK O'NEILL**, R.N.P.S.

Stoker **WILLIAM LEEFE SIMPSON**, R.N.P.S.

Able Seaman **SIMEON JOSEPH WINES**, R.F.R.



Stoker William Leefe Simpson from Immingham, Lincolnshire pictured in his parent's garden in 1940, one of the six unidentified or lost crewmen.

Courtesy Immingham – Years Gone By

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R.N.R. Royal Naval Reserve

R.N.V.R. Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve

R.N.P.R. Royal Naval Patrol Service

R.F.R. Royal Fleet Reserve

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The eight recovered casualties of Beech's sinking lie in Thurso cemetery.  
L to R: C Stephen, GM Jenkins, 3 unknown Sailors, RV Broad, TG Gale, AP Cocks

The 3 unknown and 3 missing men are remembered on the Royal Naval Memorial to the men of the Royal Naval Patrol Service at Lowestoft.

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