

A G K Leonard

Captain Charles Fryatt: "Pirate Dodger" Hero of World War I

"A wonderfully impressive scene was witnessed in London when the body of Captain Charles Fryatt was conveyed in procession through the streets of the city for the memorial funeral service at St Paul's Cathedral."

So the *Hampshire Advertiser* described the occasion on 8 July 1919, when "for the first time London saw in a state ceremonial officers and men of that great service, our mercantile marine."

Southampton-born Charles Fryatt had been acclaimed as a national hero for his exploits in 1915-16 as master of the SS *Brussels*, one of the Great Eastern Railway steamers which maintained services from Harwich and Tilbury to Rotterdam throughout the war (the Germans occupied Belgium but not Holland, which remained neutral), running the gauntlet of enemy attacks, especially by submarines based mainly at Zeebrugge and Ostend.

Captain Fryatt became the best known of the "pirate dodgers", making at least 143



such trips before his capture by the Germans in 1916 and his execution as a "*franc-tireur*" because he had earlier resisted arrest and sinking by a German U-boat, which he had boldly tried to ram.

The German authorities evidently intended his death to deter the masters of other British merchant vessels from similar actions within the waters surrounding Great Britain and Ireland which they had designated as a war zone. In the event, the shooting of Captain Fryatt had effects the reverse of those envisaged by his captors. It was widely denounced as "judicial murder" and served only to strengthen British determination to defy the German blockade.

Figure 1. Captain Charles Fryatt (1871-1916)

Southampton Childhood

Charles Algernon Fryatt was a native of Southampton, where he spent the first twelve years of his life. Born 2 December 1871 at 6 Marsh Lane, he was the second son of Charles Fryatt, described in census and parish records as a "mariner", and his wife Mary Jane Brown Fryatt, *nee* Percy.

Then in their early thirties, they had probably come to live in Southampton not long before the census of 1871 recorded Mrs Fryatt and her two children at 60 Anderson's Terrace in St Mary's parish. Charles Fryatt was then away from home, following his maritime occupation. The 1881 census noted him as having been born at Canvey Island, Essex, while his wife's birthplace was given as Holy Island in Northumberland. Their first two children, named John and Elizabeth, aged six and one respectively in 1871, had been born at Ramsgate and Harwich. Charles and three further children were added to the Fryatt family in Southampton between 1871 and 1879.

The Fryatts moved house several times during this decade, probably to secure better and more spacious accommodation. They were living at 72 Lower Canal Walk when Charles Algernon was baptised by the curate of St Mary's on 6 March 1873 - some fifteen months after his birth. Although this had been duly registered on 8 January 1872, the delay seems to have created confusion, causing his date of birth to be taken in some quarters as 1872. Previous editions of the *Dictionary of national biography* gave this date but it has now been corrected to 1871 in the current edition.

The Fryatts continued living at 72 Lower Canal Walk for some years but then made quick moves to addresses in Cambridge Street and York Street, before settling at 7 Alfred Street, Newtown, where they were listed in the directories of 1878 and 1880.

They moved house again before the 1881 census recorded the family living at 22 Trinity Terrace - presumably the last in their sequences of addresses within St Mary's parish. Charles Fryatt was at home there on census night, with his wife and five children; Sophia Bessie, baptised in 1877, had evidently died in infancy. The Fryatt's eldest son John, then 16, was already following his father's occupation, likewise described as a mariner.

Young Charles Fryatt attended the old Holy Trinity National School in New Road (built in 1853, closed in 1910), until he transferred to Freemantle C E School in March 1882, consequent upon his family having then moved from "down town" to that developing suburb (not actually brought within the borough until 1895).

The Fryatts' new home in Queens Road, Freemantle, seems to have been styled Cyprus (or Cypress?) Cottage. The 1884 edition of the Southampton directory, evidently compiled the previous year, listed Charles Fryatt, mariner, at number 33 Queens Road.

Renamed Queenstown Road in 1903 to eliminate duplication of such street names, it seems to have retained its original pattern of house numbering but modernisation and redevelopment have since obscured the identity of the Victorian "cottage" (one of a pair of semi-detached houses?) where Charles Algernon Fryatt once lived.

The Freemantle School register, preserved in the Southampton Archives, shows that he was admitted to that school on 14 March 1882 and left on 22 October 1883. The *DNB* continues to state that C A Fryatt "first attended the Freemantle School in Southampton", whereas he had previously been a pupil at Holy Trinity, probably from 1876. In his book about Captain Fryatt, Mr M G White transposed the sequence of his attendance at these two schools, with confusing result.

Charles Algernon Fryatt continued his education at the Corporation Free School in Harwich, the port to which his father moved the family home on entering the service of the Great Eastern Railway based there.

Charles Fryatt senior spent the rest of his sea-going years with this company, rising to become chief officer on its vessels running service between Harwich and Tilbury and various ports in Belgium and the Netherlands.

His second son attended the nautical training college on the Thames, HMS *Worcester*, and then served on several merchant ships before joining the GER as an AB seaman in 1892. Marrying a local girl, Ethel Townend, in 1896, he helped her raise a family of seven children while living at a house in Dovercourt, seemingly held on a tenancy from his employers. With them he worked his way up through the shipping grades to become a ship's master in 1913.

Submarines and Gold Watches

Captain Fryatt's first command that year was SS *Colchester* (on which his father had earlier been chief officer) and then SS *Newmarket*. It was the policy of the GER to rotate captains around its fleet, so in 1914 he became master of the SS *Brussels*. She was a 1,380 ton twin screw steamer built in 1902, an up-to-date vessel able to carry 164 first class and 88 second class passengers.

Following the outbreak of war, the GER steamships were taken under the control of the Admiralty. They continued to operate services between Harwich and Holland; its neutrality precluded the arming of British ships serving its ports, which had therefore to rely on seamanship and speed to elude German submarines.

Captain Fryatt's first notable encounter with the enemy was on 2 March 1915, when commanding SS *Wrexham*, a 1,414 ton vessel then on charter to the GER from the Great Central Railway company.

Bound for Rotterdam, she was chased for forty miles but making up to 16 knots, thanks to valiant efforts by engineers and crewmen, she dodged shoals and mines to evade her pursuer and reach port safely.

The GER chairman and directors presented her captain with a gold watch, inscribed "as a mark of their appreciation of his courage and skilful seamanship on March 2, 1915".

A fortnight previously, the German authorities had designated the Channel and waters around Britain and Ireland as a war zone, declaring that "every enemy merchant vessel found in it will be destroyed without it always being possible to warn the crew or passengers of the dangers threatening." British ships were therefore liable to be sunk without warning or without those aboard having time to get into lifeboats - as happened with the 5,000 ton British ship *Falaba*, sunk off the south coast of Ireland on 28 March 1915, when 104 persons lost their lives.

On the afternoon of that same Sunday, the *Brussels*, to whose command Captain Fryatt had been transferred, was making another hazardous voyage to Rotterdam when she sighted the German submarine U 33 heading towards her near the Maas lightship.

Captain Fryatt knew the fate awaiting his ship if she obeyed the signal to stop, also that he could not match the speed of this new attacker, so he boldly ordered the *Brussels* full speed ahead straight at the submarine, firing off rockets as he went - to call for aid and give the impression of guns.

His intent was to force the submarine to disengage and submerge, even to ram her. The *Brussels* may have struck a glancing blow to her conning tower or periscope as she went down. Thereafter, the *Brussels* safely made top speed into harbour at Rotterdam.

Reports of Captain Fryatt's refusal to give up his ship gained him general acclaim and commendation. The master of the *Brussels* received another gold watch, "presented by the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty in recognition of the

example set by that vessel when attacked by a German submarine on March 28, 1915."

The Admiralty also sent a vellum certificate, presented to him on its behalf by the Mayor of Harwich, expressing "their marked approbation of the manner in which you carried out your duty when attacked by a German submarine."

These "well-merited awards" were announced in the House of Commons by the Secretary to the Admiralty on 28 April and the Admiralty also wrote to the railway company praising "the highly courageous and meritorious conduct" of the masters of its steamers running between Harwich and Rotterdam, which "reflected credit on British seamanship."

While British government circles had no doubt that international law fully entitled merchant vessels to resist arrest or sinking, the Germans took a different view of such "civilian" defiance. Publicity for his awards made Captain Fryatt a marked man in their eyes and sealed his fate when he later fell into enemy hands.

There was also speculation that the *Brussels* - and perhaps other GER vessels - may from time to time have carried persons, papers and materials relating to British intelligence activities directed against Germany from the Netherlands, as well as diplomatic mail to and from the British embassy there.

Capture and Execution

For more than a year Captain Fryatt continued running his ship in and out of Rotterdam on voyages that were dangerous but without particular incident, until on the night of 22/23 June 1916, when homeward bound from Holland with Belgian refugees and a cargo of foodstuffs aboard, his ship was surrounded and captured by German destroyers - evidently with benefit of good intelligence about the steamer's movements.

Captain Fryatt had time to order destruction of papers before leading his crew in disciplined acceptance of their capture and comforting the distraught Belgian passengers. The *Brussels* was taken as a prize into Zeebrugge and her crew were sent to spend the rest of the war as prisoners in the Ruhleben camp near Berlin.

Postcards from them duly reached their families, likewise from the five stewardesses who were separately interned near Hanover until repatriated in October/November. All reported themselves well and asked for parcels. The last message from Captain Fryatt, sent from Ruhleben on 1 July, was received by his wife at Dovercourt on 29 July - by which time he was dead.

From mid-July there were reports through Holland that he was to be court martialled. On behalf of the British, the American ambassador in Berlin (the United States was still neutral, not entering the war until the following April) made enquiries and representations, trying to ensure his proper defence on the basis that he had acted legitimately in self-defence. However, the German authorities refused to delay the court martial, for which Captain Fryatt, together with some of his crew, were brought back to Bruges.

A German officer, Captain Neumann, a lawyer in civil life, was appointed to defend the accused but his role must have been marginal to the proceedings at Bruges town hall on 27 July, which were, of course, conducted in German and put Captain Fryatt at further disadvantage, even if an interpreter was present.

His official commendation by the British Admiralty was evidently held against him but the famous gold watches to which reference was also made could not be produced as evidence, since he had left them in safe keeping at home.

The trial lasted only an hour or two before Captain Fryatt was sentenced to death. Barely two hours later - some city aldermen having been hastily summoned as witnesses - he was shot against the wall of the Aurora Gardens, a court near the Kruisport in Bruges where the Germans had previously executed Belgian civilian resisters.

Outrage

A large official poster was displayed in Bruges, announcing in German, Flemish and French - in the name of Admiral August von Schroder, commander of the Flanders Marine Korps - that "the English merchant navy captain Charles Fryatt of Southampton, although not part of the enemy armed forces, attempted on 28 March 1915 to destroy a German submarine by ramming it. This is why he was condemned to death by the judgement this day of the court martial of the Marine Korps and has been executed. A perverse act has thus received its punishment, tardy but just."



Figure 2. The trilingual poster issued by the German Admiral commanding the Flanders Marine Korps, announcing the execution of Charles Fryatt on 27 July 1916. The original (of which an example is held in Southampton Archives) measures 18 by 25 inches

The trial, with its predictable outcome, must have been instituted by high-level political decision in Berlin but the execution of Captain Fryatt proved a political misjudgement, arousing horror and condemnation as "deliberate murder" in neutral countries as well as among the Allies.

The German authorities themselves may indeed have had second thoughts about it, for *The Times* stated in July 1919 that a telegram from Berlin ordering postponement of the execution arrived in Bruges half an hour after it had been carried out.

The Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, hastened to express to the Commons on 31 July his government's "utmost indignation at this atrocious crime against the laws of nations and the usages of war." First Lord of the Admiralty, Arthur Balfour, said pointedly "doubtless it is their wrath at the skill and energy with which British

merchant captains and crews have defended their lives and property under their charge that has driven the Germans into their latest and stupidest act of calculated ferocity - the judicial murder of Captain Fryatt; ... they were resolved at all costs to discourage imitation."

The tide of public feeling was exemplified by a big protest meeting that filled Trafalgar Square on Sunday afternoon, 6 August, at which a letter from Mrs Fryatt was read. She herself received a message from King George V conveying his "heartfelt sympathy and deepest indignation and abhorrence of this outrage", along with many more in similar vein.

Captain Fryatt became even more of a national hero as his story was widely publicised in newspapers and pamphlets.

Notable among the latter was the account produced by Hodder & Stoughton as an illustrated 48 page twopenny booklet, boldly titled *The Murder of Captain Fryatt*. This was issued anonymously but a recent reprint in the United States has curiously accorded its author the pseudonym Charles Algernon, taking the forenames of its subject.

The Great Eastern Railway company promptly granted his widow - left with a son and six daughters aged between 2 and a half and 18 - a substantial life pension of £250 a year, while the Government enhanced her pension under the Board of Trade insurance scheme for merchant seamen. At Ipswich on 20 September 1916, Mrs Ethel Fryatt of 55 Oakland Road, Dovercourt, was formally granted probate of the will of her late husband, whose effects were precisely valued at £1,073.16s.7d.

Post-War Honours

Captain Fryatt's body had been buried by the Germans in the cemetery at Assebroek, an eastern suburb of Bruges, with a simple wooden cross over his grave.

After the war, on 4 July 1919, his body was solemnly exhumed and ceremonially returned to England for further honour to his memory. After lying in state at Bruges, where thousands lined to pay their respects, the coffin was carried aboard HMS *Orpheus* to Dover; it lay there overnight in the same carriage that had earlier brought to London the body of Nurse Cavell.

Next day, 8 July, it was taken by special train to London and drawn on a gun carriage to St Paul's cathedral for a widely attended national memorial service.

The body was then conveyed in procession to Liverpool Street station and taken by another special train to Dovercourt, to be carried in another procession to All Saints cemetery, where, with full military honours, the burial service was conducted by the Bishop of Chelmsford.

The GER provided a Portland stone memorial over Captain Fryatt's grave - at the northern end of the churchyard, overlooking Parkestone Quay. It was inscribed in memory of the "Master of the Great Eastern steamship *Brussels* illegally executed by the Germans at Bruges on the 27th July 1916; erected by the Company as an expression of their admiration of his gallantry."



Figure 3. In the early 1920s several Belgian publishers issued series of postcards featuring various aspects of World War I. Among those produced by the Brussels firm of J Revyn was this one, inscribed in English, French and Flemish "The SS Brussels sunk near the extremity of Zeebrugge-Mole, and her heroic Captain Fryatt, who was captured on the 23rd June 1916 and shot on the 27th July 1916."

The SS *Brussels* had remained at Zeebrugge after her capture, used by the Germans as an accommodation ship. Sunk in October 1918 to block the harbour entrance, she was raised in August 1919 and reconditioned, to be sold off by the GER for re-use during the 1920s in a very different capacity - as a cattle carrier (see Postscript below).



Figure 4. Another postcard from J Revyn, numbered 13 in a booklet of 20 detachable cards, depicted "The SS Brussels set afloat again and her heroic Captain Fryatt."

The proceeds of her sale were contributed by the GER to the fund earlier set up by the Mayor of Harwich to provide a lasting memorial to Captain Fryatt. Its outcome was the Fryatt Memorial Hospital, officially opened in April 1922 - by the GER chairman Lord Claud Hamilton, who was handed the silver key by 11 year old Charles Fryatt, only son of the acclaimed sea captain.

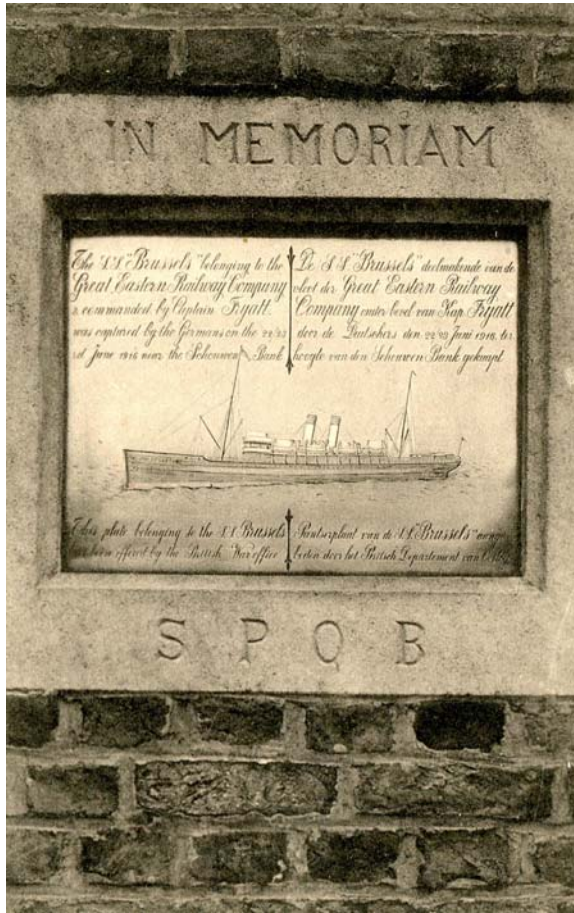


Figure 5. This card from a publisher in Bruges, A Brusselle, shows the column commemorating Captain Fryatt erected beside the "Wall of Execution" in 1922 by the English Convent in Bruges

The first memorial to him at Liverpool Street railway station was unveiled in July 1917, donated by the Dutch branch of the League of Neutral States, inscribed "from the neutral admirers of his brave conduct and heroic death." In 1922 this was incorporated into a memorial to all the Great Eastern men killed in the war.

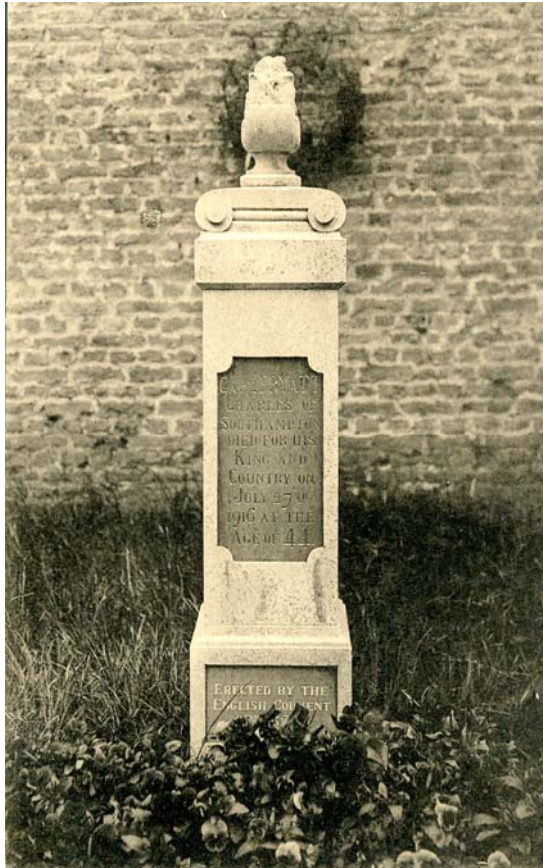
There is a "Captain Fryatt" public house at Parkestone, Harwich. More distant memorials prompted by his execution in 1916 included mountains named Mount Fryatt and Brussels Peak in the Jasper National Park in the Canadian Rockies and a Fryatt Quay in a 1917 harbour development at Wellington, New Zealand, which later lost its identity within a modern container terminal. Rediscovered by chance in 2010 in Australia, a replica of the watch presented to Captain Fryatt by

the Admiralty in 1915 was presumably created in connection with the Australian film *The Murder of Captain Fryatt* made in 1917. Its owner presented it to the Imperial War Museum, thus prompting Fryatt's descendants likewise to donate the original, along with the watch earlier presented to him by the Great Eastern Railway company.

Captain Fryatt's Belgian connections, through his captivity and execution, gained him national acclaim, highlighted by posthumous awards of the Order of Leopold and the Belgian Maritime War Cross.

Memorials at the "Wall of Execution" where he and others were shot by the Germans during World War I, in the Hof van Aurora at Bruges, included a carved stone column simply inscribed "Capn. Fryatt Charles (sic) of Southampton died for his King and Country on July 27, 1916, at the age of 44." This was provided by the English Convent at Bruges, erected in 1922.

It was complemented by a wall plaque bearing inscriptions in English and Flemish around an outline of the SS *Brussels*. The text states "SS Brussels belonging to the Great Eastern Railway Company & commanded by Captain Fryatt was captured by the Germans on the 22/23rd June 1916 near the Schouwen Bank. This plate belonging to the SS Brussels has been offered by the British War Office."



The ship's executed Master is also recalled by a street in Zeebrugge, Kapitein Fryatt Straat - briefly restyled Azores Straat by German occupiers in 1940-45 but duly reinstated after the end of World War II.

Meanwhile, on 12 September 1936, another memorial plaque had been formally unveiled in a ceremony at the English Church of St Mary in Bruges. It was subscribed for by various British individuals and organisations, including the LNER (successors to the GER) and the Imperial Merchant Service Guild. "To the memory of Charles Fryatt, Master of the SS Brussels, condemned to death and shot in this city July 27th 1916 by the enemy in occupation. His body was conveyed to England in HMS Orpheus July 6th 1919 and laid to rest in Dovercourt. The Mur des Fusilles near the St Kruispoort marks the scene of his execution."

Figure 6. A companion card from A Brusselle illustrates the complementary wall plaque depicting the SS Brussels, with an inscription (quoted in the text) engraved on a metal plate taken from this ship

The English Church in Bruges closed c.1984, when this plaque was transferred to the Provinciehof (Town Hall).

In July 2006 the 90th anniversary of Captain Fryatt's death was marked by an exhibition in the Guildhall at Harwich and a civic service at All Saints Church, Dovercourt. A happy outcome of similar commemoration at Bruges was the presentation of a replica of the 1936 plaque to Freemantle School, where it was formally unveiled on 26 January 2007 by Mrs Doris Stewart, a great niece of Captain Fryatt.

This is his only memorial in Southampton, his birthplace and childhood home. Perhaps the centenary of his death will prompt some civic commemoration in July 2016?

Postscript: SS *Brussels*

The *Brussels* was a 1,380 ton twin screw passenger steamer, built and engined by Gourlay Brothers & Co Ltd of Dundee in 1901-02 for the Great Eastern Railway, to operate on its Harwich-Hook of Holland service. She provided accommodation for up to 164 first class and 88 second class passengers, at a high standard of comfort, with a service speed of 14 knots.

After capture by the Germans in June 1916 the *Brussels* remained at Zeebrugge, in use as a submarine depot ship. She may have been damaged during the British raid on 23 April 1918 but her later sinking in October was effected by the Germans to obstruct the harbour.

The *Brussels* settled on an even keel but filled with mud, which made her recovery a complicated lifting operation for the Admiralty salvage experts. This was safely carried out on 4 August 1919, which happened to be the fifth anniversary of the outbreak of war.

Refloated and patched up, the *Brussels* was towed away by British and Belgian tugs, to reach the Tyne on 20 May 1920 and receive a civic welcome from the Mayor of Jarrow.

Her GER owners put her up for sale and she was bought by J Gale & Co Ltd of Goole, to be sent in March 1921 to Henry Robb Ltd of Leith for adaptation to serve a new function in the Dublin-Preston cattle trade.

Instead of passengers carried in comfort, the *Brussels* now had capacity for 600 cattle and 1,000 sheep. In this mundane capacity, she made her first trip for the Dublin & Lancashire Steam Ship Co in September 1921.

In 1923 she was taken over by the British & Irish Steam Packet Co Ltd, in line with whose naming policy she was restyled the *Lady Brussels*. She made her last crossing from Dublin on 19 April 1929, to go from Preston to a breakers' yard at Port Glasgow.

Meanwhile, the *Brussels* had been replaced in the service of the Great Eastern Railway from January 1921 by a 2,950 ton steamer named SS *Bruges*. She was transferred in 1923 into the London & North Eastern Railway, eventually to be sunk off Le Havre in June 1940.

Acknowledgements

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I am now particularly obliged and grateful to the maritime and railway historian Ben Carver for generously sharing with me the products of his extensive researches into the whole Fryatt story, its background and context and memorials world-wide - compiled for a future publication ahead of the centenary commemorations of Captain Fryatt's death in 2016.

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