

HARBOURING HERITAGE – A HISTORY OF FORTROSE HARBOUR PART 5



THE HARBOUR IN THE WORLD WARS

BEFORE 1914

Warships were frequently seen in the Firth in the years immediately prior to World War One although the main base was at Invergordon on the Cromarty Firth. The Inverness Firth was too shallow for the 'capital' ships so the visiting warships were the smaller destroyers, frigates corvettes, sloops or gunboats.



The fleet circa 1910 off Fortrose

*The Royal Navy
had personnel
strength of 131000
in 1910.
In 2010 it was
35000.*

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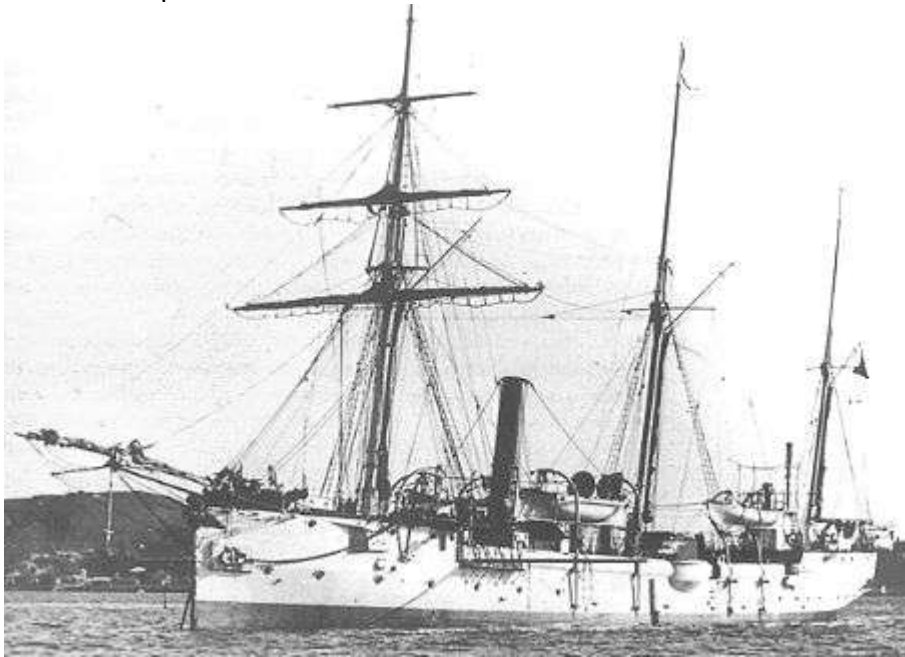
This photo shows a small launch, possibly a 'jolly boat' approaching the outer landing stage. Within the flotilla there are 2 tall masts and even at the outbreak of World War One, many older and smaller naval vessels still carried sails. The vessel berthed at the intermediate landing stage appears to be the *Annie*.

It is now clear that the growth of German sea power was a major concern to the Admiralty in the years leading up to 1914 and the outbreak of World War One. The 1889 naval defence act aimed to build 70 new warships and maintain the '2 power' standard (ie the strength of the Royal Navy would equal the combined strength of the 2nd & 3rd largest navies in the world). Clearly from these photos the navy was 'showing the flag' in the area and some idea of the naval activity can be gleaned from the record of Charles Lewin who was in the Royal Marines Light Infantry (RMLI) from 1905 to 1922. His 3rd ship was *HMS Ringdove*, a gunboat of 805 tons and 165 feet long. In June 1910 she visited Aberdeen, Invergordon and 'Fort Rose'.

On 9 June, *Ringdove* left 'Fort Rose' for the Shetland Isles where she stayed until the end of the summer. In September, *Ringdove* left Lerwick for Fair Isle and proceeded to Wick and Aberdeen. The next month, she went north again, to Helmsdale, then back to Cromarty, Invergordon and 'Fort Rose' and across the Moray Firth to Fort George. Between November and January (1911), *Ringdove* cruised between Fort George, Inverness, Invergordon, 'Fort Rose', Aberdour, Aberdeen, Helmsdale, Macduff and Buckie. *Ringdove* continued about 'Fort Rose', Golspie, Inverness, Invergordon, Peterhead and Aberdeen before returning to Devonport in March. *HMS Ringdove* was a Redbreast Class of gunboat and was composite in that she was built of iron and wood. The class dates from 1888 and was barquentine rigged but with a steam engine capable of driving her at 13 Knots. *Ringdove* became a salvage vessel on 7 December 1915, renamed *Melita*. She was sold to

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the Ship Salvage Corporation on 22 January 1920 and renamed *Telima*; she was broken up in the second quarter of 1926.



HMS Sparrow – a sister ship to *HMS Ringdove*

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

While there is no evidence of the flotilla off Fortrose during the war it would be surprising if the anchorage had not been used. A major force that was known to use the Firth was Mine Squadron One, United States Navy, that was based in Inverness in 1918 (US Naval Base 18). Mine Squadron One began operations in June 1918 to lay a barrage of mines 200 miles long and 30 miles wide across the North Sea (the Northern Barrage) from Orkney to Norway aimed at sinking German submarines. While the mine laying force was US Navy (capable of laying 6000 mines at one 'planting' – each mine containing 300 lbs of TNT) it was directly protected by a flotilla of British destroyers (the 14th Destroyer Flotilla) and screened by battleships and cruisers of the Grand Fleet. Operations were completed in late October 1918 just in time for the Armistice (11 November 1918). Much of 1919 was taken-up with a joint sweeping operation to remove the mines. The following 2 pictures are taken from 'the Northern Barrage' published by the US Naval Institute in 1919.

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Beaully Basin



Chanonry Point



A Summer Day in the North Sea

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USS SHAWMUT



The 'Yankee Channel' is attributed locally to the US Navy in World War One. It was a dredged channel from close to Munloch Bay to the Meikle Mee starboard hand marker (the present day green buoy visible to the East from the Kessock Bridge) effectively extending the natural northern channel that runs from Chanonry Point past Fortrose and Avoch to close to Kilmuir where it becomes shallower and indistinct over sandbanks. The dredged depth gave 2.5 metres depth at low water¹. Various on-line sources suggest that the channel was dredged by US engineers in 1917 to allow for the use of the Caledonian Canal but it seems more likely that it was dredged to support Mine Force One entering the River Ness and the main anchorage off North Kessock. While there is no marked channel now, careful navigation does still permit passage for small vessels between Kilmuir and the Meikle Mee green at low water.

¹ According to Gwyn Tanner, Harbour Master, Avoch
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BETWEEN THE WORLD WARS



This is an intriguing picture. The nearest vessel is probably post the First World War and is the structure in the water (with the hand drawn arrow) the outer landing stage – minus the rest of the pier? If so this picture could date from 1927. For comparison:



THE SECOND WORLD WAR

George Taylor, living close to the harbour at Craigwood, was 9 years old when war was declared in September 1939 and remembers listening to the Prime Minister's broadcast on

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the wireless² informing the nation that yet again we were at war with Germany. He recalls the town soon filling with troops and empty houses and hotels were requisitioned as accommodation. However, it was 1943 before the harbour was to have an active role.

From March 1943 to August 1944 the harbour was part of HMS Monster supporting secretive combined operations training for the D-Day Landings. The Captain of HMS Monster and Captain Landing Craft Bases, North, is listed as John Ignatius Hallett CBE DSO (1886 – 1969). Captain Hallett had joined the RN in 1905 and was awarded the DSO in 1917 for action against enemy submarines. He retired in 1932 but was recalled in 1939. After command of an armed cruiser which had to be abandoned on fire in heavy weather in the North Atlantic, he served in Singapore before becoming The Naval Officer In-Charge at Chittagong (Ceylon, now Sri Lanka) where he earned a Mention in Despatches for bravery followed by the CBE 'for zealous and valuable service.

HMS Monster was supporting 'Force S' destined to land on SWORD beach in Normandy in June 1944. Force S was headquartered in this period in Cameron Barracks, Inverness and was commanded by Rear Admiral Arthur George Talbot³. The 3rd Infantry Division was the main force destined to land on SWORD beach and trained extensively in the Beaulieu, Inverness, Cromarty and Moray Firths.

There were several different types of landing craft used but the main stay was the Landing Craft Tank Mk IV and 12 of these were moored in Fortrose Bay. This is a description of the LCT Mk IV from the Combined Operations web-site⁴

'Approximately 730 Mark IV vessels were constructed in the UK. These landing craft had a hull length of 187 ft 3 in and a beam (width) of 38 ft 9 in and their displacement was 586 tons. The forward draught was 42 inches and they could carry a maximum load of 350 tons made up of five large tanks, seven medium tanks, or any other combination of military vehicles

The vessel was operated by a crew of twelve including two officers. The engines were two Paxman Ricardo diesels, each driving a 21-inch propeller. They could drive the craft at eight knots over a range of 1,100 miles. Twin rudders were provided for steering. The armament consisted of two 20 mm Oerliken guns, two Parachute and Cables (PACs) and two Fast Aerial Mines (FAMs). All of this was intended to be used defensively against aircraft attacks.'

This account evokes the team work need to operate these ungainly but highly effective vessels⁵.

² Recalled during reminiscence recording on 6 December 2011

³ From telecon R Jenner with ex WREN Jean Gadsen October 2010

⁴ http://www.combinedops.com/LCT_980.htm

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‘The Mk IV LCT, reverberating like a biscuit box, with five Sherman tanks jammed into her hold, their engines roaring for a sprint start, their guns, together with the oerlikons from the wings of the bridge, firing at the beach ahead. The discipline and teamwork required to deposit those five tanks on the beach, in the two or three minutes which elapsed, after the kege anchor had been dropped, was breath-taking. The first tank was moving before the door was down, the last tank was leaving the door as it came up, and the LCT was sliding astern into deeper water.’

This is the account of a LCT Squadron Commander, Lieutenant Commander Maxwell Miller RN, who commanded T Squadron on D-Day which had been based at Inverness⁵. It will strike a chord with Chanonry cruising sailors who have struggled to pick-up their mooring in strong winds or who have mis-timed the tide through the Kessock Narrows.

‘I was a bit shaken, in the March of 1943, when I found myself appointed in command of a squadron of Tank Landing Craft. I was still more shaken when I saw my first vessel. It is usual for the sailor to tell the enquiring landlubber that the sharp end of a ship is the ‘bows’ and the blunt end the ‘stern’, but in the Tank Landing Craft, or LCT, you had to reverse your ideas. The stern drew in to a very narrow counter and the bows broadened out to allow for a door, hinged at the bottom edge that lowered down onto the beach and was wide enough to allow a large tank – of which the craft carried seven – to waddle out onto the beach. When I had cleared up that rather important point, I tried to take one to sea and very quickly found it wise to discover some other urgent business that forced me, reluctantly(!), to hand her over to her proper captain.

There were other peculiarities. In an ordinary ship, the propellers are large and do from thirty to one hundred and fifty revolutions a minute; moreover, if there are two of them, they turn in opposite directions to make for ease of handling. In an LCT, the propellers were small, turned at seven fifty to twelve hundred revolutions a minute and they both turned the same way! This was to help the manufacturers, but it considerably complicated the job of the captain.

If you add to this the facts that the craft was of very shallow draught and flat-bottomed so that she had very little hold on the water and sailed in a wind like a yacht and that her rudder was so small that it had no effect at all unless the propellers were turning and turning fast, it will be easy to see that taking a landing craft out of a congested harbour was no job for an orthodox naval officer. Fortunately, command of individual craft during the war was the exclusive preserve of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNVR) and, as a very experienced salvage officer once said to me, ‘The first thing I do when I get to a wreck is to send for a ship commanded by an RNVR. You can tell them to do anything you like and they don’t know

⁵ WW2 People's War is an online archive of wartime memories contributed by members of the public and gathered by the BBC. The archive can be found at bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar. From: The Sixtieth Anniversary of D-Day: Memories of Landing Craft by friendlyjohnrushton

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enough to know that it's impossible, so they go ahead and do it!' And, by Jove, if they did not do it, they were in for trouble.

In the late autumn of '43, the Admiralty started to form the three forces for the invasion of Normandy and I went to Inverness at the beginning of December to take over command of a squadron of LCT that had begun to form there. I arrived in a thick fog and drove over icebound roads to Kessock, the suburb of Inverness and there I installed my staff and myself in a group of uncompleted council houses. I suppose shells of council houses would be a more accurate description because the lack of window frames and fireplaces made rather a mockery, during that bitter winter, of the traditional staff luxury in which we were accused of indulging by the crews of my LCT moored out on the water.

In the Beaully Firth, a trot of buoys had been laid where the LCTs, about fifty of them, moored up in pairs with the bows of one pair touching the stern of the next, and whenever I had any time and energy left over from obtaining stores and fuel, organising repairs and attending planning conferences, I used to take them to sea to practise manoeuvres and station-keeping. On Christmas Eve, having about a dozen craft available, I boarded the nearest one and, slipping at about six pm, led them out to the Moray Firth for a night's exercises.

It was not a very wise move as the rising wind and the falling glass (barometer) should have warned me of the North-Easter and it made me turn back at midnight. However, it blew us home through the Inverness Firth and at about 2am we arrived at the Kessock Narrows on a full ebb tide. We had a maximum speed of some seven knots, so it took us the best part of an hour to clear the Narrows against a five and a half knot stream and then we found ourselves in Beaully Firth with the buoys somewhere away on our port bow. The night was pitch black, we were not allowed to show any lights, there was nearly a full gale blowing and a three knot tide running down the trot that had half-submerged the buoys. My own job was easy. All I had to do was to flash a signal down the line 'Secure in your previous berths', and then sit back and watch the fun, or rather, listen for the crashes because I could not see a thing. They all got there, of course. They always did. My own captain had three shots at picking up his head buoy and took the best part of two hours over it, so next day, as a Christmas present; I relieved him of his command on the grounds of inefficiency.'

Lieutenant Commander Maxwell Miller RN again on some of the peculiarities of the Mk IV LCT resulting from the need to reduce draught following the Dieppe Raid when the Mk IIIs could not get close enough in to shore:

'...it is scarcely too much to say that, if it had not been for the Mark IV LCT, the Allies would not have been in Berlin yet. Unhappily, it was the very qualities that made her such an ideal landing craft for the army that led to her dislike by the Navy. The essential thing, of course, was that she should carry the same load as her predecessors on a shallower draught and the only way to do this was to increase her beam and make her scantlings (beams/struts) lighter. The increased beam and shallower draught made her practically unmanageable in a wind and the lighter scantlings made her waggle.

That waggle was the most extraordinary thing that I have ever seen in a ship. The craft was built rather on the lines of an oil tanker. The bridges and superstructure were right aft and

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the tank hold stretched away forward with a narrow catwalk, about 5 feet wide, running either side as far as the forecastle which rose a few feet to make room for the heavy winches that raised and lowered the tank door. The result was that the hold formed a sort of beam with heavy weights at either end and the rigidity of the craft depended on the strength of the beam. In the Mark IV LCT, the beam was pretty weak, and when you steamed into a head sea, the fo'c'sle waggled at you. There was no other word for it. You could stand on the bridge and watch a ripple start at the after end of the catwalk and move forward until the whole fo'c'sle waggled. It was a most terrifying sight to anyone unfamiliar with ships and still more terrifying to someone who was familiar with them.

Of course, if you drove a craft into a head sea too hard or for too long, something had to give. What did give was the catwalk. Luckily, at the after end of the hold, there was a watertight bulkhead that stretched the whole breadth and depth of the craft because, when the catwalk split, the bows were inclined to drop off!

However, it took more than a little contretemps like that to disturb the equanimity of the RNVR. After all, as far as the crew was concerned, they were still left with a watertight bit of ship, complete with engines, propellers and rudders, and all they had to do was shore up the bulkhead and steam home, towing their bows astern of them if the weather permitted. Brought up in Harry Tate's Navy, as they had been, the crews used to view this proceeding as just one of those things that happened at sea, but the Army complained bitterly about it. Quite rightly, too, since it was their end of the ship that used to drop off.'



Model of an LCT Mk IV

*Harry Tate's Navy
referred to The
Royal Naval Patrol
Service which used
a requisitioned
fleet of small
civilian vessels*

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A Mk IV unloading⁷

Landing craft based at Fortrose were used to land troops and equipment for training on the beaches on Chanonry Ness and troops and tanks were embarked at Chanonry Point to be landed at Fort George and all along the coast to Burghead. Valentine tanks were modified to have a wading capability and disembarked from the LCTs would wade the last bit to the beach; this was very hazardous and several tanks remain underwater off the beach between Findhorn and Burghead with one of them listed as a war grave.

Arthur Walter was the First Lieutenant of an LCT based at Fortrose; this is his recollection⁸

'Regarding Fortrose Harbour, the 47th LCT Flotilla was based there from 17 February to 13 April 1944. I was a young midshipman, the first lieutenant of LCT 627, and Lieutenant John Pointon RNZNVR, was skipper. LCT 627 was the leader of the 12 craft in the flotilla and Lt Cdr Basil Cooke was the flotilla officer.'

We spent a hectic two months here in intensive training, involving beaching and unbeaching, embarking and landing troops and vehicles, around the Inverness/ Cromarty / Burghead area, working up for D Day. Although based at Fortrose for two months, I remember very little of the town/village, rarely going ashore except for visits to the shore base by the jetty. I don't even remember the pubs, but of course we did carry our own plentiful supply of suitable refreshment - duty free!'

⁷ Photo from Nevil Shute Norway Foundation

⁸ Email Arthur Walters – R Jenner 12 October 2010

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The military constructed a scaffolding pier (the jetty referred to above) during this period along the line of the original wooden pier and destroyers, between Russian convoy duties, were able to tie-up to allow the crew 'liberty'.



This is the only known photo of the World War Two scaffolding pier. The pier (known as pier 2) was removed in 1949 by William Tawse Limited who acknowledged the receipt of £1251 from the Fortrose Burgh Council on 29 October 1949 for carrying out the work involved⁹.

George Berry also served on LCTs at Fortrose. He joined the RN aged 17 ½ and was too young to be an Able Seaman so was rated as an Ordinary Seaman. After his seaman's course he completed a commando course in Plymouth before being sent to Scotland for Combined Operations arriving in Invergordon in February 1944 to join LCT 1067. The only problem was that no one seemed to know where LCT 1067 was and it was 2 weeks before he joined her at Fortrose. He remembers that they carried out highly secretive trials with DUKWs ('Ducks' – a Sparkman & Stephens design – more famous for America's Cup yachts) which were amphibious trucks destined to be used for the Rhine Crossings. He was billeted on board the LCT and they used the DUCW as a tender. His LCT was in the first wave to land on SWORD beach on 6 June 1944 (D-day) and he made 26 crossings with her. She was one of the LCTs to break her back – in her case off Lowestoft¹⁰

⁹ Original photo and provisional order to remove the jetty with the receipt are in the Groam House Museum archives

¹⁰ Telecon George Berry – R Jenner October 2010

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This recent photo (2011) shows a brick repair to the inside of the harbour mole. Apparently a small landing craft, in the harbour for mechanical repairs had been started 'in gear' and struck the wall which was then repaired with brick. Allegedly George MacFarlane had been assisting with the work and was not allowed to forget the incident!

There was insufficient accommodation for LCT crews ashore so they lived on the craft even though they had not been designed for this. A lack of heating was a serious issue. Lieutenant Commander Maxwell Miller RN again:

'During that bitter winter at Inverness, this [lack of heating] became such a menace to the health and comfort of the crew that stronger and stronger representations eventually persuaded the Admiralty to authorise the installation of coal-burning stoves on landing craft mess decks. I can still remember months after D-day the pleasure with which I read in Fleet Orders that these stoves were now available and would be supplied on demand. However, as the order reached me when I was sweltering in more than a hundred degrees of moist heat in the Southern India en route for Japan, I had to discourage my stores offer's enthusiasm for demanding stoves, as he said, 'just to teach the Admiralty a lesson'.'

Lieutenant Frederick (Ricky) Peel RNVR, Captain of LCT 462 based at Fortrose remembers that winter well and the training which involved loading tanks at Fort George in the evening then steaming around the Moray Firth in the dark to simulate a long channel crossing before landing the tanks between Culbin and Burghead. Generally he would be on the open bridge for 16 hours at a time. He remembers little about the town though. As he said: '*Spent*

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*months at the Trots, 1944. Hardly ever ashore at Fort Rose; too much work and what little free time was spent in Invergordon.*¹¹

George Taylor also recalls a large ex-French liner called '*La Largs*' anchored off Fortrose during the D-Day work up with a communication cable and power cable laid to it from the army HQ in St Anne's (a requisitioned house on Canonbury Terrace)¹². Research has confirmed her to be *HMS Largs*. *HMS Largs* was built in France in 1938 as the *MV Charles Plumier*, a 4504 ton fruit carrier. The French Navy requisitioned her in 1939 and converted her to an armed cruiser. She briefly returned to fruit carrying trade in 1940 after the fall of France before being appropriated by the Royal Navy in Gibraltar. She then served with the Royal Navy as *HMS Largs* until 1945. Initially she was employed as an Ocean Boarding Vessel before being redesignated as a Landing Ship Headquarters (Large) (LSH(L)) in 1942 to provide a combined operations communications headquarters for the army, navy and air forces during landing operations until suitable alternative facilities could be established on shore. She served at most amphibious landings during World War Two and was the command vessel for SWORD beach on D-Day.¹³



Archive picture of *HMS Largs*¹⁴

¹¹ Telecon Ricky Peel – R Jenner October 2010

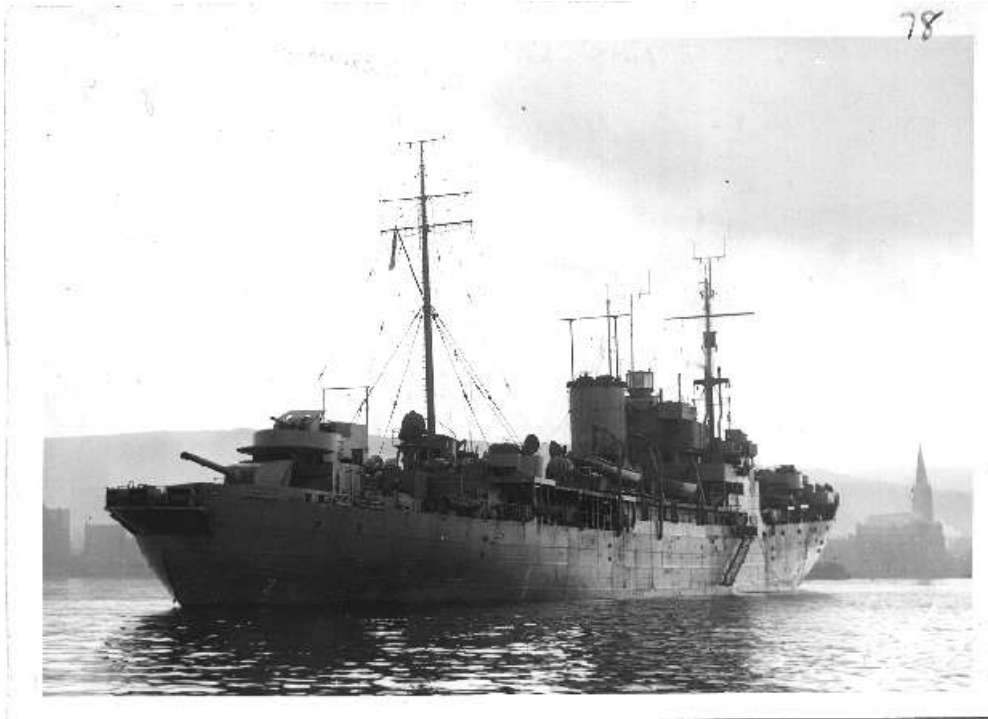
¹² Recalled during reminiscence recording on 6 December 2011

¹³ From Mike MacKenzie, Largs and District Historical Society

¹⁴ Largs and District Historical Society

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HMS Largs is confirmed to have been off Fortrose on 3 occasions: 11.2.44 - 15.3.44; 16.3.44 - 22.3.44 and 24.3.44 - 28.3.44¹⁵. After the war she was returned to France and operated under her original name until 1964 when she was sold to a Greek company as a cruise ship, renamed *MV Pleias* before retirement and the breaker's yard in 1968.



HMS Largs off Largs¹⁶

To accommodate HMS *Monster* and to provide some shore facilities for sailors serving on the LCTs, Nissen huts were constructed around the harbour and the footings of several of them are still visible in the car park. There is part of a rib built in to the present club house but you would have to be a 'Gent' to find it! The huts continued along the shore-line towards Avoch and covered the ground where Meikle Mee stands now.

The Nissen hut was developed in 1916 by Major Peter Norman Nissen who was serving with the Royal Engineers. The American version is known as the Quonset

¹⁵ From Mike MacKenzie, Largs and District Historical Society

¹⁶ Largs and District Historical Society

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The war surplus motor torpedo boat in the harbour belonged to Raymond Graves. She was a Fairmile 'D' type (with a length of 115 feet) and had no engines; he hoped to convert her in to a house boat. She was removed from the harbour around 1956 when the present sailing club formed. This photo¹⁷ dates between 1949 when the harbour store was demolished and 1956 when the first bungalow was built. If you look carefully at the Club car park today you can see the brick and concrete bases for the 3 Nissen huts in the picture.

After the war the large Nissen hut closest to the harbour wall was used a fire station from 1948 – 68.



Harbour with a Nissen hut used by the Fire Service.