

A Plaque for a Submarine – David Gray

Warship Weeks were British National savings campaigns during the Second World War, with the aim of a Royal Navy warship being adopted by a civil community.

A level of savings would be set to raise enough money to provide the cost of building a particular naval ship. The aim was for cities to raise enough to adopt battleships and aircraft carriers, while towns and villages would often focus on cruisers, destroyers, submarines and other craft. Smaller towns and villages would be set a lower figure. Once the target money was saved for the ship, the community would adopt the ship and its crew.

Local charity organisations, W.V.S., churches, schools and others would supply the crews of the adopted ship with gloves, woollen socks and balaclavas etc. Children would often write letters and send cards to the crew. When possible, officers and men from the adopted ship would visit the local community. To celebrate their visit a parade would often be organised in their honour.



The ship's commanding officer would exchange plaques, objects and photographs with the city or town that reached the target set, and an *adoption* would begin. The number of warships adopted was over 1,200, and included battleships, cruisers, destroyers, trawlers and most types of naval craft.

I have a passion for the National Savings Movement in WWII (someone has to), and I am constantly collecting items relating to the subject. Recently I became aware of a Warship Week Plaque, or shield, *left*, which had gone up for sale on a well-known auction website. I knew of these types of plaques, but had never seen one available for sale as they are so rare. Most existing examples that are to be found on the internet are located in town halls or museums. The reason they are so rare is that they were presented by the Admiralty to the District Councils of cities and towns in recognition of them having achieved their target for warship week. These would be highly regarded awards, put on display in the town halls or other civic buildings to show what had been achieved, and became part of the town's history. For this reason, these

objects are never likely to become available for sale.

However, this one clearly was! It had just been listed and was a 'Buy it Now' item. Strangely, the seller stipulated that it had to be collected from his home in Norfolk. Despite the fact that the rarity of the item meant the price was that of an arm and two legs, I found I had soon clicked 'Buy'. I don't believe I would ever have seen one of these plaques come up for sale again, and I leapt at the opportunity of owning one.



The plaque carried a brass plate which explained that it had been:

“Presented by the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to **Newmarket Rural District Council** to Commemorate the Adoption of H.M.S. P.57 (UNIVERSAL) During Warship Week March 1942.”

After contacting the seller, I set off for Norfolk the next day to collect my piece of (Newmarket) history. Before I left home I already knew the location on the wall in my study where the plaque would hang.

I arrived at the little village just outside Kings Lynn. The seller told me he was moving house and needed to reduce his collection, hence the sale. He opened his garage and there was the plaque on the floor, leaning against a bench. It was huge, the shield part was made of wood as I thought, but the emblem fixed to it, which I had imagined was pressed steel or brass was in fact a solid casting. The whole thing measured 32 inches high by 20 inches wide (84cm x 51cm), and I was later to find it weighed two stones, (12.7 kg). No way was it going to fit in the space on my wall, in fact it would be too heavy to hang safely anyway (hence the seller not wanting to post it). I took it home and it's still lying on the floor of my study. I couldn't be happier!

The Latin text around the emblem reads, “The seal of his Britannic Majesty's Admiralty”. The inscription on the brass plate is interesting as all of the text seems to be centred apart from the name of the submarine, ‘(UNIVERSAL)’. The sub wasn't launched until November 1942 and as Newmarket's Warship Week was in March of that year they must have been promised the sub before it had actually been completed. The name while being built was H.M.S. P. 57, which is engraved centrally on the brass plate. When it was finally launched and entered service it had been named H.M.S. UNIVERSAL, and I believe the Newmarket R.D.C. had the new name added to the plate as soon as they found out what it was called.

How is it that these historic items find their way out of the cities and towns that worked so hard to win them? Surely the Newmarket City Council, Museum, Historical Society, Civic Society, in fact any number of local historical interest groups would love to have this object and keep it in the town? It is a sad fact that as time passes, the historical significance of objects becomes less important. New town halls get built and old ones get knocked down and often this is how these objects get disposed of, lost in the transition by people who don't understand what they represent. Newmarket's loss is my gain and I don't regret that for one minute.

HMS *Universal* (P57) was a Royal Navy U-class submarine built by Vickers-Armstrong at Newcastle upon Tyne. So far she has been the only ship of the Royal Navy to bear the name *Universal*.



Universal (left), was laid down at Vickers Armstrong, Newcastle upon Tyne in September 1941, launched in November 1942 and commissioned in March 1943.

She spent most of the war in the Mediterranean, where she sank the Italian auxiliary patrol vessels V 130/*Ugo* and V 134/*Tre Sorelle*, the Italian merchantman *La Foce*, the German auxiliary gunboat SG 15 (the former French *Rageot de la Touche*), the

German merchants *President Dal Pia* and *Canosa* (the former French *Corsa*), the German Guardboat *FMa 06* (the former French *Guarani*) and the German auxiliary minesweeper *Petrel*. *Universal* also damaged the Spanish sailing vessel *Sevellina* and the Italian tanker (in German control) *Cesteriano*, which was later towed to Toulon. *Universal* also fired a torpedo against what is identified as an enemy auxiliary minesweeper. They claimed to have damaged the so far unidentified ship.

Universal survived the war and was sold to be broken up for scrap in February 1946. On 3 February, on passage from Foyle, Northern Ireland, to Newport, Monmouthshire, under the command of Lieut-Commander W.F.N. Main R.N.R. her engines failed and the following morning she was taken in tow by the destroyer HMS *Southdown*. With the weather deteriorating the tow broke eight or nine times and was eventually abandoned.

Lifeboats from Aberystwyth, New Quay and Fishguard attended over 24 hours, standing by in heavy seas until *Universal*'s crew had to abandon ship.

General characteristics

Class and type U-class submarine

Displacement Surfaced - 540 tons standard, 630 tons full load
Submerged – 730 tons

Length 58.22 m (191 ft)

Beam 4.90 m (16 ft 1 in)

Draught 4.62 m (15 ft 2 in)

Propulsion 2 shaft diesel-electric
2 Paxman Ricardo diesel generators + electric motors
615 / 825 hp

Speed 11.25 knots (20.8 km/h) max surfaced
10 knots (19 km/h) max submerged

Complement 27-31

Armament 4 bow internal 21 inch (533 mm) torpedo tubes – 8 – 10 torpedoes
1 – 3-inch (76 mm) gun

She was scrapped at Milford Haven in June 1946.



Above: HMS *Universal*'s Crest