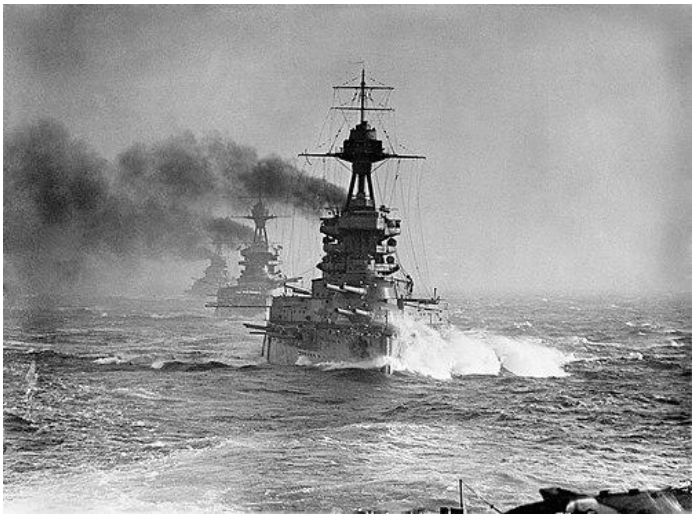
The Last Voyage of H.M.S. Benbow – David Gray

HMS Benbow was the third of four Iron Duke-class battleships of the Royal Navy, the third ship to be named in honour of Admiral John Benbow. Ordered in the 1911 building programme, the ship was laid down at the William Beardmore and Company shipyard in May 1912, was launched in November 1913, and was completed in October 1914, shortly after the outbreak of the First World War. She was armed with a main battery of ten 13.5-inch (343 mm) guns and twelve 6 in (152 mm) secondary guns. The ship was capable of a top speed of 21.25 knots (39.36 km/h; 24.45 mph), and had a 12-inch (305 mm) thick armoured belt.



HMS Benbow Underway

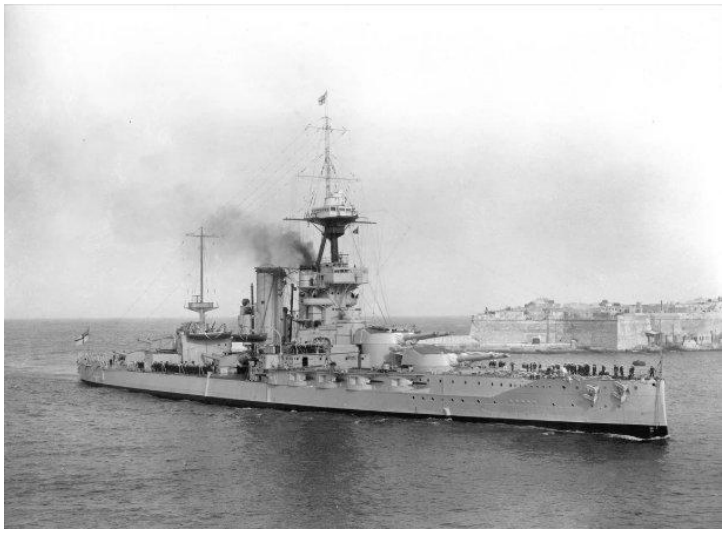
Benbow served in the Grand Fleet as the flagship of the 4th Battle Squadron during the First World War. She was present during the largest naval action of the war, the Battle of Jutland on 31 May – 1 June 1916, though she was not heavily engaged. She sortied twice more, in August 1916 and April 1918 in attempts to catch the German High Seas Fleet in another major battle, but neither produced any significant action. After the end of the war in 1918, Benbow and the rest of the 4th Squadron were reassigned to the Mediterranean Fleet. There, she took part in operations in the Black Sea in support of White Russians in the Russian Civil War until mid-1920, when the Mediterranean Fleet began supporting Greek forces during the Greco-Turkish War. In 1926, Benbow was reassigned to the Atlantic Fleet. She was decommissioned in 1929, placed on the sale list in September 1930, and sold for scrap the following year, being broken up at Rosyth in March 1931.

The Daily Express showed a particular interest in the fate of HMS Benbow, so much so that they placed a 'Special Correspondent' on board for her final ten-day trip, as she was towed from Devonport Royal Navy dockyard, Plymouth, to the breakers yard at Rosyth. This is the story of that journey, one rarely told, of a giant, stripped of her charms, making that one-way journey to oblivion in March 1931.

This first story is one describing the event itself, the ship and the reason for its journey. The second story covers the ten-day trip in detail; the journalist explored the whole ship, and described what he found and its condition.

"**Drama of a Ten-Day 'Battle' in** [the] **North Sea** – HM.S. Benbow, a weathered 25,000-ton hulk of rust and faded paintwork, sailed like a ghost ship up the grey waters of the Firth of Forth at dawn this morning, and came to rest in the Royal Navy Dockyards to end her days at the hands of the ship-breakers. The two Dutch tugs which dragged the gallant veteran of Jutland for ten days up the English Channel and into the blustering gales of the North Sea cut their tow ropes at daybreak, Benbow lay alongside, stripped of her battle honours, discharged from His Majesty's service, on the edge of the grave!

The wreckers will take possession tomorrow, Blow torch and hammer, clawing crane, and smashing engines of destruction will start to tear this historic man-of-war to pieces. The process, I was told this morning, may take ten months, but it is inevitable, and Benbow must dissolve eventually into a heap of scrap metal to be sold on the markets of the world. I was the chief mourner in the long and tragic funeral voyage that started from Devonport ten days ago and ended without the barest trace of ceremony here today.



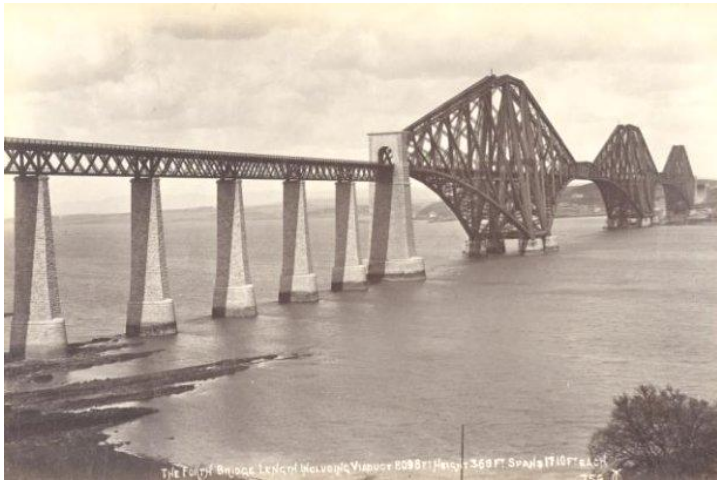
HMS Benbow at Malta in the 1920's

We slipped away from the bustle and activity of Devonport in the early morning of March 27th, and threaded our way down the Hamoaze (Tamar), across Plymouth Harbour, and into the sea. A group of sailors stood on the dockyard quay to watch us pass in idle curiosity. Riveters looked up from their pneumatic hammers and went on with their work. We crept out humbly by the battleship Malaya – a gleaming symphony of shining paintwork, glistening brass, and long, lean, polished guns – and drifted on our way. There was no dipping of flags, no salute. Benbow simply crept away on her voyage to the Valhalla of men-of-war.

It was a long voyage, an obstinate voyage, and the massive warship fought every inch of the way. For days I watched her sheer from side to side through the oily seas and mist, while the two stubborn tugs pulled steadily on the tow lines. Mile by mile Benbow gave way at a fighting two knots, and at the close of the third day she lay, still struggling off the rugged coast of France in the shadow of the light of Cap Gris-Nez. It was a human experience living aboard this mighty Titan of war as she rocked and creaked her way to the grave. There were thirteen of us in all – twelve Dutch 'runners' and myself – aboard, and Benbow, as she went into action in the 'Battle of Jutland', was thirteen in the line. There is probably no point in this parallel. Yet it seemed to have a sinister significance, as the cast-off warship battled against the steady drag of the two tugs that drew her daily towards the close of her sea career.

The wind blew from the east across our course, and Benbow fought to swing her bow into the breeze. A gale swept up from our stern, and the battleship swung broadside, and defied the pull of the Dutchmen. Once more the wind shifted, and this time it swept down from the north, Benbow stood resolutely head on, and moved a bare fifty miles in twenty-four hours. It was a gallant surrender. Day after day I watched this fine Goliath, with her ten thirteen-inch guns seared at the muzzle by oxy-acetylene torches and trained in impotent grimness fore and aft along her decks, wallow awkwardly through the heavy seas.

Canvas hoods across the rusted funnels flapped in almost eloquent defiance. Loose rigging hanging from the lofty director tower down the sturdy tripod mast slapped and banged in anger. A broken sea-cock sprang a leak and was plugged by the 'runners.' Open hatch covers came too with a crash. But the procession went on with pitiless and relentless certainty. Benbow was doomed! We glided up the still waters of the Firth of Forth yesterday morning, and towards dusk we were abeam the rock of Inchkeith.



Firth of Forth Bridge

One final touch of irony marked the close of the funeral voyage. It would have been fitting to arrive at sunset – a blood-red sunset – with the long, slanting beams of mellow crimson bathing the battered silhouette of the worn-out battleship. The tugs had shortened their towing lines to make the great Firth of Forth Bridge. Benbow was submitting gracefully to the last rites as the day was drawing to a close. A tiny destroyer flying the White Ensign drew alongside. Orders came to remain outside until morning.

So at two o'clock this morning we completed the last stage of the journey. Benbow rode smoothly up the Firth, sheering for a moment as if in final protest, so that she barely escaped a collision with the bridge abutments, and came slowly to rest at a quay that was heaped high with the red rust of metal that was once H.M.S. Dartmouth. The stars were fading and the glint of dawn was in the eastern sky."

The following article is the story of the journalist's exploration of HMS Benbow during the voyage to the breaker's yard.

"**Secret Corners of War Explored at Sea** – A tallow candle dripping hot fat over my hand, showed me the way. I was plunging down into the inky blackness of the damp, rusty stokehold of old Benbow, the doomed battleship that was plunging her way through the North Sea at the end of the tow lines of two Dutch tugs on her final voyage to the shipbreaking yard at Rosyth. The stokehold is a mysterious cavern of moist iron and cold fire-boxes. There are three stokeholds, as a matter of fact, and, although each is separated by water-tight bulkheads, all three are equally grim, equally dark, equally ghostly.

The wind above howled across the ventilators. The discarded shovels lay, like worn out toys, on the steel plates that rest on the bilge tanks in the keel of the old battleship. The bunkers at each side were empty and dark with the dust of thousands of tons of vanished coal. Gauges were set at zero in united silence. Valves at 'open' or 'shut' were meaningless.

The tallow candle flickered and steamed in the dampness, while the shadows danced in grim fantasy about the corroded steel walls of the boiler room. Directly aft I found the engine room at the end of a long series of iron ladders, through narrow manholes, and along treacherous grated galleries.

> *Here was the dead heart of Benbow, a mechanical discord of broken machinery, silent turbines, hundreds of pumps and dynamos, all motionless in the hushed darkness.*
> *I crawled over cold steam pipes, around dismantled condensers, past the massive brass engine controls and the mighty telegraph signals, all set at 'Stop.'*

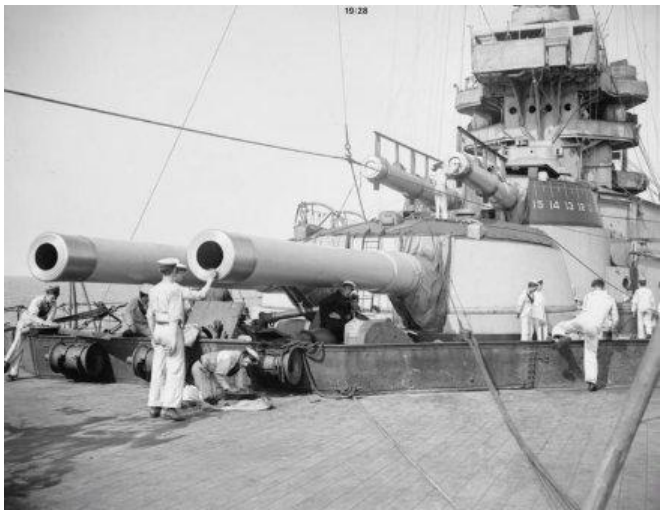
A gust of wind blew down a shaft leading up to the weather deck. My candle went out, and I fumbled with cold hands for matches to break the awesome spell of the black silence.

Prison! I came upon the tiny, narrow cells, away up in the flared structure of the bow, by sheer accident. There were five, in a neat row, on the starboard side, down at the water level and without ports. The massive bolts and padlocks were still on the steel doors. The little peep-holes for the warders were there. The only furniture – a narrow wooden ledge jutting from the side of the cell – made it eloquent that mutiny in a warship is at least uncomfortable. Directly above – two flats overhead – was the seaman's fo'castle – a great, airy, well-lit space, with the bars on the deckhead for hammocks and the little lockers about the side still in place.

> **I lived with Benbow for ten days – crawling, like a gnome, over her mighty structure, burrowing deep down into the black places below her deck, scrambling high aloft into the director tower, and about the torpedo-tube controls around the after funnel.**

A battleship in commission is a secret. A battleship on her way to the ship-breakers is a confession. So I spent these days aboard Benbow living in intimacy with the magazines, the gun turrets, the hallowed precincts of the admiral's quarters, ferreting out the mysteries of a man-o'-war.

I found a chapel. It was a bare room in the stern of the ship, adjoining the captain's accommodation. It was just an ordinary room, except for the porcelain tiles, inset with crosses, around the bulkheads and empty gun mounting against the ship's side. The hospital. The operating theatre forward of the bridge was bright, empty, and dusty. The white enamel was still clean, however, and the sinister perfume of antiseptic still hung in the air. There was the ward, the dispensary, the dressing-station, and the grim suggestion of the wide, gently sloping ladder that led from the deck above, so vividly designed to allow the stretcher cases to make an easy descent.



The Gun Turrets, HMS Benbow

The days rolled on in hushed monotony, there was no throb of live engines, no moan of steering-gear, no rattle of deck work, nor the echo of staccato commands. I continued my solitary prowl. One by one I crawled up into the awesome gun turrets – the last place in any battleship where a civilian is permitted to tread. The giant breeches of those ten 13-inch guns, covered in oil and even now slightly redolent of the fumes of cordite and the smell of war, were still dully polished and dreadfully massive. The rangefinders had been dismantled, but the empty, swinging stools of the observers were there. The firing mechanism and electrical connections to the director tower had been ripped out, but the effect of deadliness was present just the same.

> **The heavy steel armour plate – twelve and eighteen inches thick – surrounded the cramped space like a wall of bullet proof velvet. It was silent – the silence that drums like thunder in the ears.**

One by one I visited these turrets, and when the day of strange imaginary dread was over I took my candle and scaled down the ladders into the magazine. The submarine torpedo rooms in the keep of the ship, with their overhead trolleys and giant torpedo racks ranged around the steel enclosure, had sent a chill along my spine. In the magazines – little subdivided cubicles, with water-tight doors

and scarlet signs on the white painted walls: 'For Flooding,' I realised that here I was in the death-trap of a man-o'-war. The magazine for each set of guns lies at the base of the turret – a single unit that reaches from the deck above to the base of the vessel. Here I saw the shell racks, the gunpowder bins, the warning signals, the electric bells, the automatic doors that shut the ammunition depots off from the rest of the ship, the great sea cocks that would drench the magazines and drown the men who worked there, and the swift electric lifts that once on a time rushed the black cordite and gleaming shells aloft, sixty feet, to the gunners who were loading the naval artillery on the decks above.

Ten days among the relics of war passed. We lived in a maze of fantasy, grisly reminders, and rather remarkable personal discomfort. We had no means of communication with the outside world. The tugs ahead had wireless, but they were 300 yards away. There was no heat aboard save for the small stove in the captain's galley where we cooked our meals. Bedding was damp in the evening, and moisture made the clothes sodden by morning.

Twelve men – all Dutchmen – and I made this strange voyage. Twelve men who talked of tulip time in Holland among themselves, while I lived in my imagination. They had little to do, practically nothing except to plug a broken pipe which was letting sea water into the ship at the rate of fifty gallons a minute. We lived apart. Theirs was the gossip of Massluis – a tiny port on the lip of the River Scheldt, where Dutch tugs came from. Mine was the fantasy of this magnificent, derelict battleship. Yet, twice a day, I hear the 'chief runner' shout a sharp command. 'Alle handts on deckt!'

It sounded so English that it made me homesick."

[I found the information for this article in an old scrapbook that someone had kept before and during the Second World War. There are hundreds of news stories and photos covering a multitude of fascinating stories in this large scrapbook. I have been collecting these for some time and will one day write an article about them. The two pages below show the newspaper articles and some photos associated with this story about HMS Benbow.]

Grand Evening Concert

TO BE GIVEN ON BOARD

H.M.S. "BENBOW."

BOXING DAY, 1918.

Programme

1. SELECTION — By the Orchestra
2. ENTWISTLE — Vocalist
3. LITTLE — Yorkshire Comedian
4. HACKETT — The Whistling Tommy
5. THE THREE YOUNG SAILORS!
6. SKUSE — Vocalist
7. BURDIS & MADDISON — Comedy Duo
8. COMMANDER FAVELL — Father
9. HAYES — Light Comedian
10. DUNK & CO. — The Pirates
11. WHALEY, SWANN, LEEKS, MORTON — Band / Quartette

THE BENBOW PASSES TO THE SCRAP-HEAP.

DRAMA OF A TEN-DAY "BATTLE" IN NORTH SEA.

JUTLAND'S 13th IN THE LINE.

By LORNE BARTRAM,
"Daily Express" Special Correspondent.

ROSYTH, Monday.

H.M.S. BENBOW, a sweltered 25,000-ton hulk of rust and faded pasteboard, sailed like a ghost ship up the grey waters of the Firth of Forth at dawn this morning, and came to rest in the Royal Navy Dockyards to end her days at the hands of the ship-breakers.

The two Dutch tugs which dragged the gallant veteran of Jutland for ten days up the English Channel and through the steaming gates of the North Sea on their last voyage of mercy, finding her, by stampede, stripped of her battle honours, discharged from the Majesty's service, on the edge of the grave.

Then began the work of demolition. Workmen from both end hammers and clanging crane, and smashing engines of destruction will start to-day on the ship's scrap-heap is plumb. The process, I was told, is to be carried out with the utmost speed, and finished completely into a heap of scrap metal to be sold on the market.

The last chief mourner in the long and tragic funeral voyage that started from Devonport ten days ago and ended without the barest trace of ceremony now is me.

NO FORMALITIES.

We slipped away from the docks and activity of dockyard in the early morning of March 27, and followed our tugs down the Firth and out into the sea.

A group of sailors stood on the deck and stood to watch us pass by the Forth Bridge, and a few dockyard workmen on the shore waved farewell with their hats. We crept up towards the battleship Monarch, gleaming white in the morning sun, and passed her, and then the Iron Duke, flagship of the Grand Fleet in the days of the war, and passed on into the open sea.

It was a long voyage, at obstinate tempo, and the massive wrecking hought every mile of the way. For days I stood on the deck of the Benbow through the still seas and mist, which the two steamers tugs pulled steadily on the tow rope.

Men by two finished gave way at a time to the ship's work, and I was left with only my self-imposed task of watching the ship's pumps, which were kept going night and day to keep the water down in the bilges. Then, when the battleship was well out in the North Sea, the tugs left us, and we were alone.

DEFIANT HOODS.

Curious hoods across the raised funnels of the Benbow, which had been fitted to keep raging tempest from the fully directive lower deck the stiffly ripped and hinged in angry. A strange warmth sprang a look and was the only sign of life. Then fabric, always silent as with a cloak.

But the possession with us with prince and relentless certainty. Benbow was doomed.

Then, as we up the still waters of the Firth of Forth yesterday morning, the dockyard men were waiting for the Benbow.

Then there were of many watched the ship's last journey. Then the tugs had been tying to receive a message from the tug, which was to be the last. Then the tugs had received and answered the signal with the two short blasts of the whistle, and the Benbow had passed majestically. The tugs had answered their towing lines to make the great Firth of Forth bridge. Instantly the dockyard men were waiting for us on the far side, standing in silence.

A tiny destroyer flying the White Ensign drew alongside. Various naval officers from the dockyard came aboard. Then the tugs left us, and we were alone. Then the tugs left us, and we were alone. Then the tugs left us, and we were alone.

Then the tugs left us, and we were alone. Then the tugs left us, and we were alone.

A VOYAGE WITH GHOSTS IN THE BENBOW.

SECRET CORNERS OF WAR EXPLORED AT SEA.

By LORNE BARTRAM,
"Daily Express" Special Representative.

A TALLOW candle, dripping hot fat over my hand, showed me the way. I was plunging down into the inky blackness of the damp, rusty stokehold of old Benbow, the doomed battleship that was plunging her way through the North Sea at the end of the two-lime of two Dutch tugs on her final voyage to the shipbreaking yard at Rosyth.

The stokehold is a mysterious cavern of moist iron and cold fire-bricks. There are three stokeholds, as a matter of fact, and, although each is separated by water-tight bulk-heads, all three are equally grim, equally dark, equally ghostly.

The wind moans howled across the ventilators. The disrobed shields lay like worn-out toys, on the steel plates that rest on the huge tanks to left and right of the old battleship.

The bunkers at each side were empty and dark with the dust of thousands of tons of vanished coal. Ranges were as cold as stone in untrod silence. Valves at "open" or "shut" were meaningless.

FANTASTIC SHADOWS.

The yellow candle flickered and gleamed in the dampness, while the shadows danced to grim fashion above the corroded steel walls of the boiler

THE SHIP'S CHAPEL.

I found a chapel. It was a bare room in the stern of the ship, and above the captain's accommodation. It was gaunt, and cold, and empty for the altar, with its rotting cloth, was gone. The pews, hymn-books and the organ remained, however, and the chapel for those of seaworthy still hung to the air.

There was the ward, the dispensary, and the operating theatre. Here, on the floor of the ward, was a broken stretcher ladder that led from the deck above, to which I imagined to where the wounded came to make an easy descent.

The operating theatre looked gruesome, too, as the table, with its straps, to mean of securing gear, or table of sick men, was the table to operate comfortable. I mentioned my fancy.

One by one I opened up one the awesome gun turrets—the last place in over battleship where a civilian is permitted to go.

Here, in the interiors of those six 13-inch guns, covered in oil and worn now slightly reflected of the beam of electric torch, and the smell of rust, were still perfumed and strangely sinister.

Here, in the gloom, I imagined, had the men taken, swinging shells of the observers were there. The firing mechanisms were still there, and the shutter for those of projectile still hung to the air.

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The heavy steel armour plate—twelve and eighteen inches thick—surrounded the cramped space like a vault of baize proof velvet. It was silent—the silence that drums like thunder in the ears.

One by one I visited these turrets, and I found that the silence was the same. Not a sound was heard, and not a sound broke down the interior into the

DEATH-TRAP.

The submarine torpedo recess in the stern of the ship, with their sectional doors and great torpedo racks ranged on the floor, was the darkest, and most sinister, with water-tight doors and bulk-heads, all these are equally grim, equally dark, equally ghostly.

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