

12 James Shields: d 27 May 1915 on the HMS Princess Irene



Where is the grave?

Take the path that creates an oval below the crematorium. When you have reached the centre of the crematorium again (but 40 yards below it), take the path leading straight down the hill. Cross over the path going left/right. James Shield's grave is just over this junction, on the right, next to the path.

3 March 2014

James Shields (344832) was an armourer on HMS *Princess Irene*. His body was never identified, and he is commemorated on Panel 8 of the Portsmouth Naval Memorial. (CWGC) He may well have been born in Barrow in 1881. (Cumbria BMD) <http://www.cumbriabmd.org.uk/cgi/birthind.cgi>

HMS *Princess Irene* blew up unexpectedly in 1915. The steamship *Princess Irene* was built to the order of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company for their luxurious "Triangle Route" linking Vancouver, Victoria and the American city of Seattle. The ship was completed at Dumbarton, Scotland, in 1914 but, before she was able to leave for the Pacific, was requisitioned by the Royal Navy and converted into a Minelayer. She was 5,900 tons, 395'x54'x28' launched 20 October 1914. Based at Sheerness in Kent, she was in the River Medway on 27th May 1915 when she blew up as a result of a catastrophic internal explosion. There was only one survivor.

At about 11.14 on the morning of 27th May 1915, Sheerness witnessed the destruction of the minelayer HMS *Princess Irene* which was on No.28 buoy about 3 miles WSW from the town centre. The ship had been built in Scotland in the previous year to the order of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company but was requisitioned and converted for Naval use before she could sail to the Pacific. The *Princess Irene* had a complement of 225 officers and men, three of whom were ashore that morning as the mines were being primed on the ship's two mine decks. Also on board were a party of 80 or so Petty Officers from Chatham in addition to 76 Sheerness Dockyard workers who were completing tasks prior to the ship's planned departure to lay her mines on 29th May.

Without warning, the ship was blown to pieces and her remains, and the remains of those on board, were scattered over a wide area of the surrounding river and countryside. One of the Chatham Dockyard workers, David Wills, amazingly survived the explosion but few bodies were found. Those that were located were buried in Woodlands Cemetery in Gillingham. A memorial to those lost in both this and the *Bulwark* disaster is situated opposite Sheerness Railway Station.

The cause of the disaster was thought to have been due to a faulty primer (pistol) although evidence at the Official Enquiry showed that the work of priming the lethal mines was being carried out a) in a hurry and b) by untrained personnel. The lower decks and keel of the *Princess Irene* remain more or less intact and have caused a degree of navigational problems to the large ships now using the eastern end of nearby Thamesport. At present there are no plans to raise her remains.

Book: *Blown to Eternity - The Princess Irene story* (Ferry Publications), by John Hendy (2001).

<http://www.gwpda.org/naval/pirene.htm>



There is a plaque to another victim of the HMS *Princess Irene* disaster in St. Gregory's Church, Vale of Lune (near Sedburgh). It reads:

To the Glory of God and in memory of Lieut. Commander Humphrey Randle Cottrell Dormer Upton R.N., youngest son of Mrs. Upton Cottrell Dormer of Ingmire Hall who lost his life in the explosion in HMS *Princess Irene* in Sheerness Harbour, 27th May 1915. Erected by his wife Mary Cottrell Dormer and his brother John Upton.

7 April 2012