

## HMS Alresford 1919-1947

*Based on material collected by*

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H.M.S. ALRESFORD, laid down on the Clyde on 30 April 1918, was launched in January 1919. The sealed pattern of her badge, as advised by the Alresford town clerk at the time was:—

FIELD. White, the corners chequy gold and black.

BADGE. A lion rampant black.

MOTTO. CAVENDO TUTUS (Safe by taking care).

She was intended for service as a minesweeper but as the war ended while she was being built, modifications were made to her super-structure so that with an enlarged bridge, an extra chart-house aft, additional boat and cabin accommodation, she could go into immediate service as a tender to the Navigation School at Portsmouth.

For the next twenty years, she made day trips round the Isle of Wight with naval sub-lieutenants on navigation courses and longer survey cruises with advanced students, amongst whom was the present Duke of Edinburgh at the start of his naval career. But ALRESFORD was a home girl and never in her long life did she venture as far as Gibraltar. Letters from old crew members of those days emphasize that she was a happy ship and — although a coal burner — a clean ship. They have strong memories of keeping the old ship spotless and of the pleasure they felt when the job was done and they could stand back and admire their handiwork.

H.J. Higgins remembers a day in March 1936 when a party from the ship came to Alresford; 'We lost the football match but won the darts. I cannot remember the name of the pub but they did a very good job at entertaining us. On the way home by the watercress beds, I turned the old Ford over. The policeman that came out had been the centre forward in the football team. Two very nice people drove us all the way home at that time of night Eventually I was fined 14/- for driving without due care and attention !'

In early 1939 under threat of war, the Admiralty had re-commissioned many of ALRESFORD's sister ships (Improved Hunt Class twin-screw minesweepers; 231 x 29 feet with 710 tons displacement). They were known as 'smoky Joes', the last coal burners of the Fleet. The huge columns of smoke sent up by ABERDARE, DERBY, FAREHAM and BAGSHOT, as they swept the channel off Alexandria, were reputed to have given watchers on the enemy shore early warning of intense naval activity !

But ALRESFORD burnt her coal nearer home. Stripped of the flummeries of her `tender' existence, she became a warship at last and saw service during Dunkirk. In particular, she carried the explosives to Cherbourg for the blowing up of the harbour installations there to prevent them falling into German hands. At that panic time of groundless rumours, she received a signal that Brighton might be in the hands of the enemy and was ordered to investigate. Lieut-Commander Venables stood off the seaside resort and was able to send the laconic report that 'everything at Brighton seemed normal'.

But ALRESFORD had already been in action for, on the night of 3 June, while carrying out an anti-aircraft patrol in the eastern approaches to Spithead the late Commander Rudyard-Helpman R.N., hearing aircraft approaching gave the order to the 12 pdr gun crew 'Enemy aircraft — Red 30 — angle of sight 30° — Fire!' To his amazement there was a loud explosion and a German bomber fell out of the sky. When this success was reported to the gunnery experts they declared that as the target was unseen, it should be regarded as a fluke !

Commander R.E.C. Dunbar RN had long service in command of ALRESFORD and records that 'after a refit in the early summer of 1942 when additional armament was installed, she was detailed to take part in the Dieppe raid of 13th August'. ALRESFORD carried a party of Free French troops but the main force was Canadian. An early contact with a German convoy alerted the shore defences and the raid was a costly one. ALRESFORD survived considerable enemy fire and managed to take in tow a damaged L.C.T. and get the vessel and its Canadian wounded back to Newhaven.

During this period, ALRESFORD still had a role to perform for the Navigation School and Commander Dunbar remembers with gratitude the hampers of watercress which arrived on board from the people of Alresford. From then until the end of hostilities, she was a familiar sight to watchers along the south coast as she carried out her main duties of keeping the swept channel clear. In 1945, she was put on the reserve for the first time in a very active life.

In 1947 — just thirty years after her authorization — she was sold to the Belgian Merchant Marine and became scrap metal. Her photograph and a copy of her badge, presented personally by her officers and crew in 1942, hang as a permanent memorial on the south wall of New Alresford Parish church.

How did it happen that our little market town had the honour of giving its name to a warship? The Silent Service keeps 'mum' but here are some facts. Viscount Jellicoe, born and bred in Southampton, was promoted to Admiral of the Fleet in 1919 in which year his brother, the Rev: Frederick Jellicoe was rector of Alresford. This was the year that H.M.S. ALRESFORD was launched. Surely this is no co-incidence. Even that cagey organization, the Ministry of Defence, are good enough to agree that 'the reason suggested is a very likely one' !