

The Last Days of HMS Warspite in Cornwall 1947-1956 by Richard Holme
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HMS *Warspite* was a much loved battleship. The seventh of name she served with distinction in both World Wars, earning a record number of fifteen battle honours ranging from the Battle of Jutland in 1916 to the Walcheren landings as World War II came to an end. Affectionately known as “The Grand Old Lady”, there are several published histories of her career and several autobiographies by those who served aboard her for long periods. But by 1946 she was too damaged and worn for repair and so was the first of the battleships to be put up for disposal, being sold to Metal Industries for scrapping at Faslane at a price of £101,275. And so she left Spithead for her final voyage under tow by two tugs on 20 April 1947. As they passed The Lizard they were hit by a heavy storm, the tow parted and she ran aground first at Mount’s Bay and then on the rocks at Prussia Cove where her small crew was rescued by the Penlee lifeboat in weather so wild that the crew won RNLi gallantry awards. The wreck was then bought by a Bristol scrap merchant. The ship could not be refloated and so she was progressively demolished over the next nine years. This is the tale of that demolition.

The work was sufficiently risky that a new company - the Western Salvaging Company – was set up to reduce financial liability. A Blondin wire was set up between the cliffs and the ship in October 1947 so that workers could reach the ship when the weather was too poor for boats. But the work proved hard and difficult outside a breakers yard and largely had to be undertaken manually. This was dangerous stuff and one of the workmen died in a gas-filled compartment. There is a full and good description of the financial manoeuvres which proved necessary to keep the work going ahead. By 1949 hopes lay in refloating the hull and moving it to a breaker’s yard. Then in 1950 the hull was finally refloated only to be beached close by at Marazion where it was hoped she could be cut up more easily. But the ship was not beached close enough to shore; there were great local planning authority objections and the financial position of the companies involved remained precarious. In 1953 the hull was finally split in two and the bow section moved to shallower water near the shore – 700 feet rather than 2700 feet beyond the high water mark, enabling demolition to be carried out more easily and quickly. Then finally in August 1956 the last 600 tons of the hull were blown up and *Warspite* finally disappeared from view. Some remnants remain under water and other artefacts have found their way ashore to places as varied as a local hotel and a local museum.

The author has done a remarkable amount of research which enlivens the story. Using social media he got in touch with many local people, making contact with those whose families had worked on the wreck and he has uncovered many family photographs of what had become quite a tourist attraction, even visited by the teenage Duke of Kent. He uses company records, material from local and national newspapers and even newsreel material now available on Youtube. Substantial appendices cover these sources, ranging from transcripts of radio interviews, to descriptions of the lifeboat rescue, medal citations and brief biographies of people involved in the project.

This is a classic World Ship Society publication – detailed, authoritative, full of rich detail from unusual sources and is produced to the very highest standards. Full of contemporary colour and black and white photographs and with many detailed appendices it is a comprehensively detailed account of a story that typically merits only the briefest of mentions in the many published histories of *Warspite*. This is certainly niche history, but it is a joyous and very enjoyable piece of work which thoroughly deserves to be on your wishlist.

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